

What happens if associations cease to exist?

By George Bullard, The Baptist Paper, October 21, 2024



While Baptist associations continue in a season of determining, defining and communicating their current roles within the latest realm of denominational life, many have settled into a positive and productive rhythm.

However, others have closed or merged, and the ongoing stressors resulting from funding issues, denominational strategies and doctrinal debates could cause more associations to cease to exist.

The loss of associations as organizations within the denomination is disappointing. But the loss of them as spiritual organisms and missional movements is destructive to the denomination.

Associations contribute to the quality and progress of the Baptist denominational movement in ways the state, regional and national entities cannot.

Sense of community

As spiritual organisms, associations cultivate the Christlike sense of community among a family of member congregations.

As missional movements, they address Great Commission and great commandment opportunities. Associations have deeper evangelistic zeal and caring compassion for their particular context in ways no other dimension of a denomination does.

While I brainstormed three dozen things that would be different if associations cease to exist, I'm only including my top five here.

First, the depth of missional engagement in the fellowship area of a former association would be lost. Understandings of the ministry, evangelism and church planting needs in the local context would be less clear and perhaps unknown. Associations help congregations understand missional needs in their fellowship context.

State conventions and national entities share statistics. Associations share compassionate life stories.

Second, the relationship of the denomination to congregations would become transactional rather than transformational.

State conventions and national entities are programmatic. Their desire is to transactionally get congregations involved in things that make the denomination successful.

Becoming more Christlike

Associations are more concerned about what helps their congregations and context transform to become more Christlike, loving and compassionate.

Third, the denomination would know fewer of the backstories of congregations. It is more difficult for them to appropriately address true needs or opportunities. The solutions they offer congregations may not help. They could even hurt when they do not know congregations deeply enough to understand what would help them thrive.

Allegiance

Fourth, overall commitment to the denomination would decrease. This would be particularly true among laypeople. In direct, indirect and implied ways, associations represent the denomination to congregations and especially their laypeople.

State conventions and national entities focus more on pastors and staff people than on laypeople. When laypeople do not see obvious value added through their relationship with their denomination, allegiance to the denomination diminishes.

Fifth, the creeping hierarchical nature of the national denomination would increase. Larger churches would take over more representative leadership roles for churches in a given area. Medium to smaller congregations would diminish in providing leadership. Responding to new God-empowered initiatives from grassroots efforts would practically disappear.

What would you add to this list?

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.