

Reimagining *Zion*

A History of the Alliance of Baptists

Andrew Gardner

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Foreword

“Perhaps Zion is wherever the people of God reside.” So Andrew Gardner concludes this excellent history of the Alliance of Baptists, some thirty years after the movement’s founding. That single sentence portrays the “Alliance story” insightfully. Born of intense internecine divisions within the Southern Baptist Convention, Alliance-related churches and individuals have shaped an interfaith-ecumenical-justice-pursuing-Baptist identity. The courage present in the movement’s beginnings endures in concerns for peace and justice; racial, sexual and gender equality; creation care, and mission engagement. Gardner surveys all that and more as he recounts the history of the Alliance. The metaphor of Zion reflects a theological and ecclesial relocation from the nurture, identity, and traditions of the Southern Baptist Convention, to a new network of congregational and spiritual engagement. Andrew Gardner captures that journey with sensitivity and thoroughness.

Those who did not experience “the Controversy” in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) during the 1970s and 1980s may not fully grasp the intensity of the struggle for “the soul” of America’s largest Protestant denomination. From 1979 to roughly 1990, Southern Baptist “Moderates” and “Conservatives” challenged each other over theological differences and denominational control. The annual denominational gatherings drew huge crowds of “messengers” from participating churches, empowered to vote for Convention presidents who would use their appointive power to name trustees with specific agendas for affirming or redirecting the nature of the SBC itself. The Controversy probably reached its apex in 1985 in Dallas when some 45,000 messengers showed up to vote for or against Atlanta pastor Charles Stanley for president. Stanley’s election convinced many Moderates that new strategies beyond continued confrontation were essential and achievable. Some new coalition was necessary to respond to the shifting directions of the old denomination. The Southern Baptist Alliance, later to become the Alliance of Baptists, was born of that insightful, and in those days courageous, decision.

Courage is an operative word for the origins of the Alliance of Baptists. Once again, those who did not experience the Controversy in the SBC cannot know how courageous it was in 1986 to suggest an alternative approach to responding to the divisions and reshaping Baptist identity in response to transitions in American denominations and culture. Gardner's history retells that story with clarity, naming names of those who shaped the fledgling movement, forming new coalitions and ministries, many of which continue to this day.

One of those early coalitions contributed to the founding of a new theological seminary, Baptist Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, (BTSR) another courageous response to the times that became a long term contribution to theological education in the United States. Thirty years later it is all too easy to forget how daunting it was to begin a new seminary among a Baptist constituency in the South. With the exception of Southeastern Baptist Seminary, whose faculty offered immediate resistance to the rightward movement of the SBC, the other five SBC-related theological schools were still "intact" and many Moderates insisted that a new school was not necessary. Nonetheless, Alliance supporters anticipated the future and BTSR was yet another sign of something new and courageous, born of and beyond the Controversy.

Such courage was no flash in the pan. As Gardner shows, Alliance churches were from the beginning, strong advocates of women in ministry, not only through ordination, but as essential participants in pastoral ministry in congregations, chaplaincy, and other callings inside and outside the church. Likewise, as the movement took shape, the Alliance courageously affirmed the presence and voice of LGBT persons and their families in congregations and communities across the nation. Gardner reminds us that the report of the Task Force on Human Sexuality (1994), facilitated perhaps the first public dialogue regarding same-sex issues among Baptists in the South. Such a prophetic response and "fervent discussion" was not without controversy then and now, but that once again, Alliance congregations responded to persons and issues in advance of many other Baptist and non-Baptist communions.

Spiritual formation, concern for peace and justice—evident in the close relationship with the Baptist Peace Fellowship—and missional endeavors such as those forged with Cuban Baptists reflect Alliance "witness" nationally and globally. The invitation to PhD student and Millennial Andrew Gardner to write the history of the movement evidences the Alliance's commitment to and anticipation of the future.

To study Gardner's text is to get a sense of Baptist freedom from a group of persons and churches that responded to an ecclesiastical crisis but moved beyond it. His final chapter demonstrates the diversity and energy of several Alliance-related congregations, ministering with care and conscience in the communion of saints and in the naked public square. Andrew Gardner is quite correct, for the Alliance of Baptists, Zion is a moveable feast.

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Preface

R*eimagining Zion: A History of the Alliance of Baptists* was not a project I conceived of for myself. While I identify as a budding church historian and a member of the Alliance of Baptists, when I was a student in divinity school the thought of writing a history for a national religious body never emerged on my radar. It was not until Paula Dempsey, Alliance director for partnership relations, approached me about writing a history in February of 2014 that the idea took form. She explained that the Alliance of Baptists had a desire to have its story captured. I did not yet have a topic for my third-year project at Wake Forest School of Divinity, and considering that the Alliance archives were housed on campus, I thought the idea was a perfect match.

I learned that the thought of writing an Alliance history was not a new idea. Alan Neely, the first interim executive director of the (then) Southern Baptist Alliance, wrote a brief history for a book edited by Walter Shurden in 1993, *Struggle for the Soul of the SBC*. The chapter was expanded in the early 2000s as Neely began writing a full history of the organization. Neely's death in 2003, however, halted the project.

Prior to Neely's death, Mahan Siler, a fellow founder of the Alliance, promised Neely that he would find a way to finish the history. Siler and Dempsey both approached Stan Hastey and Richard Groves about writing a history, but for various reasons, both declined. Ultimately, Dempsey asked me, and I accepted with enthusiasm.

In many respects, I question why I would have been asked in the first place. My only formal connection to the Alliance of Baptists at the time was that I served as summer staff at Metro Baptist Church in New York City through the Alliance and the United Church of Christ's Summer Communities of Service program. I attended an Alliance church, Knollwood Baptist in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, but I had never attended an annual Alliance gathering. I find that this says something both about Alliance people and the organization itself. They were willing to let me hold and craft their story despite my newness to the organization.

I was not new, however, to Baptist life. I grew up in a Baptist church just outside of Yorktown, Virginia, in a little town called Poquoson. The church was known as the "liberal" Baptist church in town, but in some ways that

really just meant we had female deacons. It was not until I attended The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia, that I began to think about my faith in new ways. Perhaps the first time I ever heard of the Alliance of Baptists was in a freshman seminar class taught by Don Polaski, a longtime Alliance member. At the time, I thought the Alliance sounded a little bit more progressive than I felt comfortable with, but my feelings would change.

I participated in the Baptist Collegiate Ministries (BCM) at William and Mary for four years, during three of which I had the privilege of leading a family group Bible study known as “The Inklings.” For some strange and bizarre reason, I attracted the more progressive students. At the time, I found it a bit confusing why my Bible study attracted these students, but in reality I was excited that people were coming. Over the course of my studies at William and Mary, I eventually came to identify myself as a progressive and even, dare I say, liberal Baptist.

While leading this Bible study, I met and became good friends with a number of people who attended and, by association, became known as “Inklings.” One of these individuals was Alex. He was a year behind me and became my roommate during my junior year. By the time I was about to graduate, Alex applied to be on the Baptist Collegiate Ministry coordinating team as social outreach chair during his senior year. This was a perfect position for Alex because of his personality and commitment to justice. The rest of the organization thought so as well, and he was elected to the position with no apparent opposition.

A few weeks after his election, Alex participated in a panel called “Rainbow and Religion” for the wider campus as a gay man who happened to also be a member of BCM. News of this reached the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, which funded and staffed our campus ministry. Individuals from the state office asked Alex to step down from his position of leadership. If I had had any reservations about accepting LGBT persons within ministerial leadership positions, upon hearing of Alex’s requested resignation, all of these reservations were clarified. Not only was Alex hurt, but so was I. Alex was a dear friend, and the idea that I could serve God in a position of leadership but Alex could not seemed antithetical to the gospel. In addition, for a larger Baptist body to usurp the students’ ability to elect their own officers seemed antithetical to what it meant to be Baptist.

As an incoming student at Wake Forest School of Divinity, I began to investigate the types of organizations that would allow me to invest in a friendship like the one I had with Alex without fearing that the organization

would limit that friend's capacity to serve. I came upon the Alliance of Baptists.

As I have come to identify more fully with the Alliance of Baptists, I have continually been reminded that this is the right religious body for me. I feel at home in this organization, and many other Alliance members echo similar sentiments.

In this work, I claim my biases. I am a member of the Alliance of Baptists. At the same time, I attempt to share an accurate history of the organization. I hope to exemplify the Alliance's fifth point of its covenant — a "*respect for open inquiry and responsible scholarship*." I hope not only to provide a history of the Alliance that is of interest to those within the academic community, but to provide a history that is of value to the Alliance.

Many individuals were responsible for helping make this work a reality. First and foremost, I must thank Paula Dempsey for asking me to work on this project. She provided much support and encouragement throughout the process. Bill Leonard (my advisor at Wake Forest), Relma Hargus, Richard Groves, Mahan Siler, Ken Meyers, Jeanette Holt, and John Roberts all read various parts of the history, providing valuable editorial support and feedback. I must also thank the Wake Forest University Archives and the community at Wake Forest School of Divinity for their help and encouragement. Lastly, this work would not have come to fruition without the encouragement of my mom and dad, Susie and Brad Gardner.

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Introduction

Marked by their beginnings in the early 17th century, Baptists are a strange and diverse denomination within the Christian faith. The Southern Baptist Alliance, founded in 1987, began with the intention of providing a space for Southern Baptists disillusioned by their denominational body. Eventually changing its name to the Alliance of Baptists, this organization created a space for theologically marginalized Baptists to participate and thrive in denominational life. The organization's history is permeated with an inclusiveness and hospitality that reaches out in partnership to disenfranchised female ministers, members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, radical Baptists in Cuba, after-school programs in the South Side of Chicago, and many more.

Such expansive inclusiveness and hospitality often caused people to develop misconceptions of the Alliance. These misconceptions often arose because of characterizations that focused on one particular aspect of the organization's identity — particularly the inclusiveness of LGBT individuals. In a 2009 graduate seminar, historian Aaron Douglas Weaver acknowledged an overemphasis within Baptist life on the Alliance's support for LGBT rights and individuals. Weaver said, "Historians should be careful not to neglect the Alliance for their contributions on behalf of equality, ecumenism, interfaith dialogue and innovative missions work."¹

While Weaver accurately recognized the diversity of the Alliance's focus and scope, he wrongly pegged the intentionality of the Alliance. According to Weaver, the organization has, throughout its history, "found a small niche in Baptist Life as the most progressive or liberal Baptist body in the United States."² Such a statement, however, fails to acknowledge the complexity and diversity both within the Alliance and within Baptist life more broadly. The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America and the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists also occupy the more progressive wing of Baptist life. Beginning with the assumption that the Alliance is the most progressive Baptist body in 21st-century religious life neglects the long history and journey the Alliance took to get to the 21st century. In addition, this assumption wrongly assesses the left wing of Baptist life as a spectrum rather than a

cluster or community of organizations. Parsing out which of these organizations is the “most liberal” would be a rather pointless task.

This work serves distinctly as *a* history and not *the* history of the Alliance. While this work may be the sole book-length history of the organization, it by no means accounts for everything the Alliance accomplished until 2015. Instead, it seeks to be an introduction not only to the history of the organization, but to its identity as well.

Rather than approaching the story of the Alliance through a lens of being a progressive or liberal body, this work seeks to understand the Alliance through the circumstances and meaning of the organization’s founding. As an organization disgruntled with the theological trajectory of the Southern Baptist Convention of the 1980s, the Alliance was founded on the premise of leaving its former denomination. It was reactive. Over the course of the Alliance’s history, however, the organization has been remarkably receptive to reimagining the status quo of what it means to be Baptist. It has been proactive.

To illustrate the duality of this reactive and proactive identity, the metaphor of “Reimagining Zion” has been used as a framing tool for the work. This metaphor draws from a history of academic scholarship on the Southern Baptist Convention. Rufus Spain’s 1961 work *At Ease in Zion: A Social History of Southern Baptists 1865-1900* used the metaphor of “Zion” to describe how Southern Baptists understood both their denomination specifically and the South generally in the post-Civil War era. Spain concluded that this period witnessed a convergence of Southern Baptist religion and southern culture. According to Spain, Southern Baptists became complacent with the status quo of their religion and society — they became at ease in this southern Zion.³

Echoing Spain’s work, Barry Hankins’ *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture* recounts the history of Southern Baptist conservatives in the second half of the 20th century. These conservatives came to dominate the theological, social and political agenda of the Southern Baptist Convention by the 1990s. Drawing upon a similar metaphor to Spain’s, Hankins suggests Southern Baptist conservatives (referred to also as inerrantists or fundamentalists) were discontented with the trajectory of their society and their denomination.⁴ To combat the “Babylon” of secular society, Southern Baptist conservatives believed they needed to purify their convention by purging any remnant of “liberalism.”⁵

This work addresses the story of the moderate or progressive Baptists from whom the conservatives wrested control of the Southern Baptist Convention. Those members of the Southern Baptist Alliance and other

moderate Baptists lost their denominational home in this resurgence, or takeover. They grappled with the question of whether they could remain in the Southern Baptist Convention: could they remain in “Zion?” An even more pressing question for members of the Alliance was: Did the Southern Baptist Convention ever resemble Zion in the first place? Were their understandings of Zion flawed from the very beginning? Should they leave, rebuild, or, perchance, reimagine Zion?

I contend that the history and identity of the Alliance is concurrently one of leaving Zion and of reimagining Zion. The Alliance embodied a history and a desire to leave the perceived Zion in the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as a history and a desire to reimagine that perceived Zion. For in the process of leaving, the Alliance recognized, and more importantly was able to acknowledge, that the conception of Zion was flawed from the beginning. There remained, however, an opportunity to reimagine what a Baptist denominational institution could look like.

This history is composed of three parts: Leaving Zion, Reimagining Zion, and Living Zion. Part I — Leaving Zion — provides a chronological historical overview from Baptist beginnings in Chapter One to a history of the Southern Baptist controversies that led to the birth of the Alliance in Chapter Two. The final chapter in Part I provides a summative history of the Alliance from its formation in 1987 to its life and ministry in the second half of the 21st century.

Part II — Reimagining Zion — provides a more detailed and topical history of the Alliance of Baptists. Chapter Four provides a brief history of the creation of the Alliance Covenant, which serves as the framework for the seven subsequent chapters. Each of those chapters addresses a particular tenet of the covenant and the ways in which the Alliance of Baptists “lived into” these covenant principles. These chapters are as follows: Chapter Five — The Freedom of the Individual; Chapter Six — The Freedom of the Local Church; Chapter Seven — The Larger Body of Christ; Chapter Eight — Servant Leadership; Chapter Nine — Theological Education; Chapter Ten — Proclamation of the Good News; and Chapter Eleven — The Free Church in a Free State.

Part III — Living Zion — changes trajectory from a traditional source-based methodological perspective to a more ethnographic perspective. Within this section are brief congregational studies that examine the Sunday morning services and experiences of eight Alliance congregations from eight states. These studies attempt to provide a description of how Alliance congregations operate, rather than a birds-eye view of the organization’s history. They also

showcase some of the diversity and similarity within Alliance congregations. The congregations are First Baptist Church, Greenville, South Carolina; Glendale Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee; Ginter Park Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia; Woodbrook Baptist Church, Baltimore, Maryland; Oakhurst Baptist Church, Decatur, Georgia; Metro Baptist Church, New York, New York; Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, Raleigh, North Carolina; and Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, Oakland, California.

These three sections hopefully provide a comprehensive overview of the history and identity of the Alliance of Baptists.