

2nd Opinion: Are denominational bodies doomed?

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Recent news stories describing the massive layoffs at the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board, the nearly 50 percent downsizing of the Florida Baptist Convention staff, the continued erosion of financial support for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the sell-off by state conventions of facilities now too large for shrunken staff all confirm what is becoming obvious.



Bill Wilson We are witnessing the beginning of the end for Baptist denominational entities as we have known them. Following the lead of mainline judicatories, Baptist bodies—local, state, regional and national—are in free-fall.

Not surprisingly, the primary culprit is a decline in funding from local churches. As traditional churches have struggled to attract attenders and funds in the 21st century, more and more of their resources are kept at home to pay bills, employ staff, do local ministry, etc. The ensuing reduction of funds to local, state and national bodies has led to a funding crisis unlike anything they have known.

In Southern Baptist life, many county or regional associations no longer can afford staff, and those who do are operating at a minimal level.

Consolidation and mergers with neighboring groups are the norm.

Contractions will only increase

Declining receipts from churches and increasing pressure from the national body to forward a larger percentage of receipts up-stream are squeezing state conventions and associations. The result is massive “reorganizations” and huge reductions in staff and services. Most state conventions have reduced their staff by 33 percent to 50 percent since 2000. As reserves are exhausted, those contractions will only increase.

The national SBC similarly reports discouraging numbers, with last year seeing the lowest receipts since 1990, and the largest decline in attendance in 130 years. Recent years have seen huge layoffs occurring at the North American Mission Board and the IMB.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship fares even worse, with receipts last year of \$12.4 million, compared to \$16.9 million in 2000. That decrease, combined with a 38.5 percent inflation rate over those years, means a financial position that has been reduced by nearly 50 percent.

As denominational mission boards have scaled back on appointing fully funded missionaries (CBF has not appointed a fully funded missionary since 2006, and many IMB missionaries are self-funded), the obvious result has been those self-funded missionaries appeal to local churches and church members for support. Add the strategy of encouraging churches to adopt and support individual missionaries, areas and specific mission projects, and the cannibalizing of congregational support has had its inevitable impact. More dollars directly to missionaries and customized projects means fewer dollars to the denomination.

Competition for funds

The ensuing feeding frenzy for limited dollars in congregational budgets is

met with a less-than-enthusiastic response from stressed pastors and finance committees. The appeals bring to mind the onerous days of “societal giving,” in which various entities competed for limited dollars and attention from local churches. Frustration with that system led, of course, to the creation of the Cooperative Program in 1925.

Clearly, American churches are entering the last stages of the “institutional denominational era” that has dominated much of American religious life since the early 20th century. As we do, local, state and national denominational bodies will play an increasingly smaller role in the life of local churches. The erosion of their services and support will have a significant impact on the life of congregations.

Some results include:

- Congregations that have depended upon denominational bodies to provide a vision to guide their work and approach to ministry soon will find themselves adrift without clear plans or strategies.
- Training and teaching events will continue to diminish.
- When churches do ask denominational bodies for help, the help often will be subpar or simply will be a referral to another entity, usually with a price tag attached.
- Local churches of all persuasions will grow independent and even nondenominational without the denominational bodies to hold them together.
- Affinity groups will exert an increasing influence upon churches that find more relevant and quality help from them (Leadership Network, Willow Creek Network, Catalyst, Habitat for Humanity, the Center for Healthy Churches, etc.) than from their denominational bodies.

- A new era of entrepreneurship and innovation will emerge as congregations cast off denominational boundaries and explore creative solutions to pressing issues.
- Denominational appeals and pressure upon congregational giving will amp up as funds continue to decrease.
- Traditional churches will continue to close with regularity, even as church planting continues to expand.
- Lean, innovative groups will emerge to provide effective help to congregations.

The critical question remains unanswered: Will the surviving bits and pieces of denominational bodies coalesce into relevant sources of help and guidance to congregations and the missionary enterprise? As we anticipate thousands of local churches closing in the next 20 years and many thousands of new church plants beginning, all inundated by missionaries looking for support, we need to recognize a fundamental shift in congregational life is under way.

Will denominational bodies be able to morph into a valuable resource for those who survive? The odds appear long for most of them. Lean, visionary, future-focused and humble denominational bodies at least have a chance.

Bill Wilson is director of the [Center for Healthy Churches](#), which distributes his column.