

Richmond Baptists restructure to strengthen ministry in wake of homosexuality dispute

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The Richmond (Va.) Baptist Association will change its name and broaden affiliation categories.

By Robert Dilday

The Richmond Baptist Association has approved a significant restructuring aimed at strengthening its ministries in the wake of a dispute over homosexuality which prompted some of its member congregations to withdraw or reduce financial support.

Though final approval must be given in October, the [55-church association](#) in Virginia's capital authorized leaders to move forward with a proposal which would change the group's name and create four membership categories with varying levels of financial commitment and governance participation, and could include both Baptist and non-Baptist entities.

"Our model and prayer was to provide a path for Baptists of good will to faithfully minister together in places where ministry in the name of Jesus is deeply needed," Cecil Chambers, a Richmond pastor who chaired the task force which developed the proposal, said at the RBA's spring meeting April 24. Chambers also is the association's moderator.

River inspires new name

One recommendation will change the organization's name to the River City Faith Network, whose mission statement describes it as "a diverse family of churches working together to bring living water to transform our communities through the love of Christ and for the glory of God."

River City is one of Richmond's commonly used nicknames, referring to the James River which flows through the heart of the city. But task force member and Richmond pastor Kimberly Ridley said for Baptists, water images carry profound connotations.

Chambers said the Richmond Baptist Association likely would continue to be the organization's legal name. A branding graphic distributed at the meeting included "Richmond Baptist Association" in small type below the new name.

Under the proposal, churches and other entities may participate in the network through one of four levels of affiliation:

- Community partners may be Baptist or non-Baptist, provide financial support on an occasional basis, and have no governing representation.
- Connectors may be Baptist or non-Baptist entities, contribute a minimum of \$1,000 or 1 percent of their budget, and are permitted one representative, or messenger, at the network's annual meeting.
- Champions must be Baptist, contribute a minimum of \$2,000 or 2 percent of their annual budget, and are permitted five messengers at the annual meeting and one member of the network's executive board.
- Core partners must be Baptist, contribute a minimum of \$3,000 or 4 percent of their annual budget, and are permitted 15 messengers at the annual meeting and two members of the executive board.

Connectors, Champions and Core partners must adopt a "Covenant of Intentions" with the network each year. The covenant, not yet written, will be presented at the network's October meeting, along with necessary constitutional and bylaw changes.

The affiliation levels were presented as a means to broaden support for the RBA's key ministries — a camp in the Shenandoah Valley for inner-city children and three social ministry centers in Richmond. They also could attract churches at odds with some of the RBA's values but which support the camp and ministry centers.

Contentious votes

In March 2013, the RBA voted by a razor-thin margin to [retain the affiliation](#) of Ginter Park Baptist Church in Richmond, which the year before had ordained a member of the church who is gay. At least 15 congregations withdrew from the association as a result and others have withheld or reduced financial support. Last October the association [rejected a motion](#) to rescind its earlier action and authorized a study committee to propose a new structure and clearer priorities and values.

"This proposal comes out of the association's vote last October," Chambers said, adding that a series of listening sessions this year helped determine the recommendations. Additional "town hall" meetings are expected this summer, when the details are completed and prior to a final vote in October, he said.

One participant at the April 24 meeting asked if the new structure would alter the association's relation to Ginter Park Baptist or other churches which might take similar action. "The reason people are quitting the association is because the morality of the Bible is not being upheld in some of the churches. Is this new thing going to correct the morality problem?"

Chambers said the proposal "does not address the controversy in which this association has been involved for the past year," primarily out of respect for the RBA, "which has twice voted on this issue."

Baptist or not

But most discussion among the 154 messengers centered on dropping "Baptist" from the association's name.

"You will dilute the RBA by dropping the name Baptist," said Chuck Nunn, who was the association's director of missions for 20 years before retiring. "I would be more comfortable by dropping faith and making it the River City Baptist Network."

Sterling Severns, pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church in Richmond, said most young people coming to his congregation aren't looking for a Baptist congregation. "We take delight in telling them we're Baptist and teaching them what that means. We celebrate that identity and have it on our sign. But as an association we look for a larger community and our willingness to change the name is to say to the extended Christian community that there is room for them. That is a blessing."

The task force proposal was adopted on a 123-31 vote.

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