

# Editorial: The BGCT's greatest challenge—adversity or apathy?

November 12, 2015

A couple of conversations during this year's Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting struck an old chord of concern. A separate observation occasioned apprehension and angst. Both provoked a quest for vision.

In the first conversation, a friend mentioned the slow, steady defection of congregations to a competing convention in our state. The next morning, another friend picked up the same refrain, but in more alarming tones. He talked about the recruitment activities of the competing convention in terms of grave crisis for the BGCT.



Editor Marv KnoxMeanwhile, walking the corridors and working the exhibit hall of the annual meeting brought to mind names and faces of a multitude of Texas Baptists who did not attend the 2015 BGCT annual meeting. They haven't sided with the competition. They simply didn't show up to participate in the convention they still call their own.

This raises a fascinating and vital question: Which presents the greatest threat to the Baptist General Convention of Texas—adversity created by the competing convention or apathy within our own ranks?

Despite accepted wisdom to the contrary, the two problems are related

organically.

## **Holy War 2.0?**

Fanning the fear of fundamentalism doesn't work these days. Texas Baptists rallied to fight off the right-wing juggernaut that took control of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and '90s. Then, when Texans who wanted to maintain a tight bond with the reconfigured SBC formed their own state convention in 1998, the battle for the BGCT ended. They didn't need to take over our convention, because they had their own convention.

But as my friends noted, the battle moved to the congregational level, where it remains. The strength of both state conventions will be determined, at least in part, by how churches decide to affiliate.

Some BGCT Baptists want to fight Holy War 2.0 by arguing with supporters of the other convention over worn-out accusations of orthodoxy. To mix a couple of mammal metaphors: That dog won't hunt, because arguing theology is like mud-wrestling a pig. The pig actually likes it.

## **Better vision**

So, rather than continuing decades-old "are too/am not" debates, the best way to keep the other convention from taking our churches is to offer those churches a better vision. At root, most churches don't want to split theological hairs. They want to reach people with the gospel and minister to hurting folks in Jesus' name. The best way to ensure they stick with the BGCT is to present the most compelling, winsome vision. Convince them they can fulfill the Great Commission and follow the Great Commandment best by partnering with the BGCT.

Not surprisingly, that's also the answer to the BGCT's enormous apathy problem. Low attendance at the annual meetings is Exhibit A that more and

more churches have found the convention uninspiring. Many—probably most—still get fired up about spreading the gospel and helping the hurting. But they’ve increasingly found other avenues to do it. Support for the convention and its programs has eroded because they believe those other avenues are both more effective and more efficient.

Some defenders of the convention fault these churches for charting their own quasi-cooperative courses. To be fair, “What’s in it for me?” afflicts middle-class churches as vociferously as it afflicts middle-class families. But still, the ultimate onus is on the convention to demonstrate it casts the best vision and offers churches the greatest opportunity for fulfilling their vision.

How does the BGCT do that? Now, you’re asking a great question. Here’s one answer, in four parts:

**Admit less is more.**

During a long period of stagnation, the BGCT has downsized often, but rarely strategically. In an era when the convention cannot do everything, it must budget wisely. This means deciding to do fewer things—the best, most needful things—and doing them excellently. That demands making hard, painful decisions whose return in blessing is a long time coming.

**Prioritize ruthlessly.**

When deciding on the programs, ministries and institutions it maintains, the BGCT should ask: What is most needful for advancing God’s kingdom in Texas? Also, what can we do excellently that no one else is capable of doing or willing to do? What are we uniquely qualified to do that won’t get done if we don’t do it?

**Embrace DNA.**

As this year's annual meeting theme—"Deep Roots: Living Legacy"—illustrated, Baptists' distinctive beliefs provide a deep and durable foundation for unity and togetherness. Baptists aren't the only Christians who embrace these distinctives, but the way we historically ordered and prioritized them created our unique DNA. They are myriad, and they include compelling qualities and virtues, such as belief in soul competency and the priesthood of all believers, congregational autonomy, religious liberty and separation of church and state, compassionate evangelism and redemptive ministry, and more.

Also, Texas Baptists still champion a historic virtue that has eroded on both the right and the left. We're still a "big tent" convention that believes there is room enough for a broad range of beliefs and practices. Frankly, this characteristic is threatened by some Texas Baptists who are intimidated by the right and afraid of the left. But if we stick to our DNA, we will find a way to maintain a broad range of relationships.

### **Contemporize cooperation.**

Cooperation, a Baptist hallmark for 90 years, has fallen out of vogue. To restore its vitality and set its priorities, the BGCT must focus on the necessary programs, ministries and institutions that require cooperation. Many wonderful services and endeavors are available from others, and many ministries can be accomplished by congregations or small groups. But what are the big tasks that won't get done if we don't do them—together?

That's an aspirational question. It's a big-vision question. It's a question capable of pulling us up from apathy and back into partnership. It's a question that can challenge large and/or strong churches to work alongside others. It's a question that can inspire small and/or weak churches to team up with others.

It's a question capable of leading Baptists to a vision big enough for Texas and grand enough for God.