



Baptist Local Church Autonomy in Comparative Perspective: Insights from the Southern Baptist Convention, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church

Article History:

Initial submission:	10 July 2026
First decision:	15 July 2026
Revision received:	13 August 2026
Accepted for publication:	25 August 2026
Online release:	29 August 2026

Francis Neil G. Jalando-on, ORCID No. [0009-0000-3657-8662](https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3657-8662)

Faculty, College of Theology, Central Philippine University, Jaro, Iloilo City, Philippines

Abstract

This study examines how diverse Christian traditions understand and practice the principle of local church autonomy, with particular attention to the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), United Church of Christ (UCC), and United Methodist Church (UMC). Employing a historical research method complemented by historical theology, this study is a historical-comparative conceptual study that analyzes official resolutions, theological statements, and denominational documents to trace the development and application of local autonomy across these traditions. The SBC's 1992 and 2019 resolutions affirm congregational self-governance while emphasizing mutual accountability under the Lordship of Christ, explicitly rejecting the misuse of autonomy to conceal sin. The UCC's 1969 statement grounds autonomy in a democratic polity ordered under Christ's authority, rejecting isolation in favor of an interconnected freedom. The UMC's connectional system offers a distinctive model in which local churches exercise defined autonomy within a global, episcopal structure. Drawing on the historical experience of the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC), this study identifies how American Baptist missionaries first introduced local autonomy to the Philippines, where it was enshrined in the 1935 CPBC By-Laws. Key findings reveal that across these diverse traditions, authentic local autonomy is consistently understood not as absolute independence but as responsible self-governance exercised within covenantal, connectional, or associational relationships. The study concludes that for the CPBC, these comparative insights offer valuable resources for articulating a contextualized understanding of local autonomy that balances congregational freedom, denominational cooperation, and mutual accountability.

Keywords: local autonomy, Baptist church, Southern Baptist Convention, United Church of Christ, United Methodist Church, CPBC, connectionalism, historical analysis, historical theology, comparative ecclesiology



Copyright © 2026. The Author/s. Published by VMC Analytikis Multidisciplinary Journal News Publishing Services. Baptist Local Church Autonomy in Comparative Perspective: Insights from the Southern Baptist Convention, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church © 2026 by Francis Neil G. Jalando-on is an open access article licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). This permits the copying, redistribution, remixing, transforming, and building upon the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially, provided that appropriate credit is given to the copyright owner/s through proper acknowledgement and standard citation.

INTRODUCTION

Baptists have long been characterized by their fierce commitment to the autonomy of the local church. Shurden (1995) asserts that Baptists are “born fighters” because they were “born fighting,” a reference to their historical struggles for religious liberty and congregational independence. This commitment, while a source of strength, has also produced what Charles W. Deweese, former Executive Director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, identified in 2005 as one of the top five issues facing Baptists in the 21st century: Persistent Fragmentation. Deweese observed:

Baptists disagree about everything; sometimes, that causes organizational rupture and the multiplication of new Baptist bodies. The nature of Baptist life feeds on disagreement and diversity. In other words, no authority exists in the Baptist life that can control how Baptists think, believe, and practice their faith. Respect for the right to privately interpret Scripture is paramount. Congregational self-determination is important. The power of dissent, nonconformity, and liberty of conscience drives Baptists in different directions (Deweese, 2005, as cited in Baptist History & Heritage Society, n.d.).

This fragmentation raises a critical question: How can Baptist denominations affirm local

church autonomy while fostering the unity necessary for cooperative missions and mutual accountability? Three Christian traditions offer instructive comparative models for addressing this question: the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the United Church of Christ (UCC), and the United Methodist Church (UMC). Each has developed a distinct but convergent approach to the relationship between local self-governance and denominational coherence, and each offers resources that the CPBC can draw on in articulating its own understanding of local autonomy.

This question is particularly pressing for the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC). As Jalando-on (2026) documented, American Baptist missionaries first introduced the principle of local autonomy in the Philippines and formally enshrined it in the CPBC's founding documents. However, its application has generated persistent challenges in the field. The popular interpretation of local autonomy among CPBC churches has often been equated with Henry Venn's "three-self theory" (self-governing, self-propagating, self-supporting), leading to diverse and sometimes conflicting interpretations that have resulted in "difficult issues, misconceptions, threats, and challenges" (Jalando-on, 2026).

This study investigates how three Christian traditions: the SBC, the UCC, and the UMC understand and practice local church autonomy, with the aim of drawing comparative insights applicable to the CPBC. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church define and apply the principle of local church autonomy?
2. What lessons can the CPBC learn from these comparative frameworks and models in formulating a contextualized understanding of local autonomy?

Beyond descriptive comparison, this study contributes to theory-building in Baptist ecclesiology by proposing a Covenantal Autonomy Framework. This is a conceptual model that understands local church autonomy not as absolute independence but as responsible self-governance exercised under the Lordship of Christ, within voluntary covenantal relationships of interdependence and mutual accountability. This framework emerges from the convergence of insights across the SBC, UCC, and UMC traditions and is offered as a resource for the CPBC in articulating a contextualized, theologically grounded understanding of local autonomy suited to the Philippine Baptist context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Southern Baptist Convention's Resolutions on Local Autonomy. Among Baptist denominations, the SBC offers the most formally developed documentary articulation of local church autonomy. The SBC has addressed local church autonomy through two significant resolutions adopted in 1992 and 2019. These documents provide a comprehensive Baptist articulation of autonomy and its relationship with accountability.

The 1992 resolution is significant because it establishes, in a single document, both the absolute character of congregational autonomy and its necessary relationship to voluntary cooperation. The 1992 resolution, "On the Autonomy of Baptist Churches and General Bodies," begins by establishing the foundational premise of Baptist polity: "Baptist polity identifies the local congregation as the foundational basis of church order." It affirms that "the local Baptist congregation is understood as autonomous, with full power and authority to conduct its own affairs and is thus free from any power of coercion by other local churches or any general Baptist body." Crucially, the resolution also recognizes the voluntary nature of Baptist cooperation, stating that "autonomous Baptist churches have voluntarily and freely entered into fellowship with and cooperation through general Baptist

bodies (associations, state conventions, and the Southern Baptist Convention) for the purpose of eliciting and combining support for mission, education, and benevolence ministries" (Southern Baptist Convention [SBC], 1992).

The resolution further articulates a principle of mutual autonomy among Baptist bodies, declaring that "those general Baptist bodies are also fully autonomous, each 'independent in its own sphere,' and thus beyond the coercion of any other body or local church." It grounds this cooperative relationship in "evangelical mission, faithful confession, and mutual accountability under the Word of God," concluding with a call for "a comprehensive preservation of historic Baptist polity, understanding the proper autonomy of local Baptist churches and general Baptist bodies under the mutual accountability all Christian bodies share under the Lordship of Jesus Christ" (SBC, 1992). What is notable here is that the resolution refuses to frame autonomy and accountability as competing values; instead, it presents them as mutually reinforcing commitments grounded in shared theological conviction.

The 2019 resolution marks a theological deepening of the SBC's position. Where the 1992 document was primarily organizational in its framing, the 2019 resolution roots autonomy explicitly in Christology and Scripture. The 2019 resolution, "On Local Church Autonomy and Accountability," deepens the theological and biblical foundations for autonomy. Its preamble grounds the doctrine in specific scriptural texts, stating that "the biblical doctrine of local church autonomy is based in the local church's covenant with God in Christ (Matthew 18:18–20; 1 Peter 3:21), Jesus Christ being the eternal and only Head of His church (Ephesians 1:22–23; 2:19–22; 5:22; Colossians 1:18)." The resolution specifies that "local church autonomy is exercised through congregational processes (Matthew 18:15–17; Acts 5:12; 6:3–6; 13:1–3; 1 Corinthians 5:11–13), with reference to other churches (Acts 15:1–2, 22–23, 30; 1 Corinthians 11:16; 14:33)" (Southern Baptist Convention [SBC], 2019).

Significantly, the 2019 resolution traces the doctrine's lineage to the 1644 London Baptist Confession, quoting Article XLVII: "And although the particular Congregations be distinct and several Bodies, everyone a compact and knit City in itself: yet are they all to walk by one and the same Rule, and by all means convenient to have the counsel and help one of another in all needful affairs of the Church, as members of one body in the common faith under Christ their only head." The resolution also references *The Baptist Faith and Message*, Article VI, which confesses that each church is "governed by the Lordship of Jesus Christ and exercising its autonomy through congregational processes," and Article XIV on cooperation (SBC, 2019).

The resolution's operative clauses make several forceful assertions. It declares that "the autonomy of the local church must never be understood apart from being a gift of God in Christ, who grants His church authority for His purposes alone and only according to His ways." It explicitly rejects "the concept of local church autonomy as mere 'self-rule,' for Christian authority may never be exercised apart from Christ's Lordship and must be exercised only for God's glory as revealed in the Word interpreted by the congregation led by the Holy Spirit." It affirms that "local church autonomy is compatible with the mutual accountability to the Lord of all the churches, especially those churches of like faith and practice that voluntarily cooperate through associations and conventions." Finally, and pointedly, the resolution "repudiate[s] any who seek to use the cherished doctrine of local church autonomy as a means of hiding the sins of ministers and others in the church who abuse, sexually or otherwise, 'the little ones' of our Lord Jesus Christ" (SBC, 2019).

What is significant about the SBC's position is that autonomy is never treated as a self-justifying principle. It is always held in tension with responsibility toward God and accountability toward sister churches. This is captured well by Keucher (1976), whose reflection on congregational freedom is worth quoting at length because it articulates

precisely the kind of theologically grounded autonomy the SBC resolutions envision:

We can reflect that with freedom (autonomy) comes great responsibility. It is the responsibility of being the church, of listening for and responding to God's call so that the congregation will remain faithful in its life and ministry. No one can tell a local Baptist congregation what it must be and do, except God. It is the congregation's responsibility to listen and obey when God speaks (Keucher, 1976).

This understanding is historically grounded. The very language early Baptists used to describe themselves reveals that independence was never meant to be absolute. Stewart (1997) clarifies that early Baptists used the term "independent" to mean autonomy from the state and distinctiveness among churches, not absolute independence from all relationships. He notes that at no point did Baptists espouse the concept of the absolute independence of the local church. Along with their sense of local church autonomy, Baptists held to a belief in the universal church and to the interdependence of local churches (Stewart, 1997). This historical clarification is crucial for the CPBC, where the three-self theory has sometimes been applied in ways that conflate Baptist autonomy with Congregational isolationism.

Taken together, these SBC documents reveal a denomination that has actively wrestled with the tension between congregational freedom and corporate accountability. What is significant is that the SBC did not resolve this tension by limiting autonomy but by deepening its theological grounding. Autonomy is reframed not as a right to be asserted but as a gift to be stewarded under the Lordship of Christ. This move from a rights-based to a responsibility-based understanding of autonomy is a crucial contribution to the broader ecclesiological conversation and one with direct implications for the CPBC.

The United Church of Christ's Theological Understanding of Local Autonomy. The UCC is

included in this comparative study because its congregational heritage makes it the closest ecclesiological cousin to the Baptist tradition, yet its formal theological reflection on autonomy is considerably more developed. Its 1969 statement repays careful study because it identifies precisely the misunderstandings that have plagued Baptist practice of autonomy as well. Although not a Baptist denomination, the United Church of Christ (UCC) offers a rich theological articulation of local autonomy through its 1969 statement, "Toward an Understanding of Local Autonomy," approved by the Seventh General Synod. The Theological Commission undertook this study "prompted by its own desire to clarify and to grasp more deeply the meaning of local autonomy," as well as "to interpret that meaning to other Churches, especially to those with which the United Church of Christ is exploring through the Consultation on Church Union the possibility of a united church" (United Church of Christ, 1969).

The Commission's explanatory note acknowledges that the phrase "autonomy of the local church" "derives from the Congregational line of our inheritance and came into common usage during the last part of the 19th century." It notes that the idea was present in early Congregationalism, where "the churches are described as 'self-governing,' 'independent,' and 'free,'" but critically observes that "the idea never appears in the fathers of Congregationalism except as coupled with the idea of inter-church fellowship." To isolate the idea of autonomy from fellowship "creates a danger." The Commission references the National Council of Congregational Churches of the United States. (1913), which affirms, "We hold to the autonomy of the local church and its independence of all ecclesiastical control. We cherish the fellowship of the churches united in district, state, and national bodies for counsel and cooperation in matters of common concern" (United Church of Christ, 1969). The Commission's observation that autonomy "never appears in the fathers of Congregationalism except as coupled with the idea of inter-church fellowship" is a historically decisive point: even within the tradition that

most strongly affirmed local independence, fellowship was always the assumed context, never an optional supplement.

The Commission grounded its study in a total ecclesiology rather than a narrow polity question which is a move that elevates the discussion from church governance to theology proper. The Commission established clear theological guidelines for the study. It insisted that "the principle of local autonomy is to be understood in the light of a total understanding of the church," drawing on biblical images such as "the people of God," "the new creation," "the fellowship of saints," and "the body of Christ." Autonomy is "grounded in the awareness of the gracious personal presence of God with his people gathered in the local church" and is "based on a divine gift, God's reconciling work in Christ made effective through the Spirit." The statement emphasizes that "the freedom recognized in local autonomy is freedom under Christ, and therefore, freedom to respond to the demands of Christ. Local autonomy does not imply the rejection of all authority in the name of freedom. This means the affirmation of freedom so that the fullest possible response to the authority of God can be made by the local church" (United Church of Christ, 1969).

The Commission also highlighted the need to emphasize both positive and negative aspects of autonomy: "If one aspect is freedom from external authority, its other aspect is freedom for full obedience to the service of men in the service of Christ. If one aspect is the rejection of any attempt to violate the conscience, the other is openness to the persuasion of the Spirit of Christ. If one aspect is the rejection of a coerced unity, the other is a freely given commitment to unity" (United Church of Christ, 1969). This dialectical framing is one of the UCC statement's most important contributions: it refuses to allow autonomy to be defined only negatively, as freedom from interference. It insists equally on its positive dimension: freedom for obedience, for openness, for covenantal commitment. This is the correction needed where autonomy has been reduced to a posture of institutional self-protection.

The substantive section, "The Understanding and Misunderstandings of Local Autonomy," declares that "in the theory of the United Church of Christ all authority in the church lies, under Christ, in the church's members." This democratic polity is distinguished from secular democracy because "the authority of the people is secondary to that of the living Christ." The UCC emphasizes that "local autonomy is completely misunderstood when it is regarded as a means to isolate a congregation from the rest of the church. Only the free know the fullness of love; and the local congregation has its freedom in the United Church of Christ so that there may be no shadow of outer coercion, but only the inner compulsion of love, in its relationship to the church of the ages, the whole ministering church of this age, and the needs of humanity ministered to" (United Church of Christ, 1969).

The statement employs a striking analogy: "the local church is a school in the life of the Spirit." If it closes its mind to the rest of the church, it is comparable to a university that, in an insane moment, should shut itself off from the findings of scholars in other universities. The universal church through the totality of its experience is a source of inspiration and enrichment for the life of any local church. It concludes that "local autonomy is not a banner of self-sufficiency; it is local initiative making its own the wisdom and purposes of the larger church" (United Church of Christ, 1969).

The UCC's contribution to the broader ecclesiological conversation lies in its insistence that autonomy is not the absence of authority but the presence of the right authority who is Christ himself. Its use of the university analogy is instructive: a congregation that isolates itself from the wisdom of the wider church impoverishes itself. This insight is particularly relevant for CPBC churches that have interpreted autonomy as self-sufficiency and thereby withdrawn from convention-level cooperation. For such congregations, the UCC's model offers a compelling theological corrective: genuine freedom is exercised in community, not in isolation.

The United Methodist Church’s Connectional Model. The United Methodist Church (UMC), formally established in 1968, practices a connectional system that incorporates defined autonomy within an episcopal structure. The UMC’s foundational document, the *Book of Discipline*, governs the denomination’s structure and regulations, which is revised every four years by the General Conference, the highest legislative body (United Methodist Church, 2016).

Within this connectional framework, local churches exercise autonomy in several areas: pastoral appointments made with congregational consultation, local church governance through Church Councils or Administrative Boards, flexibility in worship styles and ministry programs, property ownership with a trust clause for the denomination’s benefit, and local mission and outreach initiatives. However, this autonomy operates within the constitutional parameters established by the General Conference (United Methodist Church, 2016).

Cox (2022) explains that connectionalism means that “the local churches do not stand alone but are connected together.” Unlike congregational polities, the local UMC congregation belongs to a larger organizational structure of districts, annual conferences, and the General Conference, bound by a “mutual covenant of mission.”

Bishop Emerito Nacpil of the United Methodist Church in the Philippines articulated this balance in his 1994 Episcopal Address, “Developing a Truly Global Church”:

Connectionalism connects the local and the global. Connectionalism does not stop connecting one local church with another church within a nation, which is what a purely autonomous structure will do. It goes on connecting with all the local churches of the one global United Methodist Church... Autonomy alone restricted by national boundary cannot and can never be global and connectional (Nacpil, as cited in Scott, 2022).

Argentine Bishop Aldo Etchegoyen (1997) grounded connectionalism theologically: “We believe in a connectional God who has moved outside himself to create all things. God’s creation is a connectional phenomenon... The opposite of connectionalism is separation.” He warned against “the dangerous possibility of falling into an irresponsible autonomy” (Etchegoyen, as cited in Scott, 2022).

The UMC model challenges the assumption that autonomy and structure are inherently opposed. In the connectional system, structure is not a threat to freedom but the very framework within which meaningful freedom is exercised. For the CPBC, which operates through a convention and provincial associations (Kasapulanans), the UMC’s experience demonstrates that structured relationships need not undermine local self-governance; they can, when properly designed, amplify it by connecting local congregations to resources, accountability, and a shared mission that no single congregation could accomplish alone.

Table 1
Comparative Synthesis of Local Autonomy Across Traditions

Tradition	Definition of Autonomy	Theological Grounding	Risks Identified	Cooperative Structures
Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)	Congregational self-governance, free from external coercion, exercised as a gift from God in Christ	Covenant with God in Christ; Lordship of Jesus Christ; priesthood of all believers; biblical authority	Misuse to conceal sin; fragmentation; autonomy as mere self-rule	Voluntary associations, state conventions, and SBC; Covenant of Relationships; resolutions as moral (not juridical) counsel
United Church of Christ (UCC)	Freedom under Christ for full obedience; not self-sufficiency but local initiative within the larger church	Divine gift of freedom grounded in God’s reconciling work in Christ; authority of living Christ over democratic polity	Isolation from wider church; misuse as self-sufficiency; rejection of inter-church fellowship	General Synod; district, state, and national bodies for counsel and cooperation; voluntary assignment of responsibilities
United Methodist Church (UMC)	Defined local discretion within a constitutional connectional framework	Connectional God; organic link between local and global church; episcopal authority and mutual covenant	Irresponsible autonomy; isolation that breaks global connectional mission	Districts, annual conferences, General Conference; Book of Discipline; episcopal oversight
Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC)	Democracy and independence of the local church (1935 By-Laws); self-governing, self-propagating, self-supporting (three-self theory)	Baptist principle introduced by American missionaries; biblical and congregational foundations	Fragmentation; diverse and conflicting interpretations; misconceptions about absolute independence	Kasapulanans (provincial associations); CPBC convention; mission cooperation structures

Note: This table synthesizes the primary documents and secondary sources analyzed in this study. The CPBC row is included to position the Philippine Baptist experience within the broader comparative framework.

The CPBC’s Historical Experience with Local Autonomy. The Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches (CPBC) provides the immediate context for this comparative study. As Jalandon (2026) documented, American Baptist missionaries introduced the principle of local autonomy to the Philippines when they arrived

in Iloilo in 1900. These missionaries shared not only the Gospel but also Baptist principles, and “they introduced the principle of ‘local autonomy’ as a guide to the leadership structure of Philippine Baptist Churches” (Jalando-on, 2026, citing Bunda, 1999).

On May 23, 1935, delegates from Baptist churches approved the first CPBC By-Laws, whose preamble explicitly enshrined “the democracy and independence of the local church” as a core Baptist principle alongside “the authority of the Bible, the competency of the soul to work out its religious destiny, a regenerated church membership, the separation of church and state, and religious liberty” (Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches [CPBC], 1935; cited in Jalando-on, 2026). This principle, subsequently taught as “local autonomy,” became the general framework adopted by local churches to administer their affairs.

However, the CPBC’s experience with local autonomy has not been without difficulty. Jalando-on (2026) notes that the popular interpretation of local autonomy among CPBC churches has often been equated with Henry Venn’s “three-self theory,” which states that the local church is self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. This has led to “diverse interpretations” and “different applications” integrated into the life and ministry of Baptist churches, resulting in what the author describes as “difficult issues, misconceptions, threats, and challenges.” Nevertheless, the principle has “not only survived but also become an essential part of the understanding and practice of the local churches and church-related institutions” (Jalando-on, 2026, citing Bunda et al., 2005).

This historical context underscores the importance of the present study. By examining how other traditions have navigated the tension between autonomy and interdependence, the CPBC can find resources to address its challenges while preserving the cherished principle of local church self-governance.

METHODS

This study employs a historical research method to investigate the development and articulation of local church autonomy across three Christian traditions. Historical research collects and analyzes data to interpret the influence of events and phenomena, discovering causes and effects to explain the development of concepts and practices (Wilhite, 2023; More, 2023). The process involves selecting a topic, formulating research questions, and critically analyzing primary and secondary sources to recapture meaningful events, draw relationships, and identify trends from the past to the present (Lune & Berg, 2016).

Historical-comparative analysis is the most appropriate methodological lens for this study because the research questions are fundamentally doctrinal and institutional in nature. The principle of local church autonomy is not merely a contemporary policy question but a historically embedded theological conviction whose meaning has been shaped by centuries of ecclesial experience, doctrinal controversy, and denominational development. Comparative analysis allows this study to move beyond the particularity of any single tradition and identify convergences and divergences that illuminate a broader ecclesiological pattern. The trustworthiness of sources is ensured through a deliberate preference for official primary documents which are denominational resolutions, theological commission statements, and constitutional documents over secondary commentary alone. Where secondary sources are used, they are drawn from peer-reviewed scholarship and recognized Baptist historians. The analysis is thematic in nature: rather than proceeding strictly chronologically, it organizes findings around the recurring theological and structural themes of freedom, accountability, cooperation, and contextualization, which emerge consistently across the traditions examined.

In examining the theological dimensions of local autonomy, this study also utilizes the method of historical theology, defined as “the branch of

theological inquiry which aims to explore the historical development of Christian doctrines and identify the factors which were influential in their formulation and adoption" (McGrath, 2013). Historical theology enriches theological and ecclesial conversations and assists the church in the processes of reformation and transformation (Dreyer & Pillay, 2017).

The primary sources for this study include the full texts of the Southern Baptist Convention's resolutions "On the Autonomy of Baptist Churches and General Bodies" (1992) and "On Local Church Autonomy and Accountability" (2019); the United Church of Christ's "Toward an Understanding of Local Autonomy" (1969), including its explanatory note and theological guidelines; the United Methodist Church's Book of Discipline (2016); the CPBC Constitution and By-Laws (1935); and episcopal addresses by Bishops Nacpil and Etchegoyen. Secondary sources include scholarly works by Keucher (1976), Stewart (1997), Shurden (1995), Bunda (1999), Bunda et al. (2005), Jalando-on (2026), Cox (2022), and Scott (2022). All data were critically analyzed to reconstruct the historical and theological development of local autonomy and identify comparative insights for the CPBC.

RESULTS

The following results address each research question in turn, drawing directly from the primary sources analyzed in this study.

RQ 1: How do the SBC, UCC, and UMC define and apply local church autonomy?

The Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC's 1992 and 2019 resolutions consistently define local autonomy as congregational self-governance grounded in a covenant with God in Christ, exercised through biblical processes, and inseparable from mutual accountability. The 1992 resolution affirms that each congregation has "full power and authority to conduct its own affairs" free from coercion, while simultaneously declaring that churches bear "the sacred responsibility to maintain the basis of true Baptist cooperation, which lies in

evangelical mission, faithful confession, and mutual accountability under the Word of God" (SBC, 1992). The 2019 resolution advances this definition by explicitly grounding autonomy in Scripture and rejecting the concept of autonomy as mere "self-rule," insisting instead that it is "a gift of God in Christ" exercised "only for God's glory as revealed in the Word interpreted by the congregation led by the Holy Spirit" (SBC, 2019). Both resolutions affirm that autonomy is fully compatible with voluntary cooperation through associations and conventions.

The United Church of Christ. The UCC's 1969 statement defines local autonomy as a divine gift of freedom under Christ, oriented not toward isolation but toward full participation in the life of the wider church. The statement declares that "local autonomy does not imply the rejection of all authority in the name of freedom" but rather "the affirmation of freedom so that the fullest possible response to the authority of God can be made by the local church" (United Church of Christ, 1969). The UCC applies this principle through a democratic but Christocentric polity in which all authority rests "under Christ, in the church's members." Autonomy is applied not as self-sufficiency but as "local initiative making its own the wisdom and purposes of the larger church."

The United Methodist Church. The UMC defines and applies local autonomy within a constitutional connectional framework. The Book of Discipline (2016) identifies specific areas of local discretion: worship, ministry programming, local governance, and mission initiatives while requiring conformity to denominational parameters on doctrine and polity. The UMC applies autonomy relationally, connecting local congregations to districts, annual conferences, and the General Conference within a "mutual covenant of mission" (Cox, 2022). Bishops Nacpil and Etchegoyen articulate the theological rationale: the local and the global are organically linked, and a purely autonomous structure cannot achieve the global reach of the connectional church.

RQ 2: What lessons can the CPBC learn from these comparative frameworks and models in formulating a contextualized understanding of local autonomy?

The comparative analysis of the three traditions yields five convergent findings that constitute the descriptive results of this study. Each finding is stated here as a pattern observed across the traditions examined; their interpretation and application to the CPBC are addressed in the Discussion.

First, across all three traditions, autonomy is consistently defined as freedom under divine authority, not absolute independence. The SBC explicitly rejects autonomy as “mere self-rule,” grounding it instead in the local church’s covenant with God in Christ (SBC, 2019). The UCC affirms “freedom under Christ” as the governing principle, distinguishing Christian autonomy from secular notions of independence (United Church of Christ, 1969). The UMC’s connectional theology grounds autonomy in the nature of “a connectional God” whose creative act establishes interdependence as the fundamental condition of existence (Etchegoyen, as cited in Scott, 2022). In each tradition, autonomy is a theological category, not merely an organizational one.

Second, voluntary cooperation and interdependence are consistently treated as integral to, not in tension with, authentic local autonomy. The SBC establishes that autonomous churches “voluntarily and freely” enter into cooperative relationships for the sake of mission (SBC, 1992), and its 2019 resolution affirms that “local church autonomy is compatible with the mutual accountability to the Lord of all the churches” (SBC, 2019). The UCC declares that “local autonomy is not a banner of self-sufficiency” but “local initiative making its own the wisdom and purposes of the larger church” (United Church of Christ, 1969). The UMC’s connectionalism institutionalizes this interdependence through districts, annual conferences, and a General Conference bound by a mutual covenant of mission (Cox, 2022).

Third, all three traditions affirm that local autonomy carries profound responsibility for faithfulness and accountability. Keucher (1976) articulates this on behalf of the Baptist tradition: with freedom comes “the responsibility of being the church, of listening for and responding to God’s call.” The UCC envisions the local church as “a school in the life of the Spirit,” enriched by its connection to the universal church rather than impoverished by isolation (United Church of Christ, 1969). Most directly, the SBC’s 2019 resolution repudiates the use of autonomy as a shield for institutional sin, declaring that Christ’s Lordship and the accountability it entails are inseparable from the exercise of congregational freedom (SBC, 2019).

Fourth, denominational and associational bodies in all three traditions function as instruments of collective discernment and moral accountability rather than as hierarchical authorities. In the SBC, resolutions carry moral rather than juridical weight; nobody has coercive authority over local churches (SBC, 1992). In the UCC, the General Synod can be disagreed with by local congregations, which retain “the positive aspect of freedom to differ from any decisions of a representative body” while remaining open to the guidance of the Spirit (United Church of Christ, 1969). In the UMC, the General Conference sets constitutional parameters, but local churches retain discretion in worship, ministry programming, and mission initiatives within those parameters (United Methodist Church, 2016).

Fifth, each tradition demonstrates that the meaning and application of local autonomy must be contextually interpreted rather than universally fixed. The SBC’s resolutions evolved from 1992 to 2019 in response to specific institutional failures, showing that the doctrine is living and responsive to ecclesial circumstances. The UCC’s 1969 statement was produced in the context of ecumenical dialogue, demonstrating that autonomy must be articulated in relation to the broader church. The UMC’s connectional model has been theologically interpreted differently by bishops in the Philippines and Argentina, confirming that even within a single tradition, local and

cultural contexts shape the meaning of autonomy and interdependence (Nacpil and Etchegoyen, as cited in Scott, 2022).

DISCUSSION

The Southern Baptist Convention's Understanding of Local Autonomy. The SBC's two resolutions together represent a significant trajectory in Baptist ecclesiological thinking. The 1992 resolution established the structural logic: congregational autonomy is absolute in its sphere, yet voluntary cooperation through associations and conventions is its natural expression. The 2019 resolution deepened this by grounding autonomy not in institutional logic but in Christology — specifically, in the local church's covenant with God in Christ and the exclusive Lordship of Jesus over his church. This theological move is decisive: it transforms autonomy from an ecclesiological arrangement into a theological obligation. A congregation that misuses its autonomy is not merely breaking associational norms. It is violating its covenant with Christ. This gives the 2019 resolution its unusual moral authority in calling out the misuse of autonomy to conceal ministerial abuse.

The resolution's theological affirmations mark a significant development in Southern Baptist ecclesiology. It defines autonomy as “a gift of God in Christ” and explicitly rejects autonomy as mere “self-rule.” This framing decisively distinguishes Baptist autonomy from secular notions of independence: the congregation is free, but its freedom is always derivative, always accountable to the One who granted it. The resolution's affirmation that autonomy is “compatible with mutual accountability” is not a concession but a clarification, the two have always belonged together in authentic Baptist ecclesiology (SBC, 2019).

The resolution's application of the doctrine to matters of church discipline and ministerial integrity is most striking. Citing specific failures concerning ministers and accountability, the resolution warns “those who would misuse local church autonomy as a license for sin” that

“God will judge both shepherds and the wolves who abuse the vulnerable sheep in the flock (Ezekiel 34:1–24).” It concludes with a forceful repudiation of “any who seek to use the cherished doctrine of local church autonomy as a means of hiding the sins of ministers and others in the church who abuse, sexually or otherwise, ‘the little ones’ of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:6–10)” (SBC, 2019).

These resolutions collectively articulate a vision in which autonomy and accountability are complementary rather than contradictory. Autonomy is freedom under Christ's Lordship, exercised within voluntary covenantal relationships, and accountable to sister churches. The SBC's approach demonstrates that the denomination has no coercive authority over local churches; however, churches are called to mutual accountability and responsible self-governance aligned with Scripture.

The United Church of Christ's Understanding of Local Autonomy. The UCC's 1969 statement is the most theologically self-conscious articulation of congregational autonomy in this comparative study. Where the SBC resolutions are responsive, addressing problems as they arise, the UCC document is constructive, offering a positive theological account of what autonomy is for rather than merely what it protects against. Its central claim that autonomy is “freedom under Christ” oriented toward full obedience rather than institutional self-protection provides the most developed theological grammar for the concept available in any of the traditions examined (UCC, 1969).

Several key principles emerge from this statement. Authority lies “under Christ, in the church's members”: a democratic but Christocentric polity where “the authority of the people is secondary to that of the living Christ.” Critically, “local autonomy is completely misunderstood when it is regarded as a means to isolate a congregation from the rest of the church.” Rather, “autonomy is not a banner of self-sufficiency; it is local initiative making its own the wisdom and purposes of the larger church” (United Church of Christ, 1969).

The statement further acknowledges “diversity in unity”: local churches retain the freedom to differ from representative body decisions while remaining open to the Spirit’s guidance, as demonstrated historically by congregations that acted prophetically ahead of denominational consensus (United Church of Christ, 1969).

The UCC model also demonstrates that autonomy can coexist with structured cooperation: local churches may voluntarily assign responsibilities to wider church bodies, and the calling of a minister, recognized as “not the concern of the local church alone,” is one area where “associating with the wider church... is indeed standard procedure” (United Church of Christ, 1969).

The United Methodist Church’s Understanding of Local Autonomy. The UMC’s connectional model represents a distinctive approach in which local autonomy operates within a constitutional framework. The Book of Discipline provides parameters while allowing flexibility in pastoral appointments (made with consultation), local governance (through Church Councils), worship and ministry styles, property management (with a trust clause), and local mission initiatives (United Methodist Church, 2016).

Bishop Nacpil’s vision of a “truly global church” links autonomy and connectionality “organically and essentially,” arguing that “in a global church one cannot have the one without the other” (Nacpil, as cited in Scott, 2022). Similarly, Bishop Etchegoyen grounded this theologically in the nature of a “connectional God,” warning against “irresponsible autonomy” and affirming “a connectionality with responsibility in which each church may take account of its own identity, may be able to perform its own government but at the same time may show clearly its historical, theological and ecclesial unity” (Etchegoyen, as cited in Scott, 2022).

Toward a Covenantal Autonomy Framework for the CPBC. The comparative analysis of the SBC, UCC, and UMC traditions yields more than a set of isolated lessons; it generates a

coherent conceptual framework with direct applicability to the CPBC. This study proposes the Covenantal Autonomy Framework as the central theoretical contribution of this research. Covenantal Autonomy is defined as the responsible self-governance of a local congregation, exercised under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, within voluntary relationships of interdependence and mutual accountability with sister churches, provincial associations, and the wider convention. It is distinguished from mere self-rule by three constitutive elements: (1) divine authorization in which autonomy is a gift from God, not an inherent organizational right; (2) covenantal relationality in which freedom is exercised within, not apart from, committed relationships with other churches and the denomination; and (3) missional accountability in which autonomy is always oriented toward the collective mission of the church and is therefore subject to the moral counsel of the wider body.

For the CPBC, this framework has practical implications at three levels. At the congregational level, it calls local churches to understand their autonomy not as a shield against convention oversight but as a platform for missional responsibility. At the associational level, it calls Kasapulanans to function not merely as administrative bodies but as covenantal communities of mutual discernment and support. At the convention level, it calls the CPBC to develop formal covenantal instruments which are analogous to the SBC’s resolutions or the UCC’s General Synod statements that articulate shared theological commitments and provide moral accountability without establishing hierarchical authority over local churches. In this way, the Covenantal Autonomy Framework addresses the fragmentation that Deweese identified as a critical Baptist challenge while preserving the congregational freedom that has been the CPBC’s founding conviction since 1935.

Regarding policy-level implications, the CPBC is encouraged to consider three concrete structural steps: first, the formulation of a CPBC Covenant of Relationships modeled on the

ABCUSA's 1983 covenant, clearly defining the voluntary nature and scope of cooperation between local churches, Kasapulanans, and the convention; second, the integration of the Covenantal Autonomy Framework into theological education curricula at institutions such as Central Philippine University, so that future Baptist pastors understand autonomy in its full biblical and historical depth; and third, the establishment of a standing consultative body within the CPBC which is analogous to the UCC's General Synod or the UMC's General Staff Council that can offer guidance and express collective discernment without exercising coercive authority over local churches.

Conclusion. This comparative study was guided by two objectives: first, to examine how the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church define and apply the principle of local church autonomy; and second, to draw lessons from these comparative models that can help the Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches formulate a contextualized understanding of local autonomy.

In response to the first objective, the study found that all three traditions converge on a crucial insight: authentic local autonomy is not absolute independence, but responsible self-governance exercised under Christ's authority and within interdependent relationships. The SBC grounds this in covenant Christology and mutual accountability; the UCC frames it as freedom for obedience rather than freedom from authority; the UMC institutionalizes it through a constitutional connectional framework in which the local and the global are organically linked.

In response to the second objective, the study identified several lessons for the CPBC. Together, the three traditions provide the CPBC with a coherent Covenantal Autonomy Framework: congregational freedom grounded in Christ's Lordship, exercised within voluntary covenantal relationships, and oriented toward collective mission. Grounded in its 1935 affirmation of "the democracy and

independence of the local church" (CPBC, 1935), the CPBC can draw on these comparative insights to empower individual congregations to flourish in their unique contexts while remaining part of a wider community of faith — as described in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, where each part of the body of Christ has its own distinct function yet belongs inseparably to the whole.

The principal conceptual contribution of this study is the Covenantal Autonomy Framework, which redefines local church autonomy for the Philippine Baptist context as responsible self-governance exercised under Christ's Lordship within voluntary relationships of interdependence and mutual accountability. This framework integrates the complementary insights of three major Christian traditions which are the SBC's accountability-grounded autonomy, the UCC's freedom-for-obedience model, and the UMC's organic connectionalism into a coherent ecclesiological proposal suited to the CPBC's historical experience and organizational structure.

Limitations. Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the analysis relies primarily on official denominational documents and secondary scholarship, without empirical fieldwork among CPBC congregations. The gap between official positions and actual congregational practice may be significant and is not addressed here. Second, the study is limited to three traditions; the inclusion of other polities such as Presbyterian, Anglican, or Pentecostal models might yield additional comparative insights. Third, the Covenantal Autonomy Framework proposed here is a conceptual contribution that requires further testing through empirical ecclesiological research within the CPBC context. Future studies are encouraged to conduct qualitative research among CPBC pastors and congregations to examine how local autonomy is understood and practiced on the ground, and to pilot-test the Covenantal Autonomy Framework as a resource for denominational formation and theological education.

Recommendations. Based on the two objectives of this study, the following recommendations are offered for the benefit of various stakeholders:

CPBC. In light of the first objective, the CPBC can utilize this study's analysis of the SBC, UCC, and UMC models to clarify its own official understanding of local autonomy. The SBC's 2019 resolution is especially instructive because it grounds autonomy in Scripture, links autonomy to mutual accountability, and repudiates the misuse of autonomy—all without establishing a hierarchy over local churches. In response to the second objective, the CPBC can adapt this framework to the Philippine context by formulating operational guidelines that affirm both congregational self-governance and voluntary interdependence, building on the CPBC's historic 1935 affirmation of local church democracy while addressing the fragmentation and diverse interpretations it has experienced (Jalando-on, 2026).

Kasapulanans. To answer the second objective practically, provincial associations can study how the UMC and UCC structure relationships between local congregations and wider bodies. The UMC's defined areas of local discretion within constitutional parameters and the UCC's practice of congregations voluntarily assigning responsibilities to the wider church (such as in calling ministers) offer concrete models. Kasapulanans can use these models to develop strategies for supporting local churches without coercion, and to facilitate collaborative mission efforts that respect each congregation's autonomy while strengthening interdependence.

Local Baptist churches. With reference to the first objective, this study shows that across all three traditions, local autonomy is consistently understood not as isolation or absolute independence but as responsible self-governance under Christ exercised with reference to other churches. Congregations are encouraged to study the SBC's biblical grounding of autonomy in Matthew 18, Acts, and 1 Corinthians, and the UCC's insistence that

autonomy is “not a banner of self-sufficiency” but “local initiative making its own the wisdom and purposes of the larger church.” This perspective can help church members understand their role in shaping their congregation's faithful exercise of autonomy while actively participating in associational and convention-wide initiatives.

Researchers and scholars. In relation to both objectives, this comparative study opens several avenues for further investigation. Researchers may examine additional denominational models, conduct empirical studies on how local autonomy functions in practice within CPBC member churches, or explore the historical development of autonomy in the Philippine Baptist context more deeply. Comparative ecclesiological studies that include Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Pentecostal polities would further enrich the conversation and test the generalizability of the finding that authentic autonomy consistently implies interdependence.

DISCLOSURES

Author contribution. The author independently conceptualized and executed the study, employing a historical-comparative method to analyze denominational documents, theological statements, and archival sources. All stages of the research, including the selection of traditions for comparison, the thematic and contextual analysis of primary texts, and the synthesis of conceptual insights, were conducted solely by the author. The work reflects the author's original interpretation and comparative framing, offering a contextualized understanding of autonomy and connectionalism within ecclesial traditions.

Conflict of interest. The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding source. This research received no external funding.

Artificial intelligence use. Grammarly was used to check grammar and spelling; the author

reviewed and approved all content. No generative AI tools were used in drafting, researching, or analyzing content for this manuscript.

Ethics approval statement. Ethics approval was not required for this study because it involved publicly available data.

Data availability statement. All data supporting the findings of this study are included within the manuscript and its supplementary materials.

Acknowledgement. (Not available)

Publisher's disclaimer. The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher. The publisher disclaims any responsibility for errors or omissions.

REFERENCES

- Baptist History & Heritage Society. (n.d.). *Baptist studies bulletin*.
<https://thebhhs.org/resources/digital-resources/baptist-studies-bulletin/>
- Bunda, N. D. (1999). *A mission history of the Philippine Baptist churches*. Hamburg: Verlag An der Lottbek.
- Bunda, N. D., Ciriaco, J. A., Jalandon, F. N. G., Java, M. A., Ruiz, L. E. J., & Gico, J. H. H. (2005). Local governance vs. centralization: The case of pastors in the CPBC. *Journal of Theology*, 1(1), 141–175.
- Convention of Philippine Baptist Churches. (1935). *CPBC constitution and by-laws*. Iloilo City, Philippines: Author.
- Cox, W. L. (2022). *Connectionalism: The ties that bind United Methodists*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Deweese, C. W. (2005). Top five Baptist issues for the 21st century. *Baptist Studies Bulletin*. Baptist History & Heritage Society.
- Dreyer, W. A., & Pillay, J. (2017). Historical theology: Content, methodology and relevance. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 38(4), a1680.
<https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i4.1680>
- Etchegoyen, A. (1997). Connectionality and autonomy. In *The Ecumenical Implications of the Discussions of "The Global Nature of The United Methodist Church"* (pp. 163–165). Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- Jalandon, F. N. G. (2026). From ABCUSA to CPBC: A historical analysis of Baptist local church autonomy. *Social Science Lens: A World Journal of Human Dynamics and Social Relations*, 7(1), 40–53. <https://doi.org/10.62718/vmca.ssl-wjhdsr.7.1.SC-1225-016>
- Keucher, R. L. (1976). *The autonomous congregation: Freedom and responsibility in the local church*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press.
- Lune, H., & Berg, B. L. (2016). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (9th ed.). Boston: Pearson.
- McGrath, A. E. (2013). *Historical theology: An introduction to the history of Christian thought* (2nd ed.). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- More, D. (2023). Historical method: A critical review. *International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology*, 11(6), 1234–1240.
<https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2023.49198>
- National Council of Congregational Churches of the United States. (1913). *Kansas City Statement of Faith*. Kansas City, MO: National Council of Congregational Churches. Retrieved from <https://www.ucc.org>

- Scott, D. W. (2022). *Methodist connectionalism: Historical and theological perspectives*. Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House.
- Shurden, W. B. (1995). *The Baptist identity: Four fragile freedoms*. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys.
- Southern Baptist Convention. (1992). *Resolution on the autonomy of Baptist churches and general bodies*. Retrieved from <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/resolution-on-the-autonomy-of-baptist-churches-and-general/>
- Southern Baptist Convention. (2019). *On local church autonomy and accountability*. Retrieved from <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-local-church-autonomy-and-accountability/>
- Stewart, H. R. (1997). *American Baptists and the church*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- United Church of Christ [UCC]. (1969). *Toward an understanding of local autonomy*. Retrieved from <https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/toward-an-understanding-of-local-autonomy.pdf>
- United Methodist Church. (2016). *The book of discipline of the United Methodist Church*. Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House.
- Wilhite, S. J. (2023). New narratives for old: The historical method of reading early Christian theology [Review]. *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 31(4), 584–586. <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.2023.a91504>