

Denominational Recommendation

May 2020

Introduction

Walnut Creek Church (WCC) is part of a church denomination called Great Commission Churches (GCC). GCC is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals as a member denomination. WCC has been a part of GCC since the church was planted in 1984.

In August 2019, after the GCC National Pastor's Conference in Bloomington, MN; WCC formed a committee of pastors to begin gathering data for discerning where God might be directing us in the future regarding broader association or denominational affiliation. This committee was encouraged by GCC President John Hopler because it was becoming clear that the future of GCC was uncertain.

The members of our WCC Future Committee were Pastor Mike Bourland, Pastor Luke Hukee, Pastor Bob Joy, and Pastor Darrin Miedema. The objective of the committee was to develop and execute a process that would inform a recommendation to the church regarding future association or denominational affiliation by June 2020. The Future Committee worked under the authority of and in conjunction with our Managing Elder team.

In the fourth quarter of 2019 at each WCC location's Member Meeting, the formation, objectives, and current findings of the WCC Future Committee were shared with the church. The Future Committee, Managing Elder team, and all of the pastors of WCC believe through this process, along with much prayer and counsel, that God has led clearly. The following document lays out that process and concludes with the pastors' recommendation to the church.

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Part 1

Why consider a new denomination, association, or network?

Throughout our history with GCC, we have enjoyed fruitful relationships with many churches and pastors, and we're excited to continue working with churches in this network to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ for many years to come.

Over the course of the last two years, several key developments related to the organizational structure and vision of GCC have resulted in us considering alternate options for affiliation. Our primary reason for considering alternative options is the fact that GCC has been in an evaluation process over the last two years. They have formed two different committees to help assess their future and seek to answer this key question: "What is the most effective way for member churches to reach the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ?"

GCC is still in the process of answering this question, and they are set to make a final decision on their future this June. However, as of right now, GCC will most likely dissolve their present denominational legal organization. This decision will leave autonomous local churches with no denominational affiliation. Churches would then be free to continue informal relationships, form new types of legal ministry organizations, or affiliate with existing organizations that serve local churches in the work of the Great Commission. Important to note, GCC has urged us to pursue greater cooperation within the Body of Christ during this process and to consider for ourselves: "What is the most effective way for WCC to reach the world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ?"

Please join our WCC pastors in praying for and uniting with GCC leaders as they work to finalize this decision. GCC is developing a formal communication plan to be released this summer. Therefore, the intent of the document that follows is not to communicate on behalf of GCC to the world about their future, but rather to help our WCC members understand the essential data points in our process of considering alternate affiliation.

Part 2

What are the criteria of consideration?

To begin the process of seeking the Lord regarding future affiliation, the WCC Future Committee developed the following criteria outlined below.

Future Association Criteria

1. Doctrine

Our primary concern is the guarding and teaching of sound, biblical doctrine. In evaluating any potential future associations or denominations, our first step will be to determine whether or not they hold to sound doctrine. The standard and authority for sound doctrine is the Bible itself, but our positions on core biblical doctrine and values are summarized in WCC's Statement of Faith, which can be found on our website under 'About'.

Any organization that overtly or covertly contradicts these positions would not be considered for future association.

2. Mission and Methodology

WCC's mission statement is as follows: *"Walnut Creek Church exists to glorify God by making authentic disciples of Jesus Christ who love and worship Him in all they do."*

Our goal is that everything we're investing in as a church would glorify God, produce the fruit of conversion for the non-believer, and increase maturity for the believer as we work toward pointing people to the worthiness of Christ.

Some key practical components of that mission in terms of methodology include (in no particular order):

- A commitment to faithful, public expositional preaching of the Bible
- Striving toward a church culture of personal responsibility for evangelism and discipleship
- Practically valuing and prioritizing seeking God in prayer corporately and individually
- A commitment to living in community with other believers
- A commitment to leadership development, particularly training and recognizing church elders/pastors
- A commitment to planting churches locally, domestically, and internationally

Any organization that does not align with our mission and methodological values would not be considered for future association.

3. Relationship

One of the greatest blessings of being a part of GCC has been the on-going relationships with believers who are a part of other local bodies with whom we can periodically gather for mutual accountability, encouragement, and counsel. This is something we would seek to continue with any potential future association/denomination. In particular, we think it's important to have practical touchpoints with other churches and leadership in our association for opportunities to:

- be held accountable to sound teaching, good stewardship, humility in leadership, and wisdom in shepherding our flock
- have practical oversight of our pastoral team in the aforementioned categories as well as others
- be equipped and sharpened by other churches and association or denominational leadership (training, conferences, etc.)
- fellowship and meaningful, long-lasting friendships where pastors across different churches can share each other's burdens and joys through prayer and other means of partnership

Any organization that lacks either the culture or the practical opportunities to develop the quality and depth of relationships described above would not be considered for future association.

4. Resources

WCC believes that, as a church, we should give regularly, generously, and sacrificially to an organization outside of ourselves. Historically, this has been GCC. This is a practice that we want to continue regardless of whether or not we remain in GCC.

With that as the goal, it's important that we are giving financially to an organization that we can trust and that we're confident is working for the advancement of God's Kingdom through the planting of churches and the spreading of the message of the gospel.

Some important considerations would be:

- What type of training does this organization provide for pastors, church leaders, church planters, and global missionaries?
- What type of financial support does this organization provide for church planting, sending missionaries, and equipping the local church?

Any organization that we do not trust to steward WCC's giving resources well would not be considered for future association.

Part 3

Which organizations were examined and why?

There are many church denominations, associations, or networks which WCC might consider. However, based on the above criteria, six were chosen for closer examination and consideration.

- Acts 29 Network
- The Evangelical Free Church of America
- Great Commission Churches
- Presbyterian Church In America
- Sojourn Network
- The Southern Baptist Convention

There were three additional important factors that were considered when developing this list:

1. The pastors of WCC wanted to develop a process that required thorough due-diligence, and one that would force us to apply real thought and effort, not just consider organizations we were already familiar and comfortable with.
2. To achieve that end, we wanted a reasonable diversity of options.
3. At the time this list was developed, it was not yet proposed that GCC dissolve its present denominational legal organization. We wanted to seriously consider staying in GCC if that was where God was leading.

Part 4

Research & conclusions regarding GCC and other organizations

Acts 29 Network

The WCC Futures Committee tasked Luke Hukee with the responsibility of contacting Acts 29 with the purpose of gathering information about the network in order to assess if WCC should consider joining. The recommendation was made to WCC to contact the U.S. Midwest Assessment Director for Acts 29 to set up a meeting for an initial conversation to help understand their process, doctrinal positions, mission, and relational network. Luke worked diligently for nearly two months, sending text messages, emails, and making phone calls to their Midwest Assessment Director. They were able to connect a few times, but Acts 29 would not commit to a meeting time or phone conversation.

Due to what appeared to be a lack of interest or priority in having a conversation with WCC regarding network affiliation, we stopped pursuing Acts 29 and focused our efforts on other organizations that were more enthusiastic about helping us understand what it might look like to partner with them.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the WCC Future Committee's main criteria for consideration is relationship, as outlined previously. Currently, there is only one Acts 29 church in Polk County, which may be why we were not a priority for their Assessment Director, who works out of Minneapolis, MN. Due to the lack of opportunity for relational connectedness within the network, WCC will not be pursuing further inquiry into Acts 29.

Evangelical Free Church of America

On January 7, 2020, Darrin Miedema and Mike Bourland met with Dr. Calvin Swan, Superintendent of the Evangelical Free Church of America's (EFCA) Central District, and Mike Shields, who replaced Dr. Swan when he retired this past March. In the last 20 years, the Central District of the EFCA has grown from 80 churches to roughly 135 churches. Their two main points of emphasis are doctrinal precision and church planting. Their statement of faith is excellent, and it appears that Walnut Creek has even borrowed some of their language for our statement of faith.

Church Planting

On the church planting front, the EFCA Central District has a church planting board that has three full-time staff. One person represents Missouri and Arkansas, another represents Iowa and South Dakota, and the third is what they call their "Multicultural Director." The IA/SD church planting position is currently open (i.e. unoccupied). Their multicultural strategy seems to center around existing churches adding services in other languages. Overall, their strategy for church-planting was not very clear or cohesive, at least from our initial conversation.

Leadership and Organization

In March, Mike took over for Calvin who retired. Mike has never been in EFCA leadership in the past, and the bulk of his experience is in pastoring. He has pastored several churches in various parts of the United States. He said his main focus over the years has been on helping revitalize struggling churches.

EFCA churches are encouraged but not obligated to give financially. They suggest giving 1 percent to the national office, and a small percentage to the District Office.

Requirements for Denominational Affiliation

EFCA “Senior Pastors” are required to be ordained by the EFCA. They do not require a seminary degree, but they do have a doctrinal examination that is administered by the EFCA. Until very recently, they required pastors to hold a pre-millennial eschatological position, but they have recently amended that to open it up to other views. Calvin said virtually all EFCA pastors hold a pre-millennial position as it was a requirement up until very recently.

EFCA churches are also required to be congregationally led. They believe that the highest authority under Christ is the congregation. This means that church members vote on certain decisions in the life of the church. What is voted on is determined by a local church’s bylaws, but the major requirement is voting on a change of “Senior Pastor”. Other typical voting items would be sale or purchase of land, change of denominations, and changes to the doctrinal statement.

EFCA churches are required to adopt the EFCA’s statement of faith. There’s nothing we would take issue with in their statement of faith, but there are some omissions that we would not be allowed to include. For example, our statement on life and marriage could not go in our Statement of Faith if we were in the EFCA.

Another important note is that they do not require EFCA member churches to practice baptism by immersion. The vast majority do, but it’s not a requirement. Mike Shields said he didn’t know that was the case and was very surprised by it. He agreed that baptism by immersion should be a requirement for church membership, even though that is not the position of the EFCA as of now.

Relationships and Equipping

The District has a full-time position called “Church Health Director”. This person facilitates a “Leadership Pipeline” that is designed to train pastors to train up leaders within their churches. He also facilitates “Preaching Workshops” a few times a year.

The District owns the Hidden Acres Christian Center in Dayton, IA, and uses it for conferences and retreats throughout the year. The conferences are for pastors and lay leaders only, not for church members. They do have a pastors/wives retreat once a year.

The EFCA’s primary seminary is Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. They do not offer discounts for member pastors.

CONCLUSIONS

On March 4, 2020, Mike Bourland and Darrin Miedema attended the EFCA District Conference at Valley Church in West Des Moines. Valley Church is the largest EFCA church in the district, and there were about 200 people at the conference including pastors and their wives. While this was only one event, our overall impression was that the practical relational connectedness

among these churches was not broad. There seemed to be pockets of strong connections among specific pastors. Additionally, it was a much older demographic than is represented in WCC, with a large percentage of the room consisting of people in their 70s and older.

While the EFCA is doctrinally aligned very well with WCC, congregational voting does not fit within our methodological vision. We are also uncomfortable with the allowance of infant baptism, even if it is very uncommonly practiced by member churches. For these reasons, we have decided not to pursue further inquiry into partnering with the EFCA.

Great Commission Churches

On April 30, 2020, the GCC Executive Committee met to vote regarding dissolution. It was approved. Pastors will have an opportunity for a final vote on dissolution at the annual Pastor's Conference in June 2020. The expectation of the Executive Committee is that the motion to dissolve will be passed by member churches at the Pastor's Conference.

CONCLUSIONS

All signs point to GCC not existing as an official organization moving forward. For this reason, WCC does not plan to be a part of GCC and will look for broader affiliation elsewhere.

Presbyterian Church In America

On March 4, 2020, Bob Joy met with Pastor Wayne Larson of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Des Moines. Pastor Larson is chairman of the Mission to Iowa Committee which is responsible for church plants in the Iowa Presbytery. The Iowa Presbytery is a fellowship of PCA churches in the state of Iowa, seeking together to be "Faithful to the Scriptures, true to the Reformed faith, and obedient to the great commission of Jesus Christ." There are nine PCA churches in Iowa, with one in the Des Moines area.

Quoting from the PCA Book of Church Order, "The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America, which is subject to and subordinate to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the inerrant Word Of God, consists of its doctrinal standards set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith, together with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, and the Book of Church Order, comprising the Form of Government, the Rules of Discipline and the Directory for Worship; all as adopted by the Church." Officers (elders and deacons) in the PCA take a vow to "sincerely receive and adopt" these confessional statements "as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures."

CONCLUSIONS

While there are many elements of the Westminster Confession of Faith with which we would agree, there are also fundamental issues of disagreement. For example, Pastor Larson had reviewed the WCC Statement of Faith and identified the area of baptism. The Westminster Confession of Faith calls for infant baptism, which WCC does not recognize or practice.

In the area of recognizing pastors, ordinations of teaching elders in the PCA are governed by the Presbytery and include

completion of an examination and approved course of study. WCC believes in local ordination and would not wish to subject itself to these requirements.

Given the doctrinal differences and church governance issues that exist, we have decided not to pursue further inquiry into partnering with the PCA.

Sojourn Network

On March 13, 2020, Mike Bourland and Luke Hukee attended the Sojourn Alignment Conference, which was a video conference hosted through a Zoom meeting format. The Alignment Conference is akin to a membership class for churches that are interested in joining the network.

Brief Overview

Sojourn Network (SN) formed from Sojourn Church that was started in 1999. Initially, this church was part of the SBC but was asked to join Acts 29 in 2004. Acts 29 pursued forming affinity groups of churches instead of regional groups. Sojourn Church began down this path, however, Acts 29 chose to form regional groups instead. Since they saw value with the affinity approach, Sojourn Church asked Acts 29 for permission to become their own network. They received approval and became SN in 2011. Their mission statement is “...to help pastors plant, grow, and multiply healthy churches that last.”

They have a goal of planting at least 125 churches in the next five years. SN requires all member churches to agree to the 13 core doctrines outlined by The Gospel Coalition. SN has a process for churches to become a part of the network, including an on-site visit by their leaders to make sure new churches are in alignment with the core beliefs and practices. SN focuses on pastors’ spiritual, emotional, and relational health so they can lead from a position of strength. Currently all member churches contribute 3.5 percent of their financial giving to SN. This percentage started off several years ago as 5 percent and has been decreasing by 0.5 percent each year. The stated plan is to go down to 3 percent in January 2021 and stay there.

Summary Statements

Goal is not uniformity but intentional application with the seven macro-practices:

- The church gathered (Heb. 10:25)
- The church scattered (Acts 2:42-47)
- The church led through plurality (1 Pet. 5:1-3)
- The church equipped (Eph. 4:11-16)
- The church cared for and shepherded (1 Pet. 5)
- The church culturally engaged through acts of mercy and compassion (Jer. 29:7; Jas. 1:27)
- The church sent and multiplied (Mat. 28:16-20)

Celebrate diversity in at least the four core areas

1. the places God sends our churches and pastors
2. the people God brings into our family
3. the programs in our local churches
4. the preferences of our pastors and churches on non-essentials

Five Core Values

1. Whole-hearted Leadership
2. Conviction and Imagination
3. Renewal Driven Mission
4. Friendship
5. Diversity

Equipping Benefits

- Two all-expense paid meetings each year that would be out of state. A pastors/wives meeting in the spring and a leadership meeting in the fall.
- A one-day assessment of potential church planters and their wives in Louisville, KY.
- Three-year financial support commitment for new church plants ranging from \$6-18K annually, paid out monthly
- Fully funded SN coach provided to new church plants. Person is available to assist as desired and will be on site some of the time. All travel and salary of coach is paid by SN.

CONCLUSIONS

While Sojourn Network seems to be a very good fit on doctrine, mission, methodology, and equipping resources, they have only one other network church in the state of Iowa, which is less than ideal. It seems like SN churches do have strong relational networks in certain parts of the country, but they have not yet established a strong network in or near Iowa. For this reason, we have decided not to pursue further inquiry into partnering with the Sojourn Network.

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)

On September 16, 2019, the WCC Future Committee met with Tim Lubinus, the Executive Director of the Baptist Convention of Iowa (BCI), and Chase Abner, Church Planting Catalyst for The Send Network, which is the church planting arm of the North American Missions Board (NAMB), part of the SBC.

This initial conversation revolved around two main categories:

1. Organizational Structure and Strategy
2. Questions regarding concerns WCC pastors have with the SBC

In addition to this initial conversation, Dan Rude, Luke Hukee, and Darrin Miedema met with Tim Lubinus, Chase Abner, and Kevin Ezell, NAMB President, in early December for a follow-up conversation.

Additionally, several WCC pastors attended a church planter gathering in Des Moines hosted by Chase Abner in February. There were about 30 pastors from the Des Moines area, and it appeared there was a real fellowship among those men. It was an encouraging time that was executed with a high degree of excellence.

On March 31, 2020, Tim Libinus and Chase Abner met with all of our WCC pastors to share some of these things in more detail and field any questions.

In terms of stated doctrinal positions, The Baptist Faith and Message is the official statement of faith of the SBC. It aligns very closely with WCC's Statement of Faith and doctrinal positions. The Baptist Faith and Message can be found on the SBC website.

1. Organizational Structure and Strategy

- The SBC has approximately 45,000 churches worldwide, which makes it the largest non-Catholic Christian denomination in the world. Domestically, the SBC is organized by State Conventions. Leadership, equipping resources, accountability, and relational networks are primarily established at the state level.
- Fundamentally, the reason the SBC exists is to pool resources for the sake of planting gospel-preaching churches across the United States and all over the world. This is at the heart of everything they're doing strategically.

In terms of broader organizational structure within the SBC, they are organized in this way:

NAMB: North American Mission Board – the domestic church-planting arm of the SBC. Led by NAMB President, Kevin Ezell, and focused on identifying and equipping church planting pastors to plant in areas of the United States that are underserved with the gospel.

IMB: International Mission Board – the international church-planting arm of the SBC. Focused on identifying, equipping, and fully funding church planters to go into unreached areas of the world with the gospel.

ERLC: Ethics and Religious Liberties Committee – the public policy arm of the SBC. Their stated mission is to be “dedicated to engaging the culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ and speaking to issues in the public square for the protection of religious liberty and human flourishing.”

Seminaries

The SBC has six seminaries across the United States and Canada including:

- Gateway Seminary of the Southern Baptist Convention (Ontario, CA)
- Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Kansas City, MO)
- New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary (New Orleans, LA)
- Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (Wake Forest, NC)
- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (Louisville, KY)
- Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Fort Worth, TX)

SBC member churches are granted 50 percent tuition reduction for any member who wants to attend an SBC seminary either in person or online.

Finances

- Member churches give money directly to the BCI
- 50 percent stays with the BCI for church planting, training, and conferences
- 50 percent goes to the SBC. Of that money:
 - 51 percent to IMB
 - 22 percent to NAMB
 - 22 percent to seminaries
 - 1.65 percent to ERLC
 - 3.35 percent to administrative costs

Church Planting

- The resounding theme of the mission of both the BCI and SBC is unapologetically focused on equipping and resourcing the local church to multiply through church planting. This is at the very heart of everything they're doing.
- NAMB helps fund church plants in many different ways. They provide \$50,000 annually for the first 3-5 years for church plants as long as the church tithes to the BCI.

International Missions

- The IMB has an evaluation process and training for overseas planters. For people who meet their requirements and are sent through the IMB, the IMB fully funds those missionaries as IMB employees for the duration of their time in the field. They are more directly involved in the placement of the missionaries in target countries and cities, but their aim is long-term church planting.
- The IMB has been working to form a partnership with Radius, acknowledging that Radius is excellent on language-learning and other elements of the training process, while IMB has more financial resources in terms of sending.

Resources

In terms of practical affiliation with the BCI, they host the following types of events, usually held in Polk County:

- Pastors/Wives Retreat
- Evangelism Training
- Men's Retreats
- Elder Training (Preaching/Counseling)
- Women's Conferences
- Youth Conferences
- Church Planter Equipping

There are several churches in the Des Moines area that attend these events including:

- Grace Church
- Frontier Church
- Cottage Grove Church
- Cornerstone Church (in Ames)
- Keystone Church
- First Family Church (Ankeny)
- First Family Church (Bondurant)

2. Questions regarding concerns WCC Pastors have with the SBC

The main concern we discussed with representatives of the BCI was regarding sexual abuse within SBC churches and some of the claims in the media in recent years that SBC leadership has tried to downplay or cover up these instances.

In response to these instances being brought to national SBC attention, the President of the SBC, JD Grear, commissioned a Sexual Abuse Advisory Group. He tasked the group with considering how Southern Baptists at every level can take discernible action to respond swiftly and compassionately to incidents of abuse, as well as to foster safe environments within churches and institutions.

The work of that group can be viewed at www.caringwell.com. A thorough investigation of the state of the SBC and what changes needed to be implemented at every level was carried out. A report of their findings can be found on their website.

The work of the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group is transparent, impressive, and reflective of the type of posture we want to have toward fostering a safe environment of integrity and accountability in our own church.

CONCLUSIONS

Benefits to joining the Baptist Convention of Iowa

- Affiliation with the largest evangelical organization in the world
 - At least among Christians, being an SBC church quickly and succinctly communicates some things about our doctrine and values that are very positive.
- Extended relational network within Iowa and potentially beyond
- Access to resources and training that are far beyond what is available through GCC or other organizations
- Opportunities for financial support for missionaries and future church plants, as well as assessments and ongoing care for missionaries and church planters
- 50 percent tuition reduction for anyone who wants to attend one of the six SBC seminaries
- Access to Guidestone insurance and financial products for employees of WCC
- Some BCI churches in central Iowa have already approached WCC about helping them develop a Set Free ministry in their local context. BCI affiliation would position WCC to help share best practices in a way that could equip and encourage other like-minded churches.

Part 5

Pastoral Recommendation for Congregational Review

After several months of praying, counseling together, and meeting with representatives from several different denominational organizations, the WCC Future Committee, the Managing Elders, and all of the pastors of WCC recommend that Walnut Creek Church join the Baptist Convention of Iowa beginning in July 2020.

The BCI and the SBC meet all of our criteria for consideration. They are doctrinally aligned very well with our church. They are passionate about and aimed at church planting, gospel preaching, and disciple making for God's glory. They have a strong network of pastors and churches in central Iowa that we can begin to develop meaningful partnerships with for mutual encouragement and accountability right away. And finally, they are one of the best organizations in the world in terms of equipping pastors and churches for church planting both domestically and internationally.

As pastors, we're asking members of Walnut Creek Church to take the next six weeks to consider this recommendation. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact one of your location pastors to discuss those things, or you can send an email to bci@walnutcreekchurch.org. It appears God is leading Walnut Creek Church in this direction, but part of what will confirm that is whether or not we can move forward in unity. That is our hope, and that's why we're asking for your feedback.

We love God's church, and our aim is to make her more fruitful, united, and holy for God's glory. Our hope and prayer is that joining the BCI will position us well to continue to pursue those ends.

Thank you for your consideration and prayers.

In Christ,
Walnut Creek Church Pastors