



Illumination Project

The Illumination Project is a project of the Governing Board of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The Illumination Project is a process of discernment and accompaniment involving CBF congregational leaders to build and strengthen CBF unity through cooperation. This is a project to illuminate the qualities that have built unity in CBF, and through discernment, to identify intentional processes by which we can maintain and grow unity through cooperation.

The Illumination Project is designed to create models of dialogue and decision-making for a cooperative body. The goal, often sacrificially enabled, to seek intentional community in spite of differences has been a strong witness of CBF. We believe that our commitment to scripture, reliance on foundational faith tenets, and the lessons from our history can be used to enable new clarity regarding the process of cooperative Christian community for the Fellowship.

Often the call to dialogue masks a requirement that we set aside our deepest convictions on important questions and be subjected to a lecture intended to persuade. The intentional design of this project is to bring CBF churches with their full conviction into a respected and trustworthy place without intent to persuade, but instead to find a path to cooperation.

The tasks of this project include:

1. Assessment — How have/are we expressing unity? It has been unity through cooperation, not unanimity.

To explore our significant achievement of unity through cooperation. To articulate the core identity measures for CBF that have formed us to be a unique Baptist body adhering to the historic Baptist principal of autonomy of the local congregation in matters of diverse opinion and practice. For example: various differences in matters of church organization and leadership, women in ministry, church membership, biblical interpretation and baptism and in matters of cultural difference like sexuality.

Some contributing factors to unity in CBF:

- Our unity through cooperation is born from a focus on sound and big essential freedoms: Voluntarism regarding participation in both churches and in CBF and the autonomy of local congregations.
- Cooperation is promoted and deepened because of essential and living networks of human relationships connecting individuals and congregations and global partners.
- Unity through cooperation is also facilitated through the structures of Governance as a network comprised of autonomous but coordinated states and regions that flourish in a context of purposeful ambiguity.
- Cooperation has been aided by certain explicit practices that differ from traditional conventions and denominations: Prohibition of resolutions, no proportional church representation through messengers, and the use of a

deliberative business model allowing for small group deliberation and amendments and minimizing contentious floor battles at General Assembly.

- Unity through cooperation is expressed in robust global and US missions.

2. Process and facilitation — What are the foundational principles and operational practices that can guide our health as a unified body under Lordship of Christ?

To claim the role and purpose of CBF and explore both the opportunities and limitations of that role. To articulate the focal ministries and priorities in church ministries, global missions and in global partnership. To identify the practices, reflecting the qualities of CBF identity that are expressions and extensions of foundational beliefs and true to the biblical underpinnings of CBF.

- Listening to voices from within the Fellowship, which can be the consensus voice of an entire congregation, but also individual voices, dissenting voices, minority voices and global voices.
- Structuring messages/voices on behalf of the Fellowship, where matters of cooperative mission and ministry require response. This includes public communication, press releases, pastoral addresses and other official CBF messages.
- The process of facilitation will recognize personal stories and experiences of a wide variety of people respecting the dignity of each person, honoring the Imago Dei in all people and voices and experiences that may not have been heard in the Fellowship.
- Employing the use of purposeful conversations — Dialogue and conversation is a strategy in a voluntary Fellowship. Purposeful conversations extend to a wide array of sectors and employ a variety of voices across the Fellowship. Sometimes those voices are voices of affinity, and sometimes they are voices of diversity.
- There are important and prescribed roles and processes of CBF Governance Bodies to create, monitor and review policies and funding. These roles and processes are for the benefit of CBF and the witness of Christ.
- Seeking expert facilitation and direction for structuring purposeful and productive work with clear parameters of discourse, respect for all voices and civility. The opportunity to put concepts like faith, trust and love into action through dialogue.

3. Reflecting CBF churches and considering global stakeholders — What are the important and representative values from the wide variety of churches and global stakeholders in CBF?

To consider the full complement of churches and global partners in CBF. CBF is a network of churches and individuals; CBF is a pervasively religious, explicitly Christian, explicitly Baptist, globally active, mission sending denominational organization. Within those boundaries and identity, we have to intentionally name the expectations and benchmarks of unity and participation. Understanding the scope of congregational identity and affinity helps calibrate the cooperation required for common life.

- Some congregations are affiliated with CBF only for one fraction of their ministry and do not claim CBF identity.
- Some congregations have a high degree of relatedness to CBF.

- As some churches leave the expectation of denominational affiliation behind, they seek CBF for service, not identity.
- Levels of financial support for the mission and ministries of CBF are not necessarily related to degrees of affinity.
- Global partnerships are critical to the cooperative missions and ministries of CBF and to a majority of CBF stakeholder churches.
- State and regional CBF organizations are primary stakeholders in CBF.
- External funding sources also play a role in CBF missions and ministries; sometimes these external funds affect CBF stakeholder churches.
- Like the people that compose them, each individual CBF congregation has its own DNA. It is an expectation that a congregation within the life of CBF be respected for its approach to living out its calling, be appreciated for its witness to the world for Christ and be granted safety in the knowledge that differences of opinion do not detract from our ability to form together.

4. Processing the important impact of cultural and historical context — What aspects of current culture and context present an intersection for discussion of Christian witness to clarify and strengthen unity through cooperation?

To explore, at various intervals, the significant/presenting places of intersection, stress and division that warrant a direct and thorough process for the Fellowship. Controversial issues continue to painfully divide the church, in part because we lack an intentional practice of deliberative dialogue. Whatever conversations and processes have carried us to a certain time, there is a need to reconvene with intent as new points of stress present themselves.

In the current cultural context,

- it's a law about the use of bathrooms in public buildings in North Carolina and the less-publicized part of the law that takes away local control from cities and counties.
- It's a law in Mississippi that was signed by the governor that allows businesses to refuse service to gay couples out of a religious objection or a similar law in Georgia that was vetoed.
- It's the worst mass killing in American history at a gay nightclub in Orlando.
- It's a unanimous ruling by the Supreme Court that bars most lawsuits between ministerial personnel and their employers.
- And it's a 5-4 ruling by the High Court that requires a state to license a same-sex marriage.
- In Texas, it's a concern that a pastor would have to serve in a role that violates his or her sincerely held religious beliefs.
- In a nation of such dizzying religious and cultural diversity as the United States, clashes can occur. As a denominetwork, CBF is manifesting that tension in recent discussions about the hiring policy.

CBF exists to serve Christians and churches as they discover and fulfill their **God-given** mission. That role as partner is strengthened when people and churches collaborate through mission and ministry endeavors. It can be strained when attention is overly focused on cultural issues that divide us.

Cooperation among those with differing opinions is uncommon today. Traditional denominations have been sundered one after another in the wake of these shifts. Can CBF be a big tent with cooperative culture?

On the matter of sexuality in local congregations, CBF is the only national religious body that has established its operating policy as abiding by the historic principle of autonomy of the local congregation. This applies to the one million people that sit in CBF pews each week. We do not see eye to eye, but neither have we plucked out eyes on this matter congregationally. Congratulations – we have done what other faith communities have not. This is more light, less heat.

Implementing the Illumination Project will yield a process for more light toward the seemingly intractable issues facing CBF, the local church, global missions and partnerships here and around the world. The implementation of the Illumination Project will be guided by an ad hoc committee of the CBF Governing Board and begin before the end of August 2016.