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# SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONFERENCE OF ASSOCIATIONAL LEADERS (SBCAL)

## Study Team Report

A fresh look at the time-honored work of associations within SBC life

Presented to the SBCAL Annual Conference on June 10, 2018



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# INTRODUCTION

## *The Study*

During the June 2017 meeting, the SBCAL commissioned a Study Team to meet, pray, research and engage in meaningful dialog around the language describing the title and the role of those serving as leaders within local associations. While there are many perspectives on this topic, all can agree that many changes over the past few decades have impacted the function and focus of the local Baptist association. The commission signaled it was time for a fresh look at associational leadership.

We, the SBCAL Study Team, contend that local churches partnering together for greater missions impact is a fundamental element within the SBC. If the SBC wishes to have strong collaboration among churches at the regional, state, national and international levels, it must be based upon strong local church partnerships. Southern Baptists cannot hope to perpetuate a system around the world if we are not practicing it among our neighboring SBC churches in our own local community. Therefore, it became significant for the purpose of this study to identify where and how local associations were functioning in a healthy and effective manner. Throughout the process of this study our goal was to honor the past while making suggestions to help us prepare for the future of associational leadership.

Identifying the limitations of a study is a crucial initial step toward determining its scope. To that end, this study is **not**:

- An attempt to recommend something new for the sake of being new. New nomenclature without addressing the current way Baptist associations are effectively functioning would not be beneficial.
- An evaluation of the general perception of associations. This study seeks to understand what is happening in particularly effective associations.
- A veiled agenda of a particular group or agency within the SBC. The primary audience for the study is the SBCAL membership who commissioned the work.
- An effort to force current leaders or associations to “adopt” or conform to a national standard. The best way to get Baptists to not do something is to “recommend” that they do it. The report will present suggestions for those interested in considering possible paths forward to even greater effectiveness.

## *The Process*

The study had many steps but could be categorized into the following stages:

- 1** First, the Team reviewed previous books, studies and reports published by SBC authors that addressed this topic. Many times, the way forward is to look at how faithful leaders in our SBC heritage rose to address the needs of their day. The Team wanted to be sure that their voice was heard, and it was.
- 2** The Team conducted an online survey to hear the voice of hundreds of leaders across the SBC on issues related to associational life. The online study also gave the opportunity for pastors to identify what they saw as significant about the work of the local association. Their voice was heard and included in the study.
- 3** The Team then solicited recommendations from a wide variety of SBC leaders at local, state, and national levels regarding associations they deem to be effective. These recommendations were grouped into large associations (over 50 churches) and smaller (or normative) size associations (less than 50 churches). Nearly 90 local associations were identified through this effort, which gave the Team great confidence that there is much good work being done through local associations across the SBC.
- 4** Next, Study Team members personally contacted the recommended local associational leaders, and additionally one pastor within their association, to interview them on what factors contributed to the association's effectiveness in serving the needs of churches.
- 5** Throughout the process, the Team gathered by video conference or in person on five occasions to review the previous literature, discuss progress, and review its findings.
- 6** On March 1st, 2018, the Team met at a hotel near the Atlanta airport for an all-day conversation to sort through our research and establish consensus around specific recommendations and suggestions to include in the study. By the end of the day, the Team identified consistent themes that described common traits identified in associations and associational leaders the Team interviewed, and a descriptor based on those traits.
- 7** After further writing, reviewing and discussion, these recommendations were then compiled into the Report the Team is now presenting to this body.

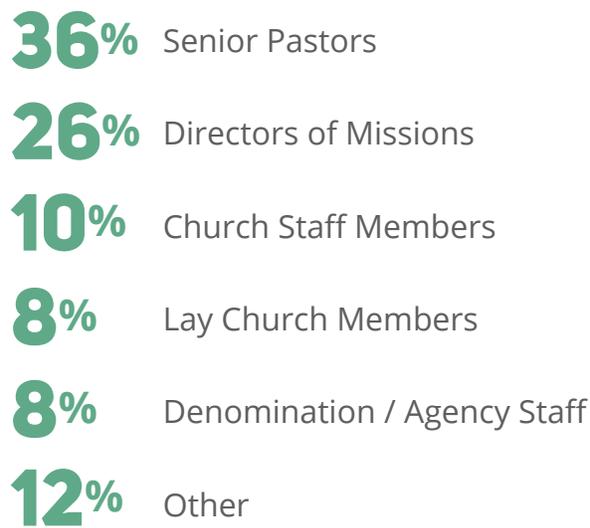
One final thought – each person on the Study Team wishes to underscore that current pastors or associational leaders should not feel pressured to take this as a call for them to drop everything and adopt every suggestion in this report. In fact, it would most likely not be wise to do so. The study provides recommendations or suggestions as guidance for those seeking to move their association into a new direction or revitalize their association. Upholding the value of contextualization, the Team is not seeking for locally derived and effective strategies to be undermined by generic proposals. The Study Team’s commission was to describe to the SBCAL what it saw when it looked across the current landscape of effective local associations in SBC life.

We, the SBCAL Study Team, are grateful for the trust the SBCAL placed in us to pursue this study. We pray that with God’s grace, it will be helpful to anyone considering how to better serve local Baptist churches toward greater collaboration in missions, evangelism, disciple-making and Kingdom impact.

# RESEARCH

## *Survey Respondents*

Building on previous survey work (Lowe, 2017), the Study Team launched an online survey to discover current information about how churches perceive and utilize their associations. Included in this survey were questions about desired qualifications and titles for associational leaders, motivations for contributing to associational work, and other issues within associational life. There were 434 total responses from a range of geographic settings in a total of 36 states. The respondents came from a variety of categories, as follows:



Among the many contextual factors that make associational work distinctive, the survey results highlighted four: geographic setting, population of the area being served, age of the survey respondent, and the respondent's church size.

A range of states and settings were represented in the survey results. It was found that 71% of all church leaders described their setting as either rural or small town, roughly aligning with the 76% of associational leaders that answered the same descriptions for their settings. For the purposes of this report moving forward, settings over 250,000 will be considered a larger population.

More than half (56%) of all respondents were over the age of 50. However 42% of Senior Pastor respondents were over the age of 50, while 90% of associational leader respondents were over the age of 50.

Reflecting a reality within SBC life, 80% of the pastors that responded serve churches with less than 250 in worship.

## Survey Results

The research yielded a rich and complex trove of information deserving further study. After gathering the quantitative results of the online survey, live interviews were scheduled with peer and state convention recommended associational leaders across a variety of contexts. The results of those interviews were collected and analyzed alongside the quantitative results.

Summarizing the key findings of the research, the Study Team offers the following takeaways:

- 80% of church leaders perceive their association to be a strategic partner with local churches in the Great Commission.
- Associations considered effective by their peers and state convention leaders are best known for
  - (1) Leadership Development and Training
  - (2) Community Impact Initiatives. Effective associations in urban settings are best known for Church Planting.
- Ministry to pastors is perceived to be a very important component of associational work.
- Associational expectations can sometimes differ between associations located in larger populations and associations located in smaller populations.
- There is a desire for associations to increase their church revitalization efforts.
- Missions mobilization efforts are still needed for most associations (especially for associations located in smaller populations).

# OUTCOMES

## *Associational Leader Qualifications*

The Study Team took the opportunity afforded by the research to interview pastors and church leaders about what they looked for in potential associational leaders. The majority of all respondents prefer associational leaders have a Master's degree. Those respondents over 60 years of age stated that they preferred associational leaders have more than ten years experience as a senior pastor, while those under 60 said that senior pastor experience was not required.

All respondents listed "Missions" as a top priority for associational leaders; however, those in larger contexts defined "Missions" more specifically as "Church Planting." The Team interpreted this finding to mean that while larger associations tend to prefer church planting as a focus of their strategy, respondents place a high expectation that their local association be a "go-to" partner for helping churches engage lostness within their local mission field.

A second common theme among the interviews was the focus on helping with church revitalization and church replanting. Since the Baptist association is the denominational missions entity closest to the local church, there is a significant opportunity to walk with churches who are struggling to provide coaching, training, and encouragement to pastors and leaders within these churches.

Another noteworthy finding was that the function of helping churches in pulpit supply, interim pastorates, and pastor search team assistance was lowest across the board. After much discussion, the Team agreed that due to the critical nature of this need, associations are encouraged to keep this service as a priority, especially in places where the state convention or other denominational partners are not offering this assistance to churches.

## *Associational Leader Proficiencies*

There is no shortage of data illuminating the reality that any collective effort requires leadership. It is the contention of this Study Team that associational leadership is a unique brand of leadership, requiring elements from several formal and informal leadership disciplines. Past leadership training offered to associational leaders deemed to be effective by their peers bears this testimony, as does the current research.

Specific questions on the survey and live interviews greatly informed the following section. When asked about qualities associational leaders should possess, the most highly rated response was "Spiritually

Mature and Growing in Christ.” However, respondents over the age of 60 preferred “Good Listener” as their second highest rated quality, but all other groups preferred “Good Leader” as their second highest quality.

When asked about strategic competencies, respondents, as a whole, preferred “Ministering to Pastors and Coaching Pastors” as the most highly rated, but “Developing and Casting Vision” was the most highly rated for Urban/Suburban settings with “Ministering to Pastors and Coaching Pastors,” a close second.

When asked about additional competencies, there was some disagreement among respondent groups based on ministry setting. Overall, respondents preferred the competency “Facilitating Relationships/Partnerships/Networks,” but respondents in smaller populations and Rural/Small Town settings tended to prefer “Missions Mobilization,” while those in larger populations and Urban/Suburban settings do not.

The Study Team therefore sifted through the best of past associational leader training and the current research to reveal what it thought was at the heart of effective associational leadership. The Team was looking for biblical servant leadership traits, professional skills, executive competencies, and strategic capacities. With deference to the tremendous work done by Hugh Townsend, Tom Billings, and others, the Study Team has chosen not to use the word “competencies,” though the meaning is appropriate. This report proposes the use of the term “proficiencies,” and breaks those proficiencies down into three categories: Foundational, Relational, and Strategic.

The following proficiencies are offered with a specific eye toward the future of associational leadership. It is the firm conviction of the Study Team that if associations are going to be effective and relevant in the future, they must be led by people called by God to serve in that role who view associational missions with the conviction that local collaborative work is a place of immense strategic leverage – both for the locale and for the kingdom. These proficiencies are also presented as transferable skills. While context plays a tremendous part in associational life, the following components transcend sociological or demographic parameters, and should be sought after by both full-time and bi-vocational associational leaders.

## 1. Foundational Proficiencies

### a. Called to Associational Leadership

Leading an association is fundamentally different than leading a church or other ministry, but it requires no less a calling to a specific position. Leading a collaborative system requires someone desiring to build coalitions and rely on sometimes diffused leadership systems, rather than employing more directive leadership styles at times.

### b. Person of Character

The Bible is clear - leaders are held to a higher standard; therefore, the heart of associational leaders must be set on Christ in order that their behavior might be above reproach.

### c. Spiritually Mature

It should go without mention that Christian leaders must be followers of Christ. But associational leaders must sometimes serve in emotionally charged environments where spiritual matters can be confused with personal preferences, and it takes considerable discernment and wisdom to assist churches in particularly trying times.

### d. Commitment to Learning

Leading requires learning, and continuing in leadership means continuing to learn. Associational leaders should have a lifelong combination of formal and informal education combined with the passion of a seeker and an explorer.

### e. A Leader of Leaders

From the basic functions of a manager to the entrepreneurial skills of non-profit leaders such as donor cultivation and team building, associational leaders need an array of leadership tools at their disposal.

## f. Trustworthy

For associational leaders to be most effective, churches must trust them. There will be times when the church must be vulnerable and expose their weaknesses, but they will not do that if they suspect such vulnerability might be taken advantage of, or that the associational leader is not trustworthy. As patients with a doctor, the patients trust a doctor to do no harm based on trust.

## 2. Relational Proficiencies

### a. Emotionally Intelligent (EQ)

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is the ability to recognize and understand emotions in oneself and in others, the ability to use this awareness to manage one's behavior and relationships, and understand the effect one's emotions have on others.

### b. Active Listener

Associational leaders are sometimes the only safe place available to pastors, but the ability to listen will play out in environments beyond counseling settings. Pastors often have no sounding board for ideas or out-of-the-box strategies, and active listening from associational leaders can often be a welcome source of help.

### c. Supportive Coach

This item was the highest rated competency response from the current research. Coaching can take many forms ranging across the prescriptive to the non-prescriptive spectrum, and associational leaders must be ready to walk alongside their churches in whatever supportive role is best for the needs of the church at the time.

#### d. Authentically Vulnerable

This proficiency is distinctive from trustworthiness in that it speaks to the relatable quality underlying the interactions an associational leader must have with their churches. There is a notable difference between an arrogant surgeon who is precise with a scalpel and a peer counselor who strikes a familial tone as they approach holistic healing, even though health is the end result for both practitioners.

#### e. Vocal Encourager

If a primary role of associational leadership is to foster and inspire collaborative expressions of the Great Commission, those same leaders must encourage churches as they adopt the charge put before them. In different seasons associational leaders will offer that encouragement from the bleachers as a bystander, at other times from the roadside as a coach, and at still other times as a co-laborer running alongside. Encouragement is a key facet of many leadership models, but none where it is more important than associational leadership.

### 3. Strategic Proficiencies

#### a. Vision Caster

Perhaps no skill is as necessary in the current age of associational life as the ability to cast a vision for truly cooperative work. Vision casting can be both motivational and instructive, and in an environment crowded with single-purpose and multi-purpose networks all vying for precious seconds of space to cast vision, it is vital for effective associations.

#### b. Strategist

The power of helping churches imagine a preferable future is greatly diminished if one cannot also help them construct a path towards that preferred future. Relying on a blend of time-tested successful models and new thinking with promise, associational leaders will be called upon to help churches intentionally engage their context.

### c. Consultant

Considered by some a toolbox within a toolbox, consulting is a prescriptive approach of assisting churches using formalized assessments and strategies toward predetermined outcomes where success is based on defined metrics. Given that consulting specialties abound, it is incumbent on the leader within their context to determine the best methods in which to pursue training.

### d. Leadership Multiplier (or Developer)

A key facet of biblical and secular leadership development is to train others, and yet there are few intentional efforts to train up future associational leaders. Associations should not have to bear this burden alone, but until a systemic solution is developed to assist them, local leaders must own the sole responsibility of being a “Paul” to the “Timothy” or “Titus” in their midst.

### e. One with Contextual Understanding

There was a time in SBC life when associational leaders were the undisputed experts on their entire context, not merely the churches within their region. If churches are going to be inspired to a collective expression of the gospel, associational leaders must have the pulse of the community and intentionally devote time to the macro-level view of a context that local church leaders often cannot afford to take. This requires much time be given to conversation with leaders within a variety of domains in their community such as education, public service, first responders and marketplace leaders.

### f. Good Communicator

Several of the proficiencies in this report depend on a leader's ability to communicate clearly and in a compelling fashion. Beyond the end goal of communication, associational leaders will need to be adept at many different methods and platforms of communication to ensure the widest possible coverage of their intended message across generational differences and communicative preferences of their churches.

## *Associational Leader Descriptor/Title*

The research afforded the opportunity to ask all respondents what the ideal title for associational leaders should be. More than 100 unique suggestions were offered as answers alongside the five most popular choices: (1) Associational Missionary (2) Director of Missions (3) Executive Director (4) Associational Director (5) Missional Strategist.

Although Associational Missionary, Director of Missions, and Executive Director were the top choices in the survey, that is probably due to the familiarity of these titles. “Director of Missions” was most popular among Church Leaders/Staff. “Executive Director” was preferred among larger populations and those in Urban/Suburban settings.

Every potential title has advantages and disadvantages. A frequent complaint about “Associational Missionary” is that when the word “missionary” is employed in common usage it refers to someone commissioned to work on behalf of a group – clearly not to the role of someone guiding a coalition of churches doing the work themselves. “Director of Missions” likewise connotes an image of someone with authority over churches, which is simply untrue. “Executive Director” sounds corporate or secular to others.

There was a lively debate within the Study Team as they tried a myriad of options combining words like missional, catalyst, mission, network, church, strategist. The Team also tried to be deferential to those associations with more than one staff member who might need forms of a title we suggest. The Study Team recommends the use of “**Associational Mission Strategist**,” “**AMS**” as an abbreviated version, or just “**Mission Strategist**” to refer to associational leaders in the future. For those with multiple staff in the association office, “**Lead Mission Strategist**” may also be employed. The singular word “mission” within the title conveys the singular focus we have of serving churches to engage with one Great Commission.

## CONCLUSIONS

### *There is a Need for a Professional Development Process*

As stated above, there is no current intentional system for producing future Mission Strategists to serve as associational leaders. As of now, there are no understood qualifications for serving as a leader within an association. Associations are left to determine on their own whom might best lead their association, a job few, if any, in their association has ever even contemplated. Can anyone in SBC life imagine the collective body of churches existing over the centuries without equipping our churches with resources to build effective pastor search committees, or helping them to discern effective pastors, or without seminars speaking into helping develop various church staff positions, or without preparing missionaries and church planters with assessments and professional development regimens? Yet this is the state facing the oldest institution in Baptist life after the churches themselves.

Until now, there has been no recognized set of proficiencies that could be utilized as a basis for associational leader search teams, coaching, assessment, and professional development. It remains an open question as to where the burden will rest and who within the SBC constellation of resources will bear the cost. However, a Professional Development Process to include elements in both formal and informal credentialing for future Associational Mission Strategists is urgently needed. This Report is a step in that direction.

### *There is a Need for Associational Succession Planning*

In addition to the need for professional development, there is a need to prepare for leadership transitions within associations. According to the survey we conducted, 90% of current associational leaders are over the age of 50. We encourage current leaders to engage and mentor emerging leaders who sense a call to associational leadership. Further, we encourage current leadership teams within associations to consider the future of their association now, and develop plans for healthy leadership transitions.

### *There is a Need for the SBCAL To Be a Strong Voice for Associational Missions*

The Team recognizes the significant role that the SBCAL currently fulfills, and encourages the SBCAL to increase its advocacy of the important role of associations and associational leaders and of the strategic mission partnerships they share with state conventions, NAMB, IMB, our seminaries, and the entire SBC family on behalf of the churches we serve. This role includes communicating the need for collaborative local partnerships among churches and the ongoing leadership needs of associations. SBCAL can also serve as an interface for SBC entities to communicate with the large body of associations (over 1100) across our convention.

### *Though Thankful for Associational Relevance, There is a Need for Even Greater Effectiveness*

While stated and implied throughout this Study Team Report, we want to emphasize this final thought: The large majority of pastors and leaders we surveyed see their local association as a strategic partner in accomplishing the Great Commission. The relevance of local associations is not just a thing of the past, but is the current way most SBC churches are partnering with sister churches to engage their local mission field. By God's grace we see a bright future of thriving local associations served by proficient leaders comprised of churches united by their faith and surrendered to Jesus Christ and His mission in the world.

Respectfully submitted

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