

# Associational Design for the Future

## Position Paper

### **Introduction:**

The Baptist Association has been undergoing both incremental as well as radical change for at least fifty years. In the 1940's and 1950's the denominational agencies and state conventions discovered associations as a means of delivering their programs and materials. During the 1960's and 1970's associations began to build significant associational structures that included associational buildings and expanded staff. The associational organization and structure often modeled that of the local congregations and ultimately began to organize and perform the functions of the church. The association further expanded by adding ministries that it performed on behalf of the churches under the banner of "we can do more together than we can do alone." This general philosophy began to mean the association was oftentimes expected to fulfill the ministries that the churches couldn't do or perhaps did not want to do.

As noble as all this sounds, slowly the association began to usurp the role of the local congregation. It was a means of gaining identity and validity for the existence of the association. However, to do so meant the cost of doing associational work increased significantly in order to support and sustain the cost of an associational building and adding additional staff. As a result, less and less resources were available to assist and support the work of the local congregations.

A new generation of leaders is emerging who have little interest in supporting what they believe to be growing, irrelevant organizations. Associations today require enormous amounts of time, finances and personnel just to maintain the organization that often provides minimal results. Thus, it is the conviction of the Associational Initiatives Team at the North American Mission Board that the association of the past and present is not and cannot be the association of the future.

The Association of the future has been emerging over the last five to six years. The purpose of this paper is to briefly outline the basic elements of what the association of the future looks like and describe how it functions.

### **Basic Premise:**

There are two key concepts that drive the association of the future.

1. The association is not a church. Only the church is a church and thus as ordained by God has the responsibility to fulfill and carry out the functions of the church. All other organizations are Para church and therefore by their very nature exist for some other role and function.

2. The role and function of the association is to assist, support and resource the unique, God-given vision of the churches to carry out the Great Commission. Thus, the role of the association is to “assist,” not “do.” Churches do, associations assist and resource.

### **The Association of the Future:**

The organizations of the future need to be fast, flexible, focused and friendly. Thus the systems that have carried the work of the association of the past and present are not adequate for the culture and times in which we currently live. What does this mean?

1. Fast: the association of the future must be in a position to respond to the needs of churches quickly. What is the process, and how long does it take most associations today to authorize the expenditure of \$1000.00 related to a need of one of its churches? The organizations of the past and present are often too cumbersome and slow to respond. The association of the future will be in a position to respond almost immediately upon receiving requests from their churches.
2. Flexible: flexibility is closely connected to “fast.” The associations of the past and present often have committed their calendar and budget for the entire year, thus reducing the ability of the association to be flexible enough to respond to new and emerging opportunities. Associations of the future need a streamlined organization that allows flexibility and speed of delivery. A team-based organizational structure can provide this kind of a system.
3. Focused: the focused association is one that knows who it is, what its mission is, and knows the future picture of what they want the association to look like. This involves establishing appropriate core values, mission and vision. The association of the future is built and organized around priorities, not programs. These priorities often include church health, church planting, leadership development, and others. These associations know what they can do and deliver and what they cannot do and cannot deliver. They do not try to be best at everything but determine what they can do best and focus on it.
4. Friendly: do the churches find the association ready and able to provide assistance and resourcing at the point of need in a timely fashion? Is the association the first choice of its churches, or do they look elsewhere for help? The association of the future will be relevant by knowing the needs of its churches and providing resource help in a relevant, timely, and friendly manner.

There is one other factor that will define the association of the future and that factor is the future association is result oriented. Most of what is measured by associations today is activities rather than results. Many Directors of Missions give reports that outline how many meetings were attended, how many meetings were sponsored by the association, how many people attended, etc.

The association of the future is interested in measuring real results that focus only on significant areas of associational work. These metrics focus on four key indicators of Kingdom impact.

- Are the churches reaching people (penetrating lostness)? Measured by baptisms
- Are the churches keeping people? Measured by church attendance. If the church is losing people it may indicate a leadership issue.
- Are the churches discipling people? Measured by stewardship. If the people are growing spiritually they will also be giving.
- Are the churches involved in Kingdom impact? Measured by partnerships you have outside the congregation. This includes mission endeavors, partnering with other congregations for church planting, and possibly global partnerships.

The association of the future is going to resource its churches in ways that will enable them to be more effective in reaching the lost, develop disciples and leaders, and involve them in kingdom partnerships. When the association focuses on these areas, they become relevant to their churches and will have the potential to experience exponential growth.

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June 24, 2005