

Executive Board votes to explore criminal charges, recovery of Valley funds

November 16, 2006

Posted: 11/13/06

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By Ken Camp

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DALLAS—At a called closed-door meeting prior to the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting, the BGCT Executive Board voted to implement all of the recommendations of an investigative team that discovered mismanagement and misuse of church starting funds in the Rio Grande Valley.

The board also directed BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade to explore with legal counsel “the full range of methods for recovery of funds” and determine whether to refer the reports’ findings to law enforcement.

Newly
elected
BGCT
officers
are First
Vice
President,
Joy
Fenner;
President,
Steve
Vernon;
and
Second
Vice
President,
Roberto
Rodriguez
. (BGCT
Photo by
Robert
Rogers)

But at least one messenger to the BGCT annual meeting wanted the convention itself to ask the FBI to investigate criminal actions that may have occurred in the Rio Grande Valley.

An investigative team reported to the board Oct. 31 that Texas Baptists gave more than \$1.3 million in start-up funding and monthly support to three pastors in the Rio Grande Valley who reported 258 church starts between 1999 and 2005. Investigators presented evidence that up to 98 percent of those churches no longer exist, and some never existed—except

on paper.

At the board meeting—a rare executive session closed to everyone except directors—Kenneth Jordan of Alpine reportedly made a motion instructing BGCT Executive Board staff leaders to implement the investigative reports’ recommendations “expeditiously and in full,” Chairman Bob Fowler of Houston said.

The full report is [available here](#) as a pdf document.

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- Charles Wade has posted a response to the report [here](#).

The motion called on Fowler to appoint an ad hoc committee from among the board's directors to monitor implementation and report to the February 2007 Executive Board meeting "with the board's expectation that they will have been fully implemented."

The board approved a motion by Dan Griffith of Haskell directing Wade—in consultation with attorneys, the BGCT president and the board's chairman—to consider all avenues deemed "appropriate, practical, cost-effective and in the best interests of the convention" to recover misappropriated church starting funds.

The board also approved a motion by Doug Evans of Laguna Park directing Wade, in consultation with the BGCT's legal counsel, to evaluate whether to refer the findings of the report to "any appropriate government investigatory agency."

During the annual meeting Monday afternoon session, David Montoya, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Mineral Wells, raised questions about giving Wade authority to decide whether to pursue any criminal investigation, saying "he still has questions to answer" about his handling of the Valley church starting fund scandal.

Montoya—who had written extensively on his blog about what he termed "Valleygate"—made a motion the convention ask for a criminal investigation by the FBI.

Items introduced during miscellaneous business will be dealt with during the second day of the annual meeting.

According to the report the Executive Board received Oct 31, the FBI explored allegations of fraud in connection with some church starting efforts in the Rio Grande Valley in 2000, but the agency dropped its investigation because the aggrieved party—the BGCT—did not pursue it.

Fowler reported the board also approved a motion by Harold Richardson of Tyler that the audit committee in January 2007 initiate an internal audit function that will report to the audit committee as soon as possible.

“This will require the audit committee to bring a recommendation to the Executive Board and amend the budget for the provision of such function at the regular board meeting in February,” Richardson’s motion stated.

The board also approved a four-part motion by Roberto Cepeda, chairman of the board’s missions and ministry committee:

- That church starting guidelines be elevated to “policy” status and be incorporated into the BGCT policy manual.

- That proposed church starting policies be presented to his committee for review in February and that the committee make a recommendation to the board regarding adoption of policies.

- That a draft of the proposed policies be made available to each committee member by Dec. 15 and to all board members at least two weeks prior to their February meeting.

- That staff adopt any proposed policy changes regarding refined or enhanced accounting procedures as soon as possible.

In his report to the annual meeting, Wade underscored his commitment to lead staff and work with the board “to right wrongs” and “clean up this mess.” He stressed his desire to restore broken relationships with pastors and church leaders in the Valley, emphasized the overall good work done by church starting staff and pledged to rebuild trust.

In other business, convention messengers elected as president Steve Vernon, pastor of First Baptist Church in Levelland; first vice president, Joy Fenner of Garland, executive director emeritus of Woman’s Missionary

Union of Texas; and second vice president, Roberto Rodriguez, pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista in Harlingen.

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