

From the Baptist Standard, August 27, 2001

Settle denominational identity before calling a pastor, Daehnert advises

By Mark Wingfield
Managing Editor

If a church is uncertain about its denominational identity, members ought to settle that question before calling a new pastor.

That is the strong recommendation of Jan Daehnert, director of the Baptist General



Convention of Texas' minister-church relations office.

Churches that expect to wait and let a new pastor tell them what to believe are asking for trouble, he warned.

To ignore the issue is dangerous for the church and unfair to the new pastor, Daehnert explained.

"You need to take care of that before the pastor comes. Decide what you believe. Tell the pastoral candidate, 'This is what we believe.'"

Likewise, pastor search committees should make sure candidates know and can express where they stand on denominational issues, Daehnert suggested. "Ask candidates where they stand on issues, and ask their references too."

Search committees should beware if a pastoral candidate says he has no opinion on the controversial matters that have divided Baptists over the last 20 years and have led to creation of a competing state convention in Texas, he asserted. "If he doesn't have any feeling about it, any opinion, I'd be worried."

"This is a day when churches are not wanting fence-sitters."

Daehnert has seen firsthand evidence of Texas Baptist pastor search committees being wooed by individuals with political agendas. And it's churches that haven't worked through a process to determine what they believe that are vulnerable to such approaches, he added.

In such cases, churches may be approached by prominent individuals who stop by in person, phone or write letters to say they know just who God wants to be the pastor there.

Such recommendations, often based on claims of doctrinal purity, are appealing to church members who don't want to have to think through matters for themselves, Daehnert acknowledged. "There are Baptist churches and ministers who are more Presbyterian than Baptist. They really believe somebody needs to perform a doctrinal accountability test outside the church, that somebody needs to help a church make that decision."

Often, this is driven by a deep-seated fear of liberalism, he added. "There's such a fear today of the influence of the pagan world ..., so we're going to find a way to confront anything that looks liberal."

While agreeing with the desire to fend off true liberalism, Daehnert urges Texas Baptist churches to remember what it means to be Baptist.

"We've never in the past allowed an outside body to determine what a church ought to be," he noted.

"Baptists have always believed that individual believers and local churches determine theology, not county, state or national Baptist bodies. When others determine theology, even when there is a fear of liberalism, we cease being Baptists. Pastor search committees need to keep that in mind, because some pastors do not agree with this approach."