

Name Change Discussion: Why Consider a New Name?

OUR RECOMMENDATION

The elders of First Baptist Church are recommending that our church walk through a discernment process to consider and select a new name for our church. We do not want this to be a divisive change for us as a community. We will do our best to listen to concerns and provide opportunities for our congregation to be involved. In keeping with the pioneering spirit that started our church in the young and fledgling city of Minneapolis 166 years ago, we want to continue serving God’s mission in our city and believe that a new name will help us do that more fully.

This is not a new discussion for us as a church, and it has been ongoing for over thirty years. We believe it is time to take this step into the future and invite our congregation to join us. The goal of this document is to provide the rationale for why we are pursuing a process to select a new name. As always, if you have questions, or feel that something is unclear, please let us know.

OUR NAME IS A BARRIER FOR REACHING PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY

We have been confronted with overwhelming evidence that our name is barrier to effectively reaching our community.

General Studies

1. In the early 1980s, Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie hired Marketing Decisions, Inc. to conduct a study of their local community. Of those surveyed, 2/3 of which were classified as unchurched, over half found the word Baptist to be “unattractive” and about one-fourth found it be “real negative.”¹
2. In the early 2000s a firm conducted a study in the Twin Cities and compiled a list of religious words and asked people throughout public spaces (malls, stores, etc.) to rank them from most positive to most negative. Of the nineteen words they studied, Baptist came back as the most negative.²
3. In the early 2010s, Grey Matter Research released a study in which they found that churches with denominational names are almost three times as likely to be viewed as old fashioned and rigid.³

Focus Group Studies

We conducted a focus group study through an outside organization⁴ in 2015. One takeaway from the researcher who moderated our focus group was that “for those that do not have any

¹ The results of this study can be found in the *Name Change Process* document produced by Wooddale Church in which they articulate the process they walked through in 1983 to change the name of their church. The copy of the document referenced was from 04/10/2003, 8:50am

² The results of this study were recorded in *A Word from Our Pastor*, which was a letter addressed to the congregation of First Baptist Church and written in 2003 by Pastor David King. A copy of the letter can be by request in the First Baptist Church office.

³ Found at: <https://greymatterresearch.com/church-names/>

⁴ Focus Groups were conducted by Think Pink Idea Consulting: <https://www.thinkpinkideas.com/>



experience with the Baptist church, they default to stereotypes, and often negative ones.” Some of the words used by focus group participants regarding Baptists were, “white racists”, “strict rules,”, and “do as I say, not as I do.”

Anecdotal

1. People in our church have reported that they are timid about telling friends and family the name of the church they attend because of the way that people have responded to our name in the past. This is not cowardness, nor is it a result of people being ashamed of the gospel, but a result of way that the name “Baptist” is perceived by others.
2. One quote from a former guest who had previously attended another like-minded church to ours, “I have driven past this church every day for almost two years, but I didn’t want to go to a *Baptist* church, so I never came before.”

The evidence is clear. Whether we like it or not, our name creates a barrier for people to come to our church. *We must reconcile with the reality that for as long as we maintain our current name, we maintain a barrier for people coming and hearing the gospel through their participation in our church family.*

There are certain Biblically faithful doctrines that are unavoidable barriers and we will not compromise them for the sake of “getting people in the door.” For example, teaching people that all people have sinned and fall short of God’s glory and need to repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins can be a barrier for some people, but we will not forsake that message. Additionally, one barrier we will not compromise is teaching people that we worship a God who became a man, lived a sinless life, died an innocent death on the cross, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and will eventually return to fully redeem his creation.

We will always hold certain beliefs and doctrines which are offensive to people, and the question is whether keeping the name “First Baptist Church” is a barrier we are confident in maintaining? As elders, we believe that unlike certain core doctrines which create an unavoidable barrier, our name is a barrier that is not necessary to keep.

CHANGING OUR NAME IS NOT A REJECTION OF OUR HISTORY OR DOCTRINE

One concern that comes with a new name is whether we will lose our commitment to our history or doctrine. It is an understandable concern, and very real for many people. However, we can say with confidence that we are not going to bury our history or compromise our doctrine under the force of a new name.

Not a deviation from our history

We are taking proactive steps to capture and codify all that God has done through our church. We will host several *Re:Capturing Our Story* lunches throughout the process so that we can hear from our church members about what God has done in and through our church. In addition, we have been pulling together previously developed resources, including videos and articles, which communicate our history. We believe that a name change is not a deviation from our church’s history but is in line with the initial intent of the pioneering people who crossed the Mississippi river to plant a church in the growing city of Minneapolis. They were pioneers and entrepreneurs who were willing to go to



great lengths to ensure a vibrant gospel presence in Minneapolis. We still want the same thing - to have a vibrant gospel presence which renews lives through relationship with Jesus in the Twin Cities and beyond. A new name will help us to do that effectively.

Our hope is that our new name will feel more like a continuation, rather than a deviation, from all that God has done through our church.

Not a deviation from our doctrine

Changing our name does not mean we are changing our doctrine. As a congregation we recently updated our Statement of Faith as part of our new bylaws that were adopted in February of 2019. We did not loosen our commitment to Baptist distinctives, and in many ways we actually reinforced and strengthen many of our long-held beliefs. For example, here are some historic Baptist distinctives, all of which we affirm and none of which we intend to change in this process.

1. Authority of Scripture
2. Congregational Autonomy
3. Priesthood of all believers
4. Two ordinances: Believers Baptism and Communion
5. Liberty of Conscience
6. Believing and Baptized church membership
7. Two offices in the church: Elder and Deacon
8. Separation of Church and State
9. Commitment to conversion through the gospel of grace through faith

Our commitment to what it means to be Baptist has always been more about our affirmation of these basic doctrines than it has been about our name. Remaining faithful to these Baptist distinctives, even while changing our name, is more consistent to what it has historically meant to be Baptist than if were to forsake these doctrines while keeping our name.

A NEW NAME WILL MORE CLEARLY AND ACCURATELY REFLECT WHO WE ARE

The denominational word “Baptist” can mean so many things and does not clearly communicate who we are as a church. For example, not all who claim the term “Baptist” today continue to affirm the historic Baptist distinctives. For example, University Baptist, the first Baptist church in Minneapolis, has become theological progressive and denies many of the core Baptist distinctives which we want to maintain. On the other end of the spectrum, Westboro Baptist in Kansas has become known for its inflammatory and hateful speech toward those who disagree with them on matters of theology and practice. We are not like either of those “Baptist” churches.

Unfortunately, the word “Baptist” has become used in so many different ways and contexts, the meaning is now vague, and as a result it does not clearly and accurately reflect who we are without several points of explanation and clarification. For many, we are not even afforded the opportunity to clarify what type of Baptist we are before they conclude they don’t even want to find out.

Our goal will be to find a new name that clearly and accurately reflects who we are a church community. A name that honors all that God has done here in the past, and even more pressing for us now, what we believe God wants to do through our church in the future.



THE RECOMMENDATION OF EVERY PASTOR AND VISION TEAM FOR THE PAST 30+ YEARS

The possibility of changing our name is not a new discussion for us as a church, and it has been the recommendation of every pastor and vision team for the past 30+ years.

1. The Reach Out for Tomorrow: Phase II team (1980s) recommended that we change our name
2. Pastor David King, in a 2003 letter to the church, wrote “one of the changes we need to make is the name of our church.”
3. The Vision Team (2014-2015) recommended a name change to the board, and the board affirmed that recommendation to the congregation.
4. Pastor Matthew Clausen recommended changing the name to the congregation on numerous occasions
5. Pastor Jeremy Adelman recommended a name change as part of his candidating process while being called through a unanimous vote to become the Senior Pastor

Our congregation should not take lightly the ongoing and persistent recommendation of its leaders that changing our name is something we should do as a church.

A NAME CHANGE IS NOT A SILVER-BULLET

We have been walking through a season of renewal and revitalization as a church family. One important step in that process will be the decision we make regarding our name. However, it must be noted that a new name is not a silver-bullet for revitalization. While we believe changing our name is a necessary step, we must be careful to not overstate its impact. A new name will not magically make people into disciples or fill our sanctuary, and if we are not engaged in effective discipleship and evangelization as a church, then a new name will not instantly change that fact. A new name is not a silver-bullet to growth; however we do believe it is an important next step in our process of revitalization.

IT IS OKAY (AND EVEN EXPECTED) THAT THIS CHANGE IS HARD FOR SOME PEOPLE

This will be hard for some of our congregation, and we need to make room for that reality. This is not necessarily a reason for changing our name or not changing it, but something important to acknowledge. If you are having a hard time with the possibility of changing our name, that is okay. Even if you believe it is the right thing to do, the potential of a new name may still be difficult for you.

Our response to the name change might be a negative one, but that doesn't necessarily mean we are opposed to the change. For some of us, what we are experiencing is far more like grief than it is like opposition. Often in life, a decision we believe is right, is still not easy to make. In fact, it can be very difficult, even when we are very confident that it is the right decision. For example, when selling the house you raised your kids in because it is too large to manage any longer, it may prove to be extremely difficult emotionally, even if you are confident it is the right decision. This is an expression of grief.

As a result, I want to encourage you to consider why you might be experiencing difficulties with the potential name change. For some of you, it is because you are grieving the loss of the name First Baptist Church. For others, it is because you are opposed to a name change for one reason or another. It is important that you take the time to know the difference, and ask yourself what it is you are feeling. Then talk with people about it in a healthy and constructive manner.



If you are someone who is not just grieving the potential loss of the name First Baptist Church, but principally opposed to the name change, please take the time to discern why, and then let us know. Be engaged in the process throughout the next several months. We will not shame you or disregard your questions and concerns, so please come to the meetings and let your voice be heard. We want to hear from you.

Throughout the process, we have the opportunity to fight for unity and grace with one another. Regardless of how you feel about the change, whether you are for it or against, don't dishonor your fellow church member who may simply have a different perspective than you. May we all allow this process to be a display of our trust in the Lord and our love for one another.

FINAL COMMENTS

The process to change a church's name is not easy, nor should it be. As elders, we feel the weight of this decision along with you. However, we also believe that God's Spirit is leading us toward this important and necessary decision. Our desire is that we walk through it as a church with unity and grace.

Please join us in praying for God's wisdom throughout the process and that we would all conduct ourselves with a spirit of unity and a disposition of grace.

Your elders,

- Mike Jones
- Rick Swanson
- Mark English
- Jeremy Adelman

