

Baptist Associations and 'Advanced' Christianity

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In the 1995 movie "The American President," President Andrew Shepherd says,

"America isn't easy. America is advanced citizenship. You've gotta want it bad, 'cause it's gonna put up a fight."

In the world of Southern Baptists, Baptist associations are advanced Christianity. For them to thrive, you've gotta want them bad, 'cause it's gonna be a challenging journey.

But it is one that is worth it.

Baptist associations represent the best of the early Christian movement. For the Baptist movement to thrive, the character, nature and missional engagement of associations must lead the movement.

The first challenge is for congregations to believe in the beauty of serving as a family of congregations on mission together in a given context, serving missionally and functioning relationally.

Second is for the organizational entities of Baptists to realize our movement is most effective through local congregations in association with one another

Associations continually act on God's leadership

Associations at their best represent the core understandings and actions of the early Christian movement. They continually discern the next moves on an exciting and ever-changing spiritual and strategic journey.

They sense the changes in their context before they are visible. They know congregations and their journeys in intimate ways.

As they respond to opportunities, God gives them new understanding on how to fulfill His Kingdom mission.

Consider how the following early Christian characteristics speak into advanced Christianity through associations:

A diversity of people heard at Pentecost: The context of many associations is diversifying. The people in associational fellowship areas are often similar to the array of pilgrims present at Pentecost as shared in Acts 2:5–11. At Pentecost each person heard about the love of Jesus in their own language.

Every congregation cannot use the same words and methods. Each pilgrim needs to hear the gospel in ways they can understand and accept. A multiplicity of congregations is needed, and not just those that are like the people already present.

Ingathering and building community: Ideally, congregations in association with one another come together individually and as a fellowship as described in Acts 2:42–47.

They gather for worship, fellowship, teaching, meals, prayer, celebration of wonders and signs, sharing of resources, inspiration for missional engagement and adding to their fellowship those who receive Jesus.

Seasons of transition and change: The simplicity of young congregations grows complex as they mature. In Acts 6:1–7 new leadership roles were defined as the early church prospered and moved into a new season of ministry.

Associations have agility to respond to new opportunities, shifting leadership needs and contextual changes. They do this through deep relationships and missional engagement rather than relying on programs and events.

Discerning values: When trying to figure out how to apply the Word of God as living, indwelling and inspiring, the movement gathers for dialogue and discernment, much as we see in Acts 15:1–29 during the Jerusalem Council.

Associations spiritually support one another as they minister in diverse contexts with new and evolving ways of understanding how to apply the unchanging values of the gospel.

Expanding and mentoring: Acts 16–20 particularly show Paul seeing many converts to Christianity. New congregations are launched, and he visits them when he can and sends spiritual leaders to continue discipling them. He writes letters to mentor them in faith and practice.

Associations nurture the Christlike journey of congregations, doing so in a manner of cherishing the family of congregations and, while never ceasing to love them, helping congregations that wander off like a prodigal.

Speaking prophetically: At times it is necessary to speak prophetically into the life of congregations, as we see in Revelation 2–3. The association is not trying to make congregations understand the one right way to do ministry in their situation. Many situations are different.

Instead, they use language that speaks into the contextual situation experienced by each congregation. The church of Laodicea was addressed in the language of water. They struggled with water, which at its source was hot or cold but became lukewarm when it reached them.

Consider these things as we talk in subsequent columns about the possible role of your association by the year 2033. Some see it as impossible, but it is possible if this is the way God leads Baptists.

EDITOR'S NOTE — George Bullard spent 45 years in denominational ministry. He served on the staff of three associations, was a key staff person working with associations in two state conventions and served on the association missions division staff of the former Home Mission Board of the SBC. He retired in June 2022 as director of Columbia Metro Baptist Association in South Carolina. He has led strategic planning processes in more than 100 associations and has written extensively in this area. Bullard now serves as a strategic thinking mentor for Christian leaders through his ForthTelling Innovation ministry and a correspondent for The Baptist Paper.