

## Motions made May 19 regarding SBC Giving Plans

Our church sends money to the Southern Baptist Convention through our giving plans.

As a result of the decision that has just been made to disaffiliate with the Southern Baptist convention and no longer be a cooperating church we need to modify our giving plans.

I (Richard Szucs) move that we eliminate the SBC plan from our giving plan options effective May 31, 2024 and that the cooperative money given through the SBC plan be redirected into the FBC plan unless those individuals let us know otherwise.

I further move that a study group be appointed by the deacon chair, a senior minister and the business office manager to bring a recommendation to the deacons and to the congregation no later than September, 2024 for how the FBC plan and any other relevant offerings should be modified.

## Motion to Separate from the SBC

On April 23, in a special called meeting of the Board of Deacons, the board unanimously approved the following motion, to be brought to the congregation for a vote:

**The Board of Deacons of RFBC recommends to the congregation that the church separate from the SBC with all due speed. If the decision to separate is taken, the Board recommends that the decision be made public and communicated to the SBC.**

This motion was approved following a discussion among deacons moderated by retired Baptist pastor and adjunct professor of Baptist polity Bert Browning. The meeting was called in response to an amendment to the SBC constitution that is likely to pass during its annual convention in June 2024. That amendment will require pastors and elders of the SBC's cooperating churches to be men. Since RFBC has ordained women for ministry as deacons and pastors for decades, and since several women currently serve as pastors, this amendment requires careful review of our relationship with the SBC. Accordingly, a working group explored the current relationship of RFBC and SBC and reported its findings (see report #3) to the deacons in December and to the congregation during a Quarterly Business Meeting in January.

The report outlined the historical relationship between RFBC and the SBC, but focused its attention on the current status of that relationship. A limited number of adult Sunday School classes use Lifeway (the SBC's publishing entity) curriculum, and the children's ministry may periodically use Lifeway curriculum. Most of our relationship comes in the form of funds given to support SBC missions efforts through the International Mission Board (IMB) and the North American Mission Board (NAMB) of the SBC (see summary #2). In the church's SBC and FBC giving plans, funds are directed from members to the SBC, IMB, and NAMB. Additionally, Global and North American mission offerings include funds that are sent to the IMB and NAMB via Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong offerings.

RFBC and SBC already function independently of one another in living out core Baptist beliefs (see distinctive #1 below). Our status as a cooperating church of the SBC stems from the fact that we submit funds to support the SBC and its mission organizations. As a church, we've not

sent delegates to the SBC annual convention since 1992, and we have little official correspondence with the SBC other than through curriculum orders and submission of funds.

RFBC has enjoyed a positive working relationship with the IMB for decades. IMB missionaries have been appointed from our church, and many retired IMB missionaries and staff remain active members in our congregation. RFBC's giving to the IMB's Lottie Moon offering has regularly dwarfed giving to other global and local mission efforts, despite overall amounts declining recently. This reality, and the allegiance many in our congregation maintain to the IMB and its missions efforts, makes the decision deeply personal to some members.

The deacons recommend that we publicly separate ourselves from the SBC, prior to the SBC vote on the constitutional amendment. Our discussion and vote on May 19 will determine what decision we need to communicate. In the meantime, the deacons hope you will prayerfully consider what you believe our congregational response to this motion should be.

## 1. Core Baptist Distinctives

The December 6, 2023, report of the RFBC/SBC Working Group identified three core Baptist distinctives which were significantly compromised or ignored by the SBC in its action denying that women can be called to ministry as a pastor of a church congregation. Below is a paragraph of description based on the writings of Walter B. Shurden<sup>1</sup> in his book, *Four Fragile Freedoms*. (His fourth "fragile freedom," religious, is also included.)

1. "Bible freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation that the Bible, under the Lordship of Christ, must be central in the life of the church and individual, and that Christians, with the best and most scholarly tools of inquiry, are both free and obligated to study and obey the scripture." (Sometimes referred to as biblical authority or the centrality of Christ.)
2. "Soul freedom is the historic affirmation of the inalienable right and responsibility of every person to deal with God without the imposition of creed, the interference of clergy or the intervention of civil government." (Sometimes referred to as the priesthood of the believer or soul competency.)
3. "Church freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation that local churches are free, under the lordship of Christ, to determine their membership and leadership, to order worship and work, to ordain whom they perceive as gifted for ministry, male or female, and to participate in the larger body of Christ, of whose unity and mission Baptists are proudly a part." (Sometimes referred to as the autonomy of the local church.)
4. "Religious freedom is the historic Baptist affirmation of freedom of religion, freedom for religion and freedom from religion, insisting that Caesar is not Christ and Christ is not Caesar." (Sometimes referred to as separation of church and state.)

For more information on these distinctives, see Jim Somerville's blog post on the topic, [Being Baptist Means Freedom](#), dated April 3, 2024.

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter B. Shurden is an acknowledged scholar on Baptist principles, and the former director of the Center for Baptist Studies at Mercer University.

## 2. Summary of RFBC Giving to the SBC in 2023

Richmond's First Baptist Church (RFBC) has three cooperative giving plans—the FBC plan, the SBC plan and the CBF plan. Each of these plans support causes outside of RFBC. Individuals can choose any of the three plans. For those who do not choose a plan, the FBC plan is the default plan. The CBF plan sends no funds to the SBC.

### **FBC Plan**

RFBC sends money to the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) on behalf of those who choose or default to the FBC giving plan.

- In 2023, 78.43% of tithes and offerings were given through the FBC plan. \$23,435.42 was sent to the IMB.

### **SBC Plan**

RFBC also sends money to the SBC budget, the IMB and the North American Mission Board (NAMB) of the SBC on behalf of those who choose the SBC giving plan.

- In 2023, 2.29% of tithes and offerings were given through the SBC plan. \$479.15 was sent to the SBC budget, \$880.00 was sent to the IMB and \$401.48 was sent to the NAMB for a total of \$1,761.27.

### **Special Missions Offerings**

RFBC also sends money to the SBC through the special offerings for International and North American Missions, the Lottie Moon Mission Offering of the IMB and the Annie Armstrong Easter offering of the NAMB.

- In 2023, \$18,580 was given and sent to the IMB.
- In 2023, \$8,132 was given and sent to the NAMB.

Giving through these offerings has declined. For comparison, in the previous five years (2018-2022), RFBC has sent to the IMB and NAMB declining amounts as follows:

- Lottie Moon Mission Offering (IMB): From \$44,865 to \$24,085.
- Annie Armstrong Mission Offering (NAMB): From \$15,420 to \$9,964.

The total giving in 2023 was as follows:

- SBC budget: \$479.15
- IMB: \$44,896.06
- NAMB: \$8,533.48

## 3. Report of the SBC/RFBC Relationship Working Group

### Background

In June, 2023, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), at its annual meeting, proposed a constitutional amendment by which churches that failed to adhere to the SBC stated policy to “affirm, appoint or employ only men as any kind of pastor,” might be subject to disfellowship in the convention. The policy will become effective if approved in June, 2024.

The specific action continues a trend of decades within the SBC to view women as unequal partners in ministry, including objections to ordination to ministry, as deacons, as leaders in co-ed Bible studies, as worship leaders, or as able to preach from the pulpit, even as a guest preacher.

In additional historic context, Richmond’s First Baptist Church (RFBC) was founded in 1780. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was organized in 1845.

### Action by RFBC

In response to the SBC action in June, the RFBC congregation approved a motion at its June 21, 2023, Quarterly Business Meeting, stating that: (1) given the proposed constitutional change by the SBC; and (2) given that RFBC has on its staff women pastors, who are loved; that a committee be formed to study the relationship of RFBC with the SBC, with a report to be brought at the October 4, 2023 QBM.

Deacon Chair, Daniel Hocutt, appointed a team and an initial report was made to the congregation on October 4. The report confirmed the formation of the team, that it had met, and that the process of gathering information on connections and relationship points with the SBC was underway.

### Information Findings

#### **People Connections**

The team found that currently fewer than five (5) members are employed by an SBC agency; that approximately 25-30 members are retired from an SBC entity; that no members were identified as having served within the last fifteen (15) years as an official messenger to the SBC Annual Meeting; that no staff ministers or lay members were identified as serving on behalf of RFBC on any boards or committees of the SBC or its entities over a similar time period.

#### **Financial Relationship**

1. RFBC defines several giving plan options which designate certain funds gifted by members to go for mission work of various entities, including two (2) plans which support the SBC or its mission work in a defined manner. The “SBC Plan” provides a percentage of a member’s gifts to fund the SBC administration, operational structure, agencies, and its mission work. The “First Baptist Plan” (also the default plan for members not making a designation) funds only the mission work of the SBC through the International Mission

Board (IMB.) More details for these giving plans are available on the RFBC website. (For context: there were 967 giving units in 2022; of which 31 chose the SBC Plan, 339 chose the FBC Plan, and approximately 475 units defaulted to the FBC Plan.)

Additionally, funds are collected annually through two special offerings: Lottie Moon, benefitting IMB missionaries; and Annie Armstrong, benefitting North American Mission Board (NAMB) missionaries.

2. Funding mechanisms for gifts from RFBC members to the SBC are processed through the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV.) Funds are not sent from RFBC directly to the SBC. The BGAV periodically transfers to the SBC a composite total of funds contributed by multiple churches and designated toward SBC applications. (Note: this funding mechanism through the BGAV records appears to be the qualifying criteria used by the SBC, pursuant to which RFBC is then designated as a cooperating church, the SBC terminology for membership.)
3. GuideStone is a retirement and investment services entity, which is used by the majority of RFBC staff ministers. This is now a separate legal entity from the SBC and is also subject to applicable federal laws for retirement and pension service providers. However, the SBC has a leadership role by its appointment power for the trustees of the governing board of GuideStone. As a result of its historic prior status as a standing board of the SBC, GuideStone requires any non-SBC church using its services to sign a statement of belief consistent with many of the published principles of the SBC.

### **Materials and Publications**

Currently, five (5) adult Sunday School classes use materials provided by or through the SBC. There are minimal or no SBC materials identified as being used by the Children's, Student, Vacation Bible School, or Women's Missionary Union (WMU) ministries. The WMU obtains its materials from the National WMU. This WMU organization is a separate entity from the SBC, including having independent administration and financing. The primary relationship of the RFBC WMU with the SBC is through church-wide publicizing of the annual special mission offerings; and through a dedicated prayer ministry and other spiritual support for missionaries employed by or associated with NAMB and the IMB.<sup>2</sup>

### **Core Baptist Principles**

In assessing the relationship of RFBC with the SBC, the team acknowledged the nature of ties between the entities based on historic core Baptist principles, including: (1) autonomy of the local church congregation; (2) priesthood of the individual believer; and (3) the centrality of Christ in interpreting and understanding scripture by application of the life and teachings of Jesus.

For this report, the principle of autonomy is relevant to the decision of a church to make its own decision as to who to call as a pastor. The principle of the priesthood of believers includes the concept that every individual is able, and empowered, to assess a personal calling by God to a

---

<sup>2</sup> There are approximately 3,500 missionaries associated with the IMB, although the number being funded exclusively by the IMB is unclear. The identified, published number includes those who are fully or partially funded by organizations other than the IMB, acting in some form of partnership with the IMB.

ministry role. The centrality of Christ is relevant in acknowledging that Jesus valued women to spread the Gospel and to share fully in his ministry to a fallen world.

The proposed SBC constitutional amendment breaks with these core principles in significant ways.

## Analysis of Findings

Based on the information developed through its research and discussions, the team reached a consensus in summarizing five (5) trends or current status points:

1. Over the last 15 to 20 years, RFBC has progressively diminished its support of, connections with, and relationship to the SBC.
2. With minimal exception, the remaining substantive relationship with the SBC is limited to financial giving to IMB and NAMB missionaries, and spiritual support to these same missionaries through a WMU-led prayer focus.
3. There is no direct communication or connection with the SBC. The flow of funds, and the designation as a “cooperating church” are administered through a process of the BGAV. (See explanation in Financial Relationship.)
4. GuideStone, the primary retirement plan service provider for RFBC ministerial staff, is a separate entity from the SBC, but the SBC retains significant authority for policies, including eligibility and statements of principle beliefs, through its power of appointment of the GuideStone governing board of trustees.
5. The diminished relationship with the SBC over the past 20 years has primarily been over differences in core Baptist principles, most visibly with regard to the ordination, hiring, roles and value of women in ministry.

## Issues To Be Resolved

Based on the identified current status of limited relationship with the SBC, and in acknowledgment that the SBC [pending] official position on women as pastors is in direct opposition to the belief and the experience of RFBC, what, if any, action should RFBC take to:

1. show its support for women in ministry, including the role of pastor, both at RFBC and as a general principle;
2. honor its continued belief in certain core Baptist principles;
3. alter its current relationship with the SBC, if desired, which potential actions might include:
  - a. Taking no specific action(s)
  - b. Acting now to notify the SBC that RFBC is withdrawing as a cooperating church
  - c. Notifying the SBC, if and at the time the SBC adopts the proposed constitutional change, that RFBC is withdrawing as a cooperating church
  - d. Taking no action if the change is adopted, but awaiting action of the SBC to disfellowship RFBC for having women pastors on staff;

4. Review options to GuideStone for use by current or future staff for participation in a retirement plan. (These reviews are underway under the appropriate authority of the Business Office and the Personnel Team.)

### Next Steps for This Team

1. Share its findings with deacons at their December 10, 2023 meeting.
2. Request that the deacons undertake to recommend an action or non-action to the church, including the timetable and process of implementation for any action, regarding the relationship between RFBC and the SBC.
3. Request that the deacons identify appropriate options, if necessitated by changes in the relationship with the SBC, for the continued giving of financial support to IMB and NAMB missionaries, most specifically via collection and disbursement of funds gifted to the special annual mission offerings.
4. Request that the deacons separately recommend actions, if any, to be taken to highlight the support of RFBC for women in ministry, including as pastors; and its support for core Baptist principles.
5. Report to the congregation at the January 2024 QBM.

Respectfully submitted,  
RFBC/SBC Working Group

- Beth Fogg, Annette Hall
- Shannon Harton, Teri Osborne
- Wendy Norvelle, Julia Scott
- Lee Stephenson (chair), Richard Szucs
- Daniel Hocutt, deacon advisor
- Lynn Turner, staff advisor