Editorial: Have conventions reached the end of their usefulness?

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Have conventions reached the end of their usefulness?

If that question doesn't chill you, you may not be employed by one.

Such a question understandably makes convention executives nervous. They work hard to keep conventions together. Questioning the usefulness of a convention seems to threaten the usefulness of their efforts.

Not only are convention executives nervous about the question. Convention personnel also might prefer it not be voiced. Their jobs could be on the line. So, yes, resistance to the question is understandable.

Nevertheless.

The question pertains to Baptist conventions and has needed to be asked long before now. The Southern Baptist Convention's current situation makes answering the question imperative for that convention. Other conventions would be wise to answer it more proactively.

Determining a convention's usefulness includes answering at least a few questions about purpose: (1) Why did conventions form in the first place; what purpose were they to serve? (2) Does that purpose still exist? (3) Is a convention the best or only way to achieve that purpose now?

Answering the first question is easy on the mind and the heart. Debate ensues with the second question. The third may lead to apoplexy or despair—or a bright and exciting future.

Why did conventions form?

Conventions—and associations before them—took shape as a means of pooling resources to engage in more missions than individual churches or associations of churches could do alone. Paul Stripling asserts in his book on Baptist associations, “They realized the simple concept that by cooperating formally, more could be accomplished *together* than through separate sister congregations” (*Turning Points in the History of Baptist Associations in America*, p. 5, emphasis in original).

Looking at the formation of the Philadelphia Baptist Association in 1707, Stripling points to the desire to protect Baptist doctrinal fidelity, foster evangelism and provide fellowship as reasons for its formation.

Over time, the desire arose for connections beyond the local context, eventually leading to the formation of a national Baptist convention—the Triennial Convention—in 1814, and the first state convention in South Carolina in 1821. The state and national conventions served the same purpose as local associations but on larger scales.

To its shame, the Southern Baptist Convention formed in 1845 as a reaction against the mission societies of the Triennial Convention rejecting slaveholders as missionaries. Thus was introduced a new purpose for the formation of a Baptist convention—to accept slaveholders as missionaries and money derived from slavery as mission funding.

One thing conventions never overcame, however, is local and regional peculiarities, needs and priorities. As American society becomes increasingly diverse, polarized and potentially balkanized, will national and state conventions be the best and most appropriate way to pool resources? Or have they reached the end of their usefulness in such a context? Or does their purpose need to shift to address secular divisions that have infected the church?

Does the original purpose still exist?

• Can churches still accomplish more by working together? Yes.
• Do Baptist doctrine and distinctives still need to be preserved? Yes, but not without examination.
• Are fellowship, evangelism and missions still important? Yes.
• Can these purposes be accomplished outside of conventions?

Do you want me to answer that last question?

Given that the original purpose still exists—at least in large measure—it is a problem that the survival of things like conventions naturally becomes an exercise in self-protection and self-preservation. The problem lies in the conflict between *self*-preservation and the call to *serve others*, purposes which tend to compete against each other.

Is a convention the best or only way?

I don't know the answer to this question, but I do know ministry leaders and churches are asking it, and conventions better pay attention.

One way leaders and churches have been and are answering this touchy question is by forming their own connections and networks outside, alongside or instead of participating in conventions. Interestingly, those "other" connections often are local.

Conventions, being highly crystallized—or calcified—structures with immense overhead, ought to study the initial focus, fluidity and responsiveness of networks. The latter is much more attractive to newer churches and younger leaders than the former. How can conventions become more focused, fluid and responsive?

Conventions, which must appease a broad constituency, ought to study

networks' focus on local needs, peculiarities and narrower priorities. Maintaining broad connections seems less likely and more taxing amid our increasing tribalism. Yet, doing so may be conventions' most important contribution.

Facing our fear

We're all at least a little apprehensive about the chaos and uncertainty that fills the void of change in or the decline of stable institutions. But our fear won't stop change from happening, nor will it stave off the inherent uncertainty.

We do better to ask the question and to answer it honestly.

Have conventions reached the end of their usefulness?

If questioning the usefulness of a thing makes its chief promoters nervous, it may be because they aren't able to answer what that thing is useful for. Or maybe their answer isn't clear, compelling or convincing—even to themselves.

If conventions have passed their shelf life, we better get on to the next thing. If they haven't, we better communicate clearly, compellingly and convincingly just what their usefulness is.

It's not just conventions that need to face this question. Every institution—including the Baptist Standard—needs to be ready to answer it.

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