

The Nontraditional Church and the Southern Baptist Convention

“(A) Southern Baptist tends to remain a Southern Baptist, whether he lives in Virginia, Georgia, California, Ohio, or Montana. He needs not easily adjust to a church fellowship in which methods and practices are different from those to which he has been conditioned. Churches which are methodologically different are automatically suspect.”¹

Just 50 years ago, Southern Baptist churches in New York looked the same as Southern Baptist churches in Alabama. They had the same structures, programs, and worship. This is not the case currently. Today, they look different from one part of Birmingham to another.

House church, contemporary, seeker-sensitive, and cell-based are new ideas to many Southern Baptists. However, they are descriptions of many dynamic Southern Baptist churches. If the standard of fellowship and affiliation is to be the perfect Word of God and our confessional statement, we must understand that this leaves a "big tent" in church practice, while maintaining theological integrity. That's good news—Southern Baptists should affirm all forms of scripturally sound churches. Yet, how can these nontraditional churches relate to the other churches of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)?

How can a cell-based church (often with no Sunday School) relate to a denomination in which many consider Sunday School as the evangelistic arm of the church? How can a contemporary worship church relate to a denomination in which many believe the number one song in heaven is "Bringing in the Sheaves," and contemporary means purchasing the latest edition of the *Baptist Hymnal*.

The challenge is clear. How does one relate to a denomination that reflects a paradigm your church does not follow? The traditional paradigm was established and promulgated in the 1950s, a time of great growth within the SBC. How do nontraditional church pastors relate to a denomination that does not understand the terminology, is concerned about some of the changes, and thinks things are just fine as they are?

First, the nontraditional church pastor and leader must understand that the nontraditional church is welcome in the SBC. Of course, it will not always seem this way. I had a recent conversation with a director of missions in a pioneer area. He railed against churches using "that cell thing" (his words) instead of the time tested, God-ordained model of Sunday School, mission groups, et cetera. The irony is that the five largest churches in his association are using nontraditional paradigms.

Contrary to the occasional discontented church or denominational leader, the nontraditional church is welcome in the Convention. Both Rick Warren, pastor of one of the nation's largest Southern Baptist churches and James Merritt, former SBC president, started churches without

¹ Judson Boyce Allen, "Westward Expansions, Southern Baptist" in the Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists (Nashville: Broadman, 1958), p. 1492.

Baptist in their names. The denomination welcomes the nontraditional church. However, misunderstanding and mistrust of nontraditional churches persist.

How can nontraditional churches participate in the SBC without necessarily adopting the traditional paradigm?

- **Have a solid commitment to theology.**

Southern Baptists are a doctrinal people. Churches of all kinds need to have a common commitment to biblical authority and its application in the church. If nontraditional churches lead to doctrinal error, we should avoid them. Doctrine should matter as much, or more, to nontraditional church leaders as to anyone else. Southern Baptist churches may look different from one another, but they must be doctrinally sound.

- **Be a team player.**

The churches I started and pastored were considered some of the most nontraditional and innovative in our state convention. Yet, we were clearly considered an integral part of the state convention. Why? Because rather than constantly opposing what was in place, we strived to affirm the areas we could. By attending the state convention meeting, by working in partnership to start new churches, by giving to the Cooperative Program and annual mission offerings we made a statement. We said, "Even though we are different, we are on the same team." As a team player, we sought to work from the same playbook at every possible opportunity.

- **Don't Reject Everything.**

The nontraditional church often makes the mistake of rejecting the entire traditional church paradigm. This need not be the case. If a church chooses not to have Sunday School (perhaps a cell-based church), it still might consider using the LifeWay Christian Resources curriculum options. (LifeWay Christian Resources recently purchased Serendipity House, the leading provider of small group materials.)

Unfortunately, one perception of innovative churches that is often true is that they don't like to work within existing structures. However, there is a reason that these structures are in place—they work! If you can make them work for you, both your church and the denomination benefit.

- **Give to SBC missions.**

The Cooperative Program works! When you support missions, you affirm why Southern Baptists are together. Certainly, the nontraditional church will not have as many common links as the traditional church, but missions should be a constant. Challenge your church to give at least 10 percent to the Cooperative Program and explain how the Cooperative Program works.

One of the great tragedies of SBC missions is the lack of reciprocity among innovative churches. Many churches are started through a cooperative effort between their association, state, and national convention. Thousands of dollars in funding, missions teams, and special gifts made these new churches possible. Also, money is provided by the Cooperative

Program to fund most pastors' seminary education. It is only appropriate that we support the denomination that made our education, discipleship, and ministry possible. Systems were set in place that allowed the innovative church to succeed. Yet, many innovative pastors take the start up money and soon are nowhere to be found in the Cooperative Program.

- **Acknowledge other paradigms.**

Emphases come and go. In the early 70s, every church sought to be confrontational in its evangelism. In the late 70s, many wanted us to be expressive in our worship. In the early 80s, some insisted that we emphasize body life and mutual edification. In the mid-80s, cell groups became popular. In the late 80s, it was the meta-church. In the 90s, it was seeker-sensitive churches. Today, it is a return to ancient forms of worship.

The point is clear, and my part must not go unconfessed. It took me several years and a few too many new revelations from God to realize that He has no one way of doing many church programs. The nontraditional church must shed its presumptuous arrogance that it is the only way that works. We must not say, "If you are not _____ (you fill in the blank) you are not going to reach people." It sounds motivating, but it is untrue. Many of the great churches in our nation are traditional SBC model churches. Traditional churches work and God uses them! Sure, your paradigm also works, but it is just one of many that God can use.

Give yourself a test. Have such words as these ever come from your mouth: "You just can't build meaningful relationships without cells;" or "Those folks are so traditional they just don't worship God;" or "God can't bless until they move the church into homes." For hundreds of years God has blessed through a myriad of methods. You and I haven't finally found the lost ark of church paradigms. We should acknowledge that God is using other models.

- **Explain your SBC relationship.**

Many nontraditional churches leave Baptist out of their names. The reasoning for placing Baptist in a church name is obvious, though not universally accepted especially by many innovative churches. Traditional churches believe to reach Baptists, placing the word in the church name is good advertising. Some nontraditional churches think if you want to reach the unchurched it is not beneficial to have Baptist in the name. Hence the problem.

The nontraditional church needs to consider effective ways to inform persons of why they are a part of the SBC. Many churches do this as a regular part of the worship service through praying for a sister church, mentioning a special emphasis, or just in a general announcement. Others introduce denominational relationships in the new members class. Regardless of the time, explain the relationship.

The fear of many in the denomination is that if you leave Baptist out of the name, people will never become part of the SBC team. If you never give your congregation the opportunity to learn of the church's SBC relationship, the critics will be proved correct. In the long-term, this will only lead to mistrust and suspicion of churches without a traditional name.

- **Maintain your own integrity.**

The Bible does not command you to be Southern Baptist, but integrity demands that if you are going to use the resources, plan to remain a part. Some nontraditional models say they are not welcome. Yet, the nontraditional church is welcome if it reaches out to its more traditional counterparts.

The SBC's focus is the authority of Scripture and the support of missions. However, there is room for seeker-sensitive and traditional worship, for cell groups and Sunday School proponents, and for churches with Baptist in the name. Yes, you are welcome, but you must be wise. Many innovative church pastors are excluded from SBC life not because of the paradigm that they follow but because of the attitude they adopt.

Tips for the denomination leaders relating to the nontraditional church:

1. **Try to learn the language.** It sounds simple, but the nontraditional church speaks a different language. If you are not sure of the difference between a seeker-friendly, seeker-sensitive, or a seeker-driven church its time to break out the church growth books.
2. **Avoid misconceptions about the paradigms.** Much controversy can be avoided with a proper understanding of the paradigms. Many misunderstandings come from wrong information. Sometimes these negative descriptions come from poor examples of the paradigm. If you are not sure, ask the pastor with whom you relate. Nevertheless, here are some obvious misconceptions that are most often untrue:
 - a. The house church is not really a church.
 - b. The contemporary church does not teach the Bible.
 - c. The seeker-sensitive church waters down the gospel.
 - d. The cell-based church doesn't provide discipleship.

If these are your perceptions, they may come from misinformation or from experience with a poor model of the paradigm. If you have one of these paradigms in your association or state convention, it is time for a little research. Search of the Internet will provide some reading to help. Or, even better, ask that nontraditional pastor for a book or two he might suggest.

3. **Bless all forms of scripturally sound churches.** Our job is not to tell pastors how they are to structure themselves. Instead, effective denominational leaders are known as the ones who are concerned about the right things—doctrine, cooperation, and missions. Any church that wants to share those values is a cooperating church. We must bless all forms of scripturally sound churches.

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