

Cooperation Group Draft of Recommendations

Chairman's Note

To inform Southern Baptists about important decisions at the upcoming Convention, the following is a draft, along with the rationale, of the Cooperation Group's 2024 recommendations to the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana, on June 11-12, 2024. This draft is published 41 days ahead of the Convention, allowing over a month for Southern Baptists to read and seek any clarity they require.

These recommendations are crafted with the desire to satisfy the intent of the motion to move forward together in "biblical fidelity" by safeguarding our adopted statement of faith and "missional clarity" by strengthening our confessional integrity via the trustee system. Additionally, we aim to promote "cooperative unity" by recognizing the rights and privileges of the messengers in key decisions and gaining a clearer picture of churches cooperating through the Convention.

Overall, our committee is in unanimity in trusting and championing the Convention's messengers.

These recommendations are subject to necessary edits. Updates will continue to be posted on the website coopgroupupdates.com. If you have questions about these recommendations, you can contact us through the website's Contact Page.

Finally, we ask you to join us as we pray and fast (for the day or for a portion of the day) on Wednesday, May 1, 2024, as Southern Baptists receive and process these recommendations.

Telling His Story,



Jared C. Wellman
Cooperation Group Chairman

PREFACE

At the 2023 annual meeting, messengers approved the following motion:

I move that the Convention authorize that the SBC president appoint a broadly representative task force from across our convention to study the issue of how this Convention should deem churches to be in friendly cooperation of faith and practice, as laid out in Article III, Section 1 in the Constitution referencing our adopted statement of faith, and to bring back recommendations to the 2024 SBC Annual Meeting in Indianapolis for how we can move forward together in biblical fidelity, missional clarity, and cooperative unity.

After much prayer, study, and conversation, the Cooperation Group offers several recommendations to the Convention we hope will prioritize and emphasize the authority of messengers in defining the boundaries of our cooperation while clarifying and refining our structure.

STATEMENT ON ARTICLE III

We believe the Constitution’s language—“a church will only be deemed to be in friendly cooperation which has a faith and practice which *closely identifies with* the Convention’s adopted statement of faith”—is sufficient, together with any additional standards messengers have or may set forth in Article III, in setting the doctrinal parameters for the seating of messengers. The phrase “closely identifies with” recognizes the freedom of the messenger body to interpret its statement of faith and to apply doctrinal standards to the seating of messengers, as they so choose in accordance with the governing documents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: To ensure that edits or amendments to *The Baptist Faith & Message* follow the same process as amendments to the Constitution (two-thirds vote, two consecutive years), we recommend the Executive Committee propose changes to our governing documents for the Convention's consideration at the 2025 Annual Meeting.

Rationale: Our adopted statement of faith plays a significant part in the Convention's composition as it concerns "friendly cooperation." Historically, the Convention has appointed a special committee to suggest revisions. The process of amending *The Baptist Faith & Message* should be robust.

Recommendation 2: To ensure that the sole authority for seating messengers is vested in the messenger body, we recommend the Executive Committee propose changes to our governing documents for the Convention's consideration at the 2025 Annual Meeting. We also recommend celebrating churches seating messengers for the first time.

Rationale: In 2019, the Convention established a standing Credentials Committee to form an opinion on whether a church should be identified as a "cooperating church." Currently, when the Committee concludes that a church should no longer be considered "in friendly cooperation," it reports its recommendation to the Executive Committee to take action.

We believe it is best for messengers to have the sole authority to seat messengers, aided by the work of the Credentials Committee, in collaboration with the Executive Committee as needed. The Credentials Committee may consider recent votes of the Convention when forming an opinion regarding the seating of messengers.

We also believe the health of our Convention's culture would be improved if messengers celebrated churches that have sent messengers for the first time.

Recommendation 3: To ensure the fidelity of our trustees to our doctrinal confession, we recommend the Executive Committee propose changes to our governing documents for the Convention's consideration at the 2025 Annual Meeting to require the Committee on Nominations to nominate as entity trustees and standing committee members only those candidates who affirm the Convention's adopted statement of faith.

Rationale: Since 2000, *The Baptist Faith & Message* has established the doctrinal parameters for our entities. We commend the Convention's entities for prioritizing doctrinal accountability. This proposal for the Committee on Nominations aligns with the expectation of Southern Baptists that trustees will affirm and discharge their duties in agreement with the Convention's adopted statement of faith. We believe this recommendation will help us "move forward together in biblical fidelity, missional clarity, and cooperative unity."

Recommendation 4: To clarify our cooperative unity, we recommend the Executive Committee evaluate the usefulness and accuracy of a public list of churches and report their updates at the 2025 Annual Meeting.

Rationale: If the Executive Committee makes available a public list of churches, Southern Baptists would benefit from greater accuracy and transparency in order to gain a clearer picture of which churches are cooperating through the Convention. This list could include churches that seated messengers at the Annual Convention, completed an Annual Church Profile, and/or gave through the Cooperative Program.

ADDENDUM

As a point of clarification about Southern Baptist polity and cooperation, we encourage Southern Baptists to refrain from the language of “disfellowshipping” for churches that messengers determine no longer to be in friendly cooperation with the Convention. Instead, we suggest the constitutional language, “not in friendly cooperation.”

Rationale: “Disfellowshipping” is not the best language to describe when the Convention determines that a church is no longer in friendly cooperation and cannot seat messengers.

- From a *biblical* standpoint, “disfellowship” suggests the withdrawal of the hand of fellowship, implying such churches have ceased to be Christian churches (Gal. 2:9; 2 Cor. 6:14; also Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3,7), which may not always be the case.
- From a *polity* standpoint, the Southern Baptist Convention is not a denomination with a perpetual membership from which a church can be removed, but a voluntary convention of messengers from autonomous churches that choose to cooperate with other churches of like faith and practice.
- From a *confessional* standpoint, Article XIV of *The Baptist Faith & Message* encourages cooperation with like-minded churches that are not Southern Baptist. Autonomous churches might choose to continue to cooperate outside the Convention with other churches that have been determined no longer to be in friendly cooperation with the Convention.

The Cooperation Group,

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