

Seeing the Big Picture

November 11, 2011

"Are we missing the big picture?"

That's the question some Christian leaders are asking as America's centuries-old denominational patterns unravel, while denominational distinctions seem as entrenched—and unbridgeable—as ever.

In a post-denominational society, can churches retain theological integrity and still find common ground with people who hold differing beliefs?

"Christians today are falling into the trap of tribalism," said Jonathan Merritt, creative director at [Cross Pointe Church](#), a Southern Baptist congregation in suburban Atlanta. "Not only are we part of the Baptist tribe, but also the Southern Baptist Convention tribe, the Reformed and non-Reformed tribe, the traditional and contemporary tribe.

"I love my heritage, but ultimately I'm looking for ways to build the kingdom" of God, said Merritt, a 28-year-old activist who has led some Southern Baptists across denominational lines to address environmental issues. "Most young Christians want to be part of the Jesus tribe. That paradigm is shaping the way we should answer this question and the way a lot of young Christians answer this question."

Some Christians insist the question—and the answer—is broader and compels them to partner with other faith traditions.

"The world's brokenness means people of faith must collaborate, and we have learned that goodwill Baptists can work with other faiths and Christian traditions to advance the common good," said Robert Parham, executive director of the [Baptist Center for Ethics](#) in Nashville, Tenn.



"We readily work with others out of faithfulness to Jesus' great commandment to love our neighbor. Loving neighbors means seeking their welfare, advancing the common good. While we might disagree with other faith expressions over the divinity of Jesus, interpreting the Bible, the meaning of baptism and the practices of the church, we refuse to let those issues become stumbling blocks keeping us from loving our neighbor."

Worries that interdenominational and interfaith cooperation will dilute theological integrity aren't new. Some 19th-century Baptists insisted on the exclusive validity of Baptist churches.

But their 21st-century descendants find the questions less clear-cut and endlessly vexing: Can an evangelical Christian vote for a Mormon presidential candidate? Can Baptists join Muslims and Hindus at a worldwide Catholic-convened day of prayer for peace? Where are the boundaries—if any?

Social ministries and disaster relief

Partnering to meet human needs, especially following a natural disaster, presents the fewest dilemmas, some Christian relief workers insist.

"Disaster response and hunger relief are areas in which Baptists are involved where we can set aside differences to meet needs of victims and hurting people," said Dean Miller, who coordinates disaster relief for the

[Baptist General Association of Virginia.](#)



"When people are hungry or need a tree cut off the roof of their houses, nothing about translations of the Bible or the meaning of baptism comes into play at all. That's true not just among Baptists but among all religious groups and non-religious groups."

Miller could think of no circumstance that would prevent the BGAV from cooperating in disaster response with any group—and that includes a rival state convention, the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia.

"We have a great relationship with the SBCV in disaster relief," said Miller—no small feat in the tortured post-conflict environment of Baptists in the American South.

When disasters occur in Texas, disaster relief units both from [Texas Baptist Men](#) and the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention may be on the scene. Likewise, after TBM begins to wrap up its work in providing emergency food service and other ministry as a first-responder, the Baptist General Convention of Texas offers ongoing disaster response to help with recovery and rebuilding.

Further complicating matters, TBM is affiliated with the BGCT and receives no financial support from the SBTC. However, some of its lay leaders are members of SBTC congregations, and their churches sometimes work

closely with the men's missions organization.

By the early 1990s, years of theological disputes among [Southern Baptist Convention](#) churches had propelled many moderates and progressives out of the national denomination and into new organizations like the [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) and the Alliance of Baptists.



Conflict eventually filtered into the SBC's state affiliates, sometimes with opposite results—in Texas and Virginia, ultra-conservatives left older, moderate state conventions to form new right-leaning ones. In Missouri, where conservatives prevailed, moderates formed an alternative network of churches. For Baptists in those states, overcoming bitter memories and continuing suspicions is nearly as challenging as setting aside doctrinal distinctions.

But at least in relief ministries, said Miller, focusing on "the big picture" has resulted in amiable collaboration.

"Since I've been state coordinator, the BGAV and the SBCV have shared responsibility in disaster relief in a variety of ways," he said, including following a spate of tornadoes in Southwest Virginia last spring and Hurricane Irene last August.

It's trickier, Miller concedes, when immediate responses transition into more explicitly evangelistic efforts.

"In a longer-term response that might include a strategy of church planting or evangelism, there's potential for conflict," he said. "If a (Christian relief) organization chose to bring its faith issues earlier in the process, it might cause us to re-evaluate how we work with them.

"That's not to say we aren't motivated by our faith from the outset of disaster responses. When we hand out food, we want to take opportunities to share Christ, but we don't staple a gospel tract on the food. If we were asked to do so, we'd say no."

Mission engagement



Cooperating across denominational boundaries in evangelism is more difficult, mission strategists insist, and some missionary-sending organizations carefully demarcate the frontiers.

Almost 5,000 overseas missionaries of the SBC's [International Mission Board](#) follow a policy of five "concentric circles" defining cooperation with other faith groups.

"IMB missionaries do not enter into strategic relationships randomly but with church-planting movement intentionality and in accord with the biblical principles of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message," notes the policy adopted by IMB trustees.

"Because our relationships have this intentionality they have different guidelines depending on the purpose we are pursuing."

[The Baptist Faith and Message](#) is the SBC's statement of faith, most recently revised in 2000.

From broadest to narrowest, the five levels:

- *Aim to "gain a presence or access to a ... population segment." At this level "creativity and flexibility are essential in associating with cultural programs, educational institutions, business forums or whatever can open the door to deeper levels of relationships."*
- *Seek to "minister to specific needs," including disaster relief and social development. This can be accomplished only with "organizations that have a Christian identity and are motivated by spiritual principles."*
- *Share the Christian gospel only in collaboration with those "whose commitment is to New Testament evangelism and who present personal repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation."*
- *Start new congregations only with organizations whose definition of "church" is consistent with the Baptist Faith and Message, which calls it "an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by his laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth."*
- *Influence the "ongoing shape of Baptist work and identity, even after the missionary is no longer present, through theological education and ministerial training. Seldom, if ever, would we engage in strategic relationships ... at this level."*

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's 160-plus mission workers also draw distinctions in collaborative activities, but without a formal policy.



"We do not have official guidelines that we have established for partnerships with other religious groups," said Rob Nash, the CBF's coordinator of global missions.

"Generally, we make decisions about partnership based upon mutually shared goals and vision and upon relationships of trust that are built over time. We have a process in place for establishing full-fledged partnerships and/or memoranda of understanding that ensures that we have exit strategies and other mechanisms in place so that the nature of the relationship is clear."

The CBF partners with a variety of Baptists around the world, Nash said, but "we have never limited ourselves to these Baptist relationships. Our field personnel have partnered with organizations even beyond the Christian faith when global disasters and other kinds of social ministry have made it helpful to do so in order to meet the needs of a community."

"Obviously, with any partner we do our homework to ensure that the organization has a good reputation and that its approach to ministry and service is in harmony with our own basic mission and vision," he added. "This ensures that the partner is focused upon a sustainable assets-based approach to community development and that we do not sacrifice our own theological and missiological commitments."

Theological education



Although educating Baptist ministers remains largely denominationally focused, collaborative models are emerging in places. Baptist communities at Methodist-affiliated [Duke Divinity School](#) in Durham, N.C., and the Disciples of Christ's [Brite Divinity School](#) in Fort Worth maintain "theological and multicultural diversity of students and faculty to be an important context for coming to a clear understanding of individual faith and practice," according to administrators.

Wake Forest University's School of Divinity, while highlighting its Baptist heritage, is "intentionally ecumenical."

"The divinity school's roots in Baptist traditions are deep and strong, and these roots enable the divinity school to ground its present story in the lived experience of preceding generations who strived to be a sign of God's justice and hope in the world," said Gail O'Day, dean of the Winston-Salem, N.C., school, in a message on its webpage.

"The divinity school's mission to be an ecumenical learning community, in service to the ecumenical family of churches, means that students from a wide range of Christian traditions contribute fully to the rich fabric of our communal life."

By contrast, the six seminaries owned and operated by the SBC maintain a distinct Baptist identity, typically restricting faculty to members of Baptist churches.

"It depends on what type of education church leadership wants to pursue," said Merritt, who earned degrees from both [Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary](#) in Wake Forest, N.C., and the Methodist-affiliated [Candler School of Theology](#) at Emory University in Atlanta.

"There's a confessional approach and a contextual approach."

Although Merritt believes cooperative initiatives such as church planting should be limited to Christians whose views are compatible—"I don't see it as being exclusionary; it's just pragmatic"—varied views in seminary communities can be spiritually rewarding, he noted.

"I love, within the range of orthodox Christian belief, when there's room for a lot of viewpoints to be presented in theological education," he said.

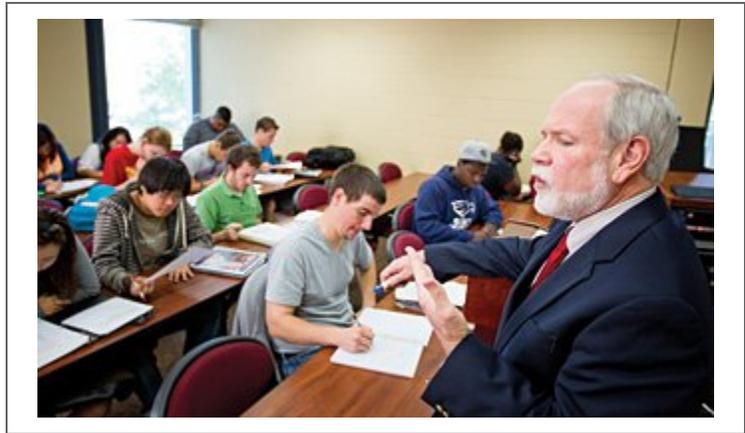
"If we are confident that what we believe is true and right and biblical, then we shouldn't be afraid to have it presented alongside other views in a theological education setting."

Social justice

Religious disagreement is no obstacle to collaboration in efforts to achieve a just society, said Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics, which has developed resources to assist Christians in the effort.

One of the BCE's documentaries "shows that each (Abrahamic) tradition sees its text as sacred and that each text calls readers to do justice," he said.

"Jews, Muslims and Christians will not prioritize the sacredness of another faith's primary text. But that disagreement does not negate the common agreement to seek justice, to care for the vulnerable, to protect orphans and the elderly."



An immigration documentary explores a shared belief among Baptists and Catholics—who "have a long, contentious history over matters of doctrine"—that "Jesus calls us to welcome the stranger," Parham said.

Merritt also advocates a Christian commitment to the "common good" that can cross denominational lines while retaining faith integrity.

"Christianity is not something you do but who you are," he said. "It's impossible to lay that aside to do a particular kind of work. Partnerships have to allow space for those who follow Jesus to conduct that work within that context."

But he detects a "shift in young people from culture-war Christianity to incarnational Christianity."

"As I rediscover the Jesus of the Bible, he didn't begin with a six-point platform but came to live among human beings and heal and weep. That's the model for us as we move forward."