

Guarneri wants BGCT to stay focused on mission

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The Baptist General Convention of Texas' executive director-elect believes the greatest challenge facing Texas Baptists and their greatest opportunity are closely related.



Julio Guarneri

Presenting the gospel to a burgeoning Texas population in the midst of “complex demographic shifts that are happening in our state will require a concerted and strategic effort,” Julio Guarneri said.

Guarneri, who assumes his duties as BGCT executive director in late November, talked about the mission that unites Texas Baptists during an Oct. 10 Zoom interview with the *Baptist Standard*.

“Reaching Texas for Christ” and mobilizing Texas Baptists to be engaged in worldwide missions in the current context will require “concerted effort” and focus, he noted.

“I’m convinced that business as usual is not going to get it done,” he said.

“I think we are doing some great things, but I think there is so much more to do. The risk is to get complacent or to major on controversies.”

Resist being pulled to extremes

Staying focused on mission means resisting forces that would seek to pull Texas Baptists toward extremes, he noted.

He recognizes a challenge in “dealing with those who would want us to move from our historic centric focus.”

“I think we live in times where society seems to thrive on extremism, and it’s difficult to stay the course to our historical, biblical and missional commitment when forces try to pull us to the extremes,” Guarneri said.

Currently, the Southern Baptist Convention is embroiled in debate over the role of women in ministry—particularly whether a church can employ a woman on its ministerial staff as a “pastor” and still be in “friendly cooperation” with the SBC.

When it comes to women serving in pastoral roles, Guarneri believes Texas Baptists properly emphasize local church autonomy and the priesthood of all believers.

Messengers to BGCT annual meetings “have consistently spoken” and declared “that this is a local church autonomy issue,” he said.

“While we believe God calls and equips women for ministry in the local church, the mission field and parachurch ministries, the specific titles for both men and women in church are for the local church to decide, not for us to dictate,” he said.

“And for me, more important than particular titles for church staff is the recognition that we champion the priesthood of all believers, and all

believers are called to obey the Great Commission.”

By keeping the emphasis on local church autonomy, “we can continue to have room for respectful dialogue where there are differences” and to encourage and provide resources to local churches “whatever position they take” on women in ministry, he said, expressing his desire to be “an executive director for all Texas Baptists.”

“While there are differences in our Texas Baptist churches in this regard, I believe that most churches and leaders don’t desire to make this an issue of fellowship,” he said. “To me that’s important, that we don’t alienate churches or ministers on either side of the issue.”

Work with those ‘who are willing to work with us’

Guarneri noted Texas Baptist churches continue to contribute more than \$22 million annually to SBC missions and ministries.

“I believe that the BGCT needs to work with those denominational bodies that are committed to the Great Commission, that are committed to the importance of cooperation for the sake of the kingdom, bodies with whom we have general agreement regarding faith and practice, and who are willing to work with us and our churches,” he said.

Guarneri expressed appreciation for the vision of those who drafted the BGCT Constitution, particularly in regard to the breadth of its mission statement: “The object of this convention shall be to awaken and stimulate among the churches the greatest possible activity in evangelism, missions, Christian education and benevolent work and enterprises; to cultivate a closer cooperation among the churches and promote harmony of feeling and concert of action in advancing all of the interests of the Redeemer’s

Kingdom.”

He also voiced support for the more succinct defining mission of Texas Baptists as “a movement of God’s people to share Christ and show love by strengthening churches and ministers, engaging culture and connecting the nations to Jesus.”

Texas Baptists can unite around Christ’s Great Commission, his Great Commandment and “churches working along with institutions in advancing kingdom initiatives—in doing things no one church could do by itself,” he said.

‘What a good servant leader does’

Guarneri, who earned a doctorate in leadership studies with a ministry concentration from Dallas Baptist University, said he aspires to be “a servant leader.”

“My goal—my desire—is to model for others what it means to follow Jesus, what it means to serve others, what it means to be about his agenda,” he said.

“And I think that includes being an encourager, being a listener, valuing working as a team, and in that process discovering vision together, casting the vision and then inspiring and empowering others to live out God’s calling on their lives. That’s what a good servant leader does.”

As executive director, Guarneri said he wants to listen to church and associational leaders, as well as institutional leaders, to hear their “dreams and hopes” and discover a shared vision for Texas Baptists.

In his new role, he acknowledged the need to balance being accessible and being strategic in how he spends his time and energy.

“I look forward to working with leaders across Texas to discover what our future looks like and how we strategize and partner for the sake of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment,” he said.

Listening to all Texas Baptists and reaching every facet of the Texas population with the gospel requires church leaders to develop “cross-cultural competencies” and learn how to minister in varied contexts, he noted.

“It’s not rocket science,” Guarneri said. “Sometimes it’s just the awareness and the willingness to have conversations and the self-awareness to understand that not everybody looks at the world the way I do. And they can love Jesus and be about the same agenda, even when they think and process differently and when they prioritize certain things I may take for granted or assume.”

‘Hard to imagine’ not being a pastor

Guarneri grew up in a Christian home and made what he called a “clear and sincere” profession of faith in Christ at an early age, and he recommitted his life to Christ as a teenager. At age 16, while attending Hispanic Baptist Youth Congreso in Houston, he was inspired by the challenge to be part of a generation that could fulfill Christ’s Great Commission.

“That really was compelling to me,” he said. “As I was thinking about that, I felt God’s Spirit really tugging at my heart, and I felt God was calling me to surrender to ministry.”

After 13 years as pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in McAllen—and previously 17 years as pastor at Iglesia Bautista Getsemani in Fort Worth—Guarneri confessed it is “hard to imagine” not serving in a pastorate.

“I’m confident my wife and I are going to find a good spiritual family when we move to the Dallas area, but it will be strange to look for a church,” he acknowledged. “We haven’t had to do that in decades.”

When asked what he would like Texas Baptists to know about the next BGCT executive director, Guarneri responded: “I want them to know I am very honored and humbled to get the opportunity to serve in this role. I want them to know that I love the Lord, that I am committed to the Scriptures and to the local church.

“I love Texas Baptists and the work of the BGCT. And I am committed to find ways to work together so that we can move forward in finishing the task.

“I hope that when history writes about the BGCT in this next era that they would say Texas Baptists were faithful to the Great Commission and invested in ‘all the interests of the Redeemer’s Kingdom’ to the glory of God.”