

NAMB presidential nominee defends church's giving record

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) — The Kentucky pastor nominated to become president of the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board says the search committee viewed his congregation's emphasis on direct funding of missions — as opposed to through denominational channels — as an asset and not a liability.

"I was not considered to be president of the North American Mission Board without you," [Pastor](#) Kevin Ezell [said](#) to worshippers at Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., Sept. 12. "They considered me and they have asked me to be nominated to do that because of you. They looked at Highview Baptist Church and all that you have done, and therefore considered me because I was the pastor here. So in a sense you are being nominated, and I happen to be the pastor, so it's me."



Kevin Ezell

With seven campuses and 4,740 resident members, Highview plans to give more than \$1.3 million this year to missions, but just over 2 percent of its budget will be channeled through the Cooperative Program, a unified budget system that funds both state and national Baptist conventions.

Baptist state convention executives in Louisiana and Arkansas have

criticized the Ezell's nomination saying the church's comparatively low percentage of support for the Cooperative Program sets a poor example for other congregations.

Ezell apologized to parishioners for criticism directed at both him and the congregation since [news](#) of his selection broke Aug. 31 in the *Florida Baptist Witness*.

"Because of the visibility of the position, there are people across the United States who want to look for things that perhaps I do not do as well or they think we should do different, and perhaps be critical of myself or of Highview, just to try to get their name in the paper," he said. "Typically those are bloggers who live with their mother and wear a housecoat during the day. Just ignore them, but I apologize if you are hurt by anything that they might say about me or indirectly about you."

Ezell recalled one meeting with a committee in particular where his church's reputation was discussed.

"They said: 'We have heard about Highview for so many years,' and 'We have heard about incredible, unique, creative ways that you guys do ministry,' and 'Explain that again; how do you guys do that?'" Ezell said.

"It was just such a blessing, because we could never have done that if you weren't willing to go, many years ago, to a second campus," he continued. "I mean, 'What a ridiculous idea,' some would have thought. But then to vote to do that in 99.7 percent — it was just incredible that you would do that.

"You did that, and two went to three and three went to four and ended up with seven. I just want you to know I have this opportunity I realize because I am pastor of Highview, not because I am anything special."

In June the Southern Baptist Convention [adopted](#) a Great Commission Task

Force report that recognizes a new category called "Great Commission Giving" that includes both the Cooperative Program and giving to designated gifts for special purposes. That was after messengers [amended](#) the report to reaffirm the Cooperative Program, the denomination's primary fund-raising channel since 1925 as "the most effective means" for missions support and say designated gifts should "supplement" and not "substitute" for the cooperative model.

Highview's "Million to Missions" [campaign](#) sets aside \$582,000 for local missions, including \$145,000 for a mentoring/intern program at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and \$340,000 for campus ministry at nearby colleges and universities.

Nearly half of \$150,000 for national causes goes to church plants in New York City, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Atlanta, Indianapolis and Boise, Idaho. Another \$24,000 is set aside for mission trip supplements and \$25,000 for a student mission trip, compared to \$10,000 for the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering that supports work of the NAMB.

International giving of \$700,000 includes \$400,000 in Cooperative Program and \$100,000 to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering that supports work of the SBC International Mission Board. Other funds include \$100,000 in mission-trip supplements, \$5,000 for a missionary house and \$10,000 for an international adoption ministry.

David Hankins, executive director of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, wrote an open [letter](#) Sept. 9 criticizing Ezell's "demonstrated lack of support for the mission of NAMB."

"While each local Southern Baptist church has the right to do whatever it decides about denominational mission support, those who would presume to lead Southern Baptist entities ought to have a track record of supporting those entities," Hankins wrote.

Hankins said the "independent model" chosen by Ezell would "send a chilling message to the thousands of Southern Baptist congregations who have been led by their pastors and their denomination to believe that generous support for our cooperative mission funding processes is the good and right thing to do." He also said the nominee would lack "moral authority" to challenge Baptists to adopt goals of raising \$100,000 million annually through the Annie Armstrong Offering.

Emil Turner, executive director of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, said he agreed with Hankins in an *Arkansas Baptist News* [story](#) also [carried](#) by Associated Baptist Press.

Trustees will vote on Ezell at a called meeting Sept. 14. If elected, he would replace Geoff Hammond, who resigned in August 2009 over philosophical differences with trustees. Richard Harris, senior strategist for missions advancement, was named acting interim president.

Tim Dowdy, NAMB trustee chairman, said in a statement [released](#) through Baptist Press that members of the search committee were drawn to Ezell "because it is clear that he has a heart for SBC missions and a heart for reaching North America for Christ."

"I realize there is an ongoing discussion among Southern Baptists about how we can best express our passion for missions through our giving," said Dowdy, pastor of Eagles Landing First Baptist Church in McDonough, Ga. "I am sure that will be part of our discussion this Tuesday when our trustees meet to discuss Kevin's nomination."

"Kevin has been a loyal Southern Baptist and I believe he will help NAMB continue to work through the long-standing partnerships we have had and help us build new partnerships and new ways of taking Christ to North America," Dowdy said.

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.

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