

Southern Baptist military chaplains may plant churches overseas

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BNG)—Southern Baptist military chaplains would be authorized to plant churches overseas under a recommendation headed toward the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting June 16-17 in Columbus, Ohio.

In February, the SBC Executive Committee approved a recommendation enabling the [North American Mission Board](#) to “provide specialized, defined and agreed upon assistance to the International Mission Board in assisting churches to plant churches for specific groups outside the United States and Canada.”

Kevin EzellIn an email to SBC entity heads and state convention executives, NAMB President Kevin Ezell said the request is being driven in part by a climate in the United States that is “more hostile toward religious liberties.”

The agency wants to be positioned to “take proactive steps should large numbers of our military chaplains decide they can no longer serve the military in good conscience,” Ezell said.

“If that becomes the case, we would like the freedom to plant churches adjacent to military bases outside the United States with the specific purpose of serving the U.S. military population.”

The new assignment would be a good fit for NAMB, the endorsing entity for Southern Baptist chaplains serving in the U.S. military, Ezell said.

According to [a 2013 article](#) in *SBC Life*, Southern Baptists have 1,440 endorsed chaplains serving in the U.S. military, more than any other denomination or faith group. *Christianity Today* [recently reported](#) new Department of Defense statistics showing Southern Baptists make up about 1 percent of the nation's current military force and are outnumbered by atheists.

SBC-endorsed chaplains have served in all major U.S. conflicts for the last 150 years.

Future in jeopardy?

Recent changes in the military—including the repeal of Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell and reprimands for proselytizing—have caused some SBC leaders to wonder about the future of military chaplaincy in the denomination.

Former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, a Republican presidential hopeful and Southern Baptist minister, [recently suggested](#) young Americans should hold off enlisting in the military until after President Obama leaves office because of the administration's "open hostility toward the Christian faith."

Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said in a 2013 blog, "Southern Baptist chaplains cannot surrender their commitment to Christ in order to maintain their commitment to ministry within the Armed Services."

Ezell and Russell Moore, head of the SBC Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, released a joint statement in 2013 about religious liberty in the U.S. military.

New guidelines

NAMB later [issued new guidelines](#) clarifying SBC chaplains will not participate in or attend wedding ceremonies for gay members of the

military.

“Southern Baptists love and pray for our chaplains,” Ezell [told Baptist Press](#) at the time. “That being said, we only want to endorse chaplains who can support Baptist doctrine and belief without reservation.

“When it comes to what our chaplains believe and practice, we do ask and we do expect them to tell.”

A chaplain questioned by NAMB leaders for attending but not participating in a same-sex wedding [switched](#) his endorsing agency from Southern Baptists to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Other Baptist groups recognized as endorsing agents by the military include the Alliance of Baptists, American Baptist Churches USA and the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

According to the [pre-convention issue](#) of *SBC Life*, David Platt, president of the International Mission Board, supports expanding NAMB’s portfolio. In addition to planting military churches overseas, the change would enable the two agencies to cooperate in evangelizing unreached people groups with populations both in the United States and abroad.

Other proposals

Other [proposals](#) to be considered at the upcoming SBC meeting include changing governing documents to allow for possible electronic voting at convention gatherings and renaming Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary as Gateway Seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention, in light of the seminary’s recent move from the San Francisco area to Southern California.

A pre-convention meeting of the SBC Executive Committee June 15 includes an agenda item on the convention’s relationship with Weatherly

Heights Baptist Church in Huntsville, Ala. The Madison Baptist Association [kicked out the church](#) in March over the pastor's support for same-sex marriage.