

Editorial: CLC deserves protection

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Texas Baptists should support steps to secure one of our most valuable ministries—the [Christian Life Commission](#).



Editor Marv KnoxFor more than six decades, the Christian Life Commission has provided prophetic leadership to Texas Baptists. The CLC began its ministry in 1950, helping Texas Baptists think about race relations and integration biblically and ethically, years before *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Through the CLC, we have worked together to apply Christian faith to daily living and public policy. The CLC is renowned for opposing gambling expansion, fighting human trafficking, addressing hunger, curbing predatory lending and standing up for religious liberty.

The Christian Life Commission not only is a Texas Baptist treasure; it is an asset to the entire state. For all our faults, Texas Baptists are more Christlike and Texas is a better place because of the CLC.

Inadvertent action

But this summer, messengers to the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting inadvertently took an action that could erode the CLC's

strength.

Messengers approved a recommendation to clean up the convention's bylaws. Primarily, the proposal removed descriptions of the BGCT Executive Board's operational committees from the bylaws and moved them to the board's policy manual.



That was a good idea. Those committees help the Executive Board do its basic, day-in and day-out work. When their descriptions were included in the bylaws, they could be changed only by vote of the convention in annual session. The Executive Board needed authority to tend to its internal committees directly and promptly.

Unfortunately, along with the committees, the recommendation also removed the description of the Christian Life Commission from the bylaws. So, now the function and operation of the CLC could be modified by the Executive Board with no input from, much less approval by, the convention at large.

Some have contended the change actually did not alter policy, since the BGCT constitution already gave the Executive Board authority to organize itself. But until this year's BGCT annual meeting, the convention's bylaws specifically named and outlined the duties of the CLC. So, the CLC was mandated, which provided a parliamentary limit to the Executive Board's authority with regard to the CLC.

CLC left vulnerable

Under the recently amended bylaws, however, a future Executive Board

could decide it wants to do away with the CLC, and the convention at large would have no say in that decision.

More specifically, the language removed from the bylaws transcended mere description. It expressed the ethos of the CLC. For example, this is where the commission was instructed to “speak to and not for the convention and the churches.” Given Baptists’ polity, this is a vital distinction. Without this policy, a future Executive Board could command the CLC to speak “for” the convention without the careful study and approval by, as well as safeguard of, the commission members.

The removed language also charges the CLC with ecumenical work. This is not always popular, but it is vital—both for the commission’s effectiveness and for Texas Baptists’ credibility.

To be sure, the immediate impact on the CLC is not dire. It still functions as it has historically, with offices in Dallas and Austin. The CLC educates Texas Baptists about applied Christianity, helping us bring our faith to bear on everyday ethics and on the great moral issues of the day. The CLC also leads Texas Baptists in public policy engagement. Although it speaks to and not for Texas Baptists, it enables us to address matters considered by state government.

BGCT Executive Director David Hardage affirmed the commission and its work. “The CLC is a vital part of who we are and what we do,” he said. “There was no intention to de-emphasize the CLC. Any conclusion that it has been de-emphasized is incorrect.”

Commission ‘reinstated’

In fact, although recent plans called for the CLC director—a position currently vacant—to report to BGCT Associate Executive Director Steve Vernon, the ethics leader will report directly to Hardage. The CLC has been “reinstated” at the upper echelon of staff leadership, he said.

Still, the Executive Board should recommend reinserting the CLC in the convention's bylaws at next year's BGCT annual meeting.

This idea does not reflect on Hardage and Vernon, whose affirmation of the CLC and its role in the convention is strong and consistent. Vernon is a former member and vice chair of the commission. Diminution of the CLC is not likely to take place on their watch.

But Texas Baptists should take a longer view of history. In both state and national spheres of Baptist life, we have seen values and policies shift with the accession of leadership. The Christian Life Commission is far too important to Texas Baptists and to the Lone Star State to be susceptible to changes in executive administration or board rotation.

All Texas Baptists have a stake in the Christian Life Commission. We should maintain a say in its future.