

Board OKs changes to fund helping clergy sex abuse survivors

May 21, 2019

DALLAS—The Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board voted to revise and rename an underused fund set aside to help subsidize counseling for survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

At the recommendation of its finance committee, the board lifted a \$1,000 cap on counseling assistance to any individual survivor from a \$100,000 endowment fund the BGCT Administrative Committee created in 2005.

“Our experience in the past few years indicates that more resources for each survivor are typically needed,” the written recommendation from the finance committee stated. “Additionally, there has been low utilization of these funds so additional resources are available.”

The board also renamed the fund, previously designated as the “victim of clergy sexual abuse” board-designated endowment. In keeping with contemporary best practices of counseling professionals, it now refers to a “counseling subsidy for survivors of clergy sexual abuse.”

Grants from the fund will be agreed upon by Texas Baptists’ director of counseling services and the BGCT treasurer/chief financial officer. Amounts will be based on the survivor’s needs, other resources to which the individual has access and funds available.

The board-approved recommendation also stipulates, “Churches will be encouraged to provide matching funds for counseling to the survivor if possible.”

MinistrySafe Training offered

During the Executive Board's May 20-21 meeting, many of the directors participated in a two-hour overview of the [MinistrySafe](#) training to prevent child sexual abuse.

The BGCT partners with MinistrySafe to provide free regional workshops to help Texas Baptist churches reduce the risk of child sexual abuse. Upcoming workshops are scheduled May 30 at Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston, Sept. 10 at First Baptist Church in Georgetown and Oct. 29 at Second Baptist Church in Corpus Christi.

In a panel discussion following the video presentation to the board, several ministry leaders who have participated in the workshops discussed the importance of creating a safety system in churches to protect children and youth—even when that means turning away some potential volunteers.

“We are not there to protect people's feelings. We are there to protect children's futures,” said Fernando Rojas, pastor of Azle Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

‘We are on watch’



Michael Evans

In his remarks to the board, BGCT President Michael Evans, pastor of

Bethlehem Baptist Church in Mansfield, cited Ezekiel 3:17. He reminded church leaders God made each of them “a watchman” over God’s people.

“As believers, we have a responsibility,” he said. “We are on watch.”

“Long gone are the days” when church leaders can turn a blind eye to issues such as sexual abuse, Evans insisted. When church leaders do nothing about a problem, they become “silent partners” in the offense, he asserted.

“When you see something, you ought to say something,” he said. “God has called us to speak up and speak out.”

In other business, the BGCT Executive Board:

- Approved a recommendation to invest the convention’s reserve fund—currently valued at about \$8.1 million—in an index fund allocation through HighGround Advisors. The finance committee will monitor results of investments in the index fund, comparing them with other BGCT funds HighGround Advisors manages.
- Authorized a \$60,000 expenditure to implement new accounting software.
- Elected Mitchell Thomas from Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas to serve on the Institutional Audits Council.

Vernon announces plan to retire



Steve Vernon

At the conclusion of the board meeting, Steve Vernon announced his intention to retire effective Jan. 3, 2020, as associate executive director of the BGCT, a position he has held since September 2008.

Vernon was pastor of First Baptist Church in Levelland from 1991 to 2008. Previously, he was pastor of First Baptist Church in Panhandle, First Baptist Church in Kress and First Baptist Church in Ames, Okla.

He was a former president of the BGCT and served on a variety of Texas Baptist boards, committees and commissions during his time in the pastorate.