

First Person: What's going on at the North American Mission Board?

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Arinder

There seem to be some very serious problems at the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board (NAMB).

The backstory: Some good Mississippi Baptists

During my college years at Mississippi State University (the 80's), I had the opportunity to meet Sandy Vandevender. We were both very much entrenched into the culture and ministries of the Baptist Student Union. As it often goes in college, Sandy met and fell in love with Will McRaney, a football and baseball player at MSU and a fine Christian man. Sandy and Will married and began a life of full time Christian service together. Will went on to earn master's and Ph.D degrees and became a professor of evangelism at New Orleans Seminary. He later became the executive director of the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware (BCMD). This is the comparable position held by Shawn Parker, executive director-treasurer of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board. My concerns about NAMB come primarily from what Will and Sandy have brought to light in their ongoing legal dispute with Kevin Ezell, the president of OUR North American Mission Board. If what the McRaney's

allege is true, then we have very serious issues in OUR home mission board.

Arguing positions in court that are contrary to SBC polity

I am shocked by the apparent position that the NAMB attorneys are arguing in federal court. Their position is diametrically opposed to all stated Baptist polity and our legal Southern Baptist Convention Constitution (see Article IV, sbc.net/about/what-we-do/legal-documentation/constitution/) and is contrary to all historic Baptist traditions and models of denominational structure. Furthermore, I am seriously concerned with the fact that the SBC and its trustees are allowing this line of legal rationale to proceed unquestioned.

The allegations

Will alleges that Kevin Ezell improperly influenced BCMD to have him (Will) fired. This influence was allegedly exerted by NAMB by way of threat to withhold funds from BCMD and conversely with a carrot of promised funds if they fired Will. Please understand that Will is not arguing the legal right of BCMD to fire him, even without cause. He is arguing that a board of OUR convention, in a top down measure of power and control, stepped into the business of a state convention and improperly influenced that convention to fire its executive director. This would be equal to Kevin Ezell interfering in our own Mississippi Baptist Convention by having Shawn Parker fired. Remember, executive directors are hired, paid, given office space, and report to the state conventions that hired them – not the SBC and certainly not a board of the SBC.

If this allegation is true, then this is a major attack on an autonomous state convention by the SBC itself. As to the veracity of this allegation, Will is not the only state convention executive that is crying foul. Bobby Gilstrap, the former executive director of the Baptist State Convention of

Michigan, is telling the same story about Ezell and NAMB (vimeo.com/391589309). Will goes on to allege that Ezell, after having him fired, then actively worked to keep him out of future employment. As I understand the situation, Will and Sandy have tried and are still trying to resolve this matter according to biblical principles. To date, apparently, Ezell refuses to meet with them.

Ascending and descending liability

My biggest concern is the legal jeopardy that this poses to the SBC. NAMB is apparently arguing in court that they have ecclesiastical "privilege" to act as they have acted as it pertains to these state conventions. If they win in court, then the autonomy of the local church, the autonomy of our local pastors, and our state conventions and their employees are greatly threatened. Under the doctrine of ascending liability, if NAMB has the right to govern in the affairs of the state conventions, then conversely it is also legally responsible for anything that happens in those conventions it governs. This line of legal reasoning is unprecedented and contrary to what the SBC has argued in court many times over, and it places our SBC in grave legal jeopardy.

For example, if a child were to drown at one of our state-managed campgrounds and negligence could be proven, then the entire SBC could be held legally responsible. In organizations where the leadership is legally structured top down, like the Catholic Church or the Boy Scouts of America, this is precisely the legal position they are in. Not so in Southern Baptist polity. If a church staff member is found guilty of some indiscretion, then the church is liable and not the convention. The SBC does not hire, direct, or supervise church staff members or state convention employees. The SBC does not own the land nor the buildings of our 47,000 autonomous churches, nor our state conventions. The churches who voluntarily agree to support and form the SBC are separate and legally autonomous institutions.

Similarly, the SBC has no legal or managerial authority over state conventions. However, if NAMB successfully argues that they have managerial “privilege” (their word used in the legal proceedings) over state conventions, then they are also necessarily liable for what happens under their watch. So, I am shocked at the legal position that NAMB and its trustees are taking. I am more shocked that the NAMB attorneys are even being allowed by the SBC president and SBC executive committee to argue policies dangerous to the SBC. Where is Ronnie Floyd and the SBC executive committee? My fear is that our SBC that is supposed to run bottom up, with our state conventions and boards serving our churches, has been turned upside down. Leadership and power have been centralized and authority is being exercised top down.

A growing chorus

One could argue that this is just a personal matter between the McRaney’s and Kevin Ezell, but evidence is building to the contrary. What happened to Will has happened in other state conventions as well, and is happening now. The executive directors of six state conventions penned a letter Aug. 12 basically stating that Ezell has cancelled all partnerships with their conventions (christianindex.org/6-state-conventions-namb-cooperative-agreements/). They claim that as it relates to church planting, Ezell is trying to cut out the work of the state conventions and is trying to centralize it all under NAMB, and is exerting political and financial pressure to do so. Notice also that this tactic is not being applied to big state conventions like Mississippi, but smaller and more financially vulnerable state conventions. Will is not alone in sounding the alarm; he is just the guy who first picked up the bugle and has blown it the loudest and the longest, and with the most facts in support of his position.

A revealing few words

Interestingly enough, NAMB responded to the letter that the

six state executives penned. One part of their response further proves the point. In their written response to the six state convention executives, NAMB called itself an "autonomous" organization. Nothing is more telling and farther from the truth. Organizationally, NAMB is a board of the SBC, which in turn is made up of the 47,000 Baptist churches who have agreed to partner to form the SBC. The SBC and its boards serve and answer to the churches, and not the other way around. NAMB is most assuredly not an autonomous organization. If it is, we no longer have our convention, but rather our convention has us.

Respectfully submitted for your information, consideration, discussion, and action.

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