

Bell decides not to seek 2nd BGCT term

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By John Hall

Texas Baptist Communications

LUBBOCK—Michael Bell will not seek a second term as president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The convention's first African-American president told participants in the African American Fellowship of Texas annual meeting he would follow the example of Ken Hall and Albert Reyes in holding the presidency for only one year.

Traditionally, BGCT presidents have served two one-year terms. But beginning in 2004, Hall and Reyes chose to serve only one year. Both times, the incumbent first vice president—Reyes, then Bell—was elected president.

Michael Bell

Stopping just shy of endorsing current First Vice President Steve Vernon for the convention presidency, Bell told the crowd it is "prudent" to follow

the precedent for presidents to hold office only one year before stepping aside for the first vice president to become president.

This pattern enables the first vice president to serve as an “apprentice” for a year, learning the BGCT system, before becoming convention president, he said.

Bell’s tenure has been marked by a continued increase in ethnic-minority inclusion in the BGCT, an emphasis on the importance of support for the convention’s Cooperative Program unified budget, and cooperation between affinity groups affiliated with the convention, he said.

But more than his points of emphasis, Bell noted, he hopes he is remembered as a president who clung tightly to who he is and followed God’s guidance.

“I hope when they look back, they say that he did not compromise his calling, that he served the convention well,” said Bell, pastor of Greater St. Stephen First Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade praised Bell’s commitment to serving the convention.

Bell has been invaluable in communicating the ministry of Texas Baptists, Wade said.

“Michael Bell has served Texas Baptists with enormous energy and a dedication to what we are and what we can become,” he explained. “He has reached out to include in meaningful ways all of our ethnic congregations and leadership. He has urged support of the Cooperative Program and the Mary Hill Davis Offering (which supports BGCT missions efforts). He has a keen insight into the impact that Texas Baptists can have on our Texas culture.”

Bell has traveled continuously to tell Texas Baptists how the BGCT staff's new structure will help accomplish the mission God has given them, Wade added. He has preached in many churches and shared in conferences for African-Americans, Hispanics, Vietnamese and Chinese. He also attended the annual meeting of bivocational and smaller-church ministers.

More ethnic minorities also were incorporated into the BGCT staff during Bell's tenure. The number of Hispanic employees has increased, and African-American additions to the staff have been made recently.

He also initiated quarterly discussions between leaders of Texas Baptist affinity fellowships. Ministers come together to discuss issues they are facing and how they can help each other.

"This is a convention that reflects the face of Texas," Bell said. "There is room under the BGCT tent for all people."

Next month, Bell is set to kick off monthly meetings for Texas Baptist pastors to gather regionally to support and pray for each other.

"The spillover from that is going to be phenomenal," he predicted. "We have to start talking to each other."

Bell asked Reyes to expand what Reyes started with the President's Council, pastors who commit to talking with other pastors about the importance of giving through the BGCT Cooperative Program, which funds Texas Baptist ministries in the state and around the world. Enlarging the group enabled more ethnic leaders to participate in the effort.

The convention has improved in all the areas he sought to help, Bell said, noting more work remains to be done. He would like to see staff members participate in mandatory diversity training. He would like convention leaders to continue focusing on making the convention what God has called it to be.

“We have a convention that is pregnant with promise,” he said. “I am so committed to helping our convention birth that promise.”

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