

Lean into disrupting binary choices

by Andrew Gardner

In November of 2017, messengers to the annual meeting of the Kentucky Baptist Convention cast their votes to ‘monitor’ congregations within their state-body that were also affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Kentucky Baptists were and are concerned that the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s Illumination Project, which is reportedly being released this week, might recommend removing the Fellowship’s nearly eighteen-year-old hiring ban on LGBT individuals.

The issue reveals the ways in which Anglo-Baptist life in the South continues to feel the affects of the fracturing of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s. While the national body of the Southern Baptist Convention may have worked through the affects of these divisions, state conventions and associations, regional bodies and Baptist bodies abroad continue to struggle through questions regarding the ramifications of the more than 30 year old conflict. Some congregations and individuals even struggle to negotiate the relationship between the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists.

Kentucky Baptists casting their votes in favor of monitoring their fellow congregations are concerned that in removing the hiring policy, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship would be “redefining sin.” Congregations affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship would be participating in this redefinition. Such a move marks the boundaries of cooperation for Kentucky Baptist executive director Paul Chitwood, who remains convinced that disfellowship would not have “a big impact” on the more conservative state convention.

Questions abound regarding whether or not disfellowship is inherently wrong or whether it can lead to the further flourishing of groups that were holding one another back. Two dangers emerge out of this conflict, however, beyond the more basic questions related to LGBT individuals, sin and disfellowshipping.

The first danger affects Anglo-Baptists in the South specifically. The prospect of disfellowship between Kentucky Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship poses congregations with a binary choice. Dually affiliated congregations will be forced to choose between whether or not they affiliate with Kentucky Baptists or Cooperative Baptists. Such a binary option, however, belies the realities that Baptist life is far more diverse than simply Kentucky Baptists and Cooperative Baptists. Congregations have numerous denominational options through which they might affiliate.

Congregations tired of looking down the barrel of the Southern Baptist conflicts of the 1980s have the option of looking to the American Baptist Churches USA. Many state Baptist bodies are no longer geographically bounded, and some congregations could look to the Baptist General Association of Virginia as some congregations in Georgia have and did. Churches might even look beyond Anglo-Baptist life generally to the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., or the

Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc. Or perhaps denominational life has burnt these congregations out and they would like to spend time as an independently affiliated congregation.

Options abound for congregations beyond the binary of the Kentucky Baptist Convention or the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Churches run the risk of belittling the tapestry of American denominational life by thinking in such binary ways. It can become dangerous to become short-sighted in the midst of these denominational conflicts.

The second danger, leading from the first, affects Baptist and even denominational life more broadly. As society quickly heads toward the third decade of the 21st century, questions of congregational membership are becoming more and more antiquated. When Alexis de Tocqueville catalogued his observations of early America he claimed that we were “a nation of joiners” for “in no country of the world has the principal of association been more successfully used or applied to a greater multitude of objectives than in America.” Nearly 200 years removed from this observation, American society appears far more skeptical of the capacity for institutions and associations to promote flourishing. What does congregational, associational and denominational membership mean in the 21st century?

In 1992, the Alliance of Baptists took steps toward thinking about membership differently, but more work is still to be done. From the group’s earliest days as the Southern Baptist Alliance, the organization allowed for not only congregational but also individual affiliation—a turn from traditional models where membership in a local congregation was the marker of denominational membership. By 1992, the organization officially broke away from Southern Baptist life and adopted the name the Alliance of Baptists.

The importance of the organization’s name change was and in many ways remains the plural “Baptists.” In the Alliance we are Southern Baptists and Cooperative Baptists, American Baptists and Cuban Baptists, Progressive National Baptists and more, including individuals who are not even Baptist. Most, if not all, Alliance congregations are affiliated with other denominational and para-denominational groups, a distinctive feature of the organization. One’s Alliance membership is not contingent upon congregational membership nor is it contingent upon abandoning or changing one’s denominational affiliation.

As conflict continues to emerge regarding denominational affiliation in places like Kentucky and elsewhere, I hope and encourage Alliance folk to continue to lean into disrupting binary choices presented by an increasingly fragmenting world. Let us continue to rethink how membership and affiliation affects our denominational body so that we might provide some solace and encouragement in a world anxious about the role of institutions in our lives.

Andrew Gardner is a doctoral candidate in American Religious History at Florida State University and author of Reimagining Zion: A History of the Alliance of Baptists. ”