

From the Baptist Standard, February 23, 2000

Claims of SBTC literature don't match well-documented facts

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In addition to the literature of Texas Baptist Laymen's Association and Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association, other similar pieces written by various individuals have been circulated around Texas in recent months.

One of the newest is from Ronnie Yarber, a founder and staff member of the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. Yarber, a former Dallas pastor, also serves as interim editor of SBTC's publication, the Southern Baptist Texan.

His 10-page typewritten piece is titled "A Historical Perspective: An Opinion Paper on the Reason for the Birth of the New Southern Baptists of Texas Convention."

Here are some of the claims he makes, contrasted with the facts of the situation as reported in the Standard and other Baptist publications.

Yarber: "1995--The BGCT leadership recommended changing the Cooperative Program giving formula for SBC causes from 63 percent to 67 percent for Texas and 37 percent to 33 percent for the SBC. This 4 percent reduction alone created a \$1.4 million shortfall of funds for the Cooperative Program going to the SBC."

Facts: Messengers to the BGCT annual session in 1995 did adopt a change in the percentage split of Cooperative Program funds between Texas and the SBC. The shift was 2.5 points, not 4 points as Yarber reports.

The portion retained in Texas changed from 64.5 percent to 67 percent. The portion forwarded to the SBC changed from 35.5 percent to 33 percent. This recommendation was made on the basis of Texas being one of the world's great mission fields, with the additional Texas funding to be used for starting new churches.

The SBC did not suffer a shortfall in missions funding in the corresponding budget year (1996-97), but instead registered a 4.6 percent increase. The amount of Cooperative Program money the BGCT forwarded to the SBC in the corresponding budget year also increased 7.81 percent (\$1.5 million), according to the SBC's own records.

Yarber: "1996--The BGCT leadership unilaterally redirected the World Hunger Offering from the churches to be shared with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, dispersed funds directly from the BGCT to other states, bypassing NAMB."

Facts: In 1996, the BGCT Executive Board (a 200-member body) voted to change the way hunger funds--always a designated offering apart from Cooperative Program--were distributed. The hunger offering, previously split 80 percent to the SBC International Mission Board and 20 percent to the SBC North American Mission Board, had been declining in contributions both in Texas and nationwide.

Under the new plan, Texas took grant requests from a variety of ministries dealing with hunger issues. Even though the IMB refused to participate with the Texas appeal, the BGCT gave the IMB \$335,000 in hunger funds in 1998.

Once the change in the hunger offering was made, Texas Baptists' gifts to the offering increased dramatically, gaining 18 percent the first year. Churches and individuals remained free to send offerings directly to the SBC, IMB or NAMB.

Yarber: "1996--An amendment requiring Southern Baptist churches in Texas to give a certain amount (a 'poll tax') to BGCT in order to allow messengers from the churches to participate in voting was presented and then failed in the Fort Worth convention meeting. The same motion was resubmitted in 1998 at the Houston convention and was passed. Therefore, churches must meet a certain financial obligation in order to participate in the annual convention sessions."

Facts: A motion was made from the floor of the 1996 convention to this effect, and it was defeated. The same idea, but not the same motion, was included in the broad report and recommendations of the BGCT's Effectiveness and Efficiency Committee in 1997.

The change was approved on first reading that year and on second reading in 1998. The change is similar to a long-standing requirement in the SBC, which also bases messenger representation on a church's giving during the previous year. Even with the change in the BGCT, every affiliated church is entitled to at least two messengers regardless of the church's giving level or membership.

Yarber: "1999--A proposal was made by the BGCT to contract with Smyth & Helwys Publishing to produce BGCT literature. Heretofore, Southern Baptist churches have used LifeWay Christian Resources literature."

Facts: The BGCT never solicited Smyth & Helwys to produce literature, said Bernie Spooner, director of the BGCT Bible study/discipleship division. When plans were being made to launch a new line of Texas Bible study literature, Smyth & Helwys came to the BGCT with a proposal, which was rejected.

While a majority of Southern Baptist churches historically have used literature published by LifeWay, churches of all political persuasions have turned to a variety of publishers for literature in the last 10 to 20 years.