



CENTER FOR HEALTHY CHURCHES

SBC Congregational Discernment Guide

As part of your preparation for addressing the recent actions by the Southern Baptist Convention, we offer this template/outline for congregations.

PHASE ONE: ASSESSMENT

FIRST STEP: Assess the stress level such a conversation will likely create in your church.

Begin by asking, will this process be:

- Easy:** we have been marginally connected to the SBC recently and have gradually moved our primary national identity to another group or become more locally focused or semi-independent. Women are welcome in all leadership positions at our church. Most of our members have little interest in national denominational squabbles.
- Moderately hard:** We have generally avoided addressing the issue as a congregation because of strong feelings about denominational identity. When we have raised questions, it has led to uncomfortable relationships. Individuals or clusters strongly identify with the SBC or alternative groups. Women are welcome in a wide range of leadership roles (lay and ministerial) in our church, but we would probably not call a woman a senior pastor.
- Difficult:** We have always been an SBC congregation and have accepted the 2000 BFM without question. We have women in leadership roles but would not consider a woman as a pastor. No other current national Baptist denominational body is an acceptable alternative to us. Having a conversation about possibly pulling back our support for the SBC would be divisive.

SECOND STEP: Do you see this as a DIY or Outside Assistance approach?

- Most churches in the **Easy** to **Moderate** category will be comfortable with engaging in this process by utilizing internal leadership and resources. Churches who anticipate a **Difficult** level of engagement may want to consider bringing external leadership and expertise in navigating difficult discussions/decisions.
- Regardless, it will be important for Baptist churches that practice a congregational polity to engage the congregation in a thoughtful and invitational manner. While ministers and lay leadership groups will certainly give leadership to the process and will express their preferences, the ultimate decision will almost certainly be a congregational one. Thus, a process that invites involvement and participation is an important aspect of this model.



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THIRD STEP: Establish a straightforward process for how your congregation will address the issue.

Clear and consistent communication with the entire congregation is essential. Our guidance for engaging in a discernment process may take one meeting, or it may require multiple gatherings, fact-finding, and congregational conversations. Your values, context, and history will determine how you will proceed.

Some underlying principles that this approach rests upon include:

- This is an opportunity for Spiritual Discernment work, not simply reactive responses to outside decisions. Spiritual Discernment focuses on discerning God's will/dream/design for your congregation. Asking, "Who are we? Why are we here? Where are we going?" is a good exercise for any congregation.
- Your church has a distinctive congregational DNA that needs to be identified. You have a history and precedents for how you treat women, denominational affiliations, etc.
- Even as you consider history, also consider your recent experience. How significant is denominational identity to those who have joined your church in the past decade? Let your recent experience be a factor in any discernment process.
- You have a way that the body presents and makes major congregational decisions that will need to be respected and honored. Some churches may have an existing denominational relations committee or team, others may want to establish one. Others may delegate the leadership of the process to an existing group (Deacons, Staff, Church Council, Elders, etc.)
- Local church autonomy: Baptist churches are self-governing and free to act out of their convictions and priorities.
- Voluntary association is a principle that most Baptist churches hold dear. We cooperate with others voluntarily to accomplish the mission God has set before us. In other words, denominational partnership/affiliation should make it easier for you to carry out your mission, not harder.
- The process must consider some elements of historical background, current context, and future expectations. Without embarking on an unnecessarily ponderous or exhaustive study, appropriate and factual materials will need to be provided to make an informed decision. Much speculation is being generated, and accurate information will be essential.

FOURTH STEP: Implement the process you have chosen. *What does a spiritually and congregationally healthy process look like?*



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PREWORK: PHASE ONE (done by a small group in preparation for Phase Two)

Create a brief historical summary of your congregation's involvement with the SBC.

- Has your congregation adopted or endorsed the 2000 BFM Statement?
- The 1963 BFM Statement? What is your current level of financial support for the Cooperative Program?
- Does your congregation understand the pathway that CP funds follow once they leave your church?

Accurately describe how women are currently involved in leadership roles within your congregation.

Questions to answer:

- Do we ordain women to serve as ministers? Do we have women in ministry leadership roles on our staff?
- Have we called out girls/women from our congregation to enter the ministry or attend seminary?
- Do we allow women to serve as Deacons? On strategic committees? As Chairs of Committees?
- Do we allow women to stand in the pulpit to preach, pray or lead music?
- Do women teach boys and men above the age of 12 in any class setting without their husbands present?
- Does your church financially support any other Baptist body outside the SBC? How about other Christian organizations (Local, State, National, International)?

PHASE TWO: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

The goal of this phase is clarity regarding your congregation's historical identity, current context, and future implications. Granted, it will be much easier to establish clarity with your past and present than with your future. Even so, it is important to seek clarity as you are able.

- This phase may be accomplished in one congregational conversation, or it may require multiple gatherings and extended conversations.
- If you seek input from the congregation, it will be much more helpful to seek responses to a presentation of background material than simply hosting a "town hall" where people simply vent or offer alternative facts. Small table groups led by helpful facilitators are much more likely to generate useful data than settings where only a few voices are heard.
- Each congregation is unique, but most will benefit from offering "Information Sessions" that are not decision-making events before making any decision.
- Creating or providing a "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) document that addresses relevant concerns is strongly suggested. A sample FAQ format is suggested below.



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PHASE THREE: DECISION-MAKING

- Congregational involvement is important. While lay and ministerial leadership is essential, Baptist churches will eventually want the entire congregation to have a way to address any change in affiliation.
- Most congregations will eventually do better if they are asked to respond to a leadership group proposal than if asked to function as a “committee of the whole.”
- Keeping central the idea that this decision honors who WE are and have been as a congregation is important.
- Framing this decision as one that focuses on who our primary ministry affiliations will be moving forward rather than who we are leaving is a helpful distinctive.
- Some churches may make the decision to respond to recent events proactively, while others may choose to wait and see whether the SBC will pass the second reading of the amendment in 2024 and then establish accountability for what defines “friendly cooperation.”

Frequently Asked Questions:

This is not an exhaustive list of questions related to evaluating your relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention but is intended to jumpstart your own set of questions that you want to address if you are considering disengagement from the SBC.

- Will our ministry staff members still have access to Guidestone services? (Contact Guidestone at guidestone.org or your State Baptist office for assistance)
- Would we continue to have the ability to give to the Lottie Moon and/or Annie Armstrong Mission offerings if we chose to? (Contact the IMB at imb.org or NAMB at namb.net)
- Would we still be a member of our State Convention? Local Association? (Contact your state office and your local Association office)
- Would we still be able to participate in SBC mission endeavors or disaster relief efforts? (Contact your State office, IMB, NAMB)
- Would our members be eligible to attend SBC Seminaries? Would they be eligible to access the SBC subsidies for those studies? (Contact the SBC Executive Committee at sbc.net)
- Would we be able to access Lifeway products moving forward? How about the Centrifuge family of camps? (Contact Lifeway at lifeway.com)
- How do we adapt our Constitution and By-laws to any changes? What is the order for doing this? Do we need to have this spelled out prior to voting to modify our relationship with the SBC?



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- What happens if the SBC doesn't vote to approve the constitutional amendment in June 2024?
- Since we don't call our female staff members "Associate Pastors," aren't we compliant with the new guidelines?
- What would we do with the funds previously sent to the SBC?
- Will we establish a financial relationship with any other Baptist organization, non-denominational network, etc.?
- What previous actions have our congregation taken regarding denominational affiliation?
- What is our congregation's current policy regarding women serving in leadership roles within the church?
- ???

Finally, each congregation will want to consider additional issues/topics that may or may not need to be addressed. These will vary based on your congregation's history, context, and leadership. These might include theological backgrounds of the issues, church polity, Baptist history, biblical interpretation of various passages, the intersection of politics and religion in the 21st-century American church, etc.