

Some Observations about Associations in Baptist Life

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The latest news for the SBC (Spring of 1999) is that President Page Patterson is calling for the metro associations with 60 or more churches to partner with the smaller, new work associations, in places of similar size for church planting and development. Probably, some will take this challenge. It follows that some associations are valued by our leadership, and that they fit into the grand missional design.

The story of SBC growth and expansion since 1945 is mostly one of a strong associational strategy:

*Old State conventions assisted associations to fund an associational missionary. Focus was on moving churches to having worship every Sunday, provide the basic programs of Baptist life, and plant new churches as needed. These missionaries also promoted the emphases of the state and national conventions. Care was taken to recognize the autonomy of associations.

*Typically, these associational missionaries were denominational loyalists, experienced leaders, knowledgeable about programs, and often did hands on work in weak churches and in communities where new congregations were needed. Often they were older pastors from the association. The function of “pastor to the pastors” was an important one. Many became skilled and effective in dealing with church conflicts and congregational splits. These associational missionaries made possible significant change, survival, and prosperity for many weak congregations during this period.

*In the cities the missionaries developed institutionalized ministries and added staff. Examples would be goodwill centers, retirement and health care facilities, seminary extension centers, church development centers, and camps. Some of these institutions were added in the rural associations as well.

*. As the denomination expanded into new territories, North and West, the Home Mission Board adopted a strategy of deploying associational missionaries as the primary carriers and doers of the task. They would plant new churches in a region and gather them into an association of churches. They would train leaders in these congregations. They would help churches find pastors. As the associations grew larger, these pioneer associations divided and divided again. An association that embraced a whole state in the early days often became six to ten associations as the work developed.

*One of the great missions stories of this half-century is the growth of Southern Baptists in the western states where we now often have the most congregations and rank second or third in adherents. The associational missionaries who severed in this region are to be honored for this work.

*Beyond this, associational missionaries both by their presence and by their teachings put missions in the heart of Southern Baptists. This continues to be the stackpole around which we come together. While we fight about other things, we agree about the centrality of the missions enterprise. Credit for this must be given, in part, to associational missionaries.

As associations face the future, we need to look at our strengths and our weaknesses:

Strengths

1. Residual understanding of what associations have done for the churches, missions and the Baptist movement.
2. Able to change direction quickly and communicate changes.
3. Able to respond to opportunities/crises quickly, effectively.
4. First call on funding from the churches.
5. Be present at important events in the life of the churches.
6. Residual trust relationship.
7. Know the pastors and leaders, personally.
8. Can help churches be Great Commission churches on a day by day basis.
9. History of *cooperation* being a basic Baptist value.
10. Investment of the churches in the life of the association.
11. Role in finding volunteers to staff the missions enterprise which is increasingly drawing upon volunteers.

Threats

1. Rising leaders who do not know the story.
2. Residue of poor leadership from DoMs in the past.
3. Graying of associational participation and leadership.
4. Task vs. Relational orientation of the coming generation.
5. Hierarchal/Control orientation of the coming generation.
6. Increasing diversity among the churches.
7. What is in it for me (WIIFM) mentality.
8. Mega church/mega city focus of the leadership of SBC
9. High tech communications—by pass the association.
10. Cost-Benefit questions by the boomers.
11. Denominational conflict coming to the associations.
12. Competition for missions dollars.

What would you add to these lists?