



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on September 26, 2011

## Southern Baptists Mull Name Change

Concerned that their group's name may sound too "regional" for effective outreach throughout the U.S., officials of the 166-year-old Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) have announced a task force assigned to study the possibility of changing the name of the 16.16-million member evangelical Christian denomination, the nation's largest.

"Starting a church in New York, or Boston, or Minneapolis, or Cheyenne, Wyoming, it's really a barrier to a lot of folks in even considering that church or that ministry," SBC President Bryan Wright told

[Christianity Today](#). "When they hear Southern Baptist, it's a regional perception there. The reason this task force has been set up to study a possible name change is [firstly] to consider a name that is not so geographically limiting, and secondly to help us be better prepared for reaching North America for Christ in the 21st century."



It is not the first time the SBC has looked into changing its distinctive label. "Motions to study a name change have been presented to the convention on numerous occasions," reported the SBC's own [Baptist Press News](#), "for example, 1965, 1974, 1983, 1989, 1990, and 1998." Additionally, a proposed "straw poll" to consider a name change was defeated at the SBC's annual meeting in 1999, and an effort in 2004 to put a study in motion was also shot down.

*Christianity Today* noted that a 2006 survey by the [Center for Missional Research](#) "found that while Southern Baptists were favored overall by the majority of adults polled, 1 in 4 said that knowing a church was affiliated with the SBC would have a negative impact on their decision to visit or join a church. That number was significantly higher for younger adults; nearly 40 percent of the adults 18 to 24 said the affiliation would have a negative impact on their decision."

In recent years there has been a trend among some SBC churches to change their names to "downplay their denominational identity," *Christianity Today* noted. Additionally, the "number of SBC members has been declining over the past few years, and the number of new baptisms into the church dropped to 332,321 in 2010, the lowest since the 1950s."

Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School, an SBC-affiliated seminary, told *Christianity Today* that addressing the denomination's name speaks to the SBC's changing role in America's Christian culture. "We began really out of the depths of the Civil War," he explained. "The 'southern' part of our name spoke about our history, our past. I think the SBC is increasingly less and less southern in the old cultural sense.... [In] respect to the prominence that we give now to church planting and world evangelization, 'southern' is probably a name that has outlived its usefulness."



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David Dockery, president of Union University in Jackson, Tennessee and a member of the name-change task force, told [Fox News](#) that there are several challenges to such an undertaking. “There are major legal issues and huge financial issues regarding a name change like this,” he said, pointing out “the whole issue of loyalty and tradition to a particular name—as marketing people would call it—to a brand name.”

Dockery noted that the name has been an issue “since the Southern Baptist Convention began planting churches far beyond the southeast. Looking for a name that would represent the work that now takes place nationally and globally has been a question for about 40 years.”

Jon Akin, as SBC pastor from Lebanon, Tennessee, suggested that the current name tends to dredge up memories of the days of slavery in the U.S. “While I’m grateful for the many good things in our heritage, there are some connotations that go with the label Southern, [reminding us] that our convention was started in part over an argument about slavery,” he told Fox News. “We’ve obviously made statements and resolutions saying that we do not affirm what happened in our past in terms of that, but it’s something we’ve got to continue to answer in terms of our heritage—that we aren’t going to be a mostly southern, mostly middle class, mostly white denomination, that we want to reach all nations.”

Nashville’s [Tennessean](#) newspaper pointed out that Wright’s actions to appoint the 19-member task force is not without controversy, having been done without the approval of the SBC’s Executive Committee. “The Rev. Frank Page, president of the Nashville-based SBC Executive Committee, said Wright is free to appoint any advisers he wants, but there’s opposition to his plan,” reported the *Tennessean*.

One opponent of the move, the Rev. Darrell P. Orman of First Baptist Church in Stuart, Florida, told the *Tennessean* that a name change for the SBC “could be a future necessity for our convention, but it should start from the bottom up, not the top down.”

Nonetheless, Wright believes now is the time to press once more for the change. “I am going to ask this task force to consider four questions,” he told BP News: “1) Is it a good idea, that is, is there value in considering a name change? 2) If so, what would be a good name to suggest? 3) What would be the potential legal ramifications of a name change? 4) What would be the potential financial implications?”

Wright emphasized the importance of having rank-and-file SBC members involved in the process, announcing that he had asked the denomination’s web team to create a special page at [Pray4SBC.com](#) where Southern Baptists could provide their input on a potential new name for the denomination.

“It also is imperative that Southern Baptists participate in this process by prayer,” said Wright. “The members of the task force will need wisdom and discernment as they pursue this inquiry. We will need God’s guidance as we consider whether to move forward with a proposed name change.”



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