Editorial: Let Glorieta homeowners have their say

May 15, 2014

Glorieta Conference Center began on the floor of the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. Sixty-six years later, homeowners from the campground in New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains hope messengers to the 2014 SBC meeting will accommodate them one more time.

The odds are long against it. But the homeowners deserve their day—and say—when the convention convenes this summer in Baltimore.

Editor Marv KnoxGlorieta has become the focal point of charges of unfairness against LifeWay Christian Resources, the publishing house that once owned the camp, as well as Glorieta 2.0, the youth camping organization that bought the property last year.

Here's an extremely brief Glorieta timeline:

• In 1948, Southern Baptists voted to build a campground in the western United States. SBC leaders dreamed of a facility that would advance the convention's westward expansion by providing training and inspirational opportunities in the region. A committee recommended a site in Arkansas, but a minority report prevailed, and the convention chose Glorieta, N.M., about 15 miles east of Santa Fe.

• Glorieta opened in 1952. The Baptist Sunday School Board, precursor to LifeWay, owned and operated the camp on behalf of the convention.

• From the start, Glorieta featured private homes, cabins and lodges. Individuals, churches and state Baptist conventions owned those buildings, but they leased the land from the Sunday School Board.

• Beginning in the early 1950s and stretching into the ’80s, Glorieta boomed. Southern Baptists packed the grounds to attend camps sponsored by the Sunday School Board, as well as the SBC’s national and international mission boards.

• For a variety of reasons, attendance began to slide about 25 years ago. The Sunday School Board/LifeWay lost money on the camp all but one of those years.

• In the fall of 2011, LifeWay reported it was considering selling Glorieta. LifeWay tried to sell Glorieta at least four times. Baptist conventions in New Mexico and Texas both turned down opportunities to buy it for $1. LifeWay offered and then rescinded that offer to sell Glorieta to Olivet University International. Finally, 11 months ago, it agreed to sell the camp to Glorieta 2.0, which owns Camp Eagle in the Texas Hill Country.

• The sale turned controversial when Glorieta 2.0 offered the homeowners three options—accept a buyout ranging from $40,000 to $100,000, reportedly far below fair market value; take a 12-year lease, after which the owners would either remove their homes from the property or give them to Glorieta 2.0; or give the facilities to Glorieta 2.0 as a charitable contribution.

Three categories of sympathy

The homeowners fall into three categories of sympathy: First, some families have owned their Glorieta homes 30 to 60 years. When they bought, they had every right to expect the convention would roll over their leases in perpetuity. Second, some owners bought their properties within the past 25 years. They claim they were promised perpetual lease rollovers, but they should have been wary, since the Sunday School Board/LifeWay itself had been the subject of what amounted to a hostile takeover in the SBC. Third, some bought homes within the past few years, and, even if they received promises, they had to disregard the declining state of the campground itself.

> • Last fall, homeowners Kirk and Susie Tompkins sued LifeWay and others. The suit claims the SBC, and not LifeWay, owned Glorieta, so LifeWay did not have authority to sell the camp. It also states LifeWay promoted private purchase of the homes, leading prospective buyers to believe the SBC would continue to own Glorieta and leases would continue to roll over.
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> • While the suit awaits court action, numerous homeowners and former homeowners have appealed to the SBC for relief. They have requested a hearing before messengers to the annual meeting next month in Baltimore. They have asked convention President Fred Luter to intervene on their behalf. So far, that appeal has not worked, and it's not likely to work, for practical reasons.

Even if the SBC accepted a resolution calling for homeowners to receive fair market value for their properties, convention policy would direct the issue to the LifeWay board of trustees. They already turned a deaf ear to the homeowners' pleas. The convention is not organized to tell a board what it must do, and it would balk at such a precedent.

Give them 30 minutes

Still, the convention can take steps within its structure to provide homeowners an opportunity to state their case. The president and order-of-business committee should find 30 minutes in the program to state their case. Barring that, they should extend the session Tuesday evening, June 10, by 30 minutes for that purpose. That session is scheduled to adjourn at 8:15. Surely, messengers could endure an additional half-hour presentation that, no doubt, would comprise the most poignant period of the entire event.

Perhaps open presentation would encourage LifeWay and Glorieta 2.0 to reconsider. It would give them an opportunity to make right, particularly for retirees whose old-age housing security was sold out from underneath them for a lousy buck.