

CBF revises hiring policy; lifts LGBT ban for some posts

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DECATUR, Ga.—The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Governing Board adopted a revised hiring policy and implementation procedure that allows LGBT individuals to be considered for some staff positions.

However, it requires candidates for ministry leadership positions and missions field personnel to practice a “traditional Christian sexual ethic of celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in marriage between a woman and a man.”

Product of CBF Illumination Project

The board adopted the new policy as part of a two-part recommendation from CBF’s [Illumination Project](#) Committee. CBF formed the group about 18 months ago to examine how the Fellowship could maintain unity in the face of cultural changes—particularly regarding human sexuality.

The committee’s recommendation included new language for a hiring policy that makes no mention of sexuality and a detailed implementation plan that provides specific instructions.

In 2000, CBF adopted a policy that prohibited “the purposeful hiring of a staff person or the sending of a missionary who is a practicing homosexual.” The same policy statement also barred “the expenditure of funds for organizations or causes that condone, advocate or affirm homosexual practice.”

The revised hiring policy states in part: “Because of our compelling mission

and vision, CBF will employ only individuals who profess Jesus Christ as Lord, are committed to living out the Great Commandment and Great Commission, and who affirm the principles that have shaped our unique Baptist heritage. Preference in hiring will be given to applicants who are active members in good standing of CBF churches as well as those who have demonstrated an active participation and contribution to the missions, ministries or other initiatives of the Fellowship and its partners. CBF employees are expected to have the highest moral character, displaying professionalism and a commitment to the highest ethical standards.”

As a note of explanation regarding moral character and ethical standards, the policy singles out “acting with integrity, being a faithful steward of resources, speaking truth in love, embracing accountability, facilitating fairness, supporting and encouraging peers, nurturing a community of respect, and establishing collaborative relationships.”

It further states: “CBF employees are expected to live out their Christ-centered relationship both inside and outside the workplace, serving as active members of their local church as well as through service to their community.”

New policy ‘focuses on Jesus’

From the time the Illumination Project Committee was formed, the CBF hiring policy adopted in 2000 was the “presenting question” it had to face, said committee member Steve Wells of Houston.

The previous policy “didn’t say you had to love Jesus or go to church” but instead centered on who was ineligible for employment, said Wells, pastor of South Main Baptist Church in Houston.

“It was not a good policy,” Wells said. “Everybody—left, right or center—recognized that. This gave us an opportunity to write a policy

that's about Jesus. Now we have a policy that brings us in line with nearly every other major Christian organization."

Suzii Paynter, CBF executive coordinator, offered a similar perspective.

"CBF is moving from a hiring policy focused exclusively on sexuality to a policy that focuses on Jesus and his work to transform the world," Paynter said. "We are a Fellowship, a big tent of faithful believers and autonomous, innovative churches in partnership. While we do not agree on everything, we have shown Baptists and others that we can come together in a relatively short amount of time, focus on what unites us and come out of it poised for a bright future."

Implementation process offers detailed instruction

The implementation process provides more detailed instruction on sexual ethics than the hiring policy.

"Among other qualifying factors, CBF will employ persons for leadership positions in ministry who exhibit the ideals set forth in our hiring policy, have gifts appropriate to the particular position and who practice a traditional Christian sexual ethic of celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in marriage between a woman and a man," it states.

That reflects the practice of most CBF congregations, the implementation process document notes.

However, it also states: "In our other positions on the CBF staff in Decatur, we will consider applications from persons who exhibit the qualities set forth in our hiring policy, including Christians who identify as LGBT."

Wells noted that also reflects the policy of many CBF churches that require

ministry personnel to adhere to the congregation's views regarding biblical sexual ethics but may not even question non-ministerial staff about those matters.

"If you're hiring a CPA for the business office, there's no such thing as gay math and straight math," Wells said. "There is no agenda here, other than for CBF to hire the best person for the job."

Recognizes concerns of global partners

The committee report—and the implementation procedure adopted by the CBF Governing Board—notes the Fellowship works with more than 100 mission partners globally.

Those global partners "have decisively rejected movement toward hiring or supporting LGBT field personnel or the inclusion of LGBT persons in ordained leadership," the document states.

Consequently, "CBF will send field personnel who have the gifts and life experiences required for the most faithful ministry in that particular setting, who exhibit the qualities set forth in our hiring policy and who practice a traditional Christian sexual ethic of celibacy in singleness or faithfulness in marriage between a woman and a man," the document states. The same standard will be applied to supervisors of field personnel, it notes.

Charlie Fuller, chair of the Illumination Project, said his committee sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit to strike a balance and find a faithful way forward.

"Over the past 18 months, the Illumination Project Committee has sought to double-down on being Baptist," Fuller said. "Baptist bodies who are true

to our rich heritage don't dictate the beliefs of individuals and churches in a top-down fashion. Rather, Baptist organizations and networks such as ours must find their direction from listening to churches and listening to individuals in all their diversity.

"We believe we have done exactly that, and we believe the Holy Spirit has spoken as the Illumination Project Committee worked through our unique process of listening and reflecting the voices of the Fellowship."

The committee made every effort to prepare CBF-supportive congregations for its report and recommendations, Wells noted.

"We made calls to about 800 stakeholders in CBF life—including a whole lot of churches in Texas Baptist life," he said. "We hope that communication will bear fruit."

Not pleasing everyone

That does not mean the committee expects the change to be met with universal approval—either from churches that disagree with lifting the hiring prohibition for some staff positions or from congregations that want CBF to open all ministry roles to LGBT Christians.

"CBF's new position is completely confusing," said Howie Batson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Amarillo. "If same-gender sexual behavior is wrong—and Scripture says that it is wrong—then it is wrong for all employees, not just certain employees."

"The double standard is a sure formula for failure that treats staff members as second-class employees."

George Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, praised the values expressed in the new hiring policy as "spiritually sound and theologically rich" but took exception with the implementation procedure,

which he called “limiting and hurtful.”

The values behind the new hiring policy “represent a maturing Fellowship more concerned with the positive character of disciples than the narrow and negative portrayals of LGBTQ sisters and brothers in the former policy,” he said. “The new guidelines can apply equally to all potential employees regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or marital status. This is a step forward, but not a leap.”

However, Mason expressed sorrow about the limits on employment in the implementation plan.

“It sadly reflects the state of mind in most of our churches at this time,” he said. “In Baptist life, that’s where change really happens. That’s where I pray more work will be done.

“While I understand the rationale and applaud the hard work of those who served tirelessly on the (Illumination Project) team, I can only feel sadness for those still denied opportunity to serve the Lord among us. The celebration of progress is too often the proclamation of the privileged. I will wait to celebrate the day when our policy and practice match, when joy and justice meet.”

Three days after the Illumination Project Committee presented its recommendations and the CBF Governing Board voted to revise its hiring policy, the Baptist General Convention of Texas issued a [statement](#) reaffirming its “long-held position on biblical sexuality and marriage.”

“While we understand the decision-making process undertaken, our position remains unchanged. We believe the Bible teaches that any sexual relationship outside the bounds of marriage between a man and woman is sin,” according to the statement. It added Texas Baptists value “every human individual, and our churches continue to be loving, respectful and welcoming to all people.”

Wells acknowledged not all CBF churches would be pleased with the recommendations of the Illumination Project Committee.

“The reality is that we’re liable to lose some churches—on the left and on the right,” Wells said. “I really don’t believe it will be that many. I remain convinced CBF is the best partner churches can have.”

After the 18-month Illumination Project process, Wells also remains convinced about his own views—both on biblical sexual ethics, which prohibit same-sex marriage, and on cooperation based on shared mission. He expressed his hope other Texas Baptists will consider CBF as a partner for missions and ministry.

“They won’t all look like everyone you know. They won’t all think the same way as everyone you know,” he said. “But they all know the same Jesus you know.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: This article, originally posted Feb. 9, was edited Feb. 10 and Feb. 13 to include additional responses.