

WHO ARE SOUTHERN BAPTISTS?

Our History

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was organized on May 8, 1845 at the First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia. Before that time, most Baptists in America were part of one denomination, The Triennial Convention. A number of factors led to the formation of the SBC as a separate denomination, including a lack of mission money being spent in the South, a difference of opinion between southern and northern Baptists about how to best fund missions, and a disagreement about whether or not someone could serve as a missionary if he owned slaves. The last point shows how even missions-minded Southern Baptists were captive to the sins of their particular culture. In 1995, Southern Baptists publicly repented for the role that slavery played in the birth of the SBC.

A commitment to missions was at the heart of the new denomination from the very beginning. According to the convention's original constitution, the purpose of the SBC is "eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the whole denomination in one sacred effort, the propagation of the Gospel." To this end, the first thing the new SBC did was establish two mission boards. In later years, other boards and agencies were founded, almost all of them tied in some way to "the propagation of the Gospel" among all people.

Since 1845, the SBC has grown from 4100 cooperating churches with 352,000 members to 42,000 churches with over 16,000,000. Once a regional denomination, the SBC has become a national denomination with cooperating congregations in all fifty states. At present, the SBC is the largest Protestant denomination in America.

Our Structure

The Southern Baptist Convention is comprised of over 42,000 autonomous congregations that voluntarily choose to cooperate together for the purpose of missions, theological education, and redemptive cultural engagement. We cooperate because it is our conviction that we can accomplish more together than we can individually. Our cooperation takes place at a variety of levels, beginning with local geographic areas and extending to the entire nation. Our basic structure (what we call our "polity") is organized as follows:

The Local Church: In the SBC, the highest authority is the local Baptist church, an autonomous congregation under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Every other level of our polity is made up of the sum total of the local churches that choose to cooperate with each other. Each church decides their degree of involvement in each of the following entities, all of which exist to assist local churches in their mandate to make disciples of all nations.

The Association: Local Baptist associations are voluntary networks of local churches that minister within a relatively limited geographic area, most often a city or county. Associations typically help facilitate ministries like church planting, leadership training, evangelistic outreach, and mercy ministries. In some states, the associations voluntarily align themselves with state conventions, representing the state convention at the local level.

The State Convention: Baptist state conventions function much like associations, but in this case they cover an entire state or group of states. State conventions provide most of the same ministries as local associations, but on a larger scale. In addition, many state conventions also facilitate other ministries, like foreign missions and Christ-centered health care, as well as provide services that local associations do not always have the resources to provide, like retirement plans, ministry placement, and Christian higher education. As with local associations, the state convention is a voluntary network with no hierarchical authority over cooperating local churches or associations.

The Southern Baptist Convention: The SBC is a national convention that includes all churches that choose to contribute financially to its ministries and refuse to support the homosexual agenda. Officially, the SBC only exists for two days during the month of June, when the convention is in session. During the other 363 days a year, the convention's ministries are carried out by a number of agencies and boards, each of which represents the interests of the cooperating churches of the SBC. Like state conventions and associations, cooperation is voluntary and the SBC has no authority over local churches.

The Cooperative Program

Because each of these levels of polity is autonomous from each other, in 1925 the SBC created a central funding mechanism to create financial ties between local churches, state conventions, and the national SBC. The result is the Cooperative Program (CP), which provides the primary funding for Baptist agencies, boards, and ministries at both the state and national levels.

The CP begins in local churches, each of which chooses to forward a portion of their undesignated receipts to the state convention. Part of that forwarded money is used to fund the ministries of the state convention, and a percentage is forwarded to the national SBC, where it funds ministries at the national level. The original plan was for the CP to be split evenly between state conventions and the SBC, but the reality is most state conventions keep a vast majority of the CP funds in their respective state.

For example, in the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina churches choose between four giving plans. In two of these plans, the percentage forwarded to the SBC is 32.5%. Another plan forwards 10.5% to the SBC. The final plan forwards no money to the SBC. Most other state conventions keep between 55% and 65% of their CP dollars in state, with a couple of exceptions. Because of this imbalance, many Southern Baptist churches choose to forward a percentage of their undesignated receipts directly to the national SBC, bypassing the state convention completely.

Our Agencies and Boards

The Cooperative Program funds a number of agencies and boards, each of which is in some way committed to missions and is dedicated to serving all Southern Baptists. The CP-funded agencies are as follows:

The Executive Committee: The Executive Committee (EC) was established in 1917 as the legal entity that represents Southern Baptists when the SBC is in between annual sessions. For all practical purposes, the EC oversees the day-to-day operations of the denomination. The current president is Morris Chapman.

The International Mission Board: The International Mission Board (IMB) was established in 1845 under the name Foreign Mission Board. The IMB assesses, appoints, funds, and provides oversight for Southern Baptists who serve as foreign missionaries. Currently, the IMB sponsors over 5,000 missionaries. The current president is Jerry Rankin.

The North American Mission Board: The North American Mission Board (NAMB) was formed in 1997 when a number of earlier ministries, including a Home Mission Board, were consolidated. The NAMB coordinates North American mission efforts much as the IMB coordinates global mission efforts. The NAMB also assists Southern Baptists in such ministries as evangelism, chaplaincy, and disaster relief. The current president is Geoff Hammond.

Guidestone Financial Resources: Guidestone Financial Resources was established in 1918 as the Annuity Board of the SBC. Guidestone provides retirement and benefits for Southern Baptist ministers, missionaries, and denominational employees. The current president is O. S. Hawkins.

The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission: The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) was formed in 1997, though earlier entities had carried out the same responsibilities. The ERLC is the public policy arm of the SBC, representing the convention's interests in the political arena. The ERLC also helps Southern Baptists address moral issues from a biblical standpoint. The current president is Richard Land.

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary: Southern Seminary (SBTS) was founded in 1859 in Greenville, South Carolina. Now located in Louisville, Kentucky, SBTS is the oldest Southern Baptist seminary and one of the largest seminaries in the world. Over the years, SBTS has pioneered a number of seminary programs, including Christian Education and Pastoral Counseling. The current president is R. Albert Mohler Jr.

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary: Southwestern Seminary (SWBTS) was founded in 1908 in Waco, Texas. Now located in Fort Worth, Texas, SWBTS is the second oldest SBC seminary. SWBTS has always been known as a seminary that emphasized evangelism, and they helped pioneer seminary programs in Church Music and Youth Ministry. The current president is Paige Patterson.

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary: New Orleans Seminary (NOBTS) was founded in 1917 as the Baptist Bible Institute before becoming a theological seminary in 1946. NOBTS has always emphasized urban evangelism, and in recent years has pioneered seminary-level distance education online, at extension centers, and in prisons. The current president is Charles Kelley.

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary: Southeastern Seminary (SEBTS) was founded in 1950 in Wake Forest, North Carolina. SEBTS occupies the former campus of Wake Forest College, which is now a university in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. SEBTS has always emphasized training individuals for pastoral ministry, though in recent years SEBTS has pioneered strong programs in both North American and international church planting. The current president is Daniel Akin.

Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary: Golden Gate Seminary (GGBTS) was founded in 1944 in San Francisco, California, and was adopted by the SBC in 1950. GGBTS has always specialized in training individuals for the unique ministry challenges of the West Coast. The current president is Jeff Iorg.

Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary: Midwestern Seminary (MBTS) is the youngest of the six SBC seminaries, established in 1957 in Kansas City, Missouri. MBTS has always specialized in training individuals for pastoral ministry and other ministries in the nation's heartland. The current president is Philip Roberts.

In addition to these CP-funded agencies and boards, Southern Baptists also have a denominational publishing house, LifeWay Christian Resources. LifeWay produces denominational curricula, publishes popular and academic titles, and operates hundreds of retail stores across America. LifeWay does not receive any CP funds, but instead gives a portion of its profits to the CP every year. The current president is Thom Rainer.

Our Theology

The Southern Baptist Convention has historically been marked by a theology that is committed to three things: the evangelical gospel, a Baptist ecclesiology, and a commitment to evangelism and missions. The most cherished Southern Baptist convictions include the lordship of Christ, the full trustworthiness of Scripture, regenerate church membership, believer's baptism by immersion, the autonomy of the local church, congregational church government, and religious liberty for all people.

When the SBC was formed in 1845, no denominational confession of faith was adopted, though most local churches, associations, and state conventions had adopted their own statements of faith. For a variety of reasons, including the spread of liberal theology, Southern Baptists adopted their first convention-wide confession of faith in 1925, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (BF&M). The BF&M has been revised or amended on three occasions, each time in response to unbiblical trends in either Baptist theology or the wider culture. The current BF&M dates to the year 2000, and all SBC-endorsed missionaries, seminary professors, and other denominational servants are expected to affirm the BF&M. You can read the BF&M at the SBC's website, www.sbc.net/bfam_2000.html.