

SBC president names members of cooperation group

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A North Texas associational missionary and the pastor of a church dually aligned with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention are among the members of a newly named group exploring what it means for a church to be in “friendly cooperation” with the Southern Baptist Convention.

SBC President Bart Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, named Matt Henslee of Collin Baptist Association and Jason Paredes, pastor of Fielder Church in Arlington, a dually aligned congregation, to the 20-member cooperation group.

In addition to chairman Jared Wellman, pastor of Tate Springs Baptist Church in Arlington, the group also includes the pastor of another SBTC congregation, Juan Sanchez from High Pointe Baptist Church in Austin, and Jim Richards, executive director emeritus of the SBTC.

Other members are:

- Victor Chayasirisobhon, executive and co-lead pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Anaheim, Calif.
- Jerome Coleman, pastor of First Baptist Church Crestmont in Willow Grove, Pa.
- Tara Dew, speaker and wife of Jamie Dew, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.
- Donna Gaines, a speaker, author and Bible teacher, wife of Steve Gaines, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, Tenn.
- Travis Kerns, associational mission strategist at Three Rivers

Baptist Association in Taylors, S.C.

- Richard Land, former president of the SBC Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.
- Jonathan Leeman, editorial director at 9Marks and elder at Cheverly Baptist Church in Bladensburg, Md.
- Gregory Perkins, lead pastor of The View Church in Menifee, Calif., and current president of the National African American Fellowship.
- Andrew Walker, ethics and public theology professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.
- Trevin Wax, author and vice president of research and resource development at the North American Mission Board.
- Tony Wolfe, executive director-treasurer of the South Carolina Baptist Convention.

Serving in ex officio roles are Barber, SBC Second Vice President Kason Branch, SBC Registration Secretary Don Currence and SBC Recording Secretary Nathan Finn.

Either reassert or redefine cooperation

Addressing “things we have never done before” in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention will permeate the group’s discussions, Barber said.

The group will present a report to the SBC annual meeting next June that could reassert or redefine what constitutes a church to be in friendly cooperation with the SBC.

“These declarations that churches are not in friendly cooperation and these appeals in response to those declarations represent a change in the fundamental processes by which we cooperate with one another,” he said.

The 20-member cooperation group was created in response to a motion at

the 2023 SBC annual meeting in New Orleans.

“Cooperation, at its heart, is an agreement between churches who provide support and believers who stand on the front lines of our shared mission,” Barber said, alluding to missionaries, professors and other denominational workers.

“This grand agreement, some of it written and some of it unwritten, consists of the specific terms by which churches are comfortable providing support and workers are comfortable providing their service to those churches.

“Within our convention exists a widespread sentiment that the terms of the agreement have changed, as evidenced by the unprecedented things that we are doing.”

Those “unprecedented things” include hearing the appeals of three churches declared by the SBC Executive Committee to not be in friendly cooperation, a declaration messengers upheld in June. Two of those churches were so deemed due to their placing women in pastoral roles.

In addition, an amendment to the Baptist Faith and Message, related to the same issue, was introduced on the convention floor “without taking any time to conduct an in-depth study” on those changes beforehand, Barber added.

It will not be the role of the cooperation group “to rule in any way on the constitutional amendment proposed by Mike Law and amended by Juan Sanchez,” Barber said.

Law, pastor of Arlington (Va.) Baptist Church, agreed to the amendment by Sanchez, who is part of the Cooperation Group.

That proposed amendment to the SBC Constitution “is in the hands of the

messenger body,” Barber said.

“They and they alone can determine the outcome of that motion. I have labored hard to demonstrate in New Orleans my unwavering commitment to processes for our meeting that follow our rules of order and are accessible and fair to everyone,” he added.

‘Spirit-given wisdom’ sought

Wellman said the group’s first meeting will take place soon after its formation. Those gatherings will occur primarily online, with at least one two-day in-person meeting expected before the end of the year and another early in 2024.

“Spirit-given wisdom” must be sought in reviewing the nature of cooperation, Barber said, with Southern Baptists being “careful, prayerful and deliberate” on any changes affecting it.

The cooperation group needs to address what it means for autonomous, independent churches to work in cooperation in the SBC, he added.

Barber said the the group will seek to answer: Are recent steps in the SBC in line with how cooperation always has been understood? Is there a need to clarify how the fundamental nature of that agreement has changed?

“Either way, with so much uncertainty and with the potential for so much division around these questions, the cooperation group needs to articulate our vision for cooperation in a way that brings clarity to any open questions and inspires Southern Baptists to redouble our enthusiasm for and commitment to the one sacred effort that brought us together long ago,” Barber said.

Based on reporting by Scott Barkley of Baptist Press, with additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp.