

Fort Worth church declines to send messengers to BGCT

November 15, 2009

FORT WORTH—Rather than face a challenge from the floor of the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting or submit to having its beliefs about homosexuality examined by the BGCT Executive Board, Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth chose not to send messengers to the state convention, saying it was “in the best interests of both our church and the BGCT.”

In June, the Southern Baptist Convention severed its longstanding relationship with Broadway Baptist over the church’s perceived toleration of homosexual members.

And after numerous conversations in recent weeks, the church’s leaders recognized it appeared inevitable its elected messengers would face some challenge at the state convention.

A public statement from the church noted its 120-year relationship with the BGCT, pointed to the consistency between Broadway’s mission and the convention’s, and announced that “after much reflection,” the church decided not to send messengers to the annual meeting in Houston.

“We understand that there is a small group who plan to attempt to create discord within the BGCT by challenging the seating of Broadway’s messengers. While we have taken no action that would justify having our messengers not seated at the convention, we have decided that not sending messengers this year is in the best interests of both our church and the BGCT,” the church statement said.

“One of the probable results of having our messengers challenged would be

a study of Broadway by the BGCT Executive Board. We believe it would be a terrible mistake for the BGCT to start down the path of investigating individual congregations and strongly assert the Baptist principle of the autonomy of the local church. We at Broadway are remaining focused, as always, on the worship of God, spiritual growth, showing hospitality to all in Jesus' name and ministering to those in need."

The church's deacon board approved a resolution granting Pastor Brent Beasley and Deacon Chair Frank Wilson authority to make the final decision about whether the church should send messengers. Beasley notified the church's elected messengers about their decision in a Nov. 13 e-mail.

"We have made the decision not to send messengers to the BGCT. This has been a terribly difficult decision, but I believe it is our best option at this point," the e-mail stated.

"I have engaged in hours of conversation throughout this week with BGCT leaders and pastors in attempts to find a solution to this situation. A compromise was devised to appease those who intended to challenge the seating of our messengers. This compromise involved seating our messengers but subjecting Broadway to a study by the BGCT Executive Board over this coming year with a report to most likely be brought back to the convention in 2010. The study was to be focused on Broadway's 'position on sexual ethics.' In the end, Frank Wilson and I feel like this is not an acceptable course of action for Broadway.

"We ended up with two choices, I think: agree to the compromise— which involved being studied by the BGCT Executive Board—or not send messengers. To not go stops a vote, doesn't force us into this compromise, and gives us the time and freedom to decide where we go from here with the BGCT."

The decision was announced to the general Broadway Baptist membership at a Sunday luncheon after worship services on Nov. 15.

Beasley noted the church's desire not to create a distraction from "the real business" of the BGCT or Broadway.

"Personally, I think those who are trying to make Broadway an issue would do better to focus more on their own ministry and less on Broadway," Beasley said.

"Surely they have plenty to do in their own churches for the kingdom of God. I know that we at Broadway have our hands full every week feeding hundreds of hungry people, distributing clothes, keeping up with the large number of visitors we have in worship each Sunday, and engaging in meaningful worship and Christian formation. We want to partner with other churches whenever possible, but we do not have time for denominational politics."

Controversy has swirled around Broadway Baptist since 2007, when a dispute arose about whether to include portraits of homosexual couples in the church's directory.

That led to a motion at the 2008 Southern Baptist Convention meeting calling for the SBC to declare the church "not in friendly cooperation with the convention." Article III of the SBC constitution stipulates "churches not in cooperation with the convention are churches which act to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

The SBC Executive Committee studied the issue, meeting with representatives from the church.

In materials provided to the Executive Committee during its investigation, Broadway staff member Jorene Taylor Swift denied violating the SBC constitution—a position later reiterated by the church's deacons.

“Broadway never has taken any church action to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior,” Swift, minister of congregational care at the church, wrote to August Boto, the Executive Committee’s general counsel.

Nevertheless, on the eve of the SBC 2009 annual meeting, the Executive Committee voted to recommend “that the cooperative relationship between the convention and the church cease, and that the church’s messengers not be seated, until such time as the church unambiguously demonstrates its friendly cooperation with the convention under Article III.”