

EDITORIAL: Starter kit for a new kind of convention

March 16, 2007

Posted: 3/16/07

EDITORIAL: Starter kit for a new kind of convention

If the Baptist General Convention of Texas hopes to survive in a postdenominational world, it must conclude the process of reinventing itself. And sooner rather than later.

Down through the years, the BGCT—as with most other denominational organizations—has bought into a false notion that seduces precisely because it sounds so true: The convention exists for the churches.



Who can argue with logic like that? We are proud of saying the churches, not the convention, are king of the Baptist hill. So, it stands to reason, the BGCT should orient itself to meet all the churches' needs. The churches are the clients, and the convention is the full-service provider.

Theologians have a term for a notion like that: Baloney.

Blame the Baby Boomers, who think they're the center of the universe and everything revolves around them. Now that most of our pastors and key lay leaders are Boomers, our churches mirror Boomer culture. They say: "It's all about us. What have you done for us lately? Why should I stick with you if I can get what I want somewhere else."

This fallacy turns things upside down. In truth, conventions exist on behalf of churches. The BGCT exists to help churches do what they can't do by themselves. Great things. Huge things. Missions-and-education things.

Of course, the convention serves the churches—so they can serve their communities and world. Not so they can consume more denominational stuff. If the BGCT is to be relevant and vital, it must resist the temptation to see churches as consumers and the convention as a service provider. It must orient everything toward calling and enabling churches to do more together than they can do alone.

What does this mean? A full answer is far too complex for an editorial, but here are some ideas to consider:

- **Keep going with a great thing.**

In a brilliant move, the recent BGCT Executive Board staff reorganization located congregational strategists all across the state. These experienced church leaders are well-equipped to help churches. They should be able to sharpen their focus on providing diagnostic help, not providing resources. Problem is, nine regional strategists and a handful of affinity strategists aren't enough. Their caseloads are too huge. We should double their number, at the very least.

- **Re-think resourcing.**

Strategists reportedly are frustrated, because they can diagnose their churches' needs, but the BGCT doesn't have all the resources to help them. We must drop the idea that the Executive Board has to provide those resources and broaden our notion of how to get resources to churches. Three ideas: First, establish peer-to-peer training, where expert volunteers from our churches train staff and members of other churches. Think it'll never work? Think Internet and e-mail. Second, provide incentives for our institutions to equip churches. Programming and training are their forte. Give them incentives to equip churches as well as they equip their own staffs or students. Third, generate bulk-purchasing power to lower the costs of resources provided by others, so even small churches can afford them.

- **De-balkanize missions.**

Missions provides one illustration of how the convention has run to fragmentation instead of effectiveness. We had two leading missions programs, River Ministry and Texas Partnerships, and several institutions were doing missions. Instead of combining forces, we created another missions network, WorldconneX, with an as-yet-unclear assignment. Why not streamline and consolidate our missions ventures, bringing Border/Mexico Missions, Texas Partnerships and WorldconneX into one unit and correlate closely with the institutions, all for the purpose of enabling the churches to do missions? (Pray this will be a result of the Missions Exchange summit at Truett Seminary in April.)

- **Feed strength.**

Our institutions are the envy of the Baptist world. We ought to provide extra support for their programs that are geared to team with local-church ministries and missions.

- **Fill niches.**

Some programs, like missions support and Bible study curriculum, represent needs far beyond Texas. We must think how our resources can jump beyond the state, but also generate revenue for our ministries.

- **Pony up.**

Present these opportunities compellingly and allocate the Cooperative Program and offerings to support them.

Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Baptist churches, in Texas, the BGCT, the nation and around the world.