

Feb. 3, 2016

NAMB Trustees and SBC Leaders,

I am sending you this letter because of your leadership role within the Southern Baptist Convention (“SBC”) and your responsibility as it relates to North American Mission Board (“NAMB”) President Kevin Ezell, a man who holds a critical position within our Convention. I have served as a pastor, a church planter, a SBC seminary faculty member, and as a staff member of two state conventions for 29 years. After seeking counsel from several SBC leaders, I bring matters to your attention as it relates to Dr. Ezell’s actions toward me in my capacity as Executive Director of the Maryland/Delaware (“MD/DE”) Convention, a position I held until June 2015. I have not addressed this with you until now so as not to potentially violate my severance agreement with the MD/DE Convention.

As detailed below, when Dr. Ezell disagreed with my decisions as Executive Director, he informed the Convention that he would withhold money from the Convention as long as I remained Executive Director. Dr. Ezell pressured the Convention over a series of months, interfering with our affairs, thereby undermining and damaging my position as the executive leader, which resulted in my forced resignation in lieu of termination. He acted against me personally and against the MD/DE Convention, damaging me, my family, the Maryland/Delaware Convention, and the mission of the SBC. Furthermore, Dr. Ezell has similarly strong-armed other state convention partners and executive directors, repeatedly damaging the relationships between the state conventions and NAMB/SBC.

## **I. The Relationship Between NAMB and the MD/DE Convention**

The MD/DE Convention is a mid-size state convention consisting of 560 churches and ranked #4 of 42 state conventions for highest percentage forwarded to the SBC, annually contributing approximately \$900,000 to NAMB and \$1.9 million to the IMB through the Cooperative Program and other offerings. NAMB annually averaged returning to the MD/DE Convention \$960,000 for evangelism and mission efforts for the previous 10 years.

NAMB has historically partnered with state conventions. The Great Commission Resurgence adopted in 2010 set the goal for NAMB to “phase out all Cooperative Agreements within seven years.” Toward that end, like other state conventions, in 2012 NAMB and the MD/DE Convention entered into a new Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) which outlined how NAMB and the MD/DE Convention would work together to advance the gospel in the Mid-Atlantic region.

State conventions typically enter into agreements with church planters who wish to receive SBC funding. These agreements include a requirement that the church plant contribute to the Cooperative Program and the local association a percentage of the undesignated offerings received by the church plant. In August 2014, NAMB directed the Northeast Conventions to remove this requirement for church plants which receive SBC funds, even though this action undermined future mission efforts at the local level.

For 2015-2017, NAMB made a three-year financial commitment to MD/DE Convention as a part of their budgeting process so that states and NAMB could make better budget forecasting.

## **II. Dr. Ezell's Interference in the Affairs of the MD/DE Convention**

In late 2014, I was informed that Dr. Ezell had concerns about my leadership as Executive Director of the MD/DE Convention as it related to the partnership with NAMB. In October and November 2014, I wrote to him five times requesting a meeting to hear and address his concerns. In late November 2014, just before Thanksgiving, I received an email from Dr. Ezell where I first learned of his three issues he wished to address:

1. I had allegedly failed to return a phone call from a NAMB staff member.
2. I was requiring church planters receiving funds through the MD/DE Convention to reinvest 2% in local and regional church plants as a substitute for the previous 3% reinvestment removed by Dr. Ezell.
3. On two occasions I allegedly violated the hiring procedures in the SPA for jointly funded missionaries.

I wrote Dr. Ezell a detailed response to his concerns, addressing each one in detail, and expressed my desire for the MD/DE Convention to have a partnership with NAMB.

## **III. Dr. Ezell's Actions in Response to My Letter and the Impact of His Actions**

Despite my efforts to meet with Dr. Ezell, he refused to meet with me. On December 3, 2014, before the 2015-2017 budget period took effect, Dr. Ezell sent a SPA one-year cancellation notice to the MD/DE Convention, cancelling the strategic and historic financial partnership between NAMB and the MD/DE Convention effective December 3, 2015. Dr. Ezell took this action without consulting me, as required by the SPA. After a review of the facts, the three elected pastor/leaders of the MD/DE Convention and I reviewed Dr. Ezell's reasons for canceling the SPA, declared them to be false, and said so in a January 14, 2015 response to Dr. Ezell and the three NAMB Trustee officers. Dr. Ezell undermined the relationship between NAMB and the MD/DE Convention by communicating with MD/DE Convention President Dr. Bill Warren, while refusing to meet with me and putting in writing false accusations against me as Executive Director as his reason to cancel the SPA.

On February 6, 2015, the MD/DE Convention General Mission Board (GMB) met to consider Dr. Ezell's claims and cancellation of the SPA. During that meeting, GMB President Mark Dooley and Administrative Committee Chair Harold Phillips declared Dr. Ezell's allegations to be false and noted that NAMB had violated the SPA in numerous ways. The Board also voted unanimously to affirm my leadership and support my handling of NAMB matters. Finally, the Board voted to not accept NAMB's offer to cancel the agreement of joint responsibility and joint funding of church planting in favor of NAMB's desire to take 100% ownership in various aspects of church planting (in essence the nationalization of church planting efforts). Ezell sent a threatening text message to a Board member during this meeting which was read aloud

to the Board. Later that day, Dr. Ezell finally told Dr. Warren he would meet with a small group of MD/DE leaders (including me,) on March 11, 2015.

When Dr. Ezell arrived in March, he refused to meet the local staff or engage with anyone not participating in the meeting. During the meeting he agreed to not withhold all funds from the Convention at the end of 2015, as he had written he would do. Instead, he said he would cut the MD/DE funding to \$500,000 (in half), and imposed the restriction that no NAMB money could go to jointly funded state staff. This effectively removed NAMB funds for seven current staff and a total of eight positions, imposing enormous pressure on and fear in the MD/DE staff and elected leaders.

In my view, Dr. Ezell acted inappropriately in at least the following ways:

He falsely told the MD/DE Convention leadership that he had repeatedly tried to meet with me, despite the multiple emails reflecting my efforts to meet with him.

He interfered with my leadership of the MD/DE Convention by falsely accusing me of violating the SPA's hiring procedures.

He sent a text message to a MD/DE Convention Board member during a February 2015 meeting threatening to withhold all future NAMB funding from the MD/DE Convention, a text message which was read aloud and recorded at that meeting.

He orchestrated my termination as Executive Director of the MD/DE Convention by tying future SBC resources to my removal. This threatened loss of funds caused the Convention to rush my termination in violation of our governing documents such that the entire process took only six days, despite a positive employment affirmation only a few months earlier (Feb. 2015). The Convention President acknowledged that he loved my wife and me, but noted that he "believed our cooperation with NAMB was not something we should lose."

He restored financial support to the Convention shortly after my termination, thereby confirming his pivotal role in the process. In fact, the Convention was rewarded with a new NAMB agreement which contained additional funding, reportedly almost doubling Dr. Ezell's March 2015 commitment, causing one former elected pastor/leader of the Convention to write that I had been "sold out" for NAMB money.

Termination Process: Drs. Ezell and Warren remained in contact as Dr. Warren drove the termination process. Warren did so around me and Admin. Chairman Phillips, in violation of policies written and promises made, and with Ezell's threat against me hidden.

- *June 8, 2015* -- To my shock, Phillips and Board member Mike Trammel informed me of my termination. When I inquired as to the accusations or causes of my termination, Trammel immediately replied, "**There are none.**"

- *July 14, 2015* -- The MD/DE Board affirmed by letter, "it was not aware, either on the date of your resignation or today, of any allegation against you related to any illegal, immoral or unethical behaviors or acts."
- *September 10, 2015* -- Before me and six witnesses, Dr. Warren revealed that he told Trammel the morning after my termination that he (Warren) should become the next Executive Director.
  - Place: Trammel's home
  - Time: Before Warren drove to the Convention offices to share my resignation with the MD/DE staff.
- *October 26, 2015* -- Dr. Warren revealed by email that I had not been informed of the reasons for my termination. "Will should not have had to wait for weeks (months?) to learn what those reasons were."

#### **IV. The Impact of Dr. Ezell's Actions on Other State Conventions**

In the wake of my experience I have learned that Dr. Ezell violated cooperative agreements with *other* state conventions by making threats to withhold NAMB money in order to further his agenda, causing these state conventions and executive directors to further question whether Dr. Ezell will honor his word or written agreements, and to accept new agreements after my termination. According to written communications, Dr. Ezell has also reportedly imposed "gag orders" on state convention executives, threatening to withhold SBC funds if anyone says anything negative about Dr. Ezell or NAMB, or if anyone discloses the terms of an agreement between a state convention and NAMB.

Dr. Ezell's tactics have led a number of state and local leaders to say they "have had it" with NAMB. Some local and associational leaders are disengaging. Some executives are reconsidering their positions regarding the most effective way to fund mission efforts across North American, especially in the non-southern states. Many of these executives may hesitate to speak out due to fear of damaging NAMB or fear of retaliation by Dr. Ezell, but I am hopeful they will speak with you at your request. Collectively there is a growing concern that the fabric of the SBC is being unraveled and will have long-term negative impact on future cooperative mission efforts.

Despite Dr. Ezell's contention in a November 13, 2015, *Baptist Press* article that claimed state partnerships with NAMB were strong, state conventions have been systematically strong-armed in ways that are unraveling the fabric of cooperative missions. Not only are partnerships not strong, many describe them as not partnerships at all. A long-term Executive Director from the South recently noted in writing, "Partnership is dead in the SBC." The past and future mission impact of the SBC is dependent upon a cooperative spirit and mutual respect among the local, state, and national levels.

Under Dr. Ezell's leadership, NAMB has also used mission dollars intended for the most under-evangelized population centers of the U.S. to entice the newer conventions to bow to NAMB's national priorities and to increasingly adopt NAMB's strategies rather than develop or continue with their own. Those who refuse to kowtow face the threat of defunding — the loss

of dollars originally given for use on the field, which means the loss of vital ministries among the newer convention churches.

A related issue is the accumulation of massive NAMB reserves, with \$400 million in assets and \$285 million in unrestricted reserves, despite SBC and NAMB governing documents restricting reserves to one-half of NAMB's annual budget. These reserves mean that local and state mission work is not being funded as it could be, and they are in stark contrast to Dr. Ezell's assertion in a November 2015 *Baptist Press* article: "Southern Baptists don't give sacrificially so that we can leave money unspent."

## V. Impact on SBC Mission Effectiveness

America is our mission field, one of the world's largest mission fields, and our base for global impact. According to SBC and NAMB Annual Reports and statistics:

- Baptisms among Southern Baptists are at 70 year lows.
- In spite of the national campaign and emphasis by Ezell/NAMB, the number of church starts has **decreased** by 592 per year over the last 5 years when compared to the previous 5 years.
  - SBC church plants are baptizing less than half of the national average of other denominations as reported in a research project conducted by NAMB.
  - NAMB is investing **twice** as many SBC mission dollars in the last 5 years, while defunding or eliminating other mission efforts in partnerships with states and associations.

## VI. Conclusion

While I have seen it firsthand, I am not the only one who has experienced Dr. Ezell's vindictive tactics. I write this letter at some risk to myself and my family. Proverbs 18:17 teaches us: "The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him," and former Congressman Daniel Moynihan is quoted as saying, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts." These facts need further investigation. Ignoring the problem will not make it go away.

Baptisms and local church plants are alarmingly decreasing, and I believe the problem is in part related to the interaction between NAMB and the state conventions. Furthermore, Dr. Ezell, in his role at NAMB, has damaged me financially and harmed my reputation. I respectfully request an investigation of the matters set forth in this letter, and that appropriate corrective actions be taken to correct what Dr. Ezell has done to me, my family, the MD/DE Convention, other state conventions, the North American Mission Board, and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Thank you.  
In truth and love,

Will McRaney