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By Marv Knox

Editor

Although it's not clear yet, a new vision for the Baptist General Convention of Texas is coming into focus, according to the consultant who is helping the convention develop that vision.

The BGCT's "revisioning" process has produced both common themes and critical issues, and a vision will emerge from those ideas, reported Sherrill Spies, an organizational consultant who works with church groups and other nonprofit organizations.

The process began about three months ago. Supported by the convention's officers, BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade named four revisioning teams—one comprised of lay leaders, two groups of pastors plus a sampling of BGCT staff. Those teams each met three times during March and April. They studied the convention, talked with peers and reported their concerns and dreams for the statewide body.

Representatives of BGCT institutional leaders, directors of missions, Executive Board staff managers, and college and seminary students also contributed in one-day visioning sessions.

Even though the groups functioned independently, they achieved remarkable consensus, said Spies, a member of First Baptist Church in The Woodlands with a doctorate in complex organizations.

“All of them agreed the BGCT exists because of the churches and their desire to do together what they cannot do alone,” she said. “They know the BGCT is here to serve the churches, and not the other way around.”

Spies pointed to six common themes expressed by the revisioning participants:

Customer focus. “The BGCT will focus on being an effective partner to churches as they act to fulfill the vision that God has for them,” she said, noting the convention must collaborate and network to help strengthen and empower churches.

Similarly, the services offered by the convention must be solution-based rather than program-based.

- ◆ Vision & purpose. A vision—which comes from God—is crucial to developing Texas Baptists' identity, Spies explained. But “the groups want the BGCT to articulate a clear vision that encourages churches to get connected with the BGCT, other churches and organizations to do kingdom work,” she added.

“They're saying (to the BGCT): 'Tell us who you are and what you're doing. And then we can get on board.'”

- ◆ Connectivity. “The BGCT must provide the infrastructure and processes for connecting churches to resources, other churches,

institutions and other organizations,” she said, noting the theme emerged repeatedly.

For example, pastors indicated they want the BGCT to provide Internet chat rooms, where they can build friendships and share ideas.

Among other infrastructure, revisioning participants called for geographically disbursed resources—locating them closer to churches across Texas rather than centralized in the Baptist Building in Dallas. They also asked for a telephone call center that would provide easier access to resources, services and products. And they requested evaluation and guidance regarding non-Baptist materials and resources aimed at churches.

- ◆ Evaluation and accountability. “The (BGCT) services, programs and ministries will be evaluated, and the Executive Board staff will be accountable to the convention and the churches,” Spies said.

- ◆ Innovation and creativity. Over and over again, participants suggested the BGCT should create a think-tank for researching and developing cutting-edge ministries and methods, as well as for spotting trends and preparing Texas Baptists to thrive in an ever-changing climate.

- ◆ Governance. This is a focus on the BGCT, not the churches, Spies said, noting, “We are studying ways to make our governance simple and more effective.”

The BGCT's complex structure—particularly the central organization, with a huge Executive Board and myriad commissions, coordinating boards, committees and subcommittees—has been criticized for being cumbersome for years.

The revisioning participants also highlighted numerous critical issues facing the convention and the churches, Spies said.

“We must have an identity for Texas Baptists,” she reported. “There is a great need for vision for our churches, associations and our state convention.”

And while churches and associations are free to develop their own individual identities, they look to the convention for a common identity that helps define their character and purpose, she said.

Credibility and accountability also are key issues, Spies said. “Our leadership must be moral and effective. Our words must match our actions. Our stewardship must be biblical and wise. And our missions and ministries must be monitored and evaluated.”

In addition, diversity dominated the list of critical issues, she added. “Our churches vary in size, traditions, styles, populations, location, region and more. The big question is: How can the BGCT provide effective services and products to meet the needs of these diverse churches?”

Part of that diversity is reflected in the symphony of languages spoken by Texas Baptists, she observed, stressing the importance of providing services and resources “in the languages of the people.”

Similarly, the teams agreed Baptists must “be aware of and embrace the people groups in Texas,” she said.

Churches should reflect the communities they serve, and BGCT leadership should reflect the diverse population of Texas, the teams agreed.

And noting the demographic forces at work in Texas, they recommended “comprehensive strategies for advancing kingdom work among Hispanic populations,” she said.

They also urged several developments that specifically impact congregations, Spies reported.

“We need to rediscover a sense of community in our churches,” she acknowledged. Also, “how can churches be true to God's word and be relevant in today's society and communities?”

A paramount concern is sharing the gospel across Texas, Spies stated, noting the revisioning teams observed: “We are not seeing enough people come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. We are not keeping up with the population growth in Texas. We are trading members more than reaching the unchurched.”

Through all the discussion, the teams did not reach a consensus on the BGCT's relationship to the Southern Baptist Convention.

“Those who want to cut all ties and those who want to find appropriate ways of partnering could not agree on suggestions for actions,” Spies said. “We will continue to study this question and seek feedback from churches.”

Now that the revisioning teams have completed their work, Wade has appointed a strategic planning committee to carry the process forward. The strategy committee will review information from the revisioning teams, as well as responses from listening sessions to be held statewide. It also will evaluate previous and current BGCT strategies and program effectiveness, and identify and learn from the convention's internal and external “stakeholders,” Spies said.

Ultimately, the committee will draft a BGCT strategic plan. It will include mission and vision statements, as well as priorities and strategies for achieving them.

The revisioning teams were supportive of the BGCT and thankful for the ministries it provides, Spies said. “At the same time, they expressed the thought that the time for change is now in order to meet the challenges of the era.”

However, the specific nature of that change is yet to be determined, she said, insisting, "Nothing is decided."

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.