Executive Board authorizes GC2 study group

May 21, 2024

With an eye toward potential fallout from the Southern Baptist Convention 2024 annual meeting, the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board affirmed the creation of a study group concerning out-of-state churches that want to affiliate with Texas Baptists' GC2 network.

The Executive Board approved by 87 percent the recommendation regarding GC2 from its senior staff leaders and Executive Committee.

The board convened May 20-21 in a hybrid-format meeting—held both online and in-person, originating from the campus of the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton.

The Executive Board affirmed the creation of "an Executive Director's GC2 Study Group including a new staff position to assist in exploring the issues involved in giving further structure to this ministry."

"We need to be ready to welcome churches who want to be a part of what God is doing through Texas Baptists," Executive Director Julio Guarneri said.

Guarneri emphasized the goal is not to compete with the Southern Baptist Convention or create another national convention or missionary-sending agency.

Rather, the GC2 network seeks to "complement" what the SBC is doing, to affirm "displaced churches" and to "walk alongside" women in ministry who "feel vulnerable and hurt," he said.

‘Provide clarity’ in anticipation of SBC action

The BGCT needs to be able to “provide clarity” about how and if GC2 churches are represented in decision-making, how they are served by Texas Baptists’ staff, and whether their students qualify for ministerial financial assistance at BGCT-affiliated schools, Guarneri said.

Messengers to the 2024 SBC annual meeting in Indianapolis next month will vote on final passage of the Law Amendment, which essentially would declare churches with women serving as a pastor in any role to be outside the bounds of friendly cooperation with the national convention.

The GC2 network predated by several years any discussion about the SBC constitutional amendment. Former Executive Director David Hardage, who retired in December 2022, launched the GC2 initiative, focused on the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

In part, GC2 provided an avenue for churches beyond Texas to partner in Texas Baptists’ efforts to “share Christ” and “show love.”

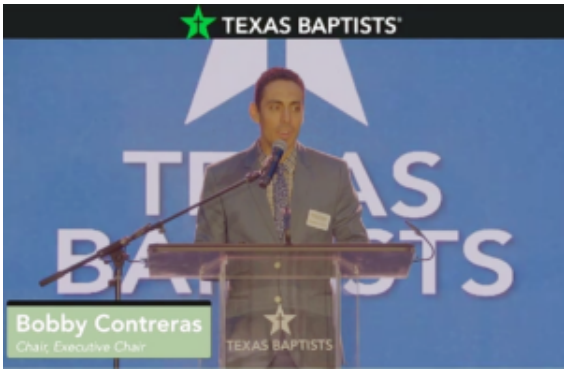
To date, about 70 churches outside the state affiliate with the BGCT—some identifying as Texas Baptists and many identifying as GC2 congregations.

Guarneri reported inquiries regarding GC2 have “increased significantly” in recent months, prompting the need for greater clarity about the purpose and organizational structure of the GC2 network.

Group already exploring strategic

vision

He asked the board to “bless” a task force that already has been at work to explore and articulate a strategic vision for Texas Baptists.



Chairman Bobby Contreras of San Antonio presides over a meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board. (Screen capture image)

Currently, convention officers and pastors working with the group are BGCT President Ronny Marriott of Burleson, BGCT First Vice President Debbie Potter of San Antonio, Executive Board Chair Bobby Contreras of San Antonio, African American Fellowship President Henry Batson III of Faith Fellowship in Red Oak, Darin Wood of First Baptist Church in Midland, Jeff Warren of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas and Joe Barber of St. Luke Baptist Church in San Antonio.

BGCT staff serving with the group are Craig Christina, associate executive director; Ward Hayes, treasurer and chief financial officer; Joshua Minatrea, director of communications; Katie Frugé, director of the Center for Cultural Engagement and the Christian Life Commission; David Miranda, director of the Ministers Development and Missional Network; and Guarneri.

A related advisory team includes Sergio Ramos, president of the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas; Steve Bezner, pastor of Houston Northwest Church; and Michael Evans, pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Mansfield, along with a possible representative from BGCT intercultural ministries.

Texas Baptists need to be able to present a "clear, comprehensive and compelling" vision consistent with Jesus' agenda as presented in the Gospels, Guarneri said in his report to the board.

"We want every Texas Baptist church, every institution that relates to us, every partner that we work with, and everyone who is considering whether they want to be part of what we're doing to have a clear sense of who we are and what we are about," he said.

Texas Baptists have "spent too much energy and effort" focusing on churches that have chosen to cut their ties to the BGCT, he asserted.

"I think it's time for us to get our eyes on Jesus and his mission and then let people who want to be part of that join us," Guarneri said.

'We are centrists'

In a changing culture, a shifting denominational landscape and a period of rapid technological advancement, Texas Baptists remain steady in their commitment to Scripture, submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ, faithfulness to historic roots, a focus on the Great Commission and willingness to stand on biblical ethics, he said.

When some groups gravitate toward extremes, Texas Baptists have maintained true to historic Christian beliefs and practice, he noted.

"We are orthodox. The basic doctrines of the Christian faith are the ones we hold to," Guarneri said. "We are centrists."

Texas Baptists value local church autonomy and voluntary cooperation, he added.

“That means for us that statements of faith are supposed to be expressions of what we hold in common and not creedal statements that are imposed on the churches or on any convention or association,” Guarneri said.

“Doctrine is important. To agree on the basics is important. But our purpose is not doctrinal uniformity. It is to obey God’s mission in the world today.”

Guarneri noted churches increasingly are forming networks to accomplish God’s mission.

“We can sit and watch that from a distance, or we can join in and lead,” he said.

NAMB already cutting church starting funds to BGCT

Guarneri also frankly acknowledged if the Law Amendment passes at the SBC annual meeting, churches with women on staff who carry the title “pastor” will face decisions to “either change their titles, change their positions or change their affiliation.”

He also reported the North American Mission Board no longer will fund any church starts in Texas that are uniquely aligned with the BGCT, because the state convention has not officially adopted the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message.

Guarneri pointed out the discontinued funding will occur even though BGCT-affiliated churches last year contributed $3.3 million to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American Missions and $2.2 million to

NAMB through the Cooperative Program.

Texas Baptists “stand fast” in support of local church autonomy, specifically regarding the role of women in ministry, Guarneri said.

The BGCT includes churches that hold to a complementarian position that reserves the role of pastor to men alone, while other churches hold a fully egalitarian belief that both men and women can serve in any ministerial role, he noted.

“Local church autonomy in this matter means complementarian churches do not impose their view on other churches. It also means egalitarian churches do not impose their view on other churches,” he said.

“It implies that we respect each other and that we work together. We don’t believe that the topic of women in ministry is a matter of scriptural authority. We believe it is a matter of scriptural interpretation.”

Guarneri took issue with those who criticize the BGCT as “tolerating error” out of a desire to remain neutral.

“We are not neutral. We are pro-church,” he said.

In other business, the Executive Board:

- Authorized the creation of networking events for women in ministry, along with mentoring opportunities, leadership training and resource development. See the related article here.
- Heard an update from Texas Baptists’ sexual abuse response task force, including a report that the group was expanded to include members with counseling and legal expertise.
- Learned the Theological Educational Council and Institutional

Relations Committee endorsed multiple ministry-related graduate degree programs at East Texas Baptist University and B.H. Carroll Theological Seminary, contingent upon the merger of the two institutions. See the related story here.

- Elected Lanette Jones from Schwab City Baptist Church in Livingston, and Jose Carreno from Northside Baptist Church in Baytown to fill vacancies on the Executive Board.
- Revised a policy regarding a retirement gift from the BGCT, eliminating the gift to employees who leave Texas Baptists to take immediate full-time employment with another organization.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The vote total in the second paragraph was edited May 24 based on additional information from BGCT CFO Ward Hayes. The 76 percent affirmative vote originally reported included only those who voted via Zoom and not those who registered their votes in person.