

ASBC Announcement Regarding ASCS

Summary: Based upon recent actions by the Board of Directors of Atlantic Shores Christian School, the relationship between Atlantic Shores Baptist Church and the school has changed. We have called this meeting to inform you of those changes and to describe what the relationship will look like going forward. First, a bit of history.

This church was founded in 1981. Four years later, in 1985, ASBC founded Atlantic Shores Christian School as a ministry of the church.

Until recently, this relationship flourished with a high level of cooperation between the leadership of the church and the leadership of the school. This began to change a few years ago. The school has steadily pulled away from the spiritual oversight of the church and very recently has taken a decisive step away from the church that has redefined the relationship. We will explain that more in just a moment.

But first, we want to tell you about two important processes that the church has been implementing over the past two and a half years: one is the revision of our key organizational documents and two is the adoption of a comprehensive mission, vision, and strategy for ASBC. Let us describe the process relating to the revision of our organizational documents first.

Revision of Organizational Documents

In December of 2014, the church believed it was time to revise and improve its organizational documents. We engaged Brian Schuette and Josh Hershberger, two attorneys who work with a lot of churches, to assist us in that process. They made a number of recommendations that led us to draft and adopt our existing bylaws and incorporate the church. These documents provide us with biblically sound organizational structures and provide strong religious liberty protections.

At the same time that the church was reviewing its organizational documents, we asked Brian and Josh to review the school's documents. They made several recommendations for changes to those documents that would have more clearly reflected the fact that the school has always been a ministry of the church. More importantly, they offered recommendations that gave the school greater religious liberty protections in view of recent changes in the culture and the law. To best protect the free expression of religious liberty for both ministries, and given the long-standing relationship between the two ministries, it was important that the governing documents harmonize.

Rejection of Suggested Changes by ASBC

Brian and Josh met with the Administrator of ASCS in May of 2015 to discuss the suggested revisions. He rejected their advice.

In many ways, the revision of the church's organizational documents resulted in the healthy church culture we currently enjoy at ASBC. It has given us the framework to build a strong leadership team that is now serving effectively to implement our mission, vision, and strategy.

That brings us to the second process we previously mentioned. In order to more effectively fulfill our mission to “glorify God by making disciples of Jesus Christ who go and make disciples,” we took a close look at every single ministry of the church, including the school. As faithful financial stewards of the money donated to the church, we reviewed all expenditures. What we discovered led to a change in the financial relationship between the church and the school.

Our review of the financial relationship between the church and the school uncovered a significant subsidy in the church’s operations budget. It was more than we believed was prudent as it deprived the church of the financial resources needed to hire additional ministry staff at a time when our church is experiencing rapid growth, especially in ministries to children and students. It’s important to note that our review of the church’s finances did not reveal an improper activity. It only revealed the lingering expenses of the school in the church’s operations budget.

That brings us to the point where the process of revising our legal documents and implementing the ministry of the church overlap.

In February of 2017, the Elder Body of the church met jointly with the school board to raise the issue and begin conversation. We expressed our expectation that after 32 years of operation, the school must at least cover its own expenses and not expect the church to subsidize its operations financially. We stressed that the church is not trying to make money on the school. The church merely wanted the school to pay for the cost of its own operation when using the church building. It is worth noting here that the school’s budget is nearly triple that of the church. The financial subsidy we discovered represented nearly 12 percent of the church’s budget (a difficult burden for the church) while the additional expenses laid upon the school represented less than 5 percent of its budget.

We want to emphasize that we entered into this difficult discussion with a firm commitment to continuing the more-than-30-year-old relationship between the church and the school. We love the school and see it as an effective way for any church to make disciples of Jesus Christ through Christian education. Let us be clear: we want Atlantic Shores Christian School to continue as a ministry of Atlantic Shores Baptist Church and have given the school a way for that to happen going forward.

We believe the school taking full responsibility for its own expenses did not lay an undue burden on ASCS. However, partial blame was laid on the church for the fact that teachers would not be receiving a cost-of-living increase for the 2017-2018 school year. The School had the option of either cutting expenses or raising the money to cover their expenses, or a combination of both. They chose to cut expenses and that included eliminating a raise in teacher salaries. The Church went the extra mile by attempting to raise the money for the School. We contacted a foundation in Virginia that exists for the purpose of strengthening Christian schools and asked them for a donation, specifically for the purpose of giving our teachers the raise they deserve for the next school year. That foundation was interested in providing financial support, but they only do so to schools that are operating under the authority of a church.

It is worth noting that the school does not have a development office that is common in non-profit educational institutions. The leadership that it takes to put this in place is missing at the school. Over the years, the financial burden resulting from the lack of a robust fundraising effort by the school has fallen upon the church.

A few weeks ago, we re-engaged the school on the issue of revising its organizational documents to accomplish three important things: 1) bring the school's documents in line with the church's documents; 2) more clearly reflect the fact that the school is a ministry operating under the ecclesiastical authority of the church; and 3) provide the school and the church with maximum constitutional protection of its religious liberty. Unfortunately, the school's resistance to the church's spiritual authority was even stronger in 2017 than it was in 2015.

On May 31, 2017, with no advance notice to the church, the school revised its organizational documents to remove the spiritual oversight of ASBC. These newly adopted organizational documents embody a full repudiation of the church's spiritual oversight of the school that it founded and provide substantially less religious liberty protection for both the school and the church. The Elder Body simply cannot continue to be involved in a ministry that has rejected the church's spiritual authority.

Let me explain to you two reasons why we find the school's approach unacceptable:

#1 The Principle of Biblical Authority

First, ASCS's rejection of ASBC's spiritual oversight is a violation of the principle of biblical authority as expressed throughout scripture. (Genesis 1-3; 1 Samuel 8; Romans 13:1-5; Matthew 16:18, 28:18-20; Ephesians 4:11-16, 5:22-33; Hebrews 13:17, and I Peter 5:1-11). If you are a ministry of the church, you must be accountable to the church. If you are not accountable to the church, you cannot receive the benefits that a ministry of the church receives. To say it another way, you cannot operate under the church's roof and not be under the church's authority.

To be responsible for the actions of a ministry over which the church has no authority is not acceptable under any circumstance. This does not mean the church wishes to reengage in day-to-day operations. On the contrary, the church delegated those matters years ago. However, proper biblical authority must be aligned and recognized in all of the ministries of the church.

#2 The Principle of Religious Liberty

Second, by separating itself from ASBC's spiritual oversight, ASCS is forfeiting important religious liberty protection that our Elder Body believes to be critical in the present legal and cultural environment. This legal principle was clearly explained to the ASCS Board of Directors at a joint meeting of ASBC and ASCS on June 1, 2017, and they seemed to acknowledge the significance of recent legal developments in the area of religious liberty. You will hear more about this on July 23rd when Josh Hershberger and Brian Schuette provide a Religious Liberty Briefing for the church and school families.

By its actions, the school has placed its independence from the church's authority above the protection of religious liberty that comes from operating under the church's authority. That puts the church in an unacceptably risky position that we cannot in good conscience accept.

We want to make clear that the Elder Body of ASBC has made every effort to bring about reconciliation between the church and the school. However, the school has chosen to go in the opposite direction. We have decided to respect its desire to separate itself from the church. Therefore, the Elder Body directed our attorneys to extend to ASCS, through its attorney, three options for resolving this problem.

#1 Reconciliation: The first option—and the one preferred by the Elder body—was to restore fully the ministry relationship between ASBC and ASCS by merging the school into the church from a legal, organization perspective. That would provide the school with maximum constitutional protection of its religious liberty. The school rejected this option and falsely characterized it as a “hostile takeover of the school by the church.”

#2 Transition Toward Separation By Agreement: The second option was for the church and the school to sit down together and work out a transition plan that would preserve unity around a jointly formulated plan. The school has falsely characterized this as an attempt by the church to negotiate for more money—which was never even a consideration. So, the school rejected this option.

#3 Transition Toward Separation Without An Agreement: The school's rejection of the first two options has left only the third option. Here are the key points of this option:

- The school will be permitted to continue using ASBC's facilities for operation of the elementary school through June 30, 2018.
- The relationship during this period of time will be nothing more than an agreement under which the school will continue to use church facilities with a financial contribution previously agreed upon. While we prefer not to function as the school's landlord, we believe it best to do so for the next year to protect the students and teachers at ASBC, and to give everybody enough time to consider their education options in the future.
- ASBC and ASCS will otherwise operate as completely separate and unrelated legal entities, in accordance with the school's clearly expressed wishes.
- After June 30, 2018, all remaining ties between the church and the school will be severed, which gives the school almost one year to find other facilities beginning in the 2018-19 school year.
- Because the school has refused our request to act upon an analysis and recommendation provided by a top company that provides security for school campuses, the church will cover the cost of providing security at the elementary campus through the end of the 2017-2018 school year.

- After June 30, 2018, the church will request that the school change its name to avoid confusion regarding the separate existence of the two organizations.

It is with a grieving heart that the Elder Body of the church makes this announcement. We love the school and together have enjoyed more than three decades of ministry through Christian education, and want nothing more than to continue that relationship.

We have no doubt that some will attempt to lay blame upon the church for this change of relationship between the church and the school. In fact, the school has insinuated that it intends to take this matter to the court of public opinion. The school has even gone so far as to claim that the church is acting “illegally.” We respectfully disagree and urge you to recognize that spiritual considerations are paramount here. We do not fear being judged by man. We have operated in the clear light of day and in accordance with Scripture.

We do hope that people will take the time to learn the facts before drawing any conclusions. I encourage you to judge for yourselves by asking this question: “As between the church and the school, who moved?” In our view, it was the school who did so when it rejected the church’s spiritual oversight.

We are posting information on the church website that answers most of the questions that are likely to arise. We have also invited Josh Hershberger and Brian Schuette to return on July 23rd to give a presentation on recent developments in the area of religious liberty. We encourage you to be here on that day and to participate in the question and answer session following the presentation.

In the meantime, we encourage you to pray for your spiritual leaders. Ask God to give us wisdom and to protect His church from false accusations. These are good days at Atlantic Shores Baptist Church and the future looks bright. We are growing and plan, by God’s grace, to touch many more lives with the timeless message of the Gospel. We are grateful to be a part of what God is doing here and look forward to the amazing future that lies ahead for this church.

The Elder Body of Atlantic Shores Baptist Church
July 16, 2017