

THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

# A CLOSER LOOK

AMONG DOCTRINES SOUTHERN BAPTISTS EMPHASIZE IS THE DOCTRINE OF LOCAL CHURCH AUTONOMY. Article VI of the Southern Baptist Convention's confession of faith clearly states, "A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel."<sup>†</sup>

The Southern Baptist *Convention* is a missional organization designed to facilitate maximum impact for Kingdom missions and ministries, designed and sustained by a network of autonomous churches working in cooperation with one another. Such cooperation requires trust; it requires commitment; it requires confidence that God's purposes are bigger than what we can accomplish individually.

The Southern Baptist *Family* is comprised of other autonomous bodies—local associations, ethnic fellowships, state or regional Baptist conventions, and a missions auxiliary—through which many of these same churches labor to fulfill God's mandate to make disciples of all peoples.

We believe it is a wonderful thing to be part of what God is doing through Southern Baptists.



## The Southern Baptist Convention

AS NOTED ABOVE, THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION (SBC) IS NOT A CHURCH. It is a set of ministries supported by a network of cooperating Baptist churches.

### Its Purpose

These ministries include international and domestic missions, theological education, advocacy for religious liberty, production of church resources, insurance and retirement services for pastors and other church workers, and the infrastructure necessary to keep these cooperative efforts operational. Specifically, the Convention was created "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."<sup>†</sup>

### Its Annual Meeting

Each June, representatives (called *messengers*) from churches that cooperate with and support the SBC convene for a two-day annual meeting. During the annual meeting, messengers adopt the SBC allocation budget, elect trustees that govern its ministries, receive motions from

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messengers, review bylaw revisions, consider resolutions, and hear inspirational reports about the great works God is doing through our cooperative efforts as Southern Baptists.

Each Baptist church that identifies itself in “friendly cooperation” with the Convention, as described in SBC Constitution Article III, and contributed to Convention work during the previous fiscal year may elect and send messengers to the annual meeting. Messengers are encouraged to participate fully in the annual meeting, voting on all matters according to their consciences.

Any registered messenger may make a motion during the general business sessions. **Motions** usually address questions of Convention governance or requests relative to one of its entities. Many motions are referred to the appropriate entity or the Executive Committee for review and report back to the Convention at the following annual meeting. The Convention assigns ministry statements and elects trustees. Beyond that, the governance of each entity is fully under the control of its respective board of trustees. *The governing documents for the Convention can be found in the sidebar links at [SBC.net/aboutus/legal](http://SBC.net/aboutus/legal).*

**Resolutions** differ from motions in that resolutions are non-binding statements that express the collective opinion of the messengers at a specific SBC annual meeting on a given subject. Covering a wide range of theological, social, and practical topics, resolutions educate our own people about important moral, ethical, and public policy issues; speak to the broader culture about our beliefs; and provide helpful tools for our churches and entities to speak with authority in the public square about the biblical application of timely and timeless matters. All resolutions can be researched and read in their entirety at [SBC.net/resolutions](http://SBC.net/resolutions).

### Its Entities

When the Convention is not in session, eleven Convention ministry entities and the SBC Executive Committee fulfill specific ministries assigned by the messengers to the Convention. The authority for the work performed by these entities is found in forty “ministry statements” given to the entities by the messengers to the Convention. These ministry assignments are in the Convention *Organization Manual* posted at [SBC.net/aboutus/legal/organizationmanual.asp](http://SBC.net/aboutus/legal/organizationmanual.asp). Governance of these entities rests in the hands of more than five hundred pastors and laypersons elected by messengers to the Convention to serve rotating terms on the respective boards of trustees.

The Convention’s Entities, the Executive Committee, and Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU), are as follows:

#### **Gateway Seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention**

Ontario, California (1944)  
GS.edu

#### **Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary**

Kansas City, Missouri (1957)  
MBTS.edu

#### **New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary**

New Orleans, Louisiana (1917)  
NOBTS.edu

#### **Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary**

Wake Forest, North Carolina (1951)  
SEBTS.edu

#### **Southern Baptist Theological Seminary**

Louisville, Kentucky (1859)  
SBTS.edu

#### **Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary**

Fort Worth, Texas (1908)  
SWBTS.edu

#### **Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission**

Nashville, Tennessee (1913)  
Washington, DC  
ERLC.com

#### **Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention**

Nashville, Tennessee (1917)  
SBC.net

#### **GuideStone Financial Resources**

Dallas, Texas (1918)  
GuideStone.org

#### **International Mission Board**

Richmond, Virginia (1845)  
IMB.org

#### **LifeWay Christian Resources**

Nashville, Tennessee (1891)  
LifeWay.com

#### **North American Mission Board**

Alpharetta, Georgia (1845, 1997)  
NAMB.net

#### **Woman’s Missionary Union**

Birmingham, Alabama (1888)  
WMU.com

There are almost fifty Southern Baptist seminary branch campuses and extension centers across the United States.



### Its Executive Committee

In addition to the eleven ministry entities, messengers to the Convention elect seventy-nine individuals from across the nation to serve on the SBC Executive Committee (EC). The SBC president, SBC recording secretary, and WMU president also serve on the Executive Committee, for a total of eighty-two members. The Executive Committee is charged to serve as the fiduciary, fiscal, and executive entity of the Convention in all its affairs not specifically assigned to another board or entity. The EC is comprised of members from thirty-four qualifying states or defined regions and includes about an equal number of pastors and church staff from many church types and sizes and laypersons from a wide variety of professions.

These eighty-two individuals meet three times each year to prepare and review the Convention budget; act in an advisory capacity on all questions of cooperation among the entities of the Convention and among the SBC and the state conventions; conduct the general work of promotion and publicity of the overall Southern Baptist ministry; work with the entities in regard to their respective ministry statements; and myriad other duties as spelled out in SBC Bylaw 18 and the EC's six ministry statements.

### Its Funding

The principal means by which Southern Baptist churches fund their respective state convention ministries and the missions and ministries of the SBC is through the Cooperative Program. In 1925, recognizing the need to consolidate financial appeals to the churches from a

host of ministries within the states and across the nation, the Convention created the Cooperative Program and invited the state conventions to partner with it, which they gladly did and do. The vast majority of Southern Baptist churches maintain this historic relationship of what many call "three levels of cooperation." On the local level, churches participate in a local association of Baptist churches—the "Jerusalem" component of cooperative ministry (see Acts 1:8). On the state level, churches participate in common ministries, missions, and fellowship in an attempt to evangelize and serve the spiritual needs of those in the "Judea and Samaria" components of their Great Commission mandate. At the national level, churches participate in the "uttermost parts of the earth" component of missions and ministries.

Church gifts to state convention and SBC ministries flow through the Cooperative Program. The state conventions receive gifts from the churches. Messengers from the churches in each state meet annually and determine what percentage of Cooperative Program gifts from churches in that state is used for state-sponsored ministry and what percentage is forwarded to the national Convention to fund the ministries of the Southern Baptist Convention. The percentage forwarded varies from state to state. Historical charts showing Cooperative Program gifts received by the SBC from the states may be found at [SBC.net/CP](http://SBC.net/CP).

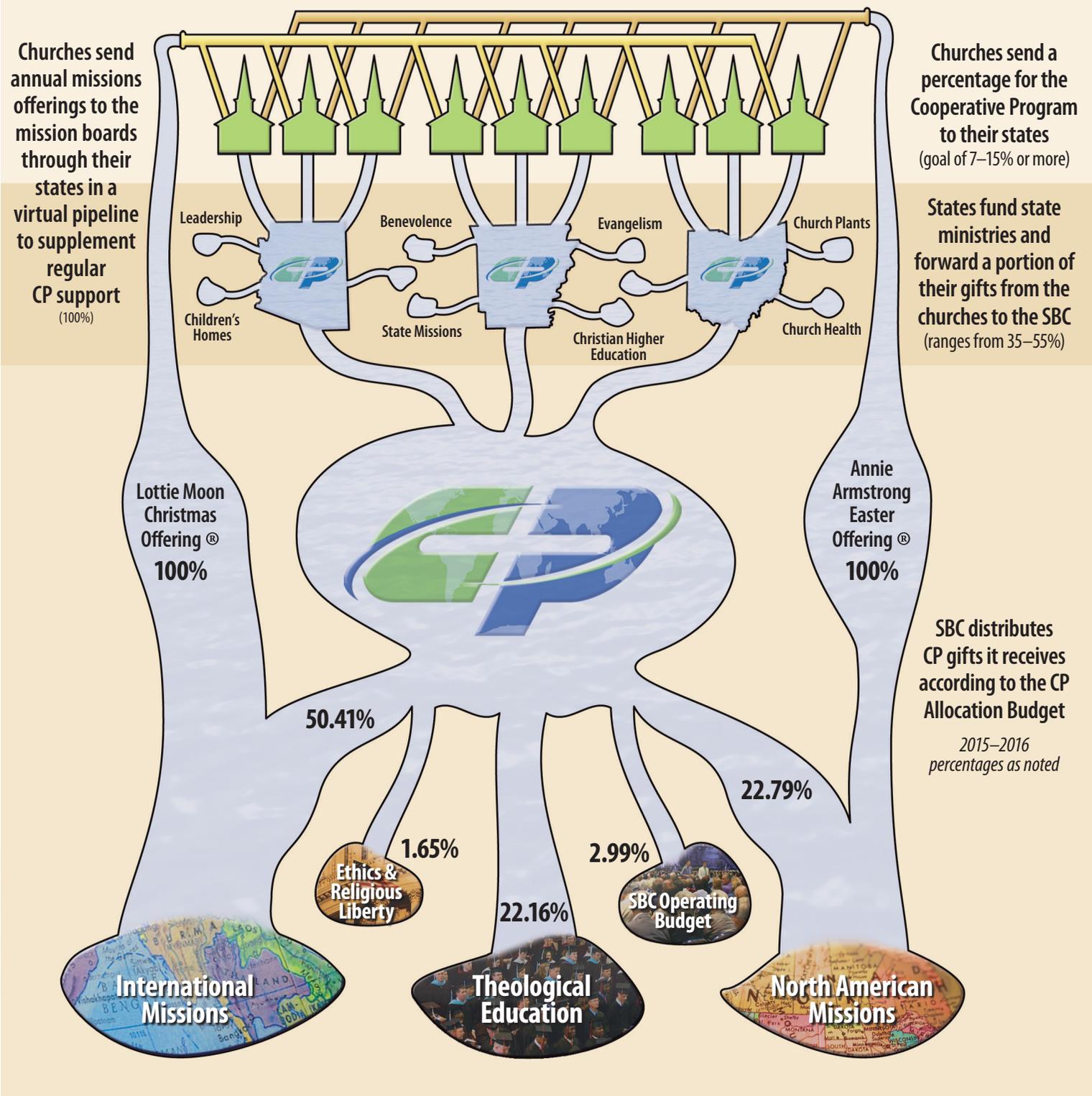
Of the funds the SBC receives from state conventions, 97 cents of every dollar goes directly to national or international missions and ministry through the two mission boards, the six seminaries, and the SBC's ethics and religious liberty ministry. The allocation budget is as follows:

- **50.41%** to International Missions;
- **22.79%** to North American Missions;
- **22.16%** to Theological Education;
- **1.65%** to Ethics and Religious Liberty; and
- **2.99%** to the SBC Operating Budget.

The SBC operating budget includes funding for the Convention's Executive Committee; the SBC annual meeting; SBC committee meetings; Cooperative Program and stewardship promotion; SBC.net web pages development and management; the SBC president's budget; SBC legal and insurance costs; subsidy for the annual SBC pastor's conference; fostering Global Evangelical Relations; and production and distribution of *SBC LIFE* and *Baptist Press*, which can be accessed online at [SBCLife.net](http://SBCLife.net) and [BPNews.net](http://BPNews.net).

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# The Cooperative Program: Like a Mighty River



In addition to gifts made through the Cooperative Program, the Convention, in partnership with WMU, promotes two annual offerings for missions, both named after former missionaries—the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering® for International Missions and the Annie Armstrong Easter

Offering® for North American Missions. The Convention also receives designated funds for Global Hunger Relief (GHR). All funds received through GHR are distributed 80 percent to international hunger ministry and 20 percent to North American hunger ministry.



## The Southern Baptist Family

SOUTHERN BAPTISTS ARE NOT HIERARCHICAL, WITH A TOP-DOWN DENOMINATIONAL STRUCTURE. In fact, Southern Baptists can only be called a “denomination” in the word’s most general meaning. Churches that practice believer’s baptism by immersion have been “denominated” as Baptists for many centuries. When the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845, it used the term in this general way in the preamble to its Constitution. By doctrine and polity, the SBC cannot and does not unite local congregations into a single “church” or denominational body. Each cooperating Baptist body—local church, association, state convention, and auxiliary—retains its sovereignty and is fully autonomous.

These autonomous Baptist bodies work together in friendly cooperation to achieve common Kingdom ministries and purposes. Each autonomous Baptist church, association, ethnic fellowship, and state convention participates in SBC causes voluntarily.

### State Conventions and Local Associations

The SBC maintains a fraternal, cooperative relationship with forty-two state and regional Baptist conventions in the United States and its territories. These state conventions provide multiple services for, with, and among the cooperating churches in their respective states or regions. Some of these services include ministries to at-risk children through residential and foster care, ministries to disabled adults, pregnancy care services, funding for Baptist colleges and academies within the

respective states, and age-graded resources to assist churches in their Bible study and discipleship ministries. However, the dominant focus of the state conventions is to assist their cooperating churches in evangelism, church planting, volunteer partnership missions, leadership development, disaster relief mobilization, and spiritual growth and prayer support.

The SBC also cooperates closely with more than one thousand associations of Baptist churches on the local level and more than thirty racial and ethnic fellowships. Local associations and ethnic fellowships provide the most grass-roots organizational structure in Baptist life, promoting regular opportunities for fellowship, cooperative ministries, and partnership missions. The SBC has traditionally looked to local associations to determine the “baptistic” identity of churches desiring to align with the Convention in its cooperative endeavors.

Though a church may be part of the Southern Baptist family without participating with a cooperating state convention or local Baptist association, more than 99 percent of all cooperating churches have historically participated in both state and national ministries. To learn more about the work of Southern Baptists in your area, locate your state on the map posted at [SBC.net/stateconventionsearch](http://SBC.net/stateconventionsearch). Contact information for the state conventions and local associations is listed.

### Synergy and Cooperation

Why be part of a fellowship of churches, associations, state conventions, and national Convention that cooperates together? It is natural and biblical that churches would take the opportunity to identify with other like-minded churches. This allows churches to be a part of a larger enterprise, pooling their resources to establish and advance Great Commission work. This loose-knit family structure can create a synergy in which the impact of the whole can be greater than the sum of the individual parts, giving churches a way collectively to express their convictions and realize their vision.

### Flexibility and Freedom

Baptists have long held the principles of congregational self-governance and self-support. Local churches select their own staff, ordain their own ministers, adopt their own budgets, organize their own ministries, hold legal title to their own properties, develop their own governance policies and bylaws, and establish their own membership requirements.

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The Southern Baptist Convention does none of these, for it is not a “church” and it has no authority over the churches. The SBC Constitution is clear: the SBC “does not claim and will never attempt to exercise authority over any other Baptist body.”† The Convention does not ordain ministers, assign staff to churches, levy contributions, choose literature, adopt the church calendar, monitor or maintain church membership lists, or assign persons to churches according to place of residence. These are all local church prerogatives and responsibilities.

## Cooperative Diversity

Within the Body of Christ, there is a great diversity of gifts, temperament, taste, and experience. Churches benefit from this range of qualities within their own fellowship and through cooperative relationships with other churches. Churches learn from and complement one another. This is not a matter of moral or doctrinal compromise. You cannot believe and do just anything and remain a part of

the Southern Baptist fellowship. All Baptist bodies have limits. But within those limits, there is room for significant cooperative diversity.

Though many Baptists work closely with other Christian groups on matters of social justice, benevolence, and evangelism in their local communities, the Southern Baptist Convention does not enter into formal relationships with inter-denominational councils or ministry initiatives.

The beauty of how Southern Baptists work together for Kingdom purposes is that each church, association, state convention, ethnic and racial fellowship, and the entities of the SBC covenant to work with one another in a spirit of mutual respect and trust. While no Baptist body is perfect, when we cooperate together for Kingdom purposes, each leverages the strengths of the other in a way that amplifies the collective abilities of the whole. This is the Southern Baptist family.



## Churches

A church typically aligns with the Southern Baptist Convention by formally declaring that it is a Baptist church in “friendly cooperation” with the Convention and contributing to the mission causes of the Convention through one of our cooperating state conventions or directly to the Convention. The number of messengers a church may seat at the annual meeting depends on the amount it contributed to Convention work in the previous fiscal year. We encourage churches that wish to identify with the SBC to notify their state convention office. Even if they have not yet qualified to send messengers to the SBC annual meeting, their report of current giving to Convention work will signal their cooperative intention and prompt their addition to Convention mailing lists.

## Individuals

Individuals do not “join” the Southern Baptist Convention; rather, they become Southern Baptist by joining one of the fifty thousand churches and church-type missions that cooperate with the Convention. Each church can tell you its membership requirements and expectations.

## Ministers

In Southern Baptist life, licensing and ordination of ministers is a local church matter. There is no denominational ordination service. The list of Southern Baptist ministers on [SBC.net/ministersearch](http://SBC.net/ministersearch) is simply a compilation from the reports of the churches and is the responsibility of the churches to update. Since the SBC is not a church, it can neither ordain nor defrock ministers; nor does it maintain

a list of “certified” ministers. Ministerial calling, licensing, and ordination are the responsibility of each local church and are certified by the congregation.

## Resources, Training, and Service Opportunities

The Southern Baptist Convention and its broader Southern Baptist Family work together to offer churches a wide array of Bible study literature and other digital materials, workshops, retreats, conferences, consultants, volunteer mission opportunities, video and audio resources, fellowship, and lists of prayer needs. It’s great to have such a support system—a network of resources to assist churches and members in their development as whole persons who faithfully follow and serve our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

† All footnotes are citations from the Convention’s primary documents and can be found at the “About” link at [SBC.net](http://SBC.net).

For more information, contact Convention Communications and Relations, SBC Executive Committee, 901 Commerce St., Nashville, TN 37203, 1-866-722-5433.

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