

Texas Baptists hit by financial scandal: Leader Charles Wade feels heat

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Rank-and-file Texas Baptists are angry about a huge financial scandal in the Rio Grande Valley that has marred their reputation. But most say they still trust their leaders—including executive director Charles Wade—to correct abuses and restore confidence in the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

That message emerged from the BGCT's annual meeting November 13-14 in Dallas, as messengers (delegates) turned back several attempts to take the matter out of the hands of Wade and the convention's executive board.

"I think Dr. Wade is going to come out of this all right, and I think he should," said Lou Balenton, pastor of New Trinity Baptist Church in Plainview, as he left the convention hall. "He's a man of integrity. I believe there should be some reprimands for staff members, but not for Dr. Wade."

An investigative team hired by the executive board reported October 31 that more than \$1.3 million in start-up funding and monthly support was given to three pastors in the Rio Grande Valley who reported 258 church starts between 1999 and 2005. Investigators presented evidence that up to 98 percent of those churches no longer exist—and that some never existed except on paper—raising the possibility that the three pastors pocketed most of the money.

Other revelations suggest that an alleged pattern of deception by one of them, Otto Arango, was repeated south of the border—in Mexico and South America—where he also peddled his church-planting expertise and training materials. Other organizations besides the BGCT donated to the work of Arango's church-planting institute.

The BGCT investigation also revealed that the convention's staff was aware of some of the allegations years ago but ignored or downplayed them, prompting some critics to accuse Wade and others of a cover-up. Two staffers already have resigned. Some BGCT insiders expected the scandal to force Wade to announce his retirement sooner than planned—perhaps even at this year's convention.

But most of the messengers to the Dallas convention accepted the apologies offered by Wade and the remedies initiated by him and the executive board. Wade asked Texas Baptists for a chance to “fix what has been broken,” and he promised, “Your trust will not be breached.”

Unconvinced was David Montoya, a blogger and pastor who has led the chorus of Wade's critics. Montoya asked the convention to amend its constitution to give messengers the authority to terminate the executive director without executive board approval. And he called for the BGCT to pursue immediate legal action and criminal charges against the church planters who allegedly falsified reports and benefited from the diverted funds.

“In a crisis like this, it should be the will of the convention that is heard,” said Montoya, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Mineral Wells. He said the board was biased and guilty of shielding Wade.

According to the original investigation, in 2000 the FBI explored fraud allegations in connection with church-starting in the Valley, but the agency dropped its probe because the aggrieved party—the BGCT—did not pursue it.

Montoya accused Wade of being “a possible accessory to an attempted cover up” and “a personal friend of the main player in this scandal”—church planter and accused ringleader Arango.

Michael Bell, BGCT president and presiding officer of the session, stopped Montoya in the middle of his speech and ruled him out of order. “That's not appropriate,” said Bell, a pastor in Fort Worth. “We are Christians and don't do personal attacks.” - *Associated Baptist Press*