

American Baptist region renamed 'Growing Healthy Churches' A new name for churches in the West: A new name for churches in the West

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In recent decades, a congregation seeking unchurched members has often called itself a "center" or "fellowship" instead of a "church." It may also drop the name of the locality for a bucolic name like "Mountain View," and may erase the denominational identity from its name.

Now, as of January 1, the American Baptist Churches of the West, based in the northern California city of San Ramon, wants to be known as Growing Healthy Churches, or GHC for short.

The decision stems partly from the ongoing struggle over homosexuality and local church autonomy in the denomination. Some ABC of the West congregations "find it difficult to be identified with a denomination that will not affirm biblical standards," the region's executive minister, Paul D. Borden, wrote to pastors November 30.

The denomination's General Board in mid-November voted 59-45 with five abstentions to add to a document "We Are American Baptists" a phrase affirming that sexual intimacy belongs in a heterosexual marriage and that homosexual practice is incompatible with biblical teaching. However, Borden and other conservative evangelicals are unhappy with denominational leaders who—on the grounds of traditional Baptist respect for local autonomy—have declined to adopt more punitive steps against clergy, congregations and associations deemed to be more permissive.

The adoption of the name Growing Healthy Churches "is a move to reflect more accurately who we are as well as losing any negative baggage that may be detrimental to the accomplishment of a mission," Borden wrote.

In an “amused and deeply troubled” response, Larry Greenfield, interim executive director of the American Baptist Churches of Metro Chicago, wrote that he was amused by the implication that “the rest of us” are not committed to biblical standards when the GHC has “so radically reduced the Bible’s message to something small and worldly.”