

# **Church Members, The Association, & The Mission**

## ***A Devotional Guide***

***For Associations Engaged in Strategic Planning***

***and for***

***Search Teams Seeking an Associational Missionary Strategist***

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**INTENDED PURPOSE:** This devotional booklet is designed for Associations engaged in a strategic planning process. It is also helpful for Search Teams seeking an Associational Missionary Strategist.

If used in Strategic Planning, then the booklet should be read from the very beginning of the process by the Planning Team. Later in the process, it should also be given to the pastors, members of associational committees, and people involved in associational ministries. One participation goal you may wish to consider is an average of one person for every 12 to 24 people attending each church. "Mileage will vary."

**FOR BEST RESULTS:** It will not be enough to merely pass around a stack of the booklets and invite anyone interested to take one — it's a good idea to do that; some people will surprise you with their interest — but it will not be enough. You will get the best results if you have a team to personally enlist church members who are involved in the Association, asking each one individually for their participation.

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*ITALICS* are occasionally added in Scripture passages for emphasis.

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## ***Why Isn't There a Picture On the Cover of This Booklet?***

A picture always dresses up the cover of a publication. Pictures can add color. They make a document more appealing. It would be a great idea for this booklet... if only we could think of the right cover photo.

How about a photo of the Associational office? No, that wouldn't work. A Baptist Association is just that: An Association of Churches. The churches are the members. Besides, most of the meetings an Association has are held somewhere other than the office.

Then, how about a map showing where the member churches are located? These maps are helpful in finding where the congregations meet. However, the locations and the buildings aren't the churches; their members are. The church is people.

We could use a picture of the associational disaster relief team... or a mission team... or the work of a food pantry or clothes closet... We could do that, but associations each have a distinct ministry niche in their respective communities. And they have multiple ministries. An association is more than any single one of them.

Cal Guy, who taught missions at Southwestern Baptist Seminary, used to say, "If you can take a picture of it, it ain't missions! Missions is winning people to Jesus."

And there it is: We are, first and foremost, involved in invisible realities. And it's hard to take a picture of eternal realities.

So, what is a Baptist Association?

***A Baptist association is a group of self-governing churches, from the same region, upholding a common faith and shared practices, voluntarily networking together to fulfill the Great Commission and to strengthen its member churches.***<sup>1</sup>

In Days 1-8, we will see how each component of this definition is found in Scripture. If it wasn't in the Bible, we could safely ignore it. But if there is, in fact, a biblical basis for what Baptist associations do, then it may be time to give our Association fresh consideration.

<sup>1</sup> Definition used in the Strategic Plan of the Elmore Baptist Association, 2016

## ***Every Christian, A Great Commission Christian***

After the conference leader concluded the session on “Winning and Growing Through the Sunday School,” he was approached by one of the pastors in attendance. The pastor told him that though he appreciated what he had to say, he felt that God had called him, not to worry about all that winning and growing, but to just pastor the little flock he had. The session leader was a retired veteran of the Marine Corps. So, the conference leader was careful to respond gently, as he replied with a slow, low growl — “God ought’a kill you.”

When I tell this story, the audiences to which I speak divide themselves into two groups. I can immediately tell which group each person is in by the looks on their faces. One group is thinking, “That mean man! Why would he pounce on that sweet pastor who only wanted to love his little flock.”

The second group laughs. They are bemused at the audacity of this “sweet little pastor” who presumed to think he had the right to redefine the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. Indeed!

In the Great Commission Jesus Christ has just finished saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” There’s nothing about having “all authority in heaven and on earth” to misunderstand. We are under orders from our superior. People under the Lordship of Christ would never dare say, “That’s just not my thing.”

We call it the *Great* Commission—because it is the one great, overarching, all-encompassing, everyone-involving mission of the church. World evangelization is the main work of the whole church for the whole age. It is not for a few specialists only, but is the responsibility of the whole church. This commission puts every believer on mission and requires a great commitment on the part of every believer.

It is great in its all-encompassing scope. It involves making “disciples,” “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” and “teaching them to observe everything” Jesus taught us to do. Each action step is necessary to fulfill Jesus’ command.

It is great in its scale: “All nations.” That is, every people group, every ethnic group, and every language group on earth. This description includes evangelism across the street and missions across the planet. We are to be



involved in this mission in ways both local and global. Together, these two aspects of the work represent world evangelization.

It is great in its empowering presence. Jesus himself said, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” He has not left us to do the work alone in our own power. Through the Holy Spirit we experience His indwelling and empowerment. It is impossible to conceive of a person close to God, plugged into what He is doing, who is not a “Great Commission Christian.”

So what does this assignment mean for the average church member? It is our job to know where the people in our lives are in relation to God. And for each one to take seriously his or her own personal sphere of influence.

It means that every one of us sees the evangelization of our town or community as our personal responsibility. We maintain situational awareness to know which circles of friends and which pockets of people know the Lord — and which ones do not. Where there are unreached people, we form a plan to reach them.

The Great Commission also means we take global missions personally. It’s not *somebody’s* job; it’s our job. It means every one of us must be open to God’s call to go anywhere in the world. It means every single one of us must be a supporter of missions financially, with *generous* offerings. It means real Christians are interested in (and not bored with) hearing about missions. We arrange our lives around the mission. For those who walk with God, it is the cause of their lives.

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *We refer to Matthew 28:18-20 as the Great Commission. Why is that a good name?*
- *What are the times the word “all” or “every” appears in this passage?*
- *Compare Luke 24:44-48, John 20:19-23, and Acts 1:1-8 to Matthew 28:18-20. In what specific ways are they similar? What additional information do they provide?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, please draw my friends \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ to yourself. Make them to feel the emptiness in specific ways in their lives without You. Give them a whiff of the presence of Christ through their relationships with Your people.

## *The Great Co-Mission*

We cannot do it alone. We can't reach our communities or our counties — certainly not the world — alone. One pastor cannot do it. One church cannot do it. Nor can it be done with a thousand points of light — but with each functioning in their own little world.

Paul didn't think he could do it alone. For example, He called Titus “my partner and coworker” (2 Corinthians 8:23). Paul often sent, as his emissary and follow-up man, Timothy whom he called “our brother and God's coworker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you concerning your faith” (1 Thessalonians 3:2). He described Epaphroditus as “my brother, coworker, and fellow soldier, as well as your messenger and minister to my need” (Philippians 2:25).

Why do we need others? We need to network with others to be more effective in *personal evangelism*. We all know our witness is more effective when it is corporate — that is, when a non-believer is exposed to a *group of believers*. Any one of us can be dismissed as an “odd duck” when the unbeliever meets the individual Christian witness. But when he finds himself around a group of Christians — loving one another, enjoying each other, bearing the fruit of the Spirit — he comes to see that Jesus Christ makes a difference in peoples' lives. Their witness as a group is winsome.

Are there some churches of which you would rather be a member than some others? Of course. Admittedly, our church cannot reach everyone in our county. No one church is a good fit for everyone. It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. Reaching our region will require multiple churches partnering together to evangelize their geographical area.

We need to network with others to engage in *world evangelization*. Some of our largest churches have a Missions Pastor on staff. These people are terrific at working with missions partners, organizing mission trips, and overseeing communication between the church and the missionaries on the field. They mobilize the church for prayer and financial support. However, very few churches could be a missionary-sending agency. Only a few churches could afford to pay the salary and expenses of even a single missionary. Just consider the cost of language training and international travel. Consider the details of handling health insurance matters internationally.



You need someone to take care of all these arrangements and so much more. So, we need to co-labor with others to engage in world missions.

Church leaders need fellowship with each other. Paul expressed his desire for fellowship with the Christians at Rome, “to be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine” (Romans 1:12). And on those days when you aren’t getting anything out of it, maybe someone else is getting something out of your comments, prayers, or bearing.

There are things which hinder fellowship and “co-laboring” among God’s people: When local churches engage in building their own little kingdoms, display a competitive attitude, resent the growth of another church, engage in deliberate sheep-stealing, are “too busy” for others, are unwilling to relate to the others’ style of doing ministry or worship, have a spirit of self-sufficiency.

Responding to the question, “What demands the immediate, crisis management attention of the Baptist association?” Otis Corbitt responded:

*The major crisis I see is that churches, church leaders, and pastors no longer value associating with each other. Fellowship among our pastors and other church leaders is at an all-time low during my ministry career. We no longer see associating together as desirable, enjoyable, or useful. Our churches and pastors are becoming more and more independent of each other.*<sup>1</sup>

Paul wrote, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ Or again, the head can’t say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” (1 Corinthians 12:21).

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- In verse 5, “has the \_\_\_\_\_ the Lord has given \_\_\_\_\_.”
- What three roles do you see in verse 6?
- Each will receive his own \_\_\_\_\_ according to his \_\_\_\_\_ “
- Verse 9: “We are \_\_\_\_\_”

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Heavenly Father, please show me the co-laborers in Christ You would have me to work with more diligently. Please give me insight regarding how networking in your kingdom can better fulfill the Great Commission.

<sup>1</sup> Otis H. Corbitt, III, This quote confirmed in a telephone conversation on April 20, 2023

## *Is That in the Bible?*

One reason many pastors and congregations don't participate with their association is that many have felt that their association is a tradition, but they haven't seen it as a pattern found in Scripture.

The question should then be asked – is that in the Bible? Did the churches of the New Testament work together like that? While there is not a passage in the Bible presenting a systematic concept of cooperative missions, as we review the distinct elements of these definitions, we find Scriptural support for each one.

We have said that “*A Baptist association is a group of self-governing churches, from the same region...*” Do we see that in the New Testament? Yes, we do. Multiple times, in fact. Here is a list:

- “To the churches of Galatia” — Galatians 1:2
- “John: To the seven churches in Asia.” — Revelation 1:4
- “The churches of Asia greet you...” -- 1 Corinthians 16:19
- “We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God granted to the churches of Macedonia” — 2 Corinthians 8:1
- “I remained personally unknown to the Judean churches in Christ”  
– Galatians 1:21
- “Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.” — Romans 15:25-26

Notice how, as Paul make his plea for the benevolence offering for Christians in Judea, he refers to multiple churches in the regions of Macedonia and Achaia by the names of their regions.

The book of Revelation and the book of Galatians were both written to be circulated among churches regionally who clearly maintained a working relationship and were, thus, addressed corporately.

A quick look at the map on the opposing page, one can see these New Testament churches were all located in specific regions and had connections with each other. There were ties that served to bind them together.





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Now, some Associations are located in areas where there are few Baptists, so their churches are more spread out more widely. An association based on language group, for example, would naturally come from a broader area.

There are networks for church planters and their churches. These provide helpful resources for that specific stage of the work. However, this type of network will be less helpful as you seek partners in reaching your county.

Nevertheless, with those types of exceptions taken into consideration, regionality is a valid principle of a Baptist Association. New Testament churches networked and partnered together. It is, in fact, in the Bible.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *In today's passage, how many times does Paul mention or name regions?*
- *Why and how is evangelizing and planting churches in a region a key factor in Paul's missionary strategy?*
- *Verse 30: "I appeal to you... \_\_\_\_\_ in prayers to God on my behalf"*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Sovereign God, I humbly ask that You would bless the work of the churches in our Associational area. Please direct the steps of each congregation to Your plan for reaching each community with the gospel.

## *A Common Faith and Standard Practices*

Did you know that a church doesn't join the Southern Baptist Convention? Nor does a church join one of the State Conventions. The only organizational body in our denomination into which a congregation is actually admitted is the Association. They may give financially to the State Convention and to the Southern Baptist Convention, but they apply for membership in a local Baptist Association. In these times in which we live, somebody needs to be able to ask the questions and then say, "Yes, these people truly do share our beliefs, they are one of us, and we can work with them."

Associations share a common faith and standard practices. As Paul wrote to churches, he affirmed a standard of faith and practice held in common among the churches. He could begin his encouragement to follow the standard of practice with the phrase, "As in all the churches of the saints..." (1 Corinthians 14:33-34). We see him urging the church at Corinth to take a course of action on this basis more than once:

- "But if anyone wants to argue about this, we have no other custom, *nor do the churches of God*" (1 Corinthians 1:16)
- "Each one must live his life in the situation the Lord assigned when God called him. This is what I command *in all the churches*." (1 Corinthians 7:17)
- "Now about the collection for the saints: You should *do the same as I instructed the Galatian churches*." (1 Corinthians 16:1)

Though Bible scholars may debate the exact meaning of some of the practices described above, it is clear the New Testament churches at the time knew what Paul meant and that they embraced a common basic standard of doctrine and practice.

We're not speaking here of worship style. And, there are some differences of perspective regarding secondary matters such as beliefs about the details of Last Things. But in the twenty-first century, we are seeing differences among churches regarding some of the most basic teachings of Scripture. That's why in Romans 16:17 Paul wrote, "Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who create divisions and obstacles contrary to the teaching that you learned. Avoid them."



There are times our churches can work with other congregations from other denominations on specific projects such a Community Thanksgiving Service or Benevolence Ministry. However, we are speaking here of a deeper level of commitment and a broader amount of agreement.

Each church is autonomous. Each congregation will have its own distinct personality, its own exact style of worship, and its own specific approach to doing things. However, that doesn't mean we can't learn anything from our sister churches. How many congregations could have spared themselves from embarrassment and adversity if they had adopted some practices standard among the churches! In areas such as preschool security, search committees, how finances are handled, their church safety team, etc.. Each church is unique, but no church is a "special case." In numerous practical matters, a little "teachability" can go a long way.

A Baptist Association doesn't tell its member churches what to do. It has no authority to do so. But it is a fellowship of member churches with a common faith and shared practices. They stand for the same things and share the same message.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *Who did the scattered Christians begin telling about Jesus in verse 20? What made this different?*
- *In today's passage, Barnabas was sent to Antioch from Jerusalem after the mother church had received word that people were responding to the gospel there. Sent to verify: Verse 23: "When he arrived and \_\_\_\_\_"*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, we live in a time when many are falling away from Your Word, suppressing the truth and trying to redefine beliefs to their liking. Please show us how to stand together — in a loving, but clear way — for the gospel.

## *A Fellowship*

Member congregations of a Baptist Association are a fellowship. It's been said that fellowship is when you have *two fellows in the same boat*, rowing in the same direction.

In the New Testament, we see how the churches had a sense of comradeship and assisted each other. For example, in the benevolence offering by Gentile churches to assist the mother church in Jerusalem and in the “church encouragement tour” of Paul and Silas.

- Regarding the offering for the Jerusalem church, Paul was able to say, “Achaia has been prepared since last year,’ and your zeal has stirred up most of them.” (2 Corinthians 9:1-2)
- [Paul together with Silas] “traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.” (Acts 15:41)

1 Corinthians 12:25 tells us in the local church there should be, “no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other.” Could one honestly maintain the spirit of this passage applies within a single local church alone, but when it comes to relations between churches, this caring concern is optional?

When we think of fellowship in the context of the Association, we may think of the Associational Pastors Conference. However, fellowship in the Association goes beyond the pastors conference and the annual deacons banquet. It shouldn't stop there. Christian fellowship helps nurture our growth in ministry and our Christian walk.

First, Christian fellowship provides *an uplifting tone*. The atmosphere isn't negative. One gets an “up-look” for having been together, and leaves the gathering feeling inspired. The flow-through presence of the Holy Spirit creates this atmosphere.

Christian fellowship offers a *culture of normal*. Like some home environments, some churches can be sub-normal. Some are even abnormal. But when healthily growing Christians gather, they experience true normal.

Nurturing fellowship provides the opportunity to hear *other believers' stories of their Christian journey*. You hear stories about spiritual growth and about serving the Lord—and you relate. These stories give us a mental



picture of what some new aspect of growth and service, which we have not yet personally experienced, might look like.

In Christian fellowship there are *people to encourage you*. The world always has someone ready to beat you down. In Christian fellowship, they build you up.

We need to know others are counting on us. Sometimes, we need someone to ask us why we were absent or how things are going spiritually. This informal accountability helps us stay on track.

Christian fellowship provides a *support group*. Many, many times, one will have a conversation with a church member who has gone through a health crisis or experience the loss of a loved one. That member will remark that he doesn't understand how people without a church family could make it through life events like that. We need someone there for us when life hurts.

We need someone who won't kick us when we're down. Someone who will love us and pray for us. People who will brush us off and get us back into the game.

Another benefit of fellowship in the Association is to sit under *solid Bible teaching*. The solid teaching of fellow church leaders gives us fresh insights into Scripture. It also serves as a check against novel ideas, which at first may sound good, but the ideas aren't biblically sound.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *In verses 3 and 7, how did Paul feel about the church at Philippi?*
- *In verses 5 and 7, why does he feel this way?*
- *Verse 5: Paul thanks God "For your \_\_\_\_\_"*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Eternal Father, thank you for the congregations who assisted in planting our church in its founding. Thank you for those who are assisting sister congregations who are struggling right now. Deliver me from the temptation of thinking of other churches as the 'competition.' Enable me, please, to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep.

## *A Communication Network*

It seems like a small throw-away line in the epistle. After all, the book of Romans is a most meaty work. However, as Paul wrote from Corinth to the Christians at Rome, he says, “...All the churches of Christ send you greetings” (Romans 16:16). These church members had never met, but they shared a common Master, a common message, a common mission. They are brothers and sisters. They are family. They wanted to reach out and connect. Believers should all have this sense of brotherhood so that when they see a fellow believer, even if he or she attends another church, we think of them as “one of us.”

Someone has counted and in Romans 16 there are 29 different people listed. They are each called by name and greeted. When many of us see a passage like this coming up, with names we cannot pronounce, we get a good running start and jump over it. However, if we will take our time as we read through such passages, we may find golden nuggets of insight. The descriptions and commendations of those being described can inspire us. Sometimes, we read warnings — for example, “Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who create divisions and obstacles contrary to the teaching that you learned. Avoid them...” (verse 17). Paul warned Timothy about “Alexander the coppersmith, who did us much harm” (2 Timothy 4:14-15).

Sister churches should feel a camaraderie with one another. We should be interested to know what God is doing in other places and among other congregations. This should be most especially true regarding those churches within the family of our Association.

*The New Testament churches, within the various regions, talked to each other and shared information.*

We see their communication in the distribution of Scripture. Laodicea was about eleven miles from Colossae, around a four-hour walk. So, when Paul wrote the epistle to the Colossians, it was only natural that he would thus urge them, “When this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans” (Colossians 4:16). Colossians is a book of the Bible, of course, but notice that Paul also mentioned a letter that isn’t included in Scripture, but it must have still would have been helpful. The



verse goes on to say, “...and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.”

We see communication as sister churches affirmed sound teachers. We believe the passage is speaking of Apollos when it says, “We have sent with him the brother who is praised throughout the churches for his gospel ministry” (2 Corinthians 8:18). Clearly, his teaching had been extremely helpful to these congregations and they shared with the members of other area churches what a blessing he had been.

Individual Christians should network together with other believers as they seek to reach their lost friends for Christ. We can agree to pray for our mutual friends. We can invite these friends to attend Christian events and services with us. We can communicate with each other about gospel conversations we’ve had and how our friend responded.

In the same way, churches need to communicate as they seek to reach their areas or counties for the Lord. We learn about resources that are available. We hear new ideas and learn about new opportunities.

Such churches warn each other about those who go from one church to another causing trouble and professional beggars.

Clearly, the churches of the New Testament didn’t silo their information one from another. They communicated. We can too.

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In Romans 16, look over the list of people and their descriptions. Is there a description which especially stands out to you? Which one?*
- *As you read through the greetings and see the ways we are told how these people worked in the Christian cause, though they lived in different places, what overall impression do you get?*
- *What relevance to today do you see in the warning found in verses 17-18?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Righteous Father, please enable me not to turn inward, to focus on only my own work in Your service. Open my eyes to see other places where You are at work. Increase my desire to see Your other Servants see fruit from their labors. Give me a listening hear to learn from Your people in other congregations.



## ***Autonomous Churches & Voluntary Cooperation***

The church member may be speaking about tithing or about being faithful in the fellowship of the church or any number of subjects — but when I hear someone in a church setting say, “No one is going to tell me what to do!” — I know that person means, “Not even Jesus Christ!” The words, the tone of voice, the spirit in which it is said, makes it very clear. This person is determined to be lord of his own life.

On the other hand, it isn't necessary to tell someone who loves the Lord to share Christ's mission. You don't have to *make* them give to missions. They have been born again. They are alive to Christ. They are led by the Spirit. Because they have a relationship with the Father, they *want* to be about the Father's business.

The same thing is true in the context of the Association. When you have churches that are on fire... filled with the Spirit... driven by the Great Commission... they *want* to work with other churches. They can see that world evangelization is something no one church could do alone. Reaching new areas with the gospel, churching new regions, strengthening those churches, and encouraging their believing members is a mission that requires the participation of every church. It is a practical necessity to work together. And it is the biblical model to follow.

Each church is autonomous. There isn't a hierarchy in Baptist life. Each congregation owns its own buildings and calls their own pastor and determines how much they should give to the Association and to missions.

In the past, there was once the peer pressure of a church being branded a “non-cooperating church,” but even that has faded away in recent decades.

Among Southern Baptist churches, we participate and give and support *voluntarily*. No one can *make* our churches do anything. There isn't a draft; this is a volunteer army. And changing the world is what we signed up for!

Again, the Great Commission is the great driving mission of the church. Any local congregation unmotivated to participate in world evangelization couldn't be considered a New Testament church at any meaningful way.

The local church is commanded to simultaneously act both locally and globally. “But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon





you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me *both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth*” (Acts 1:8, KJV). Notice how this verse lists two categories of places to be reached: (1) Jerusalem, and (2) Judea, Samaria, and uttermost part of the earth. Notice the word, “both.” Some translations omit this word, but it’s in the original language. Churches are to be involved in *both* categories of places.

Paul remembered earlier days of his missionary work and expressed appreciation to the church at Philippi – “You, Philippians, know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you alone” – only the church at Philippi had sponsored him in his work (Philippians 4:15). The key phrase is, “except you alone.” This was to the credit of the church at Philippi, but to the discredit of the non-supporting churches.

As we look through Acts, the Epistles, and the book of Revelation, we see that New Testament Churches:

- Were located in the same regional setting and worked together.
- Embraced a common basic standard of doctrine and practice.
- Had a sense of comradery and assisted each other.
- Talked to each other and shared information.
- Partnered together in efforts to fulfill the Great Commission.

They did so voluntarily and joyfully. So, yes, cooperative partnership in pursuit of missions and strengthening churches was practiced by the New Testament church. It’s in the Bible.

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In today’s passage, underline (or list) the words which show the personal interest the Christians in Philippi took in Paul’s missionary ministry.*
- *In verses 15 & 16, how can we tell these efforts were taken on their own initiative?*
- *In verse 18, how did God view and feel about the Philippians’ efforts?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, I bless You that in eternity past, You planned for our salvation. Lord Jesus, thank You for dying to secure for me a new life. Spirit, thank You for the applying new birth. Please fill me with an inner fire to see people come to know You. Show me how to work with others to see this happen.

## *Strengthening Churches System*

Just as our physical bodies have systems – circulatory system, nervous system, immune system, etc. – to keep us healthy and alive, associations have systems that make them work. Listed in this booklet are seven systems. Not every association will have every system. Some systems are “optional equipment” while some essential systems “come standard.” However, the systems listed are commonly found in Baptist Associations. There will follow explanations and examples of what is meant by each one. The first of these systems is the Strengthening Churches System.

Traditionally, the Association worked to strengthen churches in the sense of providing training in Christian service through the church. Such training generally involved church organizations such as Sunday School, Discipleship Training, and Vacation Bible School.

This system is evolving. Previously, the Association offered training events and the churches were expected to attend. However, various associations experienced assorted problems with this approach:

- First, the one-size-fits-all events didn't always help. For example, the breakout for adult Sunday School might have been helpful, but the youth/student session didn't work for us — and that was the one we most needed.
- If someone devoted an entire evening to one of these events, but left feeling like it was a waste of their time, they would *never* go back.
- There was a huge amount of pressure on the DOM to involve people from *all* the churches; but some of the members didn't have the skill or background to be that helpful.
- A lot of the churches weren't even wanting to do it right.
- A lot of the larger churches didn't think they needed any help... or felt they could do the training better in-house (and some could).
- Some of the contemporary churches felt the training opportunities offered by the Association were totally irrelevant to their needs. For example, some churches were attempting to reinvent everything their churches did, to approach church in a fresh way.

Some of the innovative churches were better at some things than



others. Production values in their worship services were great, but perhaps they didn't know as much about teaching the Bible to preschoolers as they thought. Traditional churches often did a better job of teaching their children the books of the Bible and the Bible stories.

- On the flip side, as the contemporary church movement has brought in new terminology and approaches, many Associations have been slow to adapt or to learn from them.

Take all these factors together. Put them all in a sack and shake it up. Now, imagine you're the new Director of Missions; what do you do?!

A common question from Associational leaders concerns how to get the churches to support Associational events. However, as Hugh Townsend has observed, the Association exists for the churches, not the other way around. He says, "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."<sup>1</sup>

One way forward relates to the equipping ministry of the church. One of the callings of a pastor is to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4:12). The Bible doesn't teach that the pastor should do the ministry *for* the church, but rather to equip the members to do the work of the ministry. He is like a player/coach, who both plays in the game and coaches the other players. The pastor is an "equipper" and the Association can assist in being an "equipper of the equippers."

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *In today's passage, when did Jesus begin giving spiritual gifts to the church?*
- *In verse 11, what gifts are listed?*
- *In verses 12-13, what are the purposes and goals of spiritual gifts?*

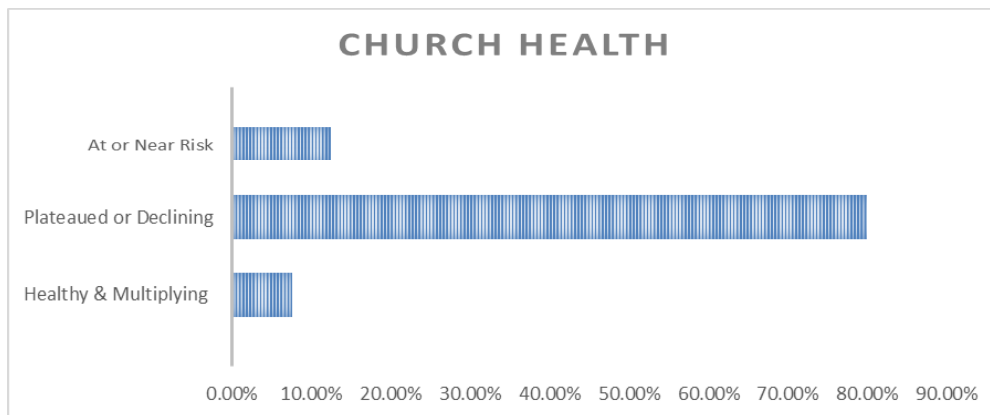
### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, we have come today to one of the most serious issues the Strategic Planning Team of our Association will be facing. Please guide them as they prepare recommendations and plans. Please enable me to be equipped and to be an equipper.

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Townsend, Position Paper, Associational Initiatives Team, North American Mission Board, June 24, 2005  
See also "Defining the Association of the Future part 1." <https://noba.equip.net/presenations/2547> Accessed 4/8/2023

## *And the Greatest of These Is Church Revitalization*

When it comes to the Association's involvements in Strengthening Churches, the greatest of these is Church Revitalization. Otis Corbitt writes, “Churches are anemic and need revitalization. The biggest threat to our denomination is not our increasingly liberal secular culture, nor arguments over soteriology, but weak, conflicted, stagnant, and dying churches.”<sup>1</sup>



The chart above shows the situation among Southern Baptist Churches:

Across our nation, regardless of setting—urban or suburban, rural or metropolitan—many churches are struggling. According to the North American Mission Board (NAMB) a great majority (80% or more) are plateaued or in decline. Furthermore, 10 to 15% are in crisis and facing the reality that they may close in a few short years or even months.<sup>2</sup>

This would mean that, in a typical Association of forty churches, around 32 congregations have plateaued or are beginning to decline. Four to six are close to disbanding. Only two to four are healthy and multiplying.

Many congregations arrive at a place where their church is no longer moving forward. Members are concerned for its future, but they don't know what to do. They need outside guidance. They need people with training and experience to come alongside to help.

Sometimes, what a church needs is spiritual renewal, to get back to first things — and to engage in strategic planning and to be intentional in evangelism. If they act soon enough, this may be the solution they need. The

<sup>1</sup> Otis Corbitt, Quote confirmed in telephone call, April 20, 2023

<sup>2</sup> Associational Planting Guide, Replant Division, North American Mission Board (NAMB), not dated, page 5



longer a church delays seeking help, the more drastic the step required.

When we start a new church, we call it “plant.” When we help an existing church start over, we a “replant.” Depending on the severity of the situation in the church and the nature of the opportunity in the community, there are five basic approaches used to reestablish vitality in such places for greater Kingdom impact. These are:

**1. Revitalization:** An existing church acknowledges their future is in peril. The congregation is willing to make drastic changes. They willingly accept outside leadership to shepherd them through a revitalization process.

**2. Fostering:** Through a clear mutual agreement, the declining church agrees to be fostered for a defined time by a stronger, healthier church. They receive their leadership, guidance and in some cases resources.

**3. Adoption:** The declining church makes an official decision to become a strategic campus or family network church of a stronger partner church and *accepts* their leadership, ministry style and philosophy.

**4. Replant From Within:** The declining church surrenders its assets, including its property, along with day-to-day decision-making to the association or a Sending Church. A new leadership group is formed and is given leadership. The church will then call an assessed and qualified Replant Pastor and launch as a *new congregation*.

**5. Closure and Donation:** The declining church disbands and donates its building and assets to an approved Southern Baptist church plant or a Southern Baptist partner, such as the association or state convention.<sup>3</sup>

### *Thinking About Today's Passage:*

- In verse 1, what is the reputation of the church at Sardis?
- Jesus says, “I know”; what does He know about the church? (verse 1)
- In verses 2-3, Jesus calls them to what actions? Are these responses urgently needed?

### *Prayer Guidance:*

Father, You are the only owner of the church. Jesus, You purchased the church with Your own blood. Spirit, You indwell and lead the church. You know our true level of spirituality and the work we are doing. It's hard to be honest. Please help our congregation see ourselves as you see us. Please help our sister churches in this same way.

<sup>3</sup> Associational Planting Guide, Replant Division, North American Mission Board (NAMB), not dated, pages 12-13

## *Crisis Intervention System*

Not only might a church need objective outside help to be strengthened, sometimes a church needs help in a time of crisis. We speak here of the Crisis Intervention System of the Association.

Some congregations have a pattern of conflict. They lack an immune system. If someone dies with AIDS, it's not AIDS that killed them; it could be any number of diseases their compromised immune system couldn't fight off. A church needs an immune system to fight off the infections which come into a church via conflict. Members often lack the courage to deal with church bullies. They need deacons who will say, "We don't do that here."

If your church wants to grow by transfer growth, then don't fight! Earn a reputation for living in peace. Sooner or later, some members of a conflicted church, who are tired of getting out of their cars in the church parking lot with their stomach in knots, will say to themselves "I'm moving my letter to a church where they don't fight!" The churches from which they come will accuse you of stealing their members, but a loving congregation attracts new people.

So what does a church do when they have controversies they aren't able to resolve among themselves? They need someone who can be objective, "with no dog in the hunt..." — without anything at stake in the current debate — with training for this kind of situation and with above-average spiritual maturity. Sometimes, a person outside the congregation is needed to serve as an impartial moderator for a church business meeting; someone who knows parliamentary procedure and who can set the right tone for the discussion. Such persons can be of great assistance. The Association is a great resource for this. And, unfortunately, will have experience in helping in this type situation.

Likewise, a church can experience crises of other types. There may be scandal involving the pastor. They need a pastor to lead them through this — but in this case, that's out of the question. In these situations, church members feel a range of emotions — from feeling betrayed, or angry, or deeply wounded, or disillusioned. It will take time for this congregation to process what has happened to them. In the moment, they are not in a posi-



tion emotionally to make wise decisions alone and unaided. Instead, they can call the Association where there will be someone who can walk with them through this season.

If a crime has been committed on the church campus, whether against members or by members, then a church usually needs help. The congregation is facing something unlike anything they have faced before. They may need assistance in relating to victims. They may need to speak to the media. They may need to secure the help of attorneys who deal with the kind of problem they're facing. Again, the Association is the place to start.

We live in a fallen world. Accidents happen. False teachers creep in. Crime happens. And when we need to deal with these situations, it is best to obtain wise counsel.

- “Let a wise person listen and increase learning, and let a discerning person obtain guidance” (Proverbs 1:5)
- “A fool’s way is right in his own eyes, but whoever listens to counsel is wise.” (Proverbs 12:15)
- “The tongue of the wise brings healing.” (Proverbs 12:18)

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In 1 Corinthians 5, the church faces a crisis, but doesn’t realize it’s a crisis, So they are not being pro-active. The presence of a spiritually mature believer who can be objective is needed. Now, think about verse 3 in light of this fact.*
- *5:7-8: In preparation for the Passover, Jewish people cleaned out all leaven from their homes. How does this and verses 12-13 relate to a church having, what we have compared to in this devotional, an “immune system”?*
- *In 6:1-8, we see church members suing each other. How do verses 4-6 advise us regarding the value of Christians who can help us with conflict resolution?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Holy Father, please protect our congregation from the types of crises I have read about today. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. But please, also, impart within us the humility required to accept help when we need it. I realize other congregations in our association may be going through a hard time right now. Please direct their paths, guide them to connect with the right people, who can help the through it.



## *Missions Support System*

Missions is a word that had to be. It is not a biblical word, but it is a biblical concept. It describes evangelism, but a particular kind of evangelism, that which crosses cultural and/or language boundaries. It gives us a handle on the kind of ministry which goes to people unlike us and to places away from us.

“A missionary is anyone sent by the Lord to establish a new Christian witness where such a witness is yet unknown. Traditionally defined missionary activity usually involves leaving our own immediate culture for another, taking the Gospel to people who differ in at least one aspect—such as language, nationality, race or tribe—from our own ethnic group.”<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes a group will take on a "mission project" and take flowers and cards to some sweet elderly ladies at the nursing home. This is an act of kindness, and certainly, there are some lonely people there who need the love and attention — but because it doesn't cross cultural or language boundaries, it isn't missions.

Sometimes we hear someone make the remark, “Missions begins at home.” World evangelization may begin at home, but missions, by definition, cannot. If it is at home, with people like ourselves, it isn't missions. It may be evangelism. It may be ministry. It may be a wonderful thing. But it isn't missions.

When people make this comment about missions beginning at home, they are usually arguing for keeping the money and resources at home instead of sending these resources overseas or across cultural boundaries. I had a professor in seminary who commented, “Missions may begin at home, but selfishness *stays there*.”

A variation on this theme is the phrase, “We are all missionaries.” Gordon Olson writes:

If every Christian is already considered a missionary, then all can stay put where they are, and nobody needs to get up and go anywhere to preach the gospel. But if our only concern is to witness where we are, how will people in unevangelized areas ever hear the gospel? The present uneven distribution of Christians and opportu-

<sup>1</sup> K.P. Yohannan, *Revolution in World Missions*, page 160. gfa Books, A Division of Gospel for Asia ©2002





nities to hear the gospel of Christ will continue unchanged... So in reality the idea every Christian is a missionary is a 'cop out.' It avoids responsibility for more than three and a half billion people who are not being effectively evangelized today. It means direct disobedience to the 'Go' of the Great Commission! <sup>2</sup>

The word missions reminds us that evangelism is a dual effort, involving both among the home folk and people everywhere else. And, as stewards of the gospel, it is our responsibility to get the message to them as well as to our own.

Most Associations have a Missions Support System. This is because most local congregations don't have the background, or the contacts, or the resources to engage in missionary efforts — beyond giving to the missions offerings. For example, many congregations don't have the wherewithal to plan and arrange a mission trip, but they do have members who would love to be involved in one. The Association can assist a local churches in organizing mission trips. Or, sponsor trips where members from multiple smaller attendance churches have the opportunity to be a part.

The Association can resource its churches in establishing partnerships with church planters who are establishing new churches in new work areas, in places with a limited evangelical presence.

Sometimes, it is a challenge to inform our members about the work of our missionaries in ways which inspire them. The Association can assist and resource here, as well.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *In today's Scripture reading, the word, 'Gentiles' appears six times. It mean nations. "In the Jewish sense... means the Gentile nations or the Gentiles in general as spoken of all who are not Israelites and implying idolatry and ignorance of the true God, i.e., the heathen, pagan nations" <sup>3</sup>*  
*What relevance does this have to the idea of missions?*  
*Would you be saved if there had not been this particular kind of missions?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father of all Grace, thank You for sending the gospel to us Gentiles. Indeed, let all the peoples praise You, rejoice in You , and place their hope in You!

<sup>2</sup> Olson, C. Gordon (2012-02-10). *What in the World is God Doing?: An Introduction to World Missions* (Kindle Locations 470-482)..

<sup>3</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

## Church Planting System

God hard-wired us to grow up looking forward to the day when we get married and have children of our own. This desire is strong. If there is a medical issue preventing a couple from being able to have a baby, they will often seek help from a fertility clinic and will go to great expense and expend much effort in order to give birth. Christians reproduce by leading other people to faith in Christ. Churches reproduce by giving birth to daughter churches. Unfortunately, many churches do not sense that something is wrong when they never give birth.

One reason many churches are reluctant to participate in church planting is that their experiences with new churches have been negative — often in the form of a church split, an “unplanned pregnancy.” Yet, every church that ever existed had a beginning. Someone went to the community and planted that church. It is only right that a congregation should want to carry on the family name and have a baby of their own, a new church.

Why should we plant churches? Starting new churches is a good evangelistic strategy. Peter Wagner called planting new churches, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven.”<sup>1</sup> New churches are over three times more effective in evangelism; established Southern Baptist churches average 3.4 baptisms per 100 members annually while new churches average 11.7 baptisms per 100 members.<sup>2</sup> Ed Stetzer says starting new churches is essential to the future ministry of our denomination:

‘Studies show that if a denomination wishes to reach more people, the number of new churches it begins each year must equal at least 3 percent of the denomination's existing churches.’<sup>5</sup> [his footnote] Southern Baptists plant about 4 percent, but still not nearly enough if we are to reach North America. That is only 1 percent over the break-even point. <sup>3</sup>

Note: In an association of 40 churches, 3% would mean one per year.

Where should we plant churches? The best place to start a new church is where there isn't one. There are many towns in the western and northern parts of North America without a single evangelical congregation.

<sup>1</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1990), page 11. Cited in Ed Stetzer, “The Most Effective Evangelistic Strategy Under Heaven,” *SBC Life*, June 2003, <http://www.sbclife.org/articles/2003/06/sla14.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Carol Pipes, “Why Every Church Must Plant,” *OnMission Magazine*, North American Mission Board, Summer 2011, Page 11-13

<sup>3</sup> Ed Stetzer, “The Most Effective Evangelistic Strategy Under Heaven,” *SBC Life*, June 2003, <http://www.sbclife.org/articles/2003/06/sla14.asp>

<sup>5</sup> Excerpt from the “Eastland Report: Church Planting,” [www.easum.com/church.htm](http://www.easum.com/church.htm), December 11, 2002)



Another “place” to plant a new church is within a population that doesn’t have a disciple-making church. There may be dozens of good churches in the area, but not one with which people from that people group, subculture, or language group would feel comfortable attending. We all know from experience that “folks like us make a church like ours” and “a church like ours can reach folks like us.” Ask if the existing churches are effectively reaching that population in significant numbers. A few exceptions here and there aren’t enough. Is it time to start a church to *effectively* reach that group? It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people.

When should we plant churches? If a couple waits until it thinks it can afford to have children, they will never have any children. Many churches want to wait until they reach a certain size to birth a daughter church. Kevin Marsico tells of a church that averaged 3,500 people in attendance and thought they needed to reach 5,000 before they could plant a church, and of another church that averaged only 36 and, yet, reproduced! If a church cannot be the sole sponsor it can participate in a “cluster” with other churches.”<sup>5</sup>

The Association is responsible to scan its county to ensure that there is a church for every area, every people group, every sub-culture, and every unreached pocket of people *so that* everyone has a church in which they feel they will fit in. The Association is responsible to call its congregations to church planting and, then, to assist and resource them to do so.

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In verse 18, how biblically literate were the Gentiles?*
- *What does verse 19 teach us about our need for God’s power in church planting?*
- *Verse 19: If you have a Bible with maps or a Bible dictionary, find Illyricum.*
- *In verse 20, where did Paul want to preach the gospel?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father of all mercies, when You choose to bring glory to Yourself, You do so through Your church. Please give our congregation a vision for church planting. Show us ways in which we can be a part in our church. Please lead our Association in church planting.

<sup>5</sup> Carol Pipes, “Why Every Church Must Plant,” OnMission Magazine, North American Mission Board, Summer 2011, Page 11-13

## *The Minister Support System*

The Minister Support System is, perhaps, the best known system in most associations. And, for good reason. Pastors engage in highly stressful work. A pastor is under the burden of meeting constant deadlines. He deals with sorrowing families and tries to encourage those who are suffering. Emotional energy is constantly pouring out of him. And this is in a strong, healthy church! Then, there are those who serve unhealthy churches.

Some churches have a reputation of ‘chewing up’ pastors. Their histories are replete with accounts of forced terminations or campaigns that eventually create a climate in which the pastor simply has no other choice than to leave.

Some churches are paralyzed by family cartels, bullies or gatekeepers who control the church under the guise of protecting or preserving it from compromise or the latest idea from the new pastor.<sup>1</sup>

Some church member has been a constant, vocal, negative critic of the pastor. So, the pastor goes to a deacon in the church and the deacon tells him, “Pastor, let’s let sleeping dogs lie.” The pastor is thinking, “That isn’t a sleeping dog. That’s a biting dog; he just isn’t biting you!”

Different pastors have different strengths and weaknesses. There are some parts of the ministry at which a pastor will *excel*, some things at which he does a *passable* job, and there are some roles you can’t make him fill. Those weaknesses can be balanced by church staff and with volunteers.

If you are a pastor, set the pace in being non-defensive! Don’t be afraid of an opportunity to grow. If you are a church member, consider how many people your church has in attendance on a typical Sunday. That’s how many people think they are the pastor’s immediate supervisor. And all of them have their own set of expectations of what a pastor should do – and their lists aren’t all the same.

Pastors aren’t super-human. They can have problems. They struggle with emotional issues and pass through stormy periods in their marriages. Their children can rebel. Perhaps a member of his family needs counseling; where does he go for that? Pastors can become discouraged, angry, or bitter. Sometimes, they need someone to talk to. Sometimes, they need an objective voice of counsel. Sometimes, they need someone to pick them up.

<sup>1</sup> Associational Church Replanting Guide, NAMB, page 7



Sometimes, they need someone to help them straighten up.

Perhaps, we would do well to remember that the enemy shoots at the officers. So if a pastor must leave a church because he messed up in some way — though not in some permanently disqualifying way — should we kick him to the curb? Or would people who love the Lord want to create a process for him to learn from his experiences, to grow, and to serve again?

Pastors need to spend time with other pastors. “Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17, NASB). That’s why many associations have a weekly or monthly pastors conference.

Additionally, most associations offer counseling from a professional psychologist. They subsidize or cover the cost of the payments and have solid Christian counselors to whom they refer. Sometimes, it’s the minister who needs this service; sometimes, it’s a member of his family.

Our ministers are an important asset. We have invested much in their training and they have invested their lives in this career calling. We should do all we can to help our pastors and ministerial staff members maintain their spiritual health and to provide them a safe place to get help during the storms of life.

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In verse 17, Paul sent for the elders of the church at Ephesus. In the days before church buildings, Christians gathered in a network of house churches in their city. These elders were probably the leaders of the house churches. Notice how they are spoken of as a single group.*
- *In verse 28, what two other descriptions are applied to the roles these men fill besides that of elder?*
- *In verses 29-31, why are the elders urged to remain alert?*
- *In verses 36-38, what impressions do you get concerning the fellowship among these pastors? Do they seem to be a single unit or a collection of individuals?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, I pray today for the pastor of our church — and for the other pastors in the Association. Theirs’ is a sacred work with draining duties. Bless them as they prepare and preach Your Word. Please guide them as they shepherd souls. Please renew their strength, protect their walk, and bless their homes.

## *Shared Ministries System*

The main role of the Association is to equip, resource, and assist its member churches in fulfilling their God-given missions. It is not to do the churches' jobs for them. However, particularly in rural associations, there are times when the member churches need to partner together to successfully implement a ministry none of its churches could do alone. This is what is meant by a *Shared Ministry System* — doing a ministry together we could not do apart.

If an individual church can carry out a ministry by themselves, then they should. The Association is not a church. Churches should do the work of the church. However, there may be a needed ministry which no congregation in the Association has the resources (money, people, or location) to perform. That's where the Association could come in. Examples of such ministries might include:

- Benevolence ministries, such as a clothes closet
- A Crisis Pregnancy center
- Counseling center
- Associational Disaster Relief Team
- Evangelistic emphases conducted together or with a shared strategy
- A shared prayer strategy

The ministries in which the member churches of an Association may be involved will vary with the needs of the community. Sometimes a need is already being met well by another group.

Shared ministries may divide the labor, but they can also divide the effectiveness of a ministry. To which church will you invite your clients? Who will feel responsible to follow up with them?

It's important that these ministries not become the tail that wags the dog. Again, the main role of the Association is to equip, resource, and assist its member churches in fulfilling their God-given missions. If you don't have the leadership coming from the member churches to carry out such a ministry on a day-to-day basis, then the Associational Missionary will end up being consumed with taking care of those issues, and become distracted from his central calling. You will recall how, in Acts 6, the Apostles refused to al-



low this to happen.

The Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, 'It would not be right for us to give up preaching the word of God to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' (Acts 6:2-4)

The work of evangelism and disciple-making is hard — harder than it's ever been. It can be a temptation to deemphasize that mission and substitute one of these shared ministries in its place.

So, *if you can*, let a local church conduct the ministry.

On the other hand, Baptists often ask, "What does the Association do?" The key word in the question is "do." And for us to rally the support of younger ministers, the answer must contain a verb. There must be a "sidewalk answer" in which people say something like, "The Association? Oh, they're the ones who do the *such and such ministry!*"

It's not enough for the Association to be a funnel to distribute monies to other worthy ministries (kind of like a Christian version of United Way). If that is what we are, then we can expect them to eliminate the middle-man and support their ministries of choice directly. While it is good to partner with other ministries, an association needs to do ministry in which they want partner *with us!*

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *In 2 Corinthians 8-9, we see a partnership created to send a benevolence offering to assist the believers in the mother-church in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church had thousands of members. Could an individual church have done this?*
- *In verse 4, how interested were the Macedonians to participate in the offering?*
- *In verses 18-22, what precaution was taken to ensure the offering was handled honestly?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, I pray today for the Christian ministries in our county which are on the front lines helping people who are hurting, in need, and sometimes with complicated issues. Please empower them to help people at the deepest levels and to see changed lives.



## *Interim Support System*

Pastors engage in ministry as general practitioners. Yet each pastor has a gift-mix and a collection of skills and experiences in meeting specific needs. There are specific areas of the work in which each excels. This combination of strengths makes each one who he is. Below is a list of things pastors do:

- Preach and Teach the Word (and study to prepare)
- Pastoral Care: Visit hospitals, homebound
- Decision counseling
- Personal evangelism (also evangelistic preaching)
- Small group discipleship
- Individual mentoring / shepherding souls
- Personal and family counseling (non-clinical counseling)
- Casting vision
- Ministry event & project management
- Lead/manage staff (but without input on salaries or authority to fire)
- Promotion within church
- Advertising in media for the community
- Serve as “the guy who knows the bylaws” and how we carry out the various processes in the church (e.g. deacon selection); to assist deacons, teams, and committees with background information on the denomination, procedures, and provide institutional memory.

If a search committee wants a pastor to have A+ skill levels in all of these areas, they are asking the impossible. If a candidate tells you he is A+ in all of these tasks, he’s lying. God doesn’t gift all pastors in all of these ways. And, even if a person were talented enough to excel at all of these skills, there wouldn’t be enough time in the week to do all these things with excellence. Thus, a search committee needs to consider what gift-mix they need in their next pastor for the season in which the church now finds itself.

The failure of some churches to understand that each pastor has a God-given niche in ministry is why so many congregations keep going from one extreme to the other in selecting their pastors. They are in a cycle of over-reacting to over-correct the weakness of the previous pastor.





This is where the Association can be an enormous help. Associations assist search committees in profiling the pastoral skills they currently need. They train search committees how to research potential pastors, to check their backgrounds, and to interview them. So, the first aspect of the *Interim Support System* is the training of search committees.

Sometimes, a church has entered the interim period in a weak and wounded condition. They need help to heal up. They may need to resolve longstanding issues from their past before bringing in a new pastor. The Association can help assess the needs and connect you with people and resources to help in the process.

“Transitional Pastors” (sometimes you will hear the term “intentional interim”) take on a larger role than an “interim pastor” as that title is traditionally understood. He does more than merely fill the pulpit and make a few visits. His work spans a longer period of time than the traditional interim. This process is a combination of recovery, self-discovery, strategic planning, and charting a new course forward. A transitional pastor even assists in finding the next pastor for the church. Your State Convention trains Transitional Pastors and the Association can help you find the right one for your church.

The final aspect of the Interim Support System is the referral service the Association can provide. Baptist associations regularly receive resumes of ministers and seminary graduates seeking a place of service. Associational Missionaries talk to one another and may have information about a potential pastor or staff member. An association is a communication network.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *In verse 23, how did they get their elders?*
- *The Apostles appointed elders and we use search committees, but what, in verse 23, do you see that communicates to you the importance of getting the right pastor?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, I pray for the churches in our Association who are seeking a new pastor or a member of their ministerial staff. Please guide them in their search. Enable them to be humble enough to seek help as needed. Show them the right person, with the right gift-mix, for their church at this time.

## *The Royal Society of Tentmakers*

Let's say it right off: If you are serving bi-vocationally you are in superlative company! The Apostle Paul himself served bi-vocationally.

Tents in his day were mainly made of leather, so Paul was a leather worker. He worked in a trade. Multiple times, Paul spoke of his tentmaking in his letters:

- “We labor, working with our own hands” (1 Corinthians 4:12)
- “I personally did not burden you...” (2 Corinthians 12:13)
- “For you remember our labor and hardship, brothers and sisters. Working night and day so that we would not burden any of you, we preached God’s gospel to you.” (1 Thessalonians 2:9)
- “We were not idle among you; we did not eat anyone’s food free of charge; instead, we labored and toiled, working night and day, so that we would not be a burden to any of you.” (2 Thessalonians 3:8)

Everywhere he went, people needed tents. He could easily relocate from one city to another. This aided him in his evangelistic and church planting efforts around the Mediterranean sea. It was good missionary strategy.

If you are bi-vocational you are not alone! Half of our churches have bi-vocational pastors! In a rural association of, say, forty-something churches, there may be only four or five churches with a fully-funded pastor.

As Paul went to new places — without the Bible, the gospel, or established churches — he couldn’t ask the unconverted to fund their own evangelization. Today, there are bi-vocational pastors who tithe more into the church than they are being paid by the church!

We are currently seeing a movement toward bi-vocational ministry as more churches are embracing it. More and more church planters are engaging in bi-vocational ministry, seeing it as good stewardship and a good strategy. Many church planting strategists see it as the wave of the future.

Bi-vocational pastors bring many strengths to the table. Daily, they are around other people in various professions; they know about the latest business trends. They have a great view in regard to the current shifts in the culture. In the normal course of their work, they have opportunities to



make contact with many different people. They bring a Christian presence into the marketplace.

For churches, it conserves financial resources, allowing them to get “more ministry bang for the buck.” Having two part-time ministerial staff members puts two hands on deck on Wednesday night, for example.

There are many reasons this is a solid strategic move — and with societal change, it is becoming an even better strategy. As we move closer and closer toward the Last Days, we will see more and more pastors serving in bi-vocational ministry. One day, we will all be bi-vocational.

Some bi-vocational ministers serve in hard places. Being bi-vocational provides flexibility of movement; it’s easier to move to another church when one doesn’t have to buy a new house and move his furniture. It also gives him more freedom to say what needs to be said.

While some bi-vocational ministers feel like they don’t quite fit in with the full-time ministers, the truth is they fit in quite well with their church members! Many church members can’t relate to someone who has spent his most of his life preparing for ministry and has been building his library since he was in his teens. But you ought to hear them bubble over when they talk about their bi-vocational pastor — “He’s *in business!*” You have respect and an instant connection.

Bi-vocational pastors are good men, doing a good work. There is great wisdom in a church having bi-vocational ministers and there is great wisdom in serving bi-vocationally.

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *Look on a Bible map in the back of your Bible. Find Rome and find Corinth. Why are Aquila and Priscilla here? What is their religious background? (verse 1)*
- *What does verse 3 tell us that Paul has in common with Aquila and Priscilla?*
- *What does verse 8 say to indicate this bi-vocational approach worked?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, please bless each pastor in our association who serves bi-vocationally. Cause their calendars to fall into place to get everything done. Bless their family time. Empower and bless their work in Your church.

## ***The Ministry of the Association To the Bi-vocational Minister***

Bi-vocational ministers are valuable in God's Kingdom. The Apostle Paul operated a small business to support himself and his ministry. However, though bi-vocational ministry is a great strategy, those who serve in this way can face numerous challenges. These challenges may include:

First and foremost, the lack of time. Bi-vocational pastors are working a fulltime job and then making visits, performing funerals, and preparing sermons in their "off-hours." Any expenditure of time for them is a sacrifice. They are giving up family time or rest in exchange.

Another issue in this regard is the lack of time to think, reflect, strategize, and plan. It can be hard just to catch one's breath.

There may be a lack of resources. Many bi-vocational pastors don't receive a book allowance or convention travel expenses. At church, they don't usually have the financial or human resources larger churches have – whether it's for small group curriculum, guest speakers, or someone to play the piano when the regular pianist is going to be out.

Sometimes, they feel like "second class" ministers around the fulltime pastors. Some of this is due to the fact bi-vocational pastors don't have as many opportunities to bond with the fulltime pastors. Sometimes, it is due to not sharing in certain life experiences, such as attending seminary.

There is often a vicious cycle where the bi-vocational pastor tries being more involved, but feels like a stranger at the meeting. Discouraged, he cuts himself off.

Bi-vocational ministers may sometimes feel they're out of the communication loop. Some of this can be attributed to the busy-ness that comes with serving bi-vocationally. One just can't read every e-mail when at work. Another factor is the lack of *informal* communication, not having opportunities to chat with other pastors.

Sometimes the congregation he serves feels their church is small and insignificant. They may be under the impression that the bigger churches think they were better than the smaller churches, even if this is not really the case. Often, this is merely an inward perception.



Weekday meetings are not possible for most bi-vocational pastors to attend. So, some associations have a monthly gathering on Saturdays. Some associations may want to consider brief “Soup and Seminar” monthly gatherings with a simple supper and a helpful presentation. Even maybe, give them a good book on the subject of the session.

We should never waste the time of these busy people. They don’t have time to waste. If we ask them to come out on a “school night,” the presentation they hear should be fresh, clearly presented, and something they can use in their churches. On the other hand, “the book” on bi-vocational ministers is, when you seek their input on what they would find helpful and the best time to have it — and do everything they suggest — they still won’t show up! Bi-vocational ministers, you need to meet them part way.

Some associations may wish to consider providing a quality supply preacher and assistance to spend a “weekend away” with his wife.

The average commute time in the United States is 25 minutes. Many people have 50 minutes a day, five days per week, to listen to podcasts or audio sermons. It would be unwise to take a complete pass on this opportunity.

Burnout is something bi-vocational ministers must be careful to avoid. Resourcing these leaders to delegate parts of the ministry can help.<sup>1</sup> Equipping the saints for the work of ministry is part of the job (Ephesians 4:12).

These pastors and ministerial staff members need to know we are praying for them... that we care about them... that they are considered a valuable part of our Association’s strategy to evangelize and church our area. Text messages and quick phone calls can be a great blessing to them!

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In verse 1, who are we not to please?*
- *In verse 5, what is the blessing Paul speaks over the Romans?*
- *What does the principle in verse 7 apply to the relations between bi-vocational ministers and fully-funded ministers?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father of all mercies, I lift up to You again today the bi-vocational pastors in our association. Guide us as an association, in specific ways, to be a blessing to them. Please grant us humility as we relate to each other, to neither feel superior nor be self-protective.

<sup>1</sup> Terry Dorsett, *Assisting Small Churches and Bi-vocational Pastors in Kingdom Expansion*, <https://noba.e-quip.net/presentations/3005>

## *What Do You Call Your Leader?*

What do you call the leader of your Association? Different associations have used different titles through the years. Perhaps the oldest title is *Superintendent of Missions*. Another an older term was *Associational Missionary*. For a long time, *Director of Missions* was the standard title. The current title associations are using for their leader is *Associational Missionary Strategist*. Associations with multiple staff members may use the term, *Lead Mission Strategist*. Notice the constant: the word *Missions* or *Missionary*.

What does your association expect your leader to do? Does his title summarize your *actual expectations* of him?

There was a time when this role was perceived by some like that of a “county agent” for farmers. Or a customer service representative for the Sunday School Board (now LifeWay). Some associations have traditionally called a man near retirement to be a “pastor to the pastors.”

It’s important to have a clear answer to this question: Does this person serve the member churches of the Association? Or, is this person serving the community on behalf of the Association? Who is he here for? What happens if the member churches think he is here to assist one group and the Associational Missionary thinks he is here to resource someone else?

Job descriptions and unwritten expectations tell the Missionary Strategist what to do. Are we asking him to do the right things? And where do we get our expectations? Some associations expect their missionary to keep the office running, do a newsletter, help them organize the annual meeting, encourage the pastors, and supply their pulpits when needed. And that’s exactly what they get. A forward-leaning Associational Missionary will have to “sneak in” the missionary parts between meeting the other expectations.

Hugh Townsend explains how this person is not mainly a “pastor to the pastors” — though sometimes he will fill that role. If *all he does* is keep the coffee fresh and wait for a discouraged pastor to come unburden his soul, he’s missing the point. First and foremost, he is a missionary strategist leading missional endeavors.<sup>1</sup>

The Associational Missionary should be the foremost expert on the geographical area his association serves. In collaboration with the pastors, he

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Townsend, “Defining the Association of the Future, part 1” <https://noba.e-quip.net/presenations/2547> Accessed 4/8/2023



should be scanning the area, looking for pockets of unreached people and unseen opportunities for ministry. He should challenge the churches to partnerships to reach new people groups and meet rising needs. As George Garner has written:

The ADOM [Associational Director of Missions], in his finest expression, is a catalyst for spiritual movements rather than organizational success. He must be a vision caster for global mobilization, rather than a keeper of local maintenance. Likewise, he must be an implementer and encourager of eternal matters and discipleship, rather than consumed by temporal administrative tasks. His efforts are most important as an advocate of local church collaborative kingdom strategies rather than a funnel for a multitude of program resources. <sup>2</sup>

Just as each local Baptist church is autonomous, so also is each Baptist Association. “They are stand-alone organizations and are not overseen, supervised, or governed by any state convention or the SBC.”<sup>3</sup> Each Association calls its own Missionary Strategist, writes its own job description for him, and has their own unwritten set of expectations of him. So, what do you want yours to be?

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In verses 6-7, how do we see the Holy Spirit directing the steps of those carrying the gospel to new places?*
- *In verses 9-10, how did God make his plan clear? Does he do that for us?*
- *In verse 13, Paul, Silas, and Barnabas went to Philippi. They found a place they expected would be a place where Jews would pray — which means, there wasn’t a synagogue. What book of the Bible comes from this small beginning?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, thank you for our Associational Missionary. Thank you for his concern for all the churches. Thank you for the times he’s helped churches in trouble. Thank you for how he resources our churches to fill their niche in the community and in Your Kingdom. Please guide him in regard to strategy. Help our churches recognize the ways in which he can be a help.

<sup>2</sup> George W. Garner, *Missional Leadership for the Baptist Association: The Associational Director of Missions/Church Starter Strategist Model Defined*, 2006. <https://georgegarner.com/files/Missional%20Leadership%20for%20the%20Baptist%20Association.pdf> Accessed April 17, 2023

<sup>3</sup> J. D. “Sonny” Tucker, *The vital role of local associations and Associational Missionaries*, *Arkansas Baptist News*, August 24, 2022. <https://arkansasbaptist.org/post/the-vital-role-of-local-associations-and-associational-missionaries/> Accessed April 17, 2023



## ***Are Members Migrating to Larger Churches?***

Many prefer the music at the larger churches. Many are looking for ministries for their children. Many want to be part of something they perceive as exciting. Some small churches feel like a knife fight in a closet; people grow weary of the conflict and move their membership to a church where they don't fight. So, yes, many church members are migrating to larger churches.

*But that's not the whole story!*

Not everyone *wants* to attend a larger church. If your church is smaller, there is a "market" for your church. Play to it! Some people feel more comfortable in a smaller church, as it offers a sense of family and a place of belonging. One is not layered into one's own age group. Instead, everyone is included into an extended family of grandparents and cousins and brothers and sisters. There are more opportunities to serve in a smaller church.

There are numerous factors to consider regarding the size of churches:

Some churches are located in a part of the county with a plateaued or declining population. Modest growth in that community may represent a significant achievement. Such congregations and their pastors are often under-respected.

Some churches may be seeing significant growth, but still aren't reaching their full potential. Located in a fast growing community, they're raking in low-hanging fruit without having to break a sweat working in the vineyard.

Consider family size. There was a time in America when a church could easily grow to 60 with a dozen families. From 1960 to 2021, the average household size decreased from 3.33 to 2.5.<sup>1</sup> We have to reach 25% more households than we did in 1960 to reach the same number of people.

Your church may be impacting more people than you realize. Count the number of different people who attend over a three-month period. The number of times per month the average member attends church continues to decrease, with people considering themselves "faithful members" if they attend even once per month.

Some churches may not want to grow. New people would make the experience of attending church seem different. They may fear the new members would take over the church and assume their leadership positions.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/demo/tables/families/time-series/households/hh6.xls> Accessed: April 17, 2023





When a church declines in attendance, it can be a sign of declining health, similar to when a person with an illness loses weight.

There are clear implications for church planting. Because our small attendance churches cannot continue to decline in size indefinitely – they will eventually disband. We must consider how we will replace the ministry of these churches in their communities.

With the movement toward larger churches, we may not need the same number of churches to evangelize and church our community. However, our county is more diverse than it was twenty years ago; so *we will need more styles of churches*. Church planting will have to be an important part of our strategy.

Though the larger churches have musicians who can hit musical notes we mere mortals cannot reach, in the smaller church it is easier to avoid the temptation of merely watching other people worship. Small churches are in a unique position to take a more participatory approach. For example, having more congregational participation, like the “each one” model found in 1 Corinthians 14:26. Involve members in Scripture readings, in prayers, in giving testimonies (salvation *and* Christian growth testimonies). Train them how to do these things. Additionally, short videos introduce the larger Christian world to your members and add spice to the service.

Size isn’t everything. All churches, large and small, are the beloved bride of Christ. All churches can be healthy. All churches can reach people with the gospel. All churches can engage in significant ministry within their communities. All churches can have *meaningful* worship services. Your church can “punch above your weight class.”

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In this passage does the Lord give every person or church the same resources?*
- *What is the principle seen in verse 10?*
- *Church growth cannot be guaranteed; it can only be deserved. Consider verses 11-12.*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, thank you for the small attendance churches in our association. I pray for them today, that You would guide them in ministry, protect them from divisions and “church bosses.” Please fill their pastors and their members with the Holy Spirit.

## ***Core Values: Local Church Autonomy, Interdependence, & Partnership***

In a Baptist Association, member churches and their leaders share some core values. One might call these “Associational Attitudes.”

The first core value is *Local Church Autonomy*. As we discussed on “Day 7,” this means every church is self-governing under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The congregation owns its own property and calls its own ministers. Even though the Apostle Paul was a “five-star general” of the faith, he said, “*Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy...*” (2 Corinthians 1:24). We stay in our lanes and respect boundaries. Cooperation is voluntary, not mandated.

A second core value is *Interdependence*. I believe there’re ways in which you can be a blessing to me and there’re ways in which I can be a blessing to you. We need each other and relate to each other with mutual respect. Ephesians 4:16 says “[Christ] makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love” (NLT). 1 Corinthians 12:21 says, “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’”

The third core value for today is *Partnership*. This means we work together in specific ministries and mission endeavors for the sake of the Kingdom. The point of partnering is not that we do everything together. The point is we combine forces when needed to reach critical mass.

Stan Albright has said:

Now I really do believe in Southern Baptist life that this aspect is going to become a major priority for associations in the future: Building and understanding partnerships. Partnerships from within the association and partnerships from outside of the association. I’m talking about building camaraderie where churches do things together instead of doing them alone. For so many years in Southern Baptist life, we’ve given the impression that we really don’t work together. We may be all part of the same association, but we don’t do things together. We actually almost see other churches in our association as competitors.<sup>1</sup>

Paul told the Philippians “I thank God... because of your partnership in the

<sup>1</sup> Presentation at Town Hall Meeting, Elmore Baptist Association, February, 2016



gospel from the first day until now” (Philippians 1:3-5).

Associations partner with the State Convention... sometimes other Associations... and often other entities. Churches within the Association can partner with each other.

Imagine a church spreading word through the Association that they are planning a training event for the adults who work with their students and inviting other churches to bring their student teams. Imagine the same approach with deacon training.

Imagine a larger church which sends out two or three mission teams each year... *reserving* a couple of spots on each team for members of smaller attendance churches in the Association.

There are some churches loaded with musicians. They have soloists who have to wait many weeks for their turn to sing. Meanwhile, there are congregations who desperately want to liven up their services; they just don't have the talent. There's an opportunity here for churches to share. Of course, a church's music ministry would have to provide firm guidance as to how often one of their members should be away. Certainly, there are Sundays when we need all hands on deck at home. But what a blessing your church can be with a modicum of generosity!

Imagine the Association facilitating partnerships with our missionaries, church planters... and within the member churches of the Association.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *According to verse 13, how does a person demonstrate that he or she is, indeed, wise?*
- *In verse 14, what are the two indications we have the wrong kind of wisdom?*
- *Why are the qualities in verses 17-18, good attitudes for a Baptist Association? In other words, how does this passage relate to the three core values for today?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, I praise You for the many thousands of variations in the congregational life in Your church and within our denomination. We have been free to be ourselves and to be whom You've gifted us to be. Deliver us from the temptation to make it about us and not Yourself, from making it about our church and not Your cause.

## *Core Values: Humility & Encouraging Community*

I was attending a pastor's conference at a very large church. On the staff of that church was someone with whom I had attended college. He was an upper classman to me and didn't know me well. However, he recognized my face in the stairwell. He asked me to remind him of my name and wanted to know where I was serving. At the time I was serving a church in a challenging context; not the kind of place which makes you well-known. I told him where I was and a little about it. He looked up and said, "Well, the Lord has blessed you then." There was an un-anticipated respect for my ministry in his tone of voice. I replied that indeed, God had blessed me. The place where I then served presented challenges and frustrations, but I was reminded how blessed I really was. That conversation was a blessing to me.

This brings us to the core value of *Humility*. We recognize, in the Kingdom of God, we are part of something bigger than any individual local church. It means the bigger churches respect the smaller churches — because they're part of the bride of Christ. It means the stronger churches, which are doing really well, know there are still things they can learn. We all realize none of us are serving *as effectively as we could be*. It means the smaller churches wouldn't be too proud to accept help from a larger church.

Humility means we all know that anyone at the pastors conference on any given day can be the biggest blessing. The older pastors don't look down on the younger pastors as inexperienced, but rather appreciate that a new generation is rising up. Conversely, the young don't adopt the attitude of being "more contemporary than thou," jumping to the conclusion that the older men are out of touch and ineffective.

Romans 12:3 says, "...I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

Humility, in the context of a Baptist Association, means we realize it's going to take all of us working together to reach our associational area. We don't resent each others' success. We don't engage in intentional sheep-stealing. We don't build our own little kingdoms, being unwilling to partner with a sister church.



There are ways to network with people with whom we have more in common. If you are a church planter, there are networks for church planters. Most churches relate with other churches, more on the basis of size than on the basis of denominational beliefs. It's more comfortable to be around people like ourselves. However, evangelizing your county is not something you can do with an online group or meetings in out of state conferences. This can be done only in the context of an association of churches in a geographical area.

We are engaging in an enormous task. We face an powerful array of challenges. There is the pull of the world with its allure and the pressure it presses on people. We all know firsthand the bent toward sin which dwells within each one of us. When people are joined in community, there will be power struggles, resentments, hurt, and rejection. The devil roams about! The world is an "away game!" For any pastor, staff member, or faithful member in a church, we can encounter extreme discouragement. This brings us to the core value of being an *Encouraging Community*.

Only humble people can be encouraging people. I can't look down on you and bless you at the same time. Nor can I compete with you and bless you.

Barnabas is a great role model in this regard. He was sent to Antioch to verify the work of God among them. We read: "When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith..." (Acts 11:23-24). Encouragers are good people, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *In verse 1, Paul asks if certain things exist. What are those things? Do they exist?*
- *What does he say will make his joy complete (verse 2)?*
- *Verses 3-4 call for an attitude and an approach to relationships. What is the attitude in verse 3? What is the approach to relationships in verse 4?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Heavenly Father, grant us please the humility to accept help and the generosity to give help, that we might fulfill the specific calling You have given each church in our association. Place within our hearts a spirit of encouragement. Place within our fellowship a spirit of holy community.

## ***Core Value: Disciple-Making***

The word “Christian” appears three times in the entire New Testament. The word “disciple” appears 29 times in Acts, 75 times in the Gospel of John, and 72 times in Matthew, including in the Great Commission. Jesus himself commissioned us, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The problem is, says Bill Hull, “The church has tried to get world evangelization without disciple making.”<sup>1</sup>

Now when we talk about discipleship, we’re not describing a class for those church members who show an extra-special interest. When Jesus told us to make disciples of “all nations,” he meant conversions from the world. As the current phrase puts it, our mission is to help irreligious people become deeply devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

In the time of Jesus, as the term was used colloquially, disciples were students of various rabbinic, philosophic or rhetorical schools. This approach to training was found among both Jews and Gentiles. These disciples:

- Traveled with their master
- Listened to the teachings of the master
- Observed the lifestyle of the master
- Assisted the master in his work
- Carried forward the message of the master after he had left the scene

With coming of Holy Spirit and the establishment of the church, discipleship came to have a deeper, more specific meaning. Paul Powell defined a disciple this way: “In the Christian sense then, a disciple is a person who has accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and is seeking to learn from, obey, and follow after him as the Master of his life.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus said we should be “Teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you.” This is where the Christian disciplines come in. These disciplines include:

- Spending time alone with God in Bible study and prayer
- Scripture memory & meditation
- Nurturing Christian fellowship

<sup>1</sup> Bill Hull, *The Disciple-Making Pastor*, ©1988, Fleming H. Revell, page 23

<sup>2</sup> Paul Powell, *Dynamic Discipleship* ©1984, Broadman Press, page 13



- Relying on the Holy Spirit for power and guidance
- Practicing the presence of God

These disciplines enable us to stay plugged in and to draw strength from Jesus. We need to train each believer in them. As the Navigators say, “Tell them why... show them how... get them started... keep them going.”

Discipleship is a relationship with Christ in which every part of life is lived together in fellowship *with* Jesus, is lived *before* Jesus, and is lived *unto* Jesus.

If most of our members can't pray out loud in the group. If they don't know how to study the Bible for themselves. If the closest they can get to witnessing is to invite someone to church. If their idea of fellowship is talking about the last ball game. It's because we haven't equipped them to do more than that.

Disciple-making involves helping others develop their daily communion with Christ, their Christ-like character (fruit-bearing), and their skills in Christian witness and service. It involves the “how to,” but more than that it involves a “heart to.”

As we consider the strategies of our churches and our associations, over and over again, we see the equipping ministries of each. A New Testament church equips its members and a Baptist association equips its churches to equip them.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *Counting Paul, how many “generations” of teachers are found in today's passage?*
- *What is the qualification for being included in this chain?*
- *If the goal to make disciples, and disciple-makers, and disciple-maker makers, why don't we see that happening more frequently in our churches?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Heavenly Father, please make me a disciple-maker. Please raise up in our church more disciple-makers. As Your Word says in the book of Acts, I ask that the gospel would be multiplied in this place.



## ***Core Values: Doctrinal Integrity & Meaningful Membership***

They spring up all the time... new churches in a town full of churches, where some of the existing churches, are quite strong. There isn't a particular need in that town for a new church. All the people groups in this town have a strong church that reaches them. So why a new church here and now? What kind of church is this?

One might have questions. How do we know this church is sound in doctrine? Who is the pastor? Who affirmed his call to the ministry? Does he have training of any kind? Why did they start this church? Was it a split-off from another congregation? Was the pastor young and too impatient to wait for "his own command?" Is it just a bunch of young people who didn't want to go to church with the grown-ups? (They do know what will happen with time?) As we drive by their new building, we wonder these things.

In a similar way, we sometimes hear someone telling about their church. When asked what kind of church it is, they gush, "Oh, we're non-denominational!" Where does this pride in being non-denominational come from? Are they admitting, "We don't play well with others"? Are they saying they have such a powerful, dynamic church they can operate like a one-church denomination? That they can evangelize planet earth all by themselves? Are they saying that churches who work together are second class? Are they saying, "I have no need of thee"?

When Southern Baptists fund a church planter, there is first a rigorous evaluation process of the planter. They call it an "assessment." The joke is, "Bring your lunch." He is questioned about his salvation, his call, his walk with Christ, his doctrinal positions, his ministry skills, and much more. And after he clears the assessment process, he gets a coach.

Similarly, there is an assessment for churches coming into a Baptist association. This is why Baptist Associations have membership committees (what some call a "Petitionary Letters Committee" and other associations call a "Credentials Committee") who sit down with the leaders of a new congregation seeking to join the Association. Representatives of the church and of the Association discuss what each believes and emphasizes. Both parties need know the answer to the questions: "Do they share our beliefs?" and



“Are these people we can work with?” Since we represent each other, we should have clear criteria for meaningful membership in the Association. It is for similar reasons local churches have policies for weddings and use of their buildings.

With the changes in our culture, it has become increasingly important to clarify the process for admission into membership within the Association and the requirements for a church to remain a member in good standing.

The Bible says, “But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). A list of beliefs and practices should also be developed of what will *not* be considered criteria for membership. This could include secondary doctrines which may be debated in some circles, but which should not be considered a test of fellowship — some specific aspects of the doctrine of last things, for example. We don’t divide over these things. However, all should be clearly embrace the biblical doctrines summarized in the Baptist Faith and Message. You will want to know where these lines are before personalities are involved.

As we mentioned on “Day 4,” a church does not join the State Convention or the Southern Baptist Convention; a church joins only the Association. It is more important than ever to have a step by step process for evaluating the faith and practices of churches which are potential members.

Like church membership, a church’s membership in the Association should mean something!

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In today’s passage, the context is the nature of the gospel and whether a person has to live as a Jew in order to be a Christian. The church answered “no” (Acts 15). This would be of particular concern to Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. In verses 1-4, did that “no” stick?*
- *Verse 5 ends “So that the \_\_\_\_\_ would be preserved for you”*
- *In verse 9, did the leaders of the Jerusalem church affirm Paul’s ministry? How?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Heavenly Father, Your Word is truth. The gospel matters. I realize the urgency of getting it right and of working with others who get it right, also. Please help us to represent You well as we work together.

## *Strategic Planning*

Churches think either strategically or selfishly. There's not really much of anything in the middle. Choosing to think selfishly requires no effort. It's not even a conscious choice. We sort of drift there. Once there however, we will fight for it. We will even think our motives are noble and that we are protecting something precious.

Thinking *strategically* is an intentional act of the will. You don't drift into strategic thinking. You strain to get there. Strategic thinking requires courage. It is absolutely ruthless in facing the truth about how well things are going. It spares itself no embarrassment. It doesn't try to save face. Strategic thinkers know it's not about them, but about the mission.

Selfish thinking or strategic thinking — pick one. Just remember that not to decide is to decide.

*Strategic Planning is the process of describing where we are as a church (or an association of churches), discovering our opportunities for ministry and outreach and, then, developing a plan to become the church/association we are supposed to be.*

The Strategic Planning process is arranged in a step-by-step approach, to consider the following seven areas:

### 1. *What Exactly is Our Mission? Why Are We Here?*

Your church or association probably already has a mission statement. Every now and then we need to recheck and make sure the statement has got it right and is worded in a way to which people can relate today.

It's possible for a church or association to be like a football team that thinks, "We run the ball left sometimes. Sometimes we run to the right. Sometimes we pass to the tight end" — without it ever occurring to them the point of the plays they run is to score points and win the game!

When you know the why, you know the what.

### 2. *Where We've Been*

We need to consider how we came to the place where we are. For good or for bad, how did we get here? There was the founding vision. Then, one thing led to another. And it all brought us *here*. This is not an attempt to sit in judgment on past leaders or to open any old wounds, but



historical and descriptive. In this step, we are not yet evaluating. Instead, we are attempting to explain, as objectively as possible, how we came to the present reality.

### 3. *Who We Are*

This is an honest look to see ourselves as we really are. Who are we demographically? How would one describe our culture? How would an objective outsider describe us? On what or on whom are we focused? What is our particular niche in the Kingdom of God?

### 4. *How We're Doing*

Here we complete a SWOT analysis, listing our Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. We try to honestly identify key components and effectiveness in serving the churches of the association.

### 5. *Who's Out There We Need to Reach?*

A careful study of our community and the people in it. Are there people groups or pockets of people under-represented among us?

### 6. *The Church or Association We're Supposed To Be*

Charting a course to more effective ministry & outreach. Parts of the plan may need to be implemented in phases, but you are providing clear picture of where you now are and charting the flight path to get there.

### 7. *Actual Implementation*

You must provide details, deadlines, needed resources, and responsible persons. Until these are provided, it's not a plan, it's only a wish.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *The sons of Issachar understood the times. They understood the season in their history. They understood the need of the hour and the choices of the moment. What do you understand those to be in your church? In your association?*
- *The sons of Issachar recognize the action steps required and were there to take those steps. What is keeping us from recognizing the action steps we need to take?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, I pray You will give Your people in our associational area — our churches, their pastors, and their leaders — an understanding of our time. Cause us to see what Your people ought to do. In this regard, I pray, especially, for our association's planning team.

## *How Not to Do Strategic Planning*

How should we not do strategic planning? The first not-recommended approach is what might be called *Non-Strategic... Strategic Planning*. It works like this:

A church appoints a blue ribbon committee. The committee decides to seek the input of the congregation. They ask members to complete a survey during the first twenty minutes of Sunday School. Church members answer the questions, off the top of their heads, about the needs of the church.

These members have never read a book on church health or attended a single conference on church growth. They are merely pooling their ignorance.

The problems with this approach are, first, a Strategic Plan should be a strategy for fulfilling the mission... the Great Commission... not making a list of demands for more fun and increased creature comforts. They will suggest meeting such “vital needs” as adding a “Bride’s Room” or a place to store the Christmas Tree. Most of the suggestions won’t be remotely related to the mission of the church. Members need wise leadership to think strategically.

The second and more serious problem is that you asked your church members what they wanted without asking God. You’ve read the books of Exodus and Numbers; would it have been a good idea for Moses to survey the Israelites?

You do want to seek your members’ input, but a church or association cannot “survey its way” to a good strategic plan.

A second flawed approach in strategic planning works something like this: A church gets a burden to reach young adults. They pray and seek the Lord’s guidance as to how they might do so. After some time of listening for the voice of God, the Lord gives them a plan. He tells them to do A, B, C, and D. They follow the plan which the Lord gives them and they reach many young adults.

The church down the road sees their success and asks them how they did it. And here’s where the church makes a mistake: They tell them they did A, B, and C. They don’t tell them, “We prayed and got God’s plan.” So the



church down the road tries A, B, and C. It may or may not work. Each church has its own unique niche in the Kingdom and in the community.

You want to learn from other churches, but you cannot photocopy your way to a good strategic plan.

A third not-recommended approach is to present the complete report in a single business meeting for a vote. Thereafter, the report sits on a shelf in the office workroom, gathering dust. A Strategic Plan should be designed for actual implementation — spelling out the details, deadlines, responsible persons, and needed resources. It is serious about getting from where you are to where you are supposed to be.

You need a well-written document, but you cannot print your way to an effective strategic plan.

A fourth defective approach is all too common. Some guy with a big belly and a short tie stands up, puts his thumbs in his belt, and says, “I can tell you right now what this church ought to do!” No praying, no learning, no humility, no process. This person may have a strong voice on the planning team or be someone speaking from the floor. Too often, everyone falls in line. This will *never* get you to the Lord’s plan for his church.

You have to take your influential members into consideration, but one member with a strong voice cannot be allowed to drive your church to *his* plan.

An effective Strategic Planning Plan takes time and learning and hard work... and lots of prayer. Don’t settle for a cheap substitute!

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- Verse 15 is the key verse for today. What did the Israelites fail to do?
- How did the Israelites come to listen to the wrong voice instead of the voice of God? Did they think they were listening to the wrong voice?

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Righteous Father, please enable our church leadership to listen to the voice of Your leading and only to Your voice. Deliver us from the temptation of listening to those whose voices flatter us, but whom are seeking their own goals and not those which are best for the Kingdom and for the church.

## *Picture This Process*

Imagine a Strategic Planning process that looks like this...

The church prays. They wait on the Lord; they don't run ahead of Him. They're not trying to "come up" with a ministry plan; it's God's plan they want! So, in their meetings, prayer isn't a formality the team quickly gets out of the way so they can get to the "important stuff." Each session includes a "season of prayer." Team members do the same in their personal devotions. They ask God for His guidance... and listen for it.

Picture the team studying the founding, history, culture, and the unique niche of their church or association. They have listening sessions to learn forgotten parts of their history and to clarify the story. Newer members are helped to understand who we are and what we are about. Adjustment to methodology are made in ways that might just take us back to our founding vision.

Imagine everyone thinking biblically. This is God's work and it must be done in God's way. The Bible reveals the nature and mission of the church. The goal is not to do what other churches or associations around us are doing, but to do what the Bible says we should do.

Picture the planning team doing their homework, learning all they can — reading books, listening to podcasts, and watching training videos. They bring in state missionaries, Christian leaders, and consultants to teach them about particular aspects of the work. Everyone has an opinion; they want informed opinions. The team understands that our most anointed service will be on the cutting edges of our new spiritual growth. The team then shares with the full body what they learned. Perhaps they invite one of the consultants to share with the whole group. Now, everyone is learning and understanding.

See the team recommending a change and its immediate implementation without waiting to present their full report. The church gets a quick win — as W.I.N. can stand for "What's Important Now."

Imagine the planning team, not issuing one big report at the end of the process, a document dump. Instead, they make multiple presentations as they go along. They educate and inform in bite-sized pieces. This gives members time to digest new ideas and approaches. Also, this helps the





planning team gauge the mind of the congregation.

Picture the team with a strong facilitator, who keeps things on track. He helps the team working at a pace that is neither exhaustingly fast nor so slow it seems nothing will ever get done. Someone who makes sure every voice is heard.

Imagine a process in which the congregation understands the reasons and goals and methods... and buys in.

Picture a process with an *implementation plan* with *assigned persons* as part of the report, so the church is ready to hit the ground running.

Imagine having a way to measure actual results to know if the plan is working or needs adjusting. And how would one measure success of the plan in an association? Four key indicators of “Kingdom impact” include:

- Are the churches reaching people? ...Measured by baptisms
- Are the churches keeping people? Measured by church attendance.
- 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 outside the congregation. This includes mission endeavors, partnering with other congregations for church planting, and possibly global partnerships. <sup>1</sup>

The metrics aren't goals in and of themselves, but they tell the story.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *Today's readings come from the book of Proverbs. Each reference speaks to the planning process. Which of these seven verses spoke to you most clearly?*
- *Which of these seven verse would you list as the most important keys at this time for your church or association in the planning process?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Heavenly Father, please lead our team as they observe and evaluate, as they learn and share with us, as they plan and recommend. Help us to see it, and get it, and see Your hand in it — and to buy in.

<sup>1</sup> Associational Design for the Future: Position Paper, Associational Initiatives Team, North American Mission Board, June 24, 2005

## *Vision is Seeing the Lost We Are Supposed to Reach*

We can be sure of one thing: When people visit our church, they are looking for people like themselves! Generally speaking – and with some wonderful exceptions – a church will have its greatest evangelistic impact among people with whom they have the most in common.

Meet Bob. He's a really a great guy. Meet Robert. He, too, is a nice person. Bob and Robert are both good at what they do for a living and are respected by their co-workers. They each have a great marriage and both have a good sense of humor. But in many ways, they are very different people.

When Bob thinks about stock prices, he's thinking cattle; when Robert thinks about the stock market, he's thinking Dow Jones

Before Sunday School, Bob talks about his vegetable garden; Robert talks about his golf game.

While driving, Bob listens to Country & Western; Robert listens to National Public Radio.

Bob drives a pick-up; Robert drives a Mercedes.

Bob graduated from the local high school; Robert holds an MBA from a prestigious university out of state.

The differences in these two men presents challenges to the leadership of the church they attend.

What will they talk about before Sunday School? Robert's golf game or Bob's garden?

What kind of music will the church sing? Bob loves Southern Gospel, but will Robert?

If the pastor preaches on "Developing a Christian World View," Robert will get a lot out of it, but will Bob?

It's been said that... *Folks like us make a church like ours – and a church like ours can reach folks like us.* As we define who feels the most comfortable with us, we will discover that it represents a *spectrum of people.*

A church can *widen their spectrum of appeal* by creating new classes (Life



Groups, Bible Studies) designed to reach into new pockets of people. That is, if our classes are willing to release a few of their members go to help start a new class. *It takes all kinds of classes to reach all kinds of people.*

To be crystal clear, we are *not* speaking here about whom we will *exclude*. If someone feels at home here, they have found their church home... we want them and they are part of the family!

Nor are we talking about race. People of the same race aren't all alike. It's not about skin pigmentation. Life experiences, education, occupations, church background (or the lack of one), personality, and many other factors — all taken together — cause a person to look for certain things in a church. People simply feel more comfortable getting started in church when there are other people like them.

Churches should scan their communities to see who's out there. They should read the demographic reports provided by the State Convention to see the current population trends. This will enable a church to discover their opportunities, as well as their limitations. They can use this information to develop a realistic estimate of their church's growth potential. In turn, that will enable them to make plans to reach that potential.

In verse 35 of today's reading, we have Jesus' command: "Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest."

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *In verse 35, why does Jesus tell his disciples to lift up their eyes?*
- *Verse 36: Many times, we think a new outreach project won't work before we even try it. What did Jesus say about the harvest?*
- *Verse 37-38: What did Jesus say about working together in regard to the harvest?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, I realize there are people with no one in their lives who will tell them about Jesus. I know also You already have scheduled for me divine appointments to share Christ. Please open my eyes to see the opportunities. Open our eyes as a church to see unreached pockets of people. Please guide our church in starting new classes to reach new people.

## ***Vision is Seeing the Lost Our Church Can't Reach***

Invisible people. We drive past them in our cars and trucks. We shop with them at the grocery store. We sit with them in the waiting room at the doctor's office. Some of them may live close to us as our neighbors. Do you see the invisible people? Sometimes, when we discuss those whom our church can reach, we didn't see any people. Of course, *we do see them*, but they may look different than us or dress differently from us or speak another language, or be from another generation. So it doesn't register with us that these are people we could reach. They might as well be invisible.

Starting new Sunday School classes (or Life Groups) will work if there are no language barriers and everyone can agree on the style of worship. However, sometimes the most effective way to reach a new people group is to start a new church designed to reach them. It takes all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people!

Revelation 5:9 provides a sneak preview of Heaven and gives us this reason for praise: "You redeemed people for God by Your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation."

Think about the ways people can be different:

- Sometimes we speak different languages
- There are different racial backgrounds
- There are differences in culture
- We may work in very different professions
- We may have different educational backgrounds
- We may be different socio-economically
- There are differences in the generations
- We may have different hobbies
- We may come from homes with very different customs and values

Sometimes, the differences are small and can be bridged. Sometimes, they can't. Sometimes, our church can find ways to reach people from that group and sometimes we can't.



So what do we do when the differences can't be bridged? We start a new church to reach them!

I can hear some saying now: "But our church can't sponsor a new church all by ourselves!" Most churches couldn't. That's why we have an association of churches who partner together.

We are responsible to reach all the people on our church field — every single one of them. Either, our church should be reaching out to them, or we should partner with a sister church who can do a more effective job of reaching them, or we should partner with other churches in our association to start a new church to reach them.

Likewise, the Association is responsible to help churches see the invisible people on their church fields. The Association assists churches in forming a strategy to reach into new pockets of people. The Association helps equip and resource the planting of churches in our area, so every significant ethnic population and each pocket of people is represented.

### ***Thinking About Today's Passage:***

- *In verse 27, how do Jesus' disciples react to Jesus' conversation with the woman at the well.?*
- *As the disciples would have seen it, what were the "strikes" she had against her?*
- *Did the disciples consider her a "prospect for the church"?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Heavenly Father, please give me the eyes to see people who have been invisible to my notice — people outside my daily orbit. Give our church a heart to extend its ministry beyond us. Help our association to do Guide our association in equipping our member churches to reach into new pockets of people in our area.

## ***Vision is Seeing Needs in the Community Our Church Should Meet***

The Gospels often refer to compassion of Jesus. We see the theme of compassion in his interactions with people who were in need and in the parables he told. Here are examples from some of his personal encounters.

A man with leprosy approached Jesus, “and, on his knees, begged him, ‘If you are willing, you can make me clean.’ *Moved with compassion*, Jesus reached out his hand and touched him. ‘I am willing,’ he told him. ‘Be made clean’” (Mark 1:40-41).

Matthew 9:36 says “When he saw the crowds, *he felt compassion for them*, because they were distressed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd.”

On another occasion, Jesus went to a secluded area to rest and be refreshed. But there were so many needy people! Somebody found him and the crowds followed his boat. “When he went ashore, he saw a large crowd, *had compassion on them, and healed their sick*” (Matthew 14:14).

In Matthew 20, we hear two blind men in Jericho begging Jesus to give them sight. Verse 24 says, “*Moved with compassion*, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they could see, and they followed him.”

In Luke 7:13-15, we read of the time Jesus encountered a funeral procession in the village of Nain. In the procession was the mother of the deceased, a young man and her only child. “*When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her* and said, ‘Don’t weep.’ Then he came up and touched the open coffin, and the pallbearers stopped. And he said, ‘Young man, I tell you, get up!’ The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.”

In these examples we see people who are helpless to help themselves. We see Jesus taking their needs personally, experiencing gut-wrenching compassion. And we see Jesus taking action.

Many times, people are in a jam because of their own irresponsibility. We’ve experienced manipulation from professional beggars. We have to work to avoid becoming jaded and losing our sense of compassion.

You will notice today’s title refers to the needs we *should* meet. There are



certainly more needs in our fallen world than can ever be met. Sometimes, in a manner of speaking, we have to let the dead bury their own dead.

We need to be alert to the voice of God as to which needs we will attempt to alleviate. We need to prayerfully consider which needs, which met, will give us the opportunity to best represent Christ.

I recently heard a free-lance missionary who operates an orphanage in Central America. There were so many starving dogs running around her area she started adopting a few strays at a time, nursing them to health, and finding them homes. I probably would have tried to talk her out of it. But she explained how the children were learning responsibility as they helped take care of the dogs. It put the missionary in contact with animal lovers who wanted to support the “dog ministry.” She wouldn’t have met these people through the orphanage, but has been able to provide a Christian witness to a number of these supporters. The missionary even clarified that she didn’t take on a new dog unless the Lord told her, “That one.” We need to be sensitive to the leading of the Spirit regarding the ministries we take on.

When we see others effectively meeting a need, we should decline to compete with their ministry. There will be plenty of needs left over for us.

We should identify our members with the gifts of mercy and of helps. These persons are uniquely able to help others in meaningful ways.

We need to recognize which needs we can’t meet alone. We can partner with others to meet them. We need to avoid doing so in ways which further enable their irresponsibility. Instead, we should strive to help people become whole. And we need to minister in ways that bear witness to Christ.

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *In verse 15, what did James use as an example of good works?*
- *Verse 20: Without such works, do we have a living faith?*
- *According to the passage are words enough?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Father, please open my eyes to see the people You have placed in my path, whom You have scheduled an appointment for me to bless. Prompt me clearly, so I don’t miss it at the time and then later, regret missing my opportunity. Give us, as a church and as an association eyes to see our opportunities for ministry.



## ***Vision is Seeing Where God is Moving And Moving With Him***

World evangelization is God-centered. It was the Father who initiated the whole project — “For God so loved the world that he gave...” Six times in the New Testament we read the phrase, “The gospel of God.” The gospel has its origin in the heart of God. It was accomplished by the work of God. It has as its goal the glory of God.

It’s been two-thousand years since his earthly ministry, but as Jesus put it in John 5:17, “My Father is still working, and I am working also.” We are “God’s coworkers” (1 Corinthians 3:9), joining the Father in what He is already doing.

How do we do see where God is moving and then move with him?

*Listen for the Father’s Voice.* Someone might say, I’ve never had God speak to me. You can hear the voice of God! Jesus said, his sheep “know his voice” (John 10:4). God will speak to your human spirit, in what believers refer to as a “small still voice” (1 Kings 19:12, KJV). Be careful not to jam out his voice with noise and distractions. Turn off your radio in your car sometimes. Have times when you’re quiet before him. Make the choice to listen. “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 2:14).

*Watch for the Blessing of God.* Jack Taylor used to say, “Find out where God’s moving and move with him.” Henry Blackaby came along soon after, having discovered this biblical principle for himself, and developed *Experiencing God*. How many people have been blessed by that! The subtitle is, “Knowing and Doing the Will of God.” The starting premise is that God is working around us and invites us to join him in what he is doing.

We should be alert to see the movement of God. For example, God may be working in the life of a friend. She may be out of tune with the Lord at this point in her life, right now. Still feeling self-protective, she is guarded in what she says. But she may drop a hint or perhaps let something slip that lets you know she is reconsidering the spiritual possibilities.

There may come series of people into your path, or the life of the church, with the same need. Is there a ministry opportunity here?

We recognize where God is moving in ways similar to how we recognized



our spiritual gifts. And how did you discover your spiritual gift? You felt this deep love for the Lord and got busy serving him. You saw needs. You sensed promptings of the Spirit. Somehow it worked. And fellow-believers affirmed it, saying “You must have the gift of...” It’s kind of like that.

*Do What God Tells You.* Moving with God is not passive. God isn’t going to lower puppet strings from Heaven and *make* you do his will. It is a matter of active obedience. Nor is the Lord likely to tell you to do anything complicated. The leprous Naaman was told to dip himself in the Jordan River seven times (2 Kings 5). It didn’t make sense to him. His servants had to reason with him. But when Naaman obeyed, it worked; he was healed.

*Be Faithful.* Roy Fish used to have a sermon entitled, “Are you willing to be number four?” He described a study that found the average Christian had come to Christ after their seventh gospel conversation. Of course, we all enjoy being the ones to reap. Those are exciting times when we have a large number to baptize. But that’s when we’re number seven. The question is, are we willing to be number four?

We don’t always get to be the “home run hitter.” Sometimes another church gets to be number seven... but God will see your faithfulness. He knows who was number four. “God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you demonstrated for his name by serving the saints...” (Hebrews 6:10). Look for the hand of God, be faithful and obey, and let God take care of the rest.

### ***Thinking About Today’s Passage:***

- *According to verse 17, who is still working?*
- *When the Son took on humanity, he lived on earth according to the same rules by which we are supposed to live. As the perfect God-Man, he lived in continuous fellowship with the Father, in total reliance upon the Father, and in complete obedience to the Father. How do we see this in verse 19?*
- *Verses 19-20, 30: How did Jesus know what to teach and which miracles to perform?*

### ***Prayer Guidance:***

Wise Father, please show me, more and more, how to see what You’re doing. Empower me to obey. Please show our church... our association... what You are doing that we obediently join You.

