

A SHORT GUIDE TO THE BAPTIST FAMILY FOR SCOUTERS

Introduction

The Baptist family is extremely diverse and often confusing, even for those of us who have been Baptists all our lives. There is a multiplicity of names, many very similar to other names, used by various branches of the Baptist family in the U. S. It is my intent in this short document to help you, as a Scouter, whether volunteer or paid professional, to understand some of the main differences in various Baptist groups so that you will be better equipped to present Scouting to Baptist churches across our nation. The groups will be treated alphabetically, and only ten (10) groups will be addressed. For information on other members of the Baptist family see the latest edition of *The Handbook of Denominations*. Nationally and at the state level, Baptists tend to organize in voluntary conventions, conferences, or fellowships. Locally Baptists tend to organize in “associations” of churches which are also voluntary in nature. There is no “bishop” or regional superintendent. Each congregation enjoys a high degree of autonomy and is self-governing. It is therefore a misnomer to ever refer generally to “the Baptist Church”, as no such thing exists.

As a prelude, it should be noted that virtually all Baptists in the U. S. descend from one of two ancestral streams. The majority of Baptists are related to what was once called the “Regular”, or “United” Baptists. These Baptists had origins in England in the 1600s for the most part, although some had been part of what was called the “Separate” Baptists, born out of New England Congregationalism during the First Great Awakening (circa 1740). This group formed the first national Baptist convention in the U. S. in 1814. In 1845 this convention split into northern and southern groups, both of which maintain distinct and separate bodies to this day (American Baptist Churches, USA and the Southern Baptist Convention).

A second stream of Baptists are commonly referred to as either “General” or “Free Will” Baptists, and they trace their origins also to England in the 1600s, where the General Baptists planted their first church on English soil in 1611. This group has tended to be the smaller of the two groups throughout Baptist history in the U.S. Their emphasis has always been on human free will and “general” atonement, or the concept that Christ died for everyone equally. The various Baptist groups discussed below will be related to one of these two main streams of Baptist life (and sometimes the streams cross, as you would expect).

American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

According to the World Council of Churches, the American Baptist Churches, USA, had 1,433,075 members in 5,834 congregations in 2006. The ABC-USA has its greatest strength in the northern and western states, but churches can be found in every state. The ABC-USA is divided geographically into regions, and a list of regions with contact information is available at <http://www.abc-usa.org/popupchurch.aspx?region=ALL>. A map of ABC-USA regions is available at <http://www.abc-usa.org/RegionalMinistries/RegionMap/tabid/425/Default.aspx>. ABS is working to build a stronger relationship with American Baptist Men (<http://www.abmen.org/>) and ABMen have signed a memorandum of mutual support with the

BSA (http://www.scouting.org/filestore/membership/pdf/4308_001.pdf).

Conservative Baptist Association of America

In 1947 the CBA organized as an independent Baptist group, having left the Northern Baptist Convention (now ABC-USA) over theological disputes. This group is very focused on mission work and maintains a conservative view of the Christian faith in general and of what it means to be a Baptist in particular. In order to promote more growth the CBA has launched an emphasis on serving local churches through “regional ministry hubs”

(http://www.cbamerica.org/documents/history_CBA/CBA%20Historical%20Perspective.pdf/).

The CBA listed for 2006 approximately 200,000 members in 1,200 churches. Their principal strength is in the mid-western and western states.

Convention of Original Free Will Baptist Churches

Tracing its origins to English settlers connected with the original General Baptists of England, the Convention of Original Free Will Baptist Churches is headquartered in North Carolina and is strongest in the North and South Carolina and parts of Georgia. Their doctrinal standards are conservative and based on an English General Baptist confession of faith from 1660. No membership numbers could be found. For more information see their website at

<http://www.ofwb.org/index.html>.

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

In 1991 the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship organized as a moderate response to the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention. The CBF has approximately 1,900 churches partnered in its organization. The CBF is theologically and socially moderate, focusing on issues of “freedom” over doctrine. Each CBF partner congregation is autonomous and free of any external denominational controls. More information can be found at

<http://www.thefellowship.info/About-Us>.

General Association of Regular Baptists

In 1932 the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches formed as a result of doctrinal disputes with Northern Baptist Convention (now ABC-USA), principally over theological trends in the NBC in the early twentieth century. The GARBC is a very conservative and evangelistic group whose principal strength lies in the northern states. In 2000 the GARBC reported a total membership of 245,636 in 1,442 congregations. More information about the GARBC can be found at <http://www.garbc.org/>.

General Association of General Baptists

From humble beginnings as the Liberty Baptist Association of General Baptists in 1824, the General Association of General Baptists have spread throughout the Midwest. Like other General

and Free Will Baptist groups, this group has an emphasis on free will and the general atonement of Christ for everyone without distinction. There are now sixty associations with 816 churches and 73,000 members. The General Association of General Baptists signed, in 2011, a historic memorandum of mutual support (hyper-link not found) with the Boys Scouts of America to make Scouting an officially recognized part of its churches' ministry to children and youth. More information can be found at <http://www.generalbaptist.com/?view=mobile> and at <http://www.meninmissions.net/>.

National Baptist Convention of America Inc., Int.

One of several African-American Baptist denominations, the NBCA, Inc., Int., has a membership of approximately 1,500,000 congregants. Organizationally, the denomination is divided into ten regions, with national headquarters in Dallas, Texas. For more information see <http://www.nbcainc.com/>.

National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.

Originally organized in 1880 in Montgomery, Alabama, this African-American Baptist denomination was founded with the goal of taking the gospel to Africa. In spite of several splits that have resulted in other African-American Baptist denominations forming, the NBC-USA remains the largest African-American Baptist fellowship in the U.S. with 7,500,000 members in 6,697 congregations, according to the World Council of Churches. More information can be found at <http://www.nationalbaptist.com/>.

Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.

Out of the Civil Rights Movement was birthed the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc., in 1961. The denomination supported Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his efforts to bring equality in civil rights to all citizens through non-violent means. Social justice and human liberation are central to the PNBC, Inc.'s vision and ministry. According to the World Council of Churches the PNBC, Inc., has 2,500,000 members in 1,800 congregations. Denominational work is divided into five regions. More information can be found at <http://www.pnbc.org/PNBC/History.html>. The PNBC, Inc. entered into a memorandum of mutual support with the BSA in 2007 (<http://www.scouting.org/filestore/pdf/ProgressiveNatBaptist.pdf>).

The Southern Baptist Convention

Historically one of the oldest Baptist conventions of churches still in existence today, the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 after a dispute within the Triennial Convention over the appointment of slave owners as missionaries. This split resulted in the formation of the SBC and the renaming of the Triennial Convention as the Northern Baptist Convention (now ABC-USA). The SBC has no centralized governing body but a system of boards and agencies. The Executive Committee works in Nashville, Tennessee and manages day to day SBC business. The North American Mission Board is located in Alpharetta, Georgia, and the International Mission Board is located in Richmond, Virginia. The North American Mission Board has

divided North America into five regions (counting Canada). The SBC reported 16,136,085 members in 2010 in 50,942 churches and missions. SBC churches can be found in every state in the Union. The SBC is historically conservative and evangelical in theology and focused on missions and evangelism. In 2006, then SBC President Frank S. Page (now President of the Executive Committee of the SBC), issued a letter of endorsement to SBC churches regarding the BSA (http://www.scouting.org/filestore/pdf/36_SouthernBaptist.pdf). For more information see <http://www.sbc.net>.