

Commentary: It's 2018. Why can't we attend the SBC convention remotely?

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As a young pastor, only a few years out of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, I was excited to accept the call to serve a small church in Durant, Oklahoma. The church had been a strong, mission engaged church that was giving 25% of all undesignated offerings through the Cooperative Program. This church was an area leader supporting the cooperative mission causes of the Southern Baptist Convention, giving sacrificially for many decades.

In 1995, as the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention approached, I discussed attending the SBC Annual Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia with our church leadership. The premise of my argument was that this church needed to have a voice since it had given tens of thousands of dollars over decades of cooperation. With such a high cooperative investment, we should have representation during the annual meeting when decisions were made by messengers of our convention. After a brief discussion, it was determined the cost of such a trip was just too high and it was not feasible.

I felt it was critical that our church have first-hand representation and a voice at the annual meeting rather than reading short meeting reports in the media. Therefore, my wife and I decided that we would personally pay for the trip. I made reservations, paid for tickets and prepared to attend.

I flew into Atlanta late on the Sunday night before the annual meeting, taking the MARTA rail system to a bus station. After making two more bus

transfers, I was dropped off about one-half mile from my hotel, in a very seedy part of Atlanta. I took my luggage and walked by two strip joint bars to reach my hotel. No doubt, I could have been an easy target for a criminal while carrying my luggage in the darkness of night. Although the hotel was 45 minutes by bus from the convention center, the cost was all our personal budget would allow. Thankfully, as I walked to the bus stop the next morning, several men were carpooling to the annual meeting and offered me a ride.

Upon my return home, I took a Wednesday night service and reported to our church on the significant work of our convention. That year, landmark actions were made related to race relations and more. I was glad I made the personal sacrifice to attend, in spite of the difficulties. Reporting to my church was my practice throughout the years since I was their voice at the annual meeting.

Most years since that 1995 annual meeting, I have attended the SBC annual meeting. Many times, it was a great financial strain. In the few years I have not attended, it has not been due to schedule but usually due to budget restraints.

The majority of churches across our Southern Baptist Convention do not have the budget to send representatives (messengers) to the various locations hosting our annual meeting. Most Southern Baptist Churches do not give 25% to the Cooperative Program like that church I served. Nor do most churches give like another Oklahoma church I later served which gave 30.25% through the Cooperative Program. Although it was a much larger church, the same financial discussions took place. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were given to support the SBC cooperative ministry, yet it was a strain to send their pastor or other representatives to have a voice in the process at the SBC annual meeting.

During those years, the technology was not present to allow remote, secure

voting and participation. In today's world, it is more than possible to set up locations for viewing and voting as active participants for any annual meeting, regardless of meeting location. Thousands of church members and pastors would drive across their local area to their associational office or a host church to participate in the process, if only it were available.

When we have elections for local, state or national leaders and issues, I can drive six miles from my home to cast my ballot. I can prepare and be well informed in a variety of ways through local media and web communication. There are no social or economic restrictions hindering my participation.

In my 37 years of ministry, the largest majority of pastors and churches where I have served have been unable to afford the travel, lodging and meals for attendance at the annual meeting of our convention. The time has come when our convention needs to make the necessary changes for involving churches all over our country. At present, most normative sized churches (under 175 in attendance) are restricted by distance and limited funds from having a voice in our convention business.

Every church that sacrifices to support our cooperative mission efforts through our Cooperative Program should have the opportunity to participate in the process. The day has arrived when our convention of churches needs to make it possible for the normative sized congregation to send their messengers to a local meeting place to watch convention reports, business sessions and vote on convention business.

Do you think that Southern Baptists can make it possible for every church to have a voice as active participants in our convention? My answer is a resounding "YES!" Every voice matters. I believe that the time is now. Let us value the voice of every cooperative church. We can make it happen.

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