

# Meet Southern Baptists

FOR ALMOST 170 YEARS, SOUTHERN BAPTISTS HAVE SOUGHT TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST TO ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE. The Southern Baptist Convention was formed with a Gospel vision. Its founding charter identifies its singular focus: . . . *for the purpose of eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the Baptist denomination of Christians, for the propagation of the Gospel . . .*

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has grown to be a network of more than 50,000 cooperating churches and church-type missions banded together to make an impact for God's Kingdom. While no two Southern Baptist churches are alike, there are certain commonalities that bind Southern Baptists together, regardless of ethnicity, socio-economic status, language, or locale. What we offer here is an overview to help tell the story of what God is doing in and through the people called Southern Baptists.



## Who Southern Baptists Are

SOUTHERN BAPTISTS ARE AS VARIED AND DIVERSE AS THE CITIES, TOWNS, NEIGHBORHOODS, AND RURAL COMMUNITIES WHERE YOU MAY FIND THEM. Each autonomous Southern Baptist church is unique; only when viewed together can one grasp the diversity that *is* the Southern Baptist Convention. Southern Baptist churches represent a broad range in . . .

- **size**—very small to very large
- **culture**—Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western, and every subculture within each region
- **age**—very young to very old
- **ministry setting**—inner-city, storefront, suburban, small town, open countryside, cowboy, motorcycle
- **ethnicity**—Caucasian, African American,

Hispanic, Korean, Chinese, Native American, and numerous other ethnic groups

- **worship style**—traditional, contemporary, and everything in between
- **theological perspective**—all within the framework of historic biblical orthodoxy.

But to know Southern Baptists means to understand that the center of who and what we are is the Person and Work of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Southern Baptists are people who have been redeemed through Christ from sin—the spiritual brokenness that causes us to resist God's ways and fall short of His glory.

Southern Baptists hold high the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the unifying center around

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which everything else is built and from which all ministry flows. We use the phrase *regenerate church membership* to emphasize that the starting point for everything related to a Southern Baptist church is each individual's personal faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of their lives.

Southern Baptists believe that each human being is a sinner by birth and by choice, that *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*

(Romans 3:23). We believe that Jesus, “in His substitutionary death on the cross,” made “provision for the redemption of men from sin” and “effected the reconciliation between God and man” (*The Baptist Faith and Message [BF&M]*, Article II B, *God the Son*). And we believe that “There is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord” (*BF&M*, Article IV, *Salvation*).

While the Bible does not teach that the waters of baptism have any saving power (salvation is by *grace* alone through *faith* alone, Ephesians 2:8), in keeping with the biblical emphasis reflected in our heritage and name, and as “people of the Book” (the Bible), Southern Baptists believe that all true believers will long to be identified fully with their Lord and Savior through the act of believer's baptism.

We believe that Christian baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 28:19). It is an act of obedience symbolizing (1) the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior; (2) the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus; and (3) the believer's trust that his or her mortal flesh shall be clothed with immortality in the final resurrection of the dead.

It is *by* the Gospel, *because* of the Gospel, and *for* the Gospel that the Southern Baptist Convention exists; so it only makes sense that everything about Southern Baptists is tied directly *to* the Gospel.

## What Southern Baptists Believe

SOUTHERN BAPTISTS BELIEVE THAT THE BIBLE REVEALS THE GOSPEL MESSAGE OF JESUS CHRIST. For that reason, Southern Baptists have summarized their biblical convictions in the confession of faith already cited, *The Baptist Faith and Message*. While Southern Baptists are not a *creedal* people, requiring churches or individuals to embrace a standardized set of beliefs, they are a *confessional* people. The *BF&M* represents the confessional consensus of “certain definite doctrines that Baptists believe, cherish, and with which they have been and are now closely identified” (*BF&M*, preamble).

The first five articles of *The Baptist Faith and Message* affirm the historical, orthodox, evangelical beliefs concerning *The Scriptures*, the Person and Works of *God*, the nature and fall of *Man*, God's

gracious provision of *Salvation* through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and *God's Purpose of Grace*—that God is the One who initiates and completes the work of salvation.

The next six articles affirm historical, biblical Baptist positions on the *Church*, *Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, *the Lord's Day*, *the Kingdom*, the doctrine of *Last Things*, and *Evangelism and Missions*.

The final seven articles summarize a number of distinctively Southern Baptist commitments to *Christian Higher Education*, *Stewardship*, *Cooperation*, *The Christian and the Social Order*, *Peace and War*, *Religious Liberty*, and *The Family*.

The entire *Baptist Faith and Message* is available online at [www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp](http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp).

Southern Baptists believe that the Bible reveals the Gospel message of Jesus Christ.

# What Southern Baptists *Do*

## Southern Baptists Proclaim the Gospel Through Evangelism and Missions

At the heart of our mission is the compelling urgency to proclaim the Gospel to everyone. The *BF&M* summarizes the biblical expectation this way:

“It is the duty and privilege of every follower of Christ and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to endeavor to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man’s spirit by God’s Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others. Missionary effort on the part of all rests thus upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life, and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the Gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the Gospel of Christ” (*BF&M*, Article XI, *Evangelism and Missions*).

In keeping with that commitment, Southern Baptist churches report their number of baptisms each year through a voluntary reporting form called the *Annual Church Profile*.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, cooperating Southern Baptist churches reported more than four million baptisms in the United States. Southern Baptist International Mission Board (IMB) missionaries reported that they and the national Baptist partners with whom they work in more than one hundred countries reported another five million baptisms around the world.



This averages about one baptism every thirty-five seconds for each day of each year during the entire decade. While this is a tremendous cause for celebration, in comparison to the darkness of the world, there is much to be accomplished in our cooperative efforts to advance the cause of Christ through sharing the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In addition, Southern Baptists are committed to starting new churches to reach the growing populations of our country and the world. The Southern Baptist Convention’s North American Mission Board (NAMB) has set a goal to see a net gain of five thousand new congregations (churches and church-type missions) in the United States and Canada during the decade ending in 2022. This would be an increase of more than 10 percent in

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the number of Southern Baptist congregations cooperating together to penetrate the lostness on the North American continent.

The Gospel truly is Good News, and Southern Baptists are passionate in our commitment to share that Good News until the Lord returns.

### Southern Baptists Demonstrate the Gospel through Compassion

Southern Baptists take seriously the Lord's example of compassion and His command to love and care for the needy (John 3:16; Luke 10:25-37; Matthew 25:31-46). The *BF&M* summarizes the biblical expectation this way:

“Means and methods used for the improvement of society and the establishment of righteousness among men can be truly and permanently helpful only when they are rooted in the regeneration of the individual by the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ. . . . We should work to provide for the orphaned, the needy, the abused, the aged, the helpless, and the sick” (*BF&M*, Article XV, *The Christian and the Social Order*).

Southern Baptist churches across the nation demonstrate God's compassion to the needy in their communities as part of their standard, ongoing ministry:

- a church in rural Arkansas sponsors a food pantry and clothing closet in a small town;
- a church in metro New Orleans actively supports the local crisis pregnancy center and provides for the needs of pregnant young girls;
- a church in Lower Manhattan sponsors a soup kitchen on Wednesday nights and offers free lunches in the park on Saturdays for the needy;
- a church in San Francisco ministers directly to homeless street people.

Whether it's through free medical services, offering classes in English as a second language, or helping a local family with rent or utilities, Southern Baptist churches throughout the land actively reflect God's love and compassion in their communities. In fact, the width and breadth of Southern Baptist ministries of compassion are as expansive as the United States itself, for Southern Baptists minister in every part of this nation, and such ministries are the norm for Southern Baptists.

On a national level, Southern Baptist efforts to extend that compassion are reflected in the following ministry expressions:



**Southern Baptist Disaster Relief (SBDR)** teams respond to fires, ice storms, tornadoes, damaging winds, hurricanes, and flooding across the United States. SBDR is one of the three largest relief organizations in America and includes flood cleanup efforts and long-term rebuilding in the wake of flooding. Southern Baptist volunteers prepare most of the meals distributed by the American Red Cross, as well as provide additional vital disaster services. Southern Baptists have more than 1,550 mobile disaster response units on call for local, state, and national emergencies, with more than one hundred thousand trained volunteers scattered across the nation.

**The Southern Baptist World Hunger Fund**, recently rebranded as *Global Hunger Relief*, receives and disburses designated contributions from individuals in local Baptist churches during the year. All contributions to the relief fund are divided 80 percent to overseas hunger relief and 20 percent to domestic hunger relief. Fifty-six million dollars was contributed and disbursed during the past decade. The SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC), working with IMB, NAMB, the SBC Executive Committee, LifeWay Christian Resources, and Woman's Missionary Union (WMU), an auxiliary to the SBC, collaborate to promote this fund. Since Southern Baptists' unified budget (the Cooperative Program) provides administrative costs to the entities of the Convention, every dollar raised through Global Hunger Relief goes directly to meet human hunger needs. In addition to food given and poverty issues addressed through thousands of projects in hundreds of countries, many of the world's neediest people have also been introduced to Jesus as the Bread of Life for their impoverished souls.

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# How and Where Southern Baptists Advance the Gospel

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCHES ACROSS THE NATION BEGIN THEIR MINISTRIES IN THEIR OWN NEIGHBORHOODS TO REACH THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES WITH THE GOSPEL; BUT THEY DON'T STOP THERE. The strength of Southern Baptist work is found in their voluntary cooperation to work together to advance an aggressive global vision while maintaining a strong home base of ministry fruitfulness.

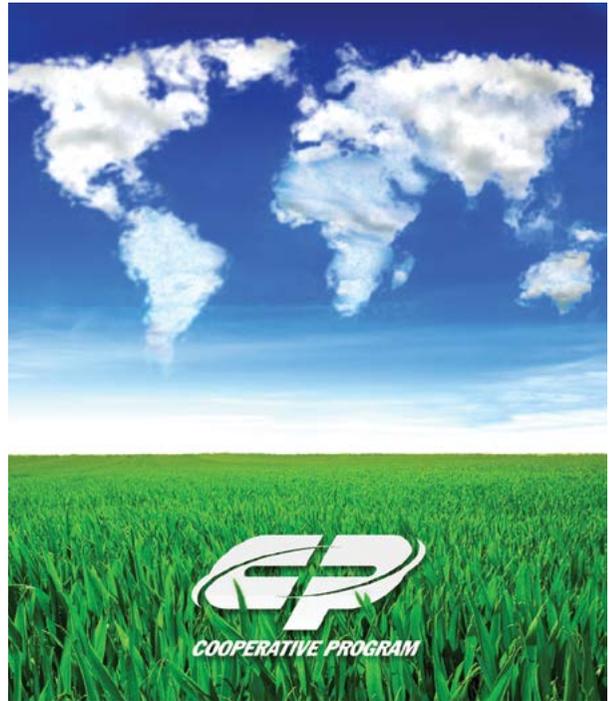
Cooperating together is not a new idea. The Apostle Paul applauded churches in the New Testament that pooled their resources for Kingdom purposes (1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8:1-2, 16-24; 11:8). The *BF&M* summarizes the biblical pattern of cooperation this way:

“Christ’s people should, as occasion requires, organize such associations and conventions as may best secure cooperation for the great objects of the Kingdom of God. Such organizations have no authority over one another or over the churches. They are voluntary and advisory bodies designed to elicit, combine, and direct the energies of our people in the most effective manner. Members of New Testament churches should cooperate with one another in carrying forward the missionary, educational, and benevolent ministries for the extension of Christ’s Kingdom” (*BF&M*, Article XIV, *Cooperation*).

## The Cooperative Program—Funding the Advance of the Gospel

Cooperation helps fuel the fire of Southern Baptist missions and ministries. Close to home, Southern Baptists advance the Gospel locally by working together in a local association of churches. The Gospel is advanced beyond the local level through participation in missions endeavors, through prayer for these collaborative endeavors, and by contributions through the Cooperative Program, the unified program for funding Convention work.

When Southern Baptist churches support the Cooperative Program in their respective states, their state Baptist convention uses those funds to fuel the ministry and mission goals established by the churches in that state. Each state Baptist convention forwards a percentage of the funds received by the state to the Southern Baptist Convention, providing financial support for thousands of church planters and missionaries in North America and around the world, theological education



through six Southern Baptist seminaries for more than 16,000 full-time and part-time students, and moral advocacy and promotion of religious liberty through the ERLC. Cooperative Program funds forwarded from the states also provide support for the SBC operating budget and the work of the SBC Executive Committee.

Obviously, to spread the Gospel message to the neighborhood and to the nations requires organization and structure to help facilitate the goal. For more information on the structure of the Southern Baptist Convention, see the companion publication *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Closer Look*.

## The Convention—Working Together for the Gospel

The Southern Baptist Convention was formed “to provide a general organization for Baptists in the United States and its territories for the promotion of Christian missions at home and abroad, and any other objects such as Christian education, benevolent enterprises, and social services which it may deem proper and advisable for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God” (SBC Constitution, Article II).

The SBC is directed by representatives of Southern Baptist churches, called *messengers*, who meet once a year to adopt a unified missions and ministry budget called the Cooperative Program allocation

Southern Baptist churches across the nation begin their ministries in their own neighborhoods to reach their local communities with the Gospel.

Cooperation helps fuel the fire of Southern Baptist missions and ministries.

You will be  
My witnesses  
in Jerusalem,  
in all Judea  
and Samaria,  
and to the  
ends of  
the earth.

ACTS 1:8

budget, elect trustees to oversee the ministry entities of the Convention, receive reports from the SBC entities, and transact the business of the Convention. These messengers come from churches that have voluntarily banded together to support the missionary, educational, moral advocacy, and benevolent causes of the Convention.

Southern Baptists work together to spread the Gospel throughout the land and around the world. Working through 1,169 local associations (composed of the churches that are geographically close to each other) and forty-two state Baptist conventions (composed of the churches in single- or multi-state groupings), Southern Baptists voluntarily unite to engage in the Acts 1:8 pattern of spreading the Gospel—in their local communities, throughout their states, across the nation, and around the world.

### Southern Baptist Ministry Entities— Assisting Churches in the Advance of the Gospel

The Convention assigns and conducts its work through eleven ministry entities—two mission boards, six seminaries, an ethics and religious liberty commission, a publishing and retail ministry, and a financial resources services ministry—a woman’s missions auxiliary, and an Executive Committee. While some of these ministries are self-sustaining, the majority are supported by the churches with financial contributions through the Cooperative Program. Of contributions received by the SBC, 73.2 percent funds missions and almost 22 percent provides ministerial training through our seminaries.

## Why Southern Baptists Do What They Do

THE ANSWER TO WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO IS SIMPLE—Southern Baptists proclaim and minister the Gospel because the love of Christ compels us to do so (2 Corinthians 5:14).

God loved us enough to send His one and only Son to pay the penalty for our sins. Whoever believes in Him has eternal life (John 3:16). In response to the love He has lavished on us, we are called to love one another (John 13:34-35; 15:12-17).

Jesus summarized this truth in what is called the Great Commandment—*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself* (Matthew 22:37-39).

Each of these ministry entities exists for the express purpose of assisting churches in the ultimate goal of advancing the Gospel.

- Missions, evangelism, and church planting are facilitated through the **International Mission Board** and the **North American Mission Board**.
- Ministerial preparation and continuing education are provided through **Golden Gate, Midwestern, New Orleans, Southeastern, Southern, and Southwestern** Baptist Theological Seminaries.
- Christian ethics and religious liberty ministries are assigned to the **Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission**.
- Church enrichment ministry and literature publication are assignments of **LifeWay Christian Resources**, which receives no Cooperative Program funding.
- **GuideStone Financial Resources**, which also receives no Cooperative Program funding, manages ministerial retirement insurance needs and administers Mission:Dignity, an assistance ministry for retired ministers and their families.
- The SBC **Executive Committee** is charged to conduct the work of the Convention between annual meetings in all areas not otherwise assigned to one of the ministry entities.
- The **Woman’s Missionary Union** is the sole auxiliary of the SBC. It cooperates very closely with the International Mission Board and the North American Mission Board to encourage churches to give generously to support missions with contributions through the Cooperative Program and two annual missions offerings.

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We know the Way to have our sins forgiven and to have a right relationship with God; the Way to be redeemed from our sin and delivered from its consequences; the Way to have eternal life—not just forever in heaven, but the fullest life possible—the life of knowing *Him* (John 17:3) and *knowing Him* (Philippians 3:10). That Way is Jesus (John 14:6). Love compels us to share the Good News of His love and extend the offer of His forgiveness with as many as possible.



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