

Special Edition: Why Do We Associate?

Executive Editor's Note: This special insert is a result of many hours of discussing with a variety of individuals concerning the decline in active participation in our associational work — from the local level to the national level! The goal of each of these articles is to help start or continue the conversation about how we can do better as we work together to do more for the glory of God. Please use this insert as a launching point to have your own discussions, then decide to take action to do your part to help make our association all it can be by being involved on the local, state and national levels.

Has Associational Vision Leaked?

By Allan Eakin, Associate Editor

In leadership circles, the mantra “vision leaks” is tossed around readily. But what does that mean? Bill Hybels suggests, in *Axiom: Powerful Leadership Proverbs*, that some leaders believe that if they present the vision of where the organization should be going — “fill people’s vision buckets all the way to the top one time” — that the vision will forever drive the organization. The reality is that people must be regularly reminded of the vision because, over time, they forget the vision — vision leaks.

Has the associational vision of early BMA leaders leaked? Is the declining attendance at associational gatherings evidence of an associational vision leak? The annual meeting of the BMA of America is just days away. In an effort to bolster attendance, program changes have been set in motion. That seems to indicate that many recognize that a problem exists. While many of the program changes may prove to be beneficial, could there be something a little deeper that needs to be addressed, too? Has the vision of early BMA

leaders leaked? Does that vision of churches associating together need to be revisited?

As a frame of reference, I began attending associational meetings in the early 1980s. I recall some high moments, as well as some low moments in the work of the BMA. Some were obviously the hand of God, while others smacked of the work of men (the flesh). I recall lots of “backwall” conversations about issues the association faced. I recall moments when leaders graciously moved the body along. However, we worked through every issue together.

Instead of laying blame on changing times, the pandemic, leadership, pastors or a different generation, maybe we need a conversation about what is right about the BMA of America and what needs improvement. Maybe we need a conversation about why so many churches no longer have a “buy-in” to associational work in general. Maybe we need a conversation that includes all generations of BMA people.

To start that candid, but constructive conversation, the *Baptist Trumpet* has produced this insert with articles that talk about what it means to be an association from varied perspectives. You will hear about the history of associations and why it is a better way to cooperate for the furtherance of the gospel. Another article shares the heart of early BMA leaders as understood by someone who participated in those early days. Another BMA leader will contrast our

association through the eyes of a boy that grew up in the BMA and now serves the churches of the BMA through an associational office. A younger pastor addresses the idea of being a part of the association through the eyes of a new pastor. Finally, the last installment in the series gives some “how-tos” of church involvement in associational work. Understand that involvement means more than just attending meetings or sending offerings, but rather working together within our communities, districts and state to further the kingdom.

What is an association of Baptist churches and is there value in such organizations? Visit bmaamerica.org and under the “Who We Are” area you will find the statement, “We are Associational in local church partnerships.” But what does that mean?

BMA churches voluntarily associate (cooperate) together for the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission. Jesus gave the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) to local churches. Churches alone carry the responsibility of fulfilling the mission of Jesus.

However, the mission of Jesus is bigger than what a single congregation can do alone. BMA churches partner together to accomplish this mission — doing more together — and that partnership is called an association. Participation is voluntary. Participation maintains church autonomy. Participation broadens the reach of a single local church acting independently.

Churches should work together for the purpose of missions, education, ministry and fellowship. An association provides the structure for these things to occur on a larger scale. Unfortunately, the independent mindset of western society has affected church associations. Every church is an autonomous (independent) body of believers. Yet, cooperating together just makes sense.

Sometimes, churches with extensive ministries do not see a need to participate in associational partnerships. Sometimes, smaller churches feel they don’t have much to offer to associational partnerships. But the reality is larger congregations, mid-size congregations and smaller congregations all need each other.

BMA leaders of the past envisioned a group of churches partnering together, with equal influence, for the purpose of missions, education, benevolence, fellowship, and more. What does your vision of our association look like for you?

“BMA churches voluntarily associate (cooperate) together for the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission.”

Why An Association Of Baptist Churches?

By Jeff Swart, Senior Adult Pastor • Antioch, Conway

The churches of the Baptist Missionary Association of America are often described as “independent” Baptist churches. By this nomenclature, we mean that every individual Baptist church is solely sufficient in and of itself. By the vote of the congregation, each local Baptist church may receive or reject members, call pastors, ordain deacons and do a whole host of other things without interference from a higher authority. Baptists believe the local church is the highest spiritual authority on earth (Matt. 18:17; I Tim. 3:15) and subject to no authority but Jesus Christ.

Independent but Associational

The churches of the Baptist Missionary Association of America are also described as “associational” Baptists — a group of like-minded Baptist churches who share the same fundamental doctrinal beliefs and have voluntarily chosen to associate (work) together for the common objective of carrying out the commands of our Savior. When churches of “like faith and order” combine their prayers, finances, personnel and efforts, the cause of Christ will prosper, and we will all be more effective in reaching the lost for Christ. As has been often said, “We are autonomous churches, but we are not alone.”

Independence and Associational Concepts in the New Testament

In the New Testament, churches of the Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated their independence by choosing their own leaders (Acts 1:15-26), deciding cases concerning church discipline (Matt. 18:15-17) and sending out missionaries to propagate the gospel where it had never been preached before (Acts 13:1-3). In these cases, not a single church sought permission from the apostles, other church leaders or other churches. Further, they felt no need to justify their actions to others. The churches of the New Testament era exhibited a spirit of independence.

The New Testament does not use the word “association,” but it does demonstrate the concept of churches working together. In the book of Acts, we read that the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch had a close working relationship to maintain doctrinal purity and for the purpose of the propagation of the gospel (Acts 11:19-23; 15:1-4, 22-35). In the New Testament, churches of the Lord Jesus Christ welcomed members of one church who traveled to another church (Rom. 16:1) and pooled their financial resources to assist their brothers and sisters in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29-30; 24:17; Rom. 15:25-27; I Cor. 16:1-4).

Furthermore, local churches shared letters and information among other churches for the good of all. For example, Paul instructed the Colossian church to read his letter to them, then to share it with the church in Laodicea. He further instructed the church in Laodicea to read his letter to them, then share it with the church in Colosse (Col. 4:16-17). In the book of Revelation, Jesus instructed the apostle John (Rev. 1:4, 11) to write seven letters to seven local churches in Asia Minor (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea — Rev. 2:1-3:21). Each local church was to read what had been specifically written to them and to also read what Jesus said to the other churches especially heeding the warnings (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

In the canon of the New Testament, there are eight “general” or “universal” epistles that were written to Christians at large (Hebrews, James, I Peter, II Peter, I, II, III John and Jude) rather than the saints in one specific church (i.e., Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi and Colosse). This suggests that there is some common link between the churches of the Lord Jesus Christ even if there was no formal organization.

Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians (Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe) — churches he planted on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-14:28). What Paul wrote was for all the churches in the region of Galatia who shared a common origin, common doctrinal beliefs and a common desire to honor the Lord.

Why No Association of Churches in the New Testament?

So, if it can be demonstrated that some churches in the New Testament were working together — why is there no association of churches mentioned in the New Testament era? I would suggest several reasons:

- Writing from an American perspective, it was because the churches of Christ underwent periods of great persecution from the time of Jesus Christ until the American Revolution. During these turbulent times, if there were associations of churches, nothing would be written down for fear of the information falling into the hands of the persecutors.

- In the beginning, many believers were slaves and did not have the liberty to attend such meetings if they were being held.

- Roads from one city to another were difficult to traverse and modes of transportation were dangerous, expensive and unreliable.

See SWART, Page 8



The Origin of Baptist Associations

Although before the 17th century, there is no specific record of official associations being formed, it is fair to say that churches of “like faith and order” had friendly informal relationships even if it cannot be proven.

The earliest Baptist associations came into existence in England. Concerning the formation of Baptist Associations in England, Dr. Larry Silvey wrote, “Apparently the English name ‘association’ originated from military practices. . . . During the English Civil War (1642-1649), the Parliamentary Army organized various counties into ‘associations’ for the defense. Later, each regiment in those groups sent two representatives to confer with Parliament. Since Baptists participated extensively in the New Model Army, they may have applied the familiar name of the army organization to the relationships with other churches.”

The earliest Baptist association was organized in 1643 when seven Particular Baptist churches in London, England formed the General Assembly of Particular Baptist Churches and, acting together, issued the First London Confession of Faith in 1644. Within a few years, other associations emerged throughout England, Wales and Ireland.

Baptist Associations in America

Associations of Baptist churches in America have existed since colonial times based upon the model set forth by English Baptist associations. Pennepack Baptist Church, the oldest Baptist Church in Pennsylvania, was founded in 1688 by Elias Keach, the son of Benjamin Keach. Five churches grew out of the Pennepack Church and became the nucleus of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, the first Baptist association in America founded in 1707.

A BMA Perspective on Associations

It has often been said, “My church belongs to the BMA of America.” What that means is that a church chooses to affiliate with the BMA of America. No church “belongs” to an association because of local church autonomy and, technically, the BMA of America only exists once a year when it called to “order” in its annual session.

According to former BMAA Missionary Homer Gunn (1907-1984), “Associations are formed for fellowship, to encourage doctrinal soundness, to carry on missionary work jointly, to foster benevolent enterprises and to further Christian education.” Churches who cannot by themselves send out missionaries, start a Bible college or seminary or plant new churches at the local, state, national and international level can cooperate with other churches and do all these things and more. Through an association of churches, individual churches can do more for the cause of Christ than they can do alone.

Our spiritual forefathers believed that some form of organization beyond the local church was needed to effectively carry out the Great Commission. Churches of “like faith and order” began to cooperate in the same community or county, local churches in neighboring counties began to work together which led to the formation of local associations, then state associations and eventually a national association.

There was a fundamental understanding when these associations were formed that an association can never usurp the authority of a local church. Associations have no right to ordain pastors and deacons, discipline church members or administer the church ordinances of baptism or the Lord’s Supper, etc.

Furthermore, the actions of an association are never binding upon any church and the actions of a church are never binding upon an association. Both churches and associations are autonomous bodies working together, neither having authority over the other, and the relationship is purely voluntary. In effect, a church gives up nothing to participate in the actions of an association but gains much by cooperating with other churches through local, state and national associations.

An association, through the majority vote of the messengers, may withdraw fellowship with an existing member church or vote to refuse a request for membership in an association of churches because of doctrinal error or irregularity of practice. However, an association has no authority to force any local church to change its beliefs or practices.

Churches who affiliate with the various associations of the BMA (local, state and national levels), elect messengers from their membership to represent them at the associational meetings. At various times, a local church might “instruct” their messengers how to vote on certain issues. Thus, the messengers do not vote their own personal convictions but the convictions of the church that elected them. At other times, churches allow their messengers the freedom to vote on issues according to the leadership of the Holy Spirit at the time of the vote. Messengers from individual churches carry no authority over the association and carry no authority from the association back to the churches. Decisions are made by the majority vote of the messengers of the churches but are not binding on any local church.

The associational meetings are much more than a mere business meeting. The meetings are designed to inspire, inform and strengthen the Lord’s churches. In addition, many associational meetings are designed to be pragmatic — giving practical ministry ideas that can be immediately implemented in the local church for the advancement of their ministries. The fellowship between messengers of the Lord’s churches is vital as friendships are formed, prayers are offered on behalf of one another and many who came to an associational meeting a discouraged saint go home with a new zeal for the work of the Lord.

Cooperating for the sake of the gospel is voluntary, but just as strands of a rope woven together increase the strength of the rope (Eccl. 4:12), so do churches increase the scope and effectiveness of their ministry by cooperating with other like-minded churches.

Personally, I am proud to be an “associational” Baptist!

The Early Days Of Forming an Association

By Larry Haynes, Retired Pastor



In God’s providence, it was my great privilege to sit, learn and fellowship with a number of those wise and cherished brethren who were among the early associational leaders. They were men of great faith, commitment and deep devotion to their Lord. Their greatness was seen in their servant spirit more than their achievements or credentials (though they too were significant!). Such were the spiritual “giants” among us with dynamic passion for a format for the Lord’s Churches to biblically and harmoniously work together in advancing our Lord’s Kingdom. It was not then, and is not now, an easy task. But, their vision was clear-eyed and biblically focused. I am convinced the Lord, indeed, raised them up for such a time as this. Yes, they were, as we, flawed men with feet of clay. However, they were men consumed to the core of their souls with sincere and honest desires for a God-honoring, Christ-centered and biblically principled method of the Lord’s coequal churches to scripturally labor together for His glory.

As a young inexperienced pastor, my first national meeting was at Shreveport, La. in 1963. Overwhelmed and intimidated would be an understatement. However, it did not take long to realize that all present were brethren and we were there as messengers of the Lord’s

“Each ministry, in particular, had to stand and exist on its own spiritual contributions to the Lord’s ‘Co-mission of Go!’”

business! My take away from that meeting (and many subsequent annual meetings) was that they were fully aware of the daunting challenge of the Lord’s departing instructions to His fledgling church (Matt. 28:18-20) and constantly referred to by the brethren as the Great Commission, which would and could only be accomplished through the reality of the activity of the Holy Spirit filling every church with the Great Commandments (loving God and loving people, Rom. 5:5 and Matt. 22:37-38)!

I do not remember going to a national association meeting in the early years when there was not a consistent emphasis made regarding the importance of the doctrine of the church and associational principles. Those early leaders knew how important those foundational truths were, and they were committed to keeping the main thing the main thing long before it became a cliché! Simply put, the doctrines and nature of the New Testament church must be the underpinnings of any system of cooperation among New Testament churches. Every activity assigned to the association must conform to those principles. Each ministry, in particular, had to stand and exist on its own spiritual contributions to the Lord’s “Co-mission of Go!” Evangelism, doctrine (teaching) and baptism were paramount in initiating and nurturing new believers through genuine, spiritual discipleship. The mission was to establish a spiritually mature body of believers (Eph. 5:23; Rom. 8:29) with Jesus Christ being both the Head and the Foundation: a New Testament church, all for the glory of God (Eph. 3:21) and the on-going mission of making disciples

of all people!

There was a mutually shared conviction among those early visionaries of the BMA that was unalterable — churches alone (independent, autonomous assemblies) are commissioned by Jesus himself to be His earthly **spiritual** body and were **sent** by Him to do **His** work, just as His Father had **sent** him in an **earthly** body (I Cor. 15:48) to earth to do His work: *....as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you* (John 20:21). The association must be a **spiritual organization**, **but** the New Testament church is a **spiritual organism** empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) on the day of Pentecost to perform the purpose of the Lord’s spiritual body through the preaching of the gospel throughout the world. Association activities (ministries) were intended to accommodate, not usurp, the churches in their mission just as a hammer accommodates a carpenter in doing his work. It was often spoken of in this way: “The tail must never wag the dog!” The term may be a little crass, but the point was well made. In other words, the association was not the “boss,” it was to be a servant with a servant spirit. It would be less than honest to say that an association has never attempted to usurp

its role. However, as long as the churches remember who their Lord is and where their power lies and *earnestly contend for the faith* (Jude 3) that will be avoided. God’s men must be both promoters and defenders of the faith. Our present culture continually reminds me of a statement made by journalist Thomas Sowell; “When

a person wants people to do something that benefits them, they will tell them what they **want** to hear. But, when a person wants to honestly benefit people, they will tell them what they **need** to hear.”

The visionary discernment of our past leaders saw great potential benefit in several “tools” that would spiritually complement the churches’ toolbox. Their value would be in direct proportion to their spiritual contribution to strengthen and aid the churches in fulfilling their mission. The *“work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope, in our Lord Jesus Christ....”* (I Thess. 1:3) first resulted in creation of a Department of Missions, which could be considered the heartbeat of the association. Three “secretaries” were elected to oversee and promote the missionary program of the churches. The first would have the general oversight with the other two focusing on the “interstate” and “foreign” mission emphasis; a Publications Ministry, which was second to none; an Educational Ministry (the seminary), which the Lord used mightily to teach, train and equip hundreds for pastoral, missionary and teaching ministries that would be a blessing to multiple churches and individuals; a Broadcast Ministry (Harvest Gleaner Hour, later known as Lifeword) that would

See HAYNES, Page 9

HAYNES

(Continued From Page 8)

eventually reach millions around the globe; a Missions magazine (*Harvest Gleaner*) that gave a connection between the missionaries and the churches and genuinely bonded their souls together; and a Youth Ministry (Daniel Springs) that has witnessed the salvation of hundreds of boys, girls, young men and women, plus scores of young men surrendering to the Lord as preachers and missionaries. These “tools” would all have a definite spiritual impact on the churches and their mission. They would have at least four things in common:

- Their purpose and function would be to assist in the furtherance of the mission of the churches.
- They would be totally under the authority of and accountable to the churches.
- They would always be guided by the Doctrinal Statement and Principles of Cooperation adopted by the participating churches.
- That all financial support — designated or otherwise — would, without exception, be used as expressly instructed.

Just as the tail might sometimes attempt to wag the dog, tools tend to get dull, rusty and

out of calibration when used, ignored, misused or abused. With wisdom and tender loving care, they can usually be efficiently refurbished, recalibrated and wonderfully restored to their original intent! There are occasions when this becomes true of associational ministries and the churches composing them! Are there not times when this is true for each of us who are flawed and have feet of clay! May the Lord of the church send us **all** a refreshing spiritual recalibration from His Holy Spirit that His will alone be done! *“Unto God be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen”* (Eph. 3:21).

As one ages, memory can easily become mere nostalgia rather than remembered facts. Emotions and circumstances that existed in past events can affect honest memory as much as stated truth, even though one’s intent may be totally honest, unbiased and without prejudice regarding the facts. It is still possible to err. And, I must confess that as I looked back in this endeavor, I truly miss those bygone days and long for the day to come! In the spirit of what Dr. R.B. Hoshaw was fond of saying, “There is nothing wrong with my remember-er. It is just that my forget-er is better.” So I humbly apologize for my forget-er and ask for any necessary forgiveness for this old-codger!

Selfish Reasons to Associate

By Derrick A. Bremer, Pastor • Denver Street Baptist Church, Greenwood

As a young pastor (I’m 29, for those of you wondering), a tremendous amount of grace has been extended to me in the areas of my life where my immaturity has displayed itself most prominently.

The question has been asked of me, “Why should we associate?” Perhaps the question should be, “Why should we **continue** to associate?” Doesn’t it seem like the trends in our work point toward a waning desire to come together to accomplish the work that we set out to do as an association year by year? Surely, I’m not the only “young buck” asking the question of myself, “How much longer will we go on like this?” If associational work is to return to the vibrancy, zealotry and virtue that was established in the days of William Carey and others at the cusp of the modern missionary era, my generation will need to catch the vision that led to establishing our work. Moreover, the generation that has come before us must break free of the chains of tradition and routine to be reminded of the simple origins of associational work.

I write from a young man’s perspective. I want to share with you why I am involved in associational work, why other young men should be passionate about the same and how you can work to inspire such people in your life to be involved.

I’m involved in associational work for selfish reasons. When I was called to salvation, it wasn’t because I grew up in a family that attended church. My discipleship journey was dependent on faithful brothers and sisters who were committed to their local church. There were people who became closer than family to me. When I surrendered to ministry, I was dependent upon the guidance and discipline of my pastor. When I accepted the call of

my first church, where I currently serve, the reigns were cut loose and I was reminded daily that I am dependent upon the love, grace and wisdom of the Almighty. For those of you who have never pastored a church or have to dig back further than 20 years in your memory to remember your first church, it’s a lot like jumping off the 20th floor of a building — by the time you make it down 19 floors you think to yourself, “This really isn’t so bad.” As willing as I am to admit my personal immaturity, I’m not satisfied to stay that way. I grow as a pastor because of associational work. Through the relationships that I have because of our association, I can look back and see evidence of that growth. My primary reason for associating is selfish — I want to be a good pastor. To that end, I



“I grow as a pastor because of associational work.”

want to be a good Missionary Baptist. I want my Lord to be pleased with the contribution I’ve been able to make in the work that comes with an association to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. I know it’s immature — but as I grow, I realize more and more that my selfish desires are shifting in the sands to the selfless pleas that God will be glorified by the limited time He has granted to give me on their earth. Maybe that’s not so bad.

It is easy to become frustrated with the bureaucracy that becomes a necessity in any organizational structure. I’m the pastor of a normative size church and I’m frustrated with business meetings. My generation seems to want to tear down and dismantle every organizational structure that we didn’t establish. That

Born in the BMA

By Dr. Steve Crawley, Executive Director • Ministers Resource Services

Years ago, some creative guys in our work created a parody of Bruce Springsteen’s song “Born in the USA,” replacing the well-known lyrics with “Born in the BMA!” Such was the case for me.

My grandfather, Verner Crawley, was present at the 1950 ABA Annual meeting in

Lakeland, Fla. Disagreements between the brethren at that meeting resulted in the genesis of the North American Baptist Association later that year. In 1968, the year I was born, the name of the association was changed to the Baptist Missionary Association (BMA) of America. As such, I was “born in the BMA,” and I have grown to appreciate countless men and women who have given their lives to advance the cause of Christ through our association of churches.

In 1975, my father, LaVay Crawley, surrendered to ministry at the age of 35. After graduating from Southeastern Baptist College in 1977, my father accepted the call to Calvary Baptist Church in Purvis, Miss. Calvary was a member of the Oak Grove Association, and it seems much of our lives revolved around fellowship with sister churches. Dad would attend the monthly local association meeting, and the youth would attend the monthly Youth-in-the-Harvest meeting. These occasions provided a strong network for both adults and youth. We looked forward to the meetings each month, as it presented an opportunity to connect with friends and make new ones.

In 1981, my father accepted the call to Vardaman Street Baptist Church in Wiggins, Miss. There we were part of another strong local association — the In addition to the local association meetings, I recall my parents’ involvement in an associational wives’ fellowship. These perpetual fellowships produced a strong bond between the pastors, resulting in a solid local mission effort, as well as colleagues with which to share burdens, ideas and life in general.

Being “born in the BMA,” I would have never imagined as a child that one day I would be allowed to serve in four of our national departments and agencies. In 2013, the BMA went through a departmental integration, leading to multiple organizations converging on a common site in Conway. Further, it led to the creation of the BMA of America Limited Liability Company, an entity owned by the departments and created to share assets and employees. This tactical move changed the structure of the BMA at a national level and reduced annual overhead costs by hundreds of thousands of dollars. Don Brown, editor of the *Mississippi Baptist*, explained the changes at that time using another parody from a 1980s auto commercial — “This is not your father’s Oldsmobile” — with “This is not your father’s BMA.” He was not being critical but just explaining that “Today’s BMA” would be structured differently. Fortunately, as we look back over the past 10 years, the changes

is one (of many) possible reasons the younger generation is becoming less interested in the work of which we are proudly a part. I would contend, though, that it is easier to fix a broken system than it is to build a system from scratch. Other young men and women are needed to be a part of reshaping our associations. My generation is necessary, not just to maintain the structure that has been established before us, but to continue to influence its growth and health. Without participation, the influence of such people who have pure and noble ambitions are lost in their individuality.

You can be a part of stirring up these individuals and spurring on the health of our work! It’s as simple as getting back to the roots of Associational Baptists. Quit thinking of associational meetings as pastor meetings. They’re not. Historically, when associations began forming, it was more closely akin to what we see in Lions Clubs. That is, community members tied to each other by varying degrees of proximity and desire to come together to accomplish a task. All churchmen should have a common desire — to share the gospel. Are you willing to roll up your sleeves and get to work? That’s what associational life is about. Invite the easily excited pot-stirring young Christian to roll up their sleeves with you. Believe it or not, the riff-raff is most easily handled by giving them a task to work toward. Give them room to express their concerns and be ready to admit there is room to improve. Challenge them when necessary and listen earnestly. I believe the real reason for a lack of engagement among the generation you have the ability to influence is simply that they do not have a sense of being able to contribute. Either they’ve been muted or simply never been shown how to simply get to work. Bring them with you and watch what happens.



Association of churches. In 1975, my father, LaVay Crawley, surrendered to ministry at the age of 35. After graduating from Southeastern Baptist College in 1977, my father accepted the call to Calvary Baptist Church in Purvis, Miss. Calvary was a member of the Oak Grove Association, and it seems much of our lives revolved around fellowship with sister churches. Dad would attend the monthly local association meeting, and the youth would attend the monthly Youth-in-the-Harvest meeting. These occasions provided a strong network for both adults and youth. We looked forward to the meetings each month, as it presented an opportunity to connect with friends and make new ones.

In 1981, my father accepted the call to Vardaman Street Baptist Church in Wiggins, Miss. There we were part of another strong local association — the In addition to the local association meetings, I recall my parents’ involvement in an associational wives’ fellowship. These perpetual fellowships produced a strong bond between the pastors, resulting in a solid local mission effort, as well as colleagues with which to share burdens, ideas and life in general.

Being “born in the BMA,” I would have never imagined as a child that one day I would be allowed to serve in four of our national departments and agencies. In 2013, the BMA went through a departmental integration, leading to multiple organizations converging on a common site in Conway. Further, it led to the creation of the BMA of America Limited Liability Company, an entity owned by the departments and created to share assets and employees. This tactical move changed the structure of the BMA at a national level and reduced annual overhead costs by hundreds of thousands of dollars. Don Brown, editor of the *Mississippi Baptist*, explained the changes at that time using another parody from a 1980s auto commercial — “This is not your father’s Oldsmobile” — with “This is not your father’s BMA.” He was not being critical but just explaining that “Today’s BMA” would be structured differently. Fortunately, as we look back over the past 10 years, the changes

“All of us are wiser and stronger than one of us.”

See CRAWLEY, Page 10

CRAWLEY (Continued From Page 9)

have produced the anticipated results, with departmental leaders working together more harmoniously, efficiently and effectively. It has been good to see our association move forward in many new, innovative ways.

Nonetheless, as we contrast our “Fathers’ BMA” with the “Today’s BMA,” we must not lose sight of the example set by those who have gone before us. They may not have had the systems, processes and resources in place we have today, but they overcame countless

challenges because they relied on each other. They were intentional about building and maintaining relationships with their brothers and sisters, and it served them well.

All of us are wiser and stronger than one of us. Today, more than ever, we need to continue our efforts to associate for fellowship, missions, doctrinal integrity and accountability. Given the current spiritual climate of our nation and the inherent challenges, it is now more important than ever that churches, pastors and entity leaders of the BMA work together to fulfill our mission mandate for the glory of God!

Revitalizing Our Association

By Allan Eakin, Associate Editor

During the 2021 local associational season, members of the *Baptist Trumpet* team visited several local associations to share about the ministry of the *Baptist Trumpet*. For most, those fall meetings were the first following the COVID-19 pandemic. Not gathering for approximately two years seemed to have had a negative effect on many local associations. The pandemic was not the problem but only exposed an already underlying problem — a declining involvement of participation and interest in the association. The same was true of the 2021 BMA of Arkansas Meeting.

But what could be done? What was the answer? Many conversations occurred in the days following those 2021 meetings. The following is a summary of those conversations:

Missionary Baptists believe everything flows from the local church. God commissioned the local church to carry out the Great Commission. God established the local church as the primary vehicle of ministry to a sin-broken world.

Missionary Baptists also believe the health of the local church and the health of the local association are directly connected. Some would go so far as to say they are two sides of the same coin. The theme of the 2022 BMA of Arkansas meeting was Healthy Churches — Healthy Association. The converse can be true as well.

Why Do We Need Strong Associations?

The practice of associating together is biblical, practical and necessary. Why? First, a strong association will multiply the impact of the local church by member churches cooperating together. Second, a strong association will strengthen its member churches. Third, strong associations can support the ministries of the association.

For the local church, the local association is the first layer of cooperation. Through it, a church can multiply its impact, strengthen sister churches and champion local ministries. The same is true for all layers of cooperation — state and national associations.

What are Some Hindrances to Strong Associations

Several potential mindsets or practices hinder strong associations.

• **Isolationism** — Several BMA of Arkansas churches are not involved in a local association or state association. They may send a letter of representation to those meetings or even send money to the association but are functional isolationists because they do not participate in meaningful cooperation with other churches.

• **Territorialism** — True churches are not in competition with one another. Church A does not have a perceived territory, nor does church B. To feel like another church is infringing on your territory is wrong. They are simply reaching people you can't or won't reach. True churches must work together to advance the kingdom of God!

• **Inferiority Complex** — Some churches or church leaders, assume that because their church is not a mega-church, with a multi-million dollar budget, there is little they can contribute to the cause of Christ. In reality, every congregation has equal standing in associational work. Whether a church gives \$ 10 per month to missions or \$100 to the *Baptist Trumpet*, they are equal in ecclesiastical standing.

• **Superiority Complex** — Some churches experience the blessings of God on a particular ministry or ministry style and attempt to project it onto other churches. For example, a church with a thriving home group ministry may view a church with a Sunday School ministry as inferior. Yet another example might be a church with traditional style worship viewing a church with contemporary style worship as inferior. The superiority complex can be detrimental to associational cooperation. God uses different churches to reach different people.

“For the local church, the local association is the first layer of cooperation.”

What are Practical Ways to Strengthen an Association?

A hallmark principle of being a part of an association is the autonomous nature of the local church. That means no local church is under the authority of a hierarchy, board or other governing entity. Therefore, each local church is responsible to determine its level of involvement with a local, state or national association. The following are suggested ways of becoming more involved:

Support

• **Stay informed about each ministry.** Most ministries on a state and national level maintain websites and produce newsletters, blogs or social media posts to inform church members about events, needs or other happenings. Be intentional about staying informed. At the *Baptist Trumpet*, part of our mission is to do our best to keep you informed about things on every level of the BMA — local, state, national and international.

• **Pray specifically for other churches.** Consider choosing another church in your local association and pray specifically for that congregation. To make that more meaningful, call the pastor of the church for whom you are praying and ask about how you can effectively pray for them. Pray for them during your public worship. Then let them know you prayed for them.

• **Pray for associational ministries specifically.** Consider praying for associational ministries (local, state or national) regularly or on a rotating basis, in addition to the times of Special Emphasis that are promoted. Pray regularly for them, especially when specific needs are expressed.

• **Financially support associational ministries.** Autonomy, when applied to the financial support of various ministries, means the local church chooses which ministries to support and in what amount they choose to support them. For example, on a state level, the BMA of Arkansas has four ministries — Central Baptist College, State Missions, Student Ministry Matters and *Baptist Trumpet*. Associational Baptists can choose which of those ministries they choose to support. Some churches may support State Missions only, and others may support all four. As to how much financial support each ministry receives, again, the local church determines the amount. Some churches choose a set amount and others choose a percentage. The ministries of our association cannot effectively carry out their mission without the faithful support of churches and individuals.

Participate

In the New Testament, churches shared personnel and finances with one another. The church at Antioch sent out its best leaders to evangelize Asia. The churches in Macedonia collected offerings for the Jerusalem church. Modern churches can do the same.

• **Share ministry resources.** If your church owns a tent, an inflatable or other ministry items, be willing to share with those who do not. Support the ministry of other churches.

• **Develop associational resources.** Another option is for the local association to acquire ministry resources like inflatables, popcorn machines and snow cone machines, then make them available to churches for events and ministry.

• **Invest in other churches.** Recently, the facilities of Park View Baptist Church in North Little Rock were damaged in a tornado and likely will be a total loss. What an opportunity to invest in a sister church by giving to that church financially to cover unexpected expenses. Yes, they had insurance, but insurance doesn't cover every expense. Also, if another church in your area is without a pastor and you have a young minister or even a retired pastor in your congregation looking to fulfill their calling, encourage them to minister to that church with no pastor.

• **Intentionally cooperate in ministry together.** Consider hosting training events for area churches, like teacher trainings, prayer retreats, etc. Find a need among churches in your area and meet that need. Support the ministry events of other churches. If another church in your area is hosting an outreach event or other ministry event, offer to support them with personnel or just show up to encourage them.

Conclusion

So, let's get the conversation started about revitalizing our associational work. Let's get involved in impacting our communities together. Let's serve one another.

Let us know what you are doing as a local association to promote more cooperation within your area. We would love to share as a way to encourage others. Contact Executive Editor Jeff Herring at editor@baptisttrumpet.com or call the office at (501) 565-4601.

Special Edition: Why Do We Associate?