

Why do I want to do ministry in a Southern Baptist church?
Michael E. Simons

If you read my doctrinal statement, there are no doubts in my mind whatsoever that I believe that conservative Southern Baptist churches come closer to interpreting and following the Bible than any other denomination. I say that with a very clear conscience because there have been events in my life that have caused me to question which denomination really follows the Bible.

I was raised primarily as an independent Baptist for most of my life. It took a lot for me to overcome that tradition and finally walk in through the doors of a Southern Baptist church many years ago. My wife and I had been deeply wounded in a legalistic Independent Baptist church where the only Bible that was used under any circumstances was a King James Version. The pastor, in my humble opinion, did not tend for the sheep as he should have and we were regularly subjected to tirades that didn't build up the church. When we finally left, we were warmly greeted and tended for by a loving, conservative Southern Baptist church just up the road. Even to this day, many years later, we still have a relationship with that church.

One of the hardest decisions that my wife and I had to make over five years ago was to leave an evangelical denomination. We had been in that church for over ten years and we left for Biblical reasons. We had many friends that we left behind, and it was quite tough for us. But we had to make the break.

When we started attending Town Creek Baptist Church in 2003, I was looking for any reason not to join. If any red flags went up, that was the end for me. Funny thing was, no red flags went up. We went through the new members class before we joined, and the teacher shared some ideas that blew apart in my mind the typical stereotypes I had of a Southern Baptist church.

Based on what I learned, I am firmly convinced that the spirit of cooperation that exists among Southern Baptist churches has a clear foundation in the Word of God. Southern Baptists work together to get the job done, there is a defining doctrinal statement (The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message) that binds us together in a common creed, and we as a denomination are focused on evangelistic outreaches not only locally, but also around the world. Our size as a denomination allows us to do outreaches that independent Baptists and those of other denominations can only dream about.

When we take these ideas and couple them with my desire and calling to work with the educational ministry, and specifically youth, in a Southern Baptist church, there is so much that we can do together. I believe that parents want to see their youth disciplined in the truths of the Word of God. We can cooperate in a spirit of love, unity, and fellowship to make a difference both here in our local communities and around the world. I believe that youth, their parents, and the adult workers who will be working with me are more open to a wide variety of ideas and methods than probably in any other denomination.

As your educational pastor, here's a small glimpse of what you can expect from me.

Communication

This is a key need in any successful church ministry. As a parent, accurate, available and advance information concerning what's going on in the ministry itself is absolutely vital. I'll make sure that you will have quick access to the most important information, whether it is through a web page, an email, a newsletter, or even an announcement at church.

Vision

Parents need to know my heart and vision. As we partner together in this journey toward mature faith, you will know the plans that I have for reaching out inside our church, as well as those who are outside the church. As we work together, it is my God-given responsibility to build up the home as we are working together. I won't do everything for you, but I will promise my prayers and support and a desire to come along next to you as you work with your youth in seeing that they become a robust disciple of Jesus Christ.

As youth workers, we must strongly believe that students can make a real difference in the world where they are right now. They aren't just the church of tomorrow; they are the church of today. Our hope to develop young leaders through the youth in our church is only eclipsed by our struggle to unlock their zeal. There's nothing more painful than seeing the wasted potential of those entrusted to our care or a life mired early by guilt and shame. There would probably be many youth workers who will tell you that it can be a pit of despair, but there's hope. We are called to prepare all of our students for the work of the ministry. It's a daunting task, but one that must be attempted if we're to adequately prepare the church.

In educational ministry, if you don't have a goal, you'll hit it every time! We simply cannot leave the discipleship and evangelism arms of the church to pure chance. We have a race to win and there's much that goes into winning the race. Proverbs 29:18 tells us that where no vision exists, the people will perish. Keil and Delitzsch state in their Old Testament commentary that "the word of God is preached among a people belongs to their condition of life; and they are only truly happy when they earnestly and willingly subordinate themselves to the word of God which they possess and have the opportunity of hearing." The Word of God is to be paramount to our ministry; it is the hearing of and subsequent obedience to the Bible that changes lives.

Tools

There will be times that I'll be teaching in some Bible study or class setting. However, there will be other times that I'll simply function as a facilitator in helping you and your family succeed. I'll frankly admit that I don't have all the answers and don't know where all the resources are that you'll need. But if there's one area that I'm really good at, it's researching. But when we band together in a spirit of unity and cooperation as existed in the early church, I can give you ideas that will work when it comes to having a regular

family altar program, or how to set up a small group with other parents who are seeking to understand this complex issue called adolescence. We can work together with other like-minded Southern Baptist churches and have a seminar or retreat on being more effective as parents. It's okay if you look at me as being a useful resource for helping to get your job done more effectively and in a Biblical manner.

Encouragement

There's no doubt about it: living this thing called the Christian life isn't easy. Being a parent and raising a godly family, especially adolescents, is even more difficult. With the rise of the Internet, there's a lot of bad stuff that will destroy our Christian faith. At the same time, adolescence is one of those periods in life where our youth start traversing the road to independence in becoming an adult in just a few years. There are times when you'll need that encouraging word from me when your young person does something good. There will be other times that you need a word of affirmation that your youth is going to make it through these troublesome years. That's what I'm here for during those crazy moments. We all need encouragement, and the church is the best place to get the encouragement that is needed, or at least it ought to be!

I'm firmly convinced that working with understanding, well-intentioned families in a conservative Southern Baptist church that binds us together in a common creed is the only way to do effective ministry with long lasting results.

Leadership

Students, if they are to be prepared for service as adults, must learn leadership qualities now. Additionally, if adults are to be equipped for service and prepared to pass along those leadership qualities to our youth, they need discipleship as well. There is no one who should say, "I don't need discipleship anymore." Based on a website I found, these look like good ideas in terms of jumpstarting leadership potential in my future ministry. If our church and subsequently our denomination are to succeed (not just survive), we must work together now. I can't think of a better place to accomplish this than in a conservative Southern Baptist church based on what I know at this moment.

1. Make servanthood a necessary criterion for all leaders. Ministry is meeting needs in love, and we want our students to do that in two ways. First, always be on the lookout and attentive to others, and second, be proactive in doing something to help it. Jesus said if you want to be the winner, you have to put yourself into the lowest position and serve selflessly.

2. Determine high standards for your student leaders, and make them known. Set standards that requires student leaders to live an "above reproach" lifestyle. It is a difficult concept to get when they are 16, but we need to help them understand that giving up some liberties makes it possible to influence more people for Christ. The criteria should also come with some responses to potential problems, including taking a "season

off” in the leadership role and addressing issues before they escalate into something greater.

3. View leadership more as a commitment rather than a program. Leadership is more than just attending a program or a monthly meeting reserved for the good kids. It is more than a set of responsibilities and tasks that make someone’s to-do list. It is a continual commitment to be a servant and live blamelessly. This kind of thinking will help your students be leaders in all aspects of their lives, so they don’t compartmentalize their faith while at church or during a particular program.

4. Focus on celebration, community, and accountability. When your leadership team gathers, we know that training and vision casting are certainly valuable, but we believe these other things are more important. Don’t forget them in the rush to prepare an inspiring message.

Celebration: There are plenty of good things happening – it’s time to celebrate! Acknowledge the progress and the successes of your students. Notice the difference they are making. Commend them for a job well done. Practical stories and testimonies are a vehicle to reinforce your vision and train authentically. Let them see firsthand why you need them to be a student leader – look at the changed lives and the difference made!

Community: Students who are a cut above their peers need to identify with other students who are like them. Take time to build community with your leaders by making it a priority to spend time with them. Don’t let this community grow so close that it becomes an exclusive clique that makes outsiders feel ostracized. This will hurt your ministry in the long run. Make it open for those willing to step up to the challenge. It’s not likely that your leadership team requires the closeness of a small group, but there should be a significant connection built among them.

Accountability: If you’re going to ask them to live by a higher standard, you’re going to need to hold them accountable to that. This isn’t an easy task, but one that is crucial to keeping the right people in positions of leadership. Build this principle right into the group, have them hold each other accountable, and pray for one another during your meetings and in the rest of their life as well.