

Dear Friend,

Thank you for expressing interest in understanding the structure of Heartland Baptist Bible College as it relates to the local church. We're grateful for your interest in Heartland, and we welcome sincere questions. Because Heartland is not organized as a ministry of one specific church, perhaps you've wondered:

- *Is Heartland a local church ministry, or is it a parachurch organization?*
- *Can our church send students to Heartland when we believe ministry training is a local church responsibility?*
- *Why is Heartland not under the exclusive authority of Southwest Baptist Church?*

These are reasonable questions that warrant clear answers. We are passionate about biblical church doctrine, which means we're glad to explain how a high view of the local church can co-exist with fervent support for Heartland.

Although some churches ostracize themselves from all outside engagement, most churches choose to depend on support organizations to help them do what they do. Many churches use a bank to secure the church's funds, a local business to print tracts, or an architectural firm to design the sanctuary. Some churches send children to camps that are not ministries of any particular church, or they may purchase Sunday school materials or choir music from organizations that are not local churches. Pastors often draw sermon material from commentaries having no local church origin, and many pastors recommend books or resources that have no local church connection.

Stating these real-world examples is not intended to incite controversy to them. Rather, the purpose is to demonstrate that churches and pastors draw "a line" (whether intentionally or inadvertently) regarding the support organizations or helps they are willing to use. At Heartland, we have two responses to this line. First, because we believe in the autonomy of the local church, we support every pastor's right to lead the church he pastors in the placement of that line. Second, in our own lives and in the lives of others, we want that line's placement to please the Lord! In the absence of specific mandates and in the presence of many applicable principles, our choices should at least be biblically defensible and logically consistent.

May we suggest there are good reasons for Heartland Baptist Bible College to exist inside the line of organizations you and your church can use and support? To articulate these reasons, we will: 1) offer biblical and historical precedent for a ministry training institution with Heartland's structure, 2) clear up a potential misunderstanding about Heartland's structure, and 3) explain why Heartland's structure is well-positioned to be a help to you and the church of which you are a part.

Biblical Precedent for Heartland's Ministry Training

Should a church share one of its core functions—the training of people for ministry—with an institution that is not a church? We agree that ministry training should hold a place of heightened importance! We also believe the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) offers significant precedent for ministry training conducted as a collaborative effort of God's people.

During the times of Israel's judges and kings in the Old Testament, the schools of the prophets were established to train men for service in God's work. These schools were not the tabernacle or the temple, and they weren't even always located where either the tabernacle or the temple was located. Yet they received investment from God's true prophets and experienced signs of God's favor through supernatural provision. In other words, God seemed to bless ministry training schools that were organized independently of the tabernacle or temple—as long as those schools were doctrinally pure and spiritually fervent.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul commends a group of New Testament churches (plural) for their sacrificial giving to believers in Jerusalem. Through this commendation, Paul notes the churches' collective vision for helping needy believers, their collective plan for meeting the need, and even their collective selection of men to accomplish this work on their behalf. No individual church was given hierarchical authority over the other churches in making decisions that represented their joint efforts. Instead, the churches that participated voluntarily in the giving also worked together in approving representatives who would execute the work for them. Through Paul's inspired words, God commended the churches' collaboration in meeting specific spiritual and material needs of other churches.

If we apply the principles reflected in these Old and New Testament examples (among others) to current ministry training needs, the potential for many churches' mutual benefit through collaborative ministry training becomes clear. Also, by contrast, there is simply no biblical reason to suggest that independent churches cannot work together to train people for ministry.

Historical Precedent for Heartland's Ministry Training

Examples from the history of independent Baptists also add credence to the value of collaboration in ministry training. Pacific Coast Baptist Bible College (which eventually became Heartland) was founded by a group of pastors and churches who desired to establish a training institution for ministry workers in the western United States. Why did they organize the college using a collaborative model? This model had experienced God's blessings in many settings all over the world. In fact, prior to the megachurch movement in mid-20th century America, nearly all Bible colleges and ministry training schools operated as cooperative endeavors of like-minded churches. For the founders of PCBBC, collaborating also seemed more feasible financially and more beneficial academically.

When PCBBC needed to relocate and eventually arrived in Oklahoma City, the college's proximity to Southwest Baptist Church was an essential factor in the relocation decision. PCBBC leaders wanted to improve upon the previous approach in which students could attend any area Baptist church and instead wanted the college to be located where all students could attend one church of sufficient size and stability to assimilate them.

With a disruptive transition already taking place, and with the leaders seeking the benefits of a single host church, why wasn't the college just reorganized as a ministry of Southwest Baptist Church? First, Bro. Sam Davison and other leaders on the "receiving end" of the college's move believed it would be unethical to change the college's founding organization or to absorb the college's assets into one church. Second, the leaders continued to believe in the advantages of a collaborative model. Through their decision, Heartland Baptist Bible College was able to move forward with *both* the benefits of a strong host church and the benefits of many supporting churches. The continuing existence of Heartland today is primarily a witness to God's providential care, but it also points to the wisdom of this insistence on cooperative organization.

In response to this historical explanation, some may say, "Right. . . But many of the colleges founded with a collaborative structure have eventually failed." That's true! However, Bible colleges of many different structures have eventually failed or drifted into apostasy. In fact, several prominent examples of failure among Baptist colleges in America are colleges that were organized as ministries of individual churches. Considering the particular and overall history of ministry training endeavors, the key to a Bible college's endurance seems to be less related to the institution's organizational structure and more related to matters of doctrinal fidelity, ethical leadership, and spiritual fervency.

Therefore, both biblical and historical precedent suggests there can be a season of great collective benefit when doctrinally sound churches invest in a ministry training institution for doctrinally sound churches.

What Some Misunderstand about Heartland's Structure

Because of our tendency to organize our world using labels or categories, it's easy to misclassify something when we're not sure how to label it. Through the years, some have wondered whether Heartland should be categorized as a parachurch organization. This unfortunate perspective may be based on a misunderstanding of parachurch organizations, a misunderstanding of Heartland's structure, or a misunderstanding of both. We're glad to clear up any confusion we can!

Consider the following definitions of "parachurch organization" from a standard internet search:

- "Parachurch organizations are Christian faith-based organizations that work outside and across denominations to engage in social welfare and evangelism."
- "Parachurch organizations are Christian faith-based organizations that usually carry out their mission independent of church oversight."
- "Parachurch organizations are religious organizations that do not operate under the auspices of a particular faith tradition."

There are certainly more definitions out there, but you catch the meaning of the term. Now you can understand why we are taken back by the categorization! Heartland's doctrinal statement contradicts all of the major tenets of these definitions! We only employ staff and faculty who are independent, fundamental Baptists, and we only accept students from independent, fundamental Baptist churches. We're not engaged in social welfare or independent evangelism, and we're most certainly committed to (and dependent upon) church oversight!

Perhaps you are asking, then, "So, if Heartland is not a parachurch organization, what is it?" We're glad to answer this question.

Heartland is Well-Structured to Be a Help to Your Church

Heartland is not a ministry of one local church, but it is a local church ministry. This sentence may seem like it's playing a semantic game, but it's not! In fact, it lies at the heart of Heartland's existence and mission. Local churches collaborated in Heartland's founding and preservation, and Heartland's leadership has designed it to operate in a way that tethers it to local church authority at almost every dimension. This means Heartland is a local church ministry because *it is a collaborative ministry of many local churches*. This also means that local churches can safely support it and use it, knowing that it is ultimately a product of their investment and influence.

Consider these examples of how strongly Heartland is structured as a local church ministry:

- *Authority.* Heartland is led by officers (i.e., a president, vice-president, etc.) who are elected by 24 directors who must all be current pastors of independent, fundamental Baptist churches. How are these 24 directors selected? They are elected by current pastors from independent, fundamental Baptist churches that support and send students to Heartland.
- *Accountability.* Heartland is not accredited by any governmental agency or parachurch organization. The college's financial, academic, and doctrinal accountability is provided by the same pastors who lend Heartland its authority.
- *Funding.* Heartland does not receive any direct federal funding, although students receiving veterans' benefits are able to apply them to an education at Heartland. Heartland is

radically affordable because of monthly support from 300+ local churches and the yearly May College Offering. These funding sources amount to 45% of the cost of educating a Heartland student, which means Heartland would cease to exist at its current cost if churches stopped supporting it.

- *Purpose.* Heartland is not a vocational school, a liberal arts college, or a public university. It is a ministry training school with a narrow focus of majors designed to prepare men and women for church ministry.
- *Doctrine.* Heartland's doctrinal statement declares the importance of the local church, and we deny the existence of any universal church. The college also teaches strong local church authority as evidenced through instruction on Baptist baptism and closed communion.
- *Southwest Baptist Church.* Students who attend Heartland Baptist Bible College are required to become members of Southwest Baptist Church in Oklahoma City (with exceptions for students from other OKC-area churches and upperclassmen who participate in approved internships). As members of SWBC, students are able to practice local church ministry while learning local church ministry. Plus, the loving church staff and members create a wonderful "church home away from home."
- *Pastoral Leadership.* Because Heartland is not attempting to function as a church but does require church participation, all of its staff, faculty, and students are either in positions of pastoral leadership (Pastor Gaddis and local pastors who teach as volunteers) or are under pastoral leadership. No one involved is independent of local church leadership.
- *Everyday Function.* Students who attend Heartland are not severed from their home churches or pastors. Rather, when students are facing difficulties or are making major life decisions, Heartland administration purposefully involves students' home pastors—knowing these pastors understand the students' backgrounds and have already invested deeply into them.

As a local church ministry with these local church connections, Heartland is well-structured to train students from local churches, and we're laboring to do the work—with excellence—that has been entrusted to us. Because of the collective investment of churches like yours, Heartland has assembled a group of doctrinally sound faculty and staff with over 1,000 years of combined ministry experience. These godly servants have dedicated their lives to training Heartland students, and they're able to make a remarkable collective investment in each student.

No matter how zealously we're striving for ministry training excellence, we're not saying that Heartland can automatically do ministry training better than a church. Some parachurch organizations go so far as to say that the local church would not make it without their organization. We say the opposite: Heartland Baptist Bible College cannot continue without students and support from local churches. However, because of many churches' investments of precious people and resources, the Lord has allowed Heartland to see some encouraging outcomes.

On that note, and to conclude, the graduates of Heartland are a fitting final testament to Heartland's fidelity as a local church ministry. Since the college moved to Oklahoma City in 1998, over 1,800 students have graduated from one of the college's programs. Rather than leading parachurch organizations or living only for secular careers, many of these graduates are sacrificially serving in local churches as pastors, missionaries, song leaders, Sunday school teachers, youth workers, and faithful members. Heartland has demonstrated its trustworthiness as a local church ministry through the destinations of the lives it has impacted.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely in Christ,

Heartland Baptist Bible College