

EDITORIAL: The Executive Board's crucial agenda

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The eyes of Texas Baptists will be upon the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board Feb. 26-27. We'll watch to see if the board resolves three key issues:

- **Church-starting scandal.**

In a called meeting Oct. 31, Executive Board directors received a report on [misappropriation of church-starting funds](#) in the Rio Grande Valley. It told a terrible tale. Texas Baptists spent \$1.3 million to start 258 churches and only have five churches to show for it. Staff disregarded their own policies. The convention wasted six years promoting a church-starting scheme that failed miserably. Even after the FBI inquired, board leaders failed to get to the bottom of things.



Independent investigators made seven suggestions for fixing the problem: (1) Review and revise church-starting guidelines, (2) gather accurate, accessible information about new-church mortality rates, (3) integrate recordkeeping between program areas, (4) institute better internal controls over disbursements and hire an internal auditor, (5) give the accounting department authority to control and design the reporting system, (6) respond immediately to allegations of impropriety and (7) trust but verify.

A committee of Executive Board directors has been working with staff to ensure the recommendations are implemented. Early reports seem positive, but staff must realize each correction must be addressed thoroughly. We will listen to learn how closely recommendations have been followed. We will be anxious to hear the status of efforts to provide documentation to legal authorities and to solicit restitution. And we will seek safeguards to ensure the problem will not recur. We wonder if the board will institute accountability practices for implementing policies. Cleanup of one mess is not enough; we want to know future messes will not be made.

- **Convention authority.**

Two weeks after the investigators reported, Executive Board directors gathered on the eve of the BGCT annual meeting to decide how to respond to the scandal. The response sounded encouraging. Among other steps, the board voted to implement “expeditiously and in full” the investigators’ seven recommendations and to evaluate whether to turn their findings over to “any appropriate government investigatory agency.”

During the BGCT annual meeting, a messenger sought to take that last idea one step further. Rather than depend upon the Executive Board to evaluate the possibility of turning findings over to government officials, he proposed a motion that would have directed the board to give the material to the FBI. The convention president [ruled his motion out of order](#), citing a ruling by a

parliamentarian that the Executive Board's previous decisions "pre-empted any action by the convention." This sent shock waves through the convention, since most Texas Baptists believe messengers to annual meetings comprise the ultimate convention authority and the Executive Board should serve the wishes of the messengers. While most Texas Baptists would agree some functions and authority should be delegated to the board, few would claim the board should wield authority superior to the messengers'.

So, we wait for the Executive Board's response. Will the board repudiate the parliamentary ruling? Will it consider governance changes to ensure future parliamentarians do not rule similarly? Early indications are positive. But for almost 400 years, Baptists have practiced democratic polity, and Texas Baptists above all have championed fierce autonomy. So, a failure to reject the presbyterian form of governance to which the ruling leads would not only be ironic, but also historically repulsive.

- **Leadership/future.**

The alarm caused by the Valley scandal and the parliamentary ruling does not exist in isolation. These issues merely compound discomfort from several years of churning change. Discomfort has been agitated by awkwardly paradoxical [convention reorganization](#)—at once brash and timid, far-reaching and tentative, unable to be ignored at convention meetings but easily overlooked in local churches. Frankly, folks don't have a lot of confidence in the Executive Board staff and directors these days.

This has cast a shadow over fine Christians. Texas Baptists openly speculate about the tenure of Charles Wade, the Executive Board's executive director, whose record as a creative and passionate pastor is sterling. Likewise, the fate of the newly reorganized Executive Board is an open question. It's only been in existence for a year, but it has reached a

moment of truth. Will it step up, restore trust and lead the BGCT to a bright future, or will it be seen as a bit player in the decline of a once-vibrant convention?

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