Repaving the Road

Mapping the Future of Southern Baptist Associations

UBA is a voluntary missional association of churches practicing basic Baptist beliefs, cooperating together to pursue a common vision of the transformation of our world, and generally located in the greater-Houston metropolitan area.

Our Vision: Healthy reproducing congregations cooperating to transform our communities, Houston, and the world.

Contents

"The passage of the Baby Boomers will mark the end of an era, the end of the membership association as we know it" (Sladek, 2011, para. 8).

"We are slowly dying, but refuse to admit that we are even sick" (Akin, 2009, p. 271).

"If denominations are to continue, it will largely depend on how their existence can be justified in relation to local churches and mission Dei: can they enable the former, promote the latter, and be subject to both?"(Stetzter, 2011, p. 38).

"If associations are going to have a chance to thrive, we must be able to question our community's most orthodox beliefs" (de Cagna, 2012, slide 7).

"If our conventions are not careful to take into account a shift in the landscape, we shall find ourselves inessential after all" (Chapman, 2009, p. 241).

Searching the Internet using the term "future of associations" yields approximately 11,000 entries of which a large number are dire predictions warning that member-supported associations are nearing the end of their existence. Other entries forecast the end of associations unless their leaders institute drastic changes, while some stipulate that the purpose of associations will live on in future, even if associations as they exist now do not. A minority of entries tout the near future as a time of opportunity for associations to recruit the next generation of leaders and thereby thrive for years to come.

The overarching question of this study is, "Are the dire predictions correct?" Should associations be present in the future, what will be their purpose? How will they operate? What services will they provide? Associations were once vibrant places of collaboration, and a road may exist taking associations to a new place of relevancy for generations to come. The purpose of this study is to survey the issues, factors, drivers, and trends

determining the future of Southern Baptist associations in the U.S. and offer some insight about how to intentionally shape future associations into relevant, thriving, vision-casting entities.

Definition of Terms

Baptist: Unless otherwise specified, "Baptist" will refer exclusively to Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) entities such as local churches, associations, state conventions or national bodies (The Association of Religious Data Archives, n.d.). Self-identifying as Southern Baptist does not mean universal and comprehensive support for the SBC or contribution to the Cooperative Program (CP) (Wingfield, 2002).

Cooperative Program (CP): Launched in 1925, the CP is a central fund into which state conventions contribute money from their member churches to support the ministries of the SBC, including the budgets for the International Mission Board (IMB), North American Mission Board (NAMB), and six SBC seminaries. CP funds are also distributed to state conventions, and through them, local associations (What is the Cooperative Program?, 2011).

Director of Missions (DOM): This term will be used in place of all other titles designating the senior---most staff member of the Southern Baptist association such as Associational Missionary (AM), Associational Director of Missions (ADOM) and Executive Director (ED). When necessary to reference the equivalent position in secular associations, Executive Director (ED) will be used.

Messengers: Lay and/or staff leaders of member congregations elected or designated by the congregations to participate in associational meetings, though these people do not necessarily represent the churches themselves or obligate the churches to act in any way (Measures, 2000, p. 4).

Millennials: Persons born in the years 1980---2000 (Rainer & Rainer, 2011), although various starting points occur in the literature ranging from 1982-1985 (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2008; Tapscott, 2009).

Associations in the U.S.

In 1707, Baptist churches in Philadelphia designated their most capable members as messengers to an annual meeting where the group would "consult about such things as were wanting in the churches, and to set them in order" (Gillette, 1851). Following that event, the model of forming local associations of churches proliferated and 125 local associations established themselves before the end of 1814 (Day, 2009). Approximately 1,200 associations exist within the SBC at the time of this writing (The Southern Baptist Convention, 2012).

Outside of the Southern Baptist family, associations constitute a significant block of the U.S. economy. Of the more than 1.9 million U.S.---based organizations recognized in 2009, "90,908 were classified as 501(c)(6) trade or professional associations, and 1,238,201 were classified as 501(c)(3) charities, foundations or religious organizations" (How associations power America, 2011). Associations range in design and constituency and include trade, membership, and professional associations; they provide services to their members such as education, professional development, networking, and in some cases, health insurance. Perhaps not surprisingly, employment within associations is highest in states with significant agriculture and manufacturing sectors, but also in areas with large groups of professionals. California, New York, Illinois, Florida, and Pennsylvania represent the five states with the most association employees. Nearly 10% of the private sector workforce in Washington DC is employed by associations.

It may appear unorthodox that a study concerning the future of Southern Baptist associations would include data from secular associations. There are certainly notable differences between the religious and the secular association, the foremost being that Southern Baptist associations are—at least in theory—collections of like-minded churches with an agreed---upon theology at their core. However, there are a number of commonalities between the two worlds in which associations operate. Throughout the course of this study, it will come to light that the trends and forces determining the future of Southern Baptist associations are very similar to

those impacting secular associations. Furthermore, profound operational and managerial insight among secular associational professionals can be applied to the future of Southern Baptist associations, and it would be unwise to dismiss their strategies simply because they lack a theological foundation. Before proceeding, however, the issue of theology must be addressed.

The Role of Theology in the Future of Associations

Theology is a significant driver in the future of associations. Theological differences are one of several factors that led to the formation of new associations and state conventions within California, Texas, Virginia, and Missouri (Elliot & Warner, 2007). A detailed explanation of every possible theological issue that might cause future schisms within the SBC is not necessary. It is only necessary to acknowledge that some associations will break away from existing associations over matters of theological or social issues, either because the original association took a stance that the new association disagreed with or because the original association failed to take a stand that the new association wanted to address. Therefore, while any number of specific theological, political, or social issues may play a dominant role in shaping the future of associations, the existence of issues versus their absence can also be a driver. For instance, an association's decision to admit member congregations regardless of which *Baptist Faith and Message* they support as opposed to requiring all congregations to support a specific version will have a profound impact on the future of that association. The consequences of decisions such as these shape the future.

In---depth exposition of theology concerning associations is beyond the scope of this study and the capabilities of its author. There are numerous resources available that address the theological foundations of SBC, its distinctive practices, and how theology may shape the future of the denomination and associations (Akin, 2007; Clendenen & Waggoner, 2008; Dockery D. S., 2009, 2011; Garrett, 2009; Humphreys, 2002; Lempke, 2005; Norman, 2005). This study will not attempt to duplicate the work of the field, nor will it select particular theological positions or practices to elevate above others.

Mohler (2009) advocated for "theological triage" (p. 31) to help determine the difference between first, second, and third---order issues, or namely, those issues that distinguish Christian from non-Christian (e.g. denominational differences), those issues keeping Baptists from joining a covenant community with other Christians, and those issues that should not keep Christians from cooperating together even though differences on those issues exist. The fact that theology will play a role in future associations' policies concerning cooperation is merely an extension of Christianity's history. Two foundational assumptions of this study are that associations of the future will place a high priority on people attaining new life in Christ (John 3:16; Rom. 3:21---26, 6:4; 2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 1:22---23, Holman Christian Standard Bible), and that many of the issues that Mohler (2009) would designate as secondary issues, including those that divide Baptists from other Baptists, are irrelevant to determining strategies for effective associations of the future.

The Role of Ecclesiology in the Future of Associations

Dockery (2011) believes that because Evangelical theologians have focused so much attention on issues relating directly to scripture and scriptural interpretation, they have simultaneously failed to give necessary attention to "articulating a theology of the church" (p. 21). The resulting drift of churches within and across their networks, and the loss of understanding regarding how denominations are designed to interact with their churches, prompts Dockery to predict ecclesiology will gain increased attention in the coming decades.

Ecclesiology is at the heart of several discussions impacting the future of the association. How churches organize themselves from a methodology perspective may not affect their membership within associations, but it frequently influences the relationships between the church and their state convention(s) and national entities. State conventions and national entities may support brick-and-mortar institutional church plants over simpler models, such as house churches, many of which do not hire full---time staff, file paperwork to be recognized as a 501(c)(3) non-profit religious

organization, or have a permanent mailing address beyond the pastor's private home. Associations, state conventions, and national entities determine autonomously whether a particular church counts on the membership rolls, as some organizations will count simple church models as churches and others will not, referring to them as Bible studies, home groups, or discipleship groups instead. How the SBC relates to various church models is a significant driver in the future of the SBC, and associations are no different. The topic of varied methodologies will be addressed in other sections, but an additional assumption of this study is that future associations will be faced with how to determine membership status for any interested churches regardless of their ecclesiology. Therefore this study will not directly address or distinguish all of the possible methodologies, choosing instead to note that associations will likely be faced with this dilemma in the future.

The Role of Autonomy in the Future of Associations

Closely associated to the issue of ecclesiology is the Baptist distinctive of local church autonomy. With the creation of the South Carolina Baptist Convention in 1821 and the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, the nature of the association changed. State programs and national agendas obligated the association to two functions: continue relating to their local churches and providing a conduit to the churches from the larger entities (Day, 2009). The intent behind the creation of the larger entities was missional and kingdom-focused. When 55 messengers from 22 churches across Texas gathered in 1848 to form the state convention of Texas, they resolved that "the object shall be missionary and educational, the promotion of harmony of feeling and concert of action in our denomination" (Commander, 1977, p. 17). The new convention promptly started fundraising to support the college that would become Baylor University, chartered in 1845 and founded through the efforts of the first Texas association, now known as the Union Baptist Association located in Houston, Texas (Commander, 1977).

The original framers of the convention never intended to design an institutional hierarchy ranging from churches at the bottom to the Executive

Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention at the top. Southern Baptists have publically proclaimed that each entity, beginning with the local church, is autonomous. Words such as collaboration, fellowship, and cooperation are used to describe the relationships between churches and Baptist entities, but the idea of formal connectionalism "is widely understood as a violation of local church autonomy, it must be rejected as an acceptable polity for Southern Baptists" (Chapman, 2009, p. 159). However, the question remains: is autonomy a practical reality or a theoretical hope?

"In theory, we make the assumption that the affirmation of autonomy has successfully warded off the emergence of hierarchical structures in Southern Baptist life. In practice, however, we must acknowledge the presence of a hierarchical system as a reality and predicament of current Baptist life and polity." (Day, 2009, p. 232). As Day goes on to note, Southern Baptists live with a dual reality: churches are autonomous, but there are other channels in place that are only available to state conventions. Associations wholly funded by their member churches represent the peak of autonomy, while associational executives whose positions are funded by the North American Mission Board (NAM B) often find themselves servants to multiple masters.

Who is the Association?

Before assessing the changes that might be necessary for associations in the future, a brief note explaining the complexity of associational polity seems appropriate. Regardless of the association's size and specific organizational structure, Baptist associations and conventions generally conform to six principles:

1. Members must be equal in rank and privilege.

2. Cooperation is voluntary.

3. All are autonomous and independent.

4. Conventions and associations are advisory and exemplary in nature.

5. Conventions and associations exist to enable churches to carry divinely ordained task more efficiently and expeditiously.

6. Conventions and associations can be dissolved or disbanded by the members (Patterson, 1958, p. 878, as cited in Measures, 2000).

Confronted with these principles, who is the primary customer of the association? If one answers the member churches, the corresponding question becomes, "Who is the church?" Do associations serve pastors, the members of a church, or some combination of both? Furthermore, if associations equip churches to do ministry, can it be said that associations are really serving the people who might benefit from the churches' ministries. Serving the customer of the customer is akin to the "demand-driven association model" (Funk, 2006) in that the final customer of an association can only be indirectly impacted. Therefore if an association is measuring its effectiveness, should it not incorporate its members' efficacy measurements as their own in some way?

However, in a discussion regarding changing the direction of an association itself, who is in charge? "There is no Baptist pontiff in Nashville, Atlanta, Louisville, Winston-Salem, or Fort Worth, or in any state convention office or mission agency headquarters. The heart of the Southern Baptist Convention is in its 50,000 congregations" (Stetzer, 2011, p. 56). The DOM reports to the churches, often represented by a council or leadership team of some kind. Associations whose budgets are funded in any way by state convention or national entities must be good stewards of those relationships to ensure continuing support. Strategic planners commonly suggest that all stakeholders—or their representatives—take part in organizational planning efforts, but the Baptist reality of this suggestion is a complex mix of staff, messengers, and personnel from other Baptist entities (Bryson, 2011). Charging DOMs with the task of leading change is akin to asking them to lead a wide array of constituencies. They must simultaneously cast a vision their churches will endorse through formal permission and active participation, operationalize the vision in the form of a plan their paid and volunteer staff can implement, and align with or influence outside stakeholder agencies enough to maintain support through funding and other forms of support.

The Future of the SBC?

To some, it would seem presumptuous to consider the future of Baptist associations before considering the future of the SBC. While it is not an assumption of this study that Baptist associations require the existence of the SBC to ensure their own survival, it is nonetheless beneficial to present issues relating to the future of the SBC, as there is a significant correlation to some of these issues and the future of associations.

A common approach in forecasting the existence of something is to consider the consequences of inexistence. Junker (Rolfes, Oliveri, McNulty, & Junker, 2010) ascertain the voids that might be present in a world without secular associations: advocacy (mostly in the form of legislative lobbyists); education and certifications; awards and recognitions programs; and networking. Junker goes on to point out that the educational role currently performed by associations might be filled by for-profit companies and universities, as well as informal gatherings of smaller groups. However, formal accreditation and certification of "small subspecialties in larger fields or professions that are too small to offer much profit opportunity might find themselves missing the education their associations formerly provided" (Rolfes et al., 2010, para. 61). An online commentator of Rolfes et al., (2010) remarked that the functions of the association would carry on beyond the existence of associations, leaving a world without associations being merely a world without "associational buildings and hierarchies" (para. 68).
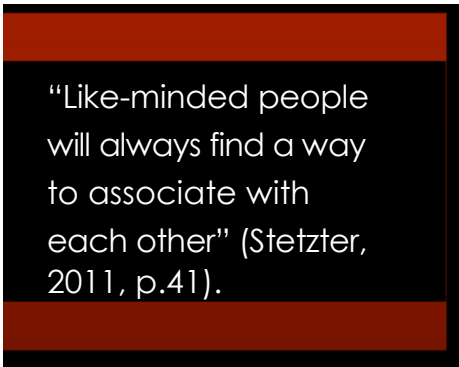
Just as Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation curve demonstrates that innovations have life cycles, advances in social thought and technology have prompted the question of whether large institutions are now antiquated. Gallup has measured American confidence in various institutions since the early 1970s. Americans who felt significantly high degrees of confidence in organized religion fell from 65% in 1979 to 52% in 2009. Though the drop is notable, only 38% had high levels of confidence in public schools and 22% had confidence in banks; other business entities, as well as Congress, ranked even lower. In fact, only the police, small business, and the military were rated higher than organized religion (Saad, 2009). Confidence in particular institutions affects individuals' willingness to be associated with those same

institutions. "People today do not want to be categorized or identified with major institutions, and this invariably affects the religious sector as well" (Lindsay, 2011, p. 63).

The SBC suffers from negative feelings associated with the name "Southern Baptist." Confirming earlier research (Stetzer & Stanley, 2006), respondents to a recent Lifeway Research study (2011) were asked:

> "If you were considering visiting or joining a church, would knowing that the church was Southern Baptist impact your decision positively, negatively or have no impact?" Forty---four percent of Americans indicate that knowing a church is Southern Baptist would negatively impact their decision to visit or join the church, 36 percent say it would have no impact and 10 percent say it would positively impact their decision (para. 9).

The study did not investigate the reasons why such negativity was associated with SBC churches. However, SBC statistics between 2010---2011 confirm the denomination is functionally stagnant in terms of membership (down 0.98%), new churches (up 0.08%), and baptisms (up 0.70%) (Rankinon, 2012). While the entire U.S. only grew 0.9% over the same period (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), all of America's top 15 fastest growing cities grew more than 3% from 2010 ---2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The SBC lost slightly more in total membership (-157,932) than the three cities with the largest numerical increase gained in population (147,645), and the loss of SBC worship attenders (-40,333) is only slightly different than the numerical gain for Houston alone (45,716) (Rankinon, 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

One cannot look at declining numbers alone and assume that denominations have no future. Stetzer (2011) looks to the relational nature of denominations as reasons to think that denominations, or some form of them, will exist in the future. Wuthnow (1988) emphasized the emergence of networks, parachurch groups, and transdenominational movements as the most significant change to Christianity since the Reformation, and he did so before the contemporary technological advancements and progression of decentralized organizational thinking which enabled even more networks

"Like-minded people will always find a way to associate with each other" (Stetzter, 2011, p.41).

Lindsay (2011) adds that institutions have inherent accountability systems due to the membership protecting and self-policing the community, providing "vital buffers against our worst instincts" (p. 71). Lindsay also argues that institutions provide "convening power" or the ability to network people, and that they provide "institutional gravitas" (p. 73) to open doors and enable organizations to navigate and operate more effectively in a highly complex world.

Perhaps more than at any point in their history, denominations must make an argument to justify their existence. Networking, a sense of stability, and an orthodox community are not enough reasons to justify the immense bureaucracy that is the SBC. However, that same bureaucracy can be a strength over less robust networks. Denominations, not networks or individual churches, are responsible for the majority of world missions and church planting (Stetzer, 2011). Provided that denominations maintain a clear sense of outward-focused priorities and operate with the goal of helping churches accomplish the Great Commission, the *missio Dei* remains the standard by which effectiveness is measured. "Until we are assured of the role of denominations within the framework of God's mission, we should assume them to flexible, malleable, and possibly even temporary" (Stetzter, 2011, p. 38).

Denominations cannot hide from the declining attendance numbers and the challenge of collaborating with future generations. The external pressures motivating denominations to clarify and operate according to their stated values may exactly what is needed to begin a change process: a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996).

> Now is the time for leaders of all conventions to concentrate upon priorities of their organization's very existence and determine that more shall be done for less. To fail to do so will bring the disadvantages of smaller budgets and reduced ministries. Now is the time to maximize our resources by creating leaner organizations and eliminating wasteful expenditures for failing and static ministries and programs. (Chapman, 2009, p. 173)

Chapman (2009) suggests that the time is right for considerable change within the SBC by asking difficult questions and doubting traditionally held assumptions. Day (2009) alludes to the need for more streamlined organizations and to the enormous cost involved in maintaining subsidiary institutions as reasons that state conventions are ending long---time partnership or ownership of camps, colleges, hospitals, student centers, and missionary centers. In the not-too-distant past, conversations about whether to continue subsidiary ministries may have revolved around the issue of available funds, prompting a theological response and encouraging people to maintain an abundance mentality. Contemporary discussions are more likely concerned with purpose, and whether the ownership of such organizations distracts from the entity's primary mission or whether subsidiary funds are not better spent in the service of more primary goals. Regardless of the reason, the end result is a streamlined structure supporting an outward, missional focus, which prevents the organization from turning inward and inadvertently elevating self-preservation to the position of highest priority (Stetzer, 2011).

The structure of the SBC prompts additional questions beyond the size of the bureaucracy. As an introduction to those questions, some background statistics might prove useful. The majority of SBC churches run less than 200 in attendance, but the majority of members attend larger churches (Rainer, 2012), even though churches having more than 1,000 in attendance constitute about 1.5% of all SBC churches (Rainer, 2011) . Trends indicate that the disparity of membership in smaller churches versus larger churches is growing, creating the possibility that numerous small SBC churches will disappear in the next few decades. National entities, state conventions, and the majority of local associations all employ people proficient in similar tasks, something Day (2009) refers to as "duplicated effort syndrome." (p. 231). The majority of leadership positions at associations, state conventions, and the national entities are held by white males over 55 years of age. Therefore, here is a sample of questions important to the future of the SBC:

1. Should formal measures be taken to ensure that leadership positions in the SBC within the convention and the national entities include more leaders from small and ethnic churches?

Dockery (2011) blames the likelihood of a person to change denominations during their lifetimes—rising from 33% in 1985 to 60% in 2009 (p. 22)—on two familiar victims: decline in denominational loyalty and affinity to special interest groups or parachurch organizations. Dockery, as well as Lempke (2005), seems to long for the days of static and brand loyalty. Others take a more technical approach by looking for collaborative partners within the convention that display markers of loyalty such as curriculum, Bible translation, style of worship, and associational/state convention involvement. Secular marketers might label the markers approach as a search for product loyalty. Wax (2011) takes issue with this approach:

> "Those who emphasize markers of loyalty rather than our common confession adopt a posture of being Southern Baptist over against other evangelicals. 'This is who we are. Those outside our denomination are not like us. Therefore, Southern Baptists who network with others are suspect. Their Baptist credentials are called into question.'" (Wax, 2011).

Loyalty is a subjective concept, and systems dependent on loyalty as the basis for engagement are doomed. Furthermore, if loyalty is treated like a continuum of behaviors and attitudes, it is difficult to measure. Can a church affiliated with Acts 29 that also gives to the CP but never attends an association or convention meeting be labeled disloyal, as opposed to a self-labeled "loyal" church that leads a charge for a new state convention, directs their CP giving to only a particular school, and attends every local association and national convention meeting? Spandler---Davidson's (2012) blog about an association's revitalization effort led by a group of young pastors illustrates both the subjective nature of loyalty and a common Millennial approach to institutions. The conclusion of the blog reads as follows:

> The local Baptist association is not dead. In terms of making a local impact for the gospel, it has been a vital tool for us here. Do not be too quick to give up on it. It can be a powerful gospel partnership in your local context." (Spandler-Davidson, 2012, para. 24)

On the surface, this statement seems to typify the very best hopes for combining associational revitalization and Millennial engagement. However,

in the midst of writing about how the young leaders revitalized their association, the author also recommends starting a new association if the old cannot be saved. "You might look at your own association and conclude there is no way you can move things in a better direction, and that might be true" (Spandler-Davidson, 2012, para. 22). The new association the author suggests does not appear to be a formal organization complete with charter, bylaws, and constitution. Rather, the author seems to suggest an informal arrangment of a few churches for the benefit of church planting, missions, and leadership training. From all apeparances, the arrangement would be a cause-driven, ad hoc gathering of like-minded leaders for an explicit and possibly temporary purpose. This should serve as a perfect warning to dysfunctional associations, in particular those run by older generations. What the author wrote was not a statement of disloyalty, but of practicality. Due to its subjective nature, loyalty is not a reliable driver for the future of associations.

The Art of Forecasting

There is an important distinction between a prediction of the future and a forecast of the future. Predictions are guarantees from the guarantor that a certain thing will happen. A forecast is an examination of the components determining change—drivers—and a range of estimates in the form of scenarios describing how different quantities of the drivers will interact to form different future outcomes. If one has working knowledge of the forces shaping change, one can better anticipate the outcomes. Preparing for the future as a range of options rather than a string of specific events allows people and organizations to better adapt to reality as it unfolds. As a result, scenario planners attempt to provide their clients with a mix of certainty and uncertainty, creating novel stories that allow their clients to imagine a wide range of futures and plan accordingly.

Trends are only one form of drivers that effect the future (Hines & Bishop, 2006). Long---0range futurists consider the interaction of trends in increments of 10, 20, or even 50 years. There are enormous complexities when forecasting a future using such a long time horizon. As the speed of

information discovery and technological advancement increases, it seems the audience for longer time horizon forecasts grows ever smaller.

The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) (2006) conducted a survey of strategic practices used by associations and found less than 3 percent of the 459 respondents reported using planning horizons of 10 years or more. The majority of respondents reported horizons of two years at most. The ASAE determined traditional "strategic planning" efforts had transitioned to a constant process of adaptation called "strategic evolution" (American Society of Association Executives & The Center for Association Leadership, 2006, p. 3).

Before considering the time horizon most relevant to particular associations, a thought-provoking question may help. "What year is it in your association?" If your association and its members use current technologies, innovative methods, and operate from the perspective of contemporary paradigms, the year in your association is either the same as reality or possibly even a little in the future. In those associations whose members operate in older paradigms for whatever reason, serious effort should be expended to determine how old the mental models are, and what the implications of innovation might be. For instance, in areas of considerable ethnic diversity, if the association is just beginning to see diversity among its members or feel the need for services in languages other than English, the "year" in the association is in the past compared to other associations that have been addressing diversity for years. If the association has members just now considering an entity web page, it is doubtful that reaching them through means of social media will be successful.

There is nothing to fear about bringing the "year" in the association closer to reality, provided that sound leadership is exercised throughout the process. In fact, companies seeking to modernize have an advantage in that companies that modernized before them offer examples of successful and unsuccessful strategies. Those associations living in the current year have no such examples, and must innovate going forward with a higher degree of uncertainty. Leaders should take care to bring associations along at a speed that the members can handle, meaning there is a balance to be found

between what the members will not tolerate—and thereby abandon the process—and a speed that is too slow to achieve the desired results. To borrow a horticulture reference, culture and paradigms have deep roots. Rather than leaving some of the old soil intact when moving a plant to a new location, simply pulling a plant out of the ground and attempting to plant it in completely new soil is traumatic to the plant and counter-productive to seeing fruit come from the transition.

Trends

Considerable work is done every year to scan the associational environment and discern trends that are shaping the future of associations (Alcorn & Alcorn, 2012; American Society of Association Executives & The Center for Association Leadership, 2001, 2006; Church, 2011; Dixon, n.d.; Drake, 2012; Funk, 2006). While a full treatment of each of the available trends is well beyond the scope of this work, three trends will be explored in depth. The selected trends each have implications to the future of secular and Baptist associations.

1. **The changing purpose of the association**
2. **Member-driven structures**
3. **The question of membership**

The changing purpose of the association

Perhaps the longest-standing reason for the existence of associations is networking and sharing information (Dixon, n.d.; Measures, 2000). With unique access to front-‑‑‑line practitioners, associations were able to produce resources pertaining to the latest models, approaches, and systems among their members. Associations were at one time the gatekeeper to associational information. Secular associations have also long been entrusted to represent the needs of their members to larger entities such as the government or the media (Dixon, n.d.).

Following the advent of the state and national conventions, Baptist associations were used to channel information from the larger entities to the local churches. Association personnel became representatives for the

convention and advised churches on how to best use convention material or programs (Measures, 2000). This may still be the case in associations with smaller staffs, those where the staff positions are subsidized by the state or national convention, or where the DOM is an influential player at the state or national level.

Should the contemporary association exist only for networking, its future existence is unstable. However, networking should not be dismissed entirely. The ASAE (2007) produced findings stating that networking still ranked as the highest member benefit among Board members and the third highest among members. The findings suggest that active membership and participation leads to increased satisfaction. When leaders experience greater satisfaction, it may lead to the false assumption that everyone experiences the same level of satisfaction as they do, otherwise termed the "curse of knowledge" (Heath & Heath, 2007, pp. 19‑‑‑21). When leaders are out of sync with the members, organizational direction may be set to benefit a subset of the membership, even if they are the most engaged members Drake (2012).

Dixon (n.d.) suggests three purposes for the association: thought leadership, community support, and collective action. Baptist associations must also adopt these purposes, even if only as a part of their overall foundation. Finn (2012) suggests that associations focus on "promoting local evangelism and mercy ministries, contextual church planting, church revitalization, gospel‑ centered fellowship for pastors, and collaborative missions and service opportunities" (para. 7). Other associations have found a niche by providing specialized research and consultation, disaster relief training, and leadership coaching.

Regardless of future strategic decisions regarding the association's purpose, leaders would do well to remember three things:

1. Associations are merely one form of networking open to their members. Social media outlets, intra-denominational groups, and affinity groups all exist to provide relationships, information, and development to their

participants. The days of choosing one or two networks to belong to are over.

2. Associations cannot rely on their roles as guardians of information. Internet search engines can provide more information at a faster rate than any person or organization. The Internet has conditioned people to search for free information first, and while content providers continue to search for an economic model whereby they can charge a fee for information, there is frequently a competitor providing the same quality of information for free. Furthermore, when there were fewer curriculum options, churches were considered presumed customers of denominational literature, and associations the presumed pushers of those programs. An ever-expanding array of curriculum options has relegated denominational publishers to the same competition for customers as mainstream publishers.

3. Geographically––based associations are not the only game in town. Baptist associations were once solely responsible for their geographic context, but now state conventions and national entities deploy personnel to interact directly with churches. Some state conventions have done away with local associations. And other types of associations, like those that are affinity-based, have no ties to traditional geographic boundaries. If the SBC ever decides that churches can contribute directly to the CP without state convention channels, it will have profound impacts on the association, both positive and negative.

Member-driven structures

"There is a growing disconnect between those associations who choose to embrace social benefit as part of their mission and those associations who choose to 'represent their members' interests' exclusively" (Alcorn & Alcorn, 2012, p. 19).

"The present needs of the churches transcend the structures created to serve them. As churches change, so must associations and conventions" (Steely, 1982, p. 7, as cited in Measures, 2009).

"To be a guiding force every Christian entity must have a fluid policy which tends to make relatively easy the necessary adjustment to changing circumstances" (Torbet,1959, p. 231, as cited in Measures, 2009).

Even with the decline of the traditional associational purposes, Baptist associations remain the closest entity to the churches. Such a position places the association at the crossroads of service and leadership, though by no means are those terms mutually exclusive (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2001; Blanchard & Hodges, 2005; De Pree, 2004; Greenleaf, 2002; Howell, 2003). Associations are technically subservient to their member churches. Yet many member churches view their associational staff as leaders. The formal responsibility of associations is to equip their members to meet needs designated by the churches. The informal responsibility of many associations is to provide their churches with a panoramic view of unmet needs in the world. Accordingly, associations must equip churches to meet needs previously unknown by their churches. To balance the demands of formal and informal responsibilities, positional weakness within the convention structure but vibrant relational connection to the front-line ministries, the currency of influence is more important to associations than any other form of support their members might provide.

Chapman (2009) rightly reminds all levels of the SBC that pastors and their churches ultimately drive the changes within the SBC and the priorities of their ministries. It is a regrettable mistake for associations, conventions, or national entities to assume that because they launch a program or designate a need, it will be supported by the churches automatically. Should a squad leader leap from their trench without the support of his squad, that leader will find himself alone in the fight.

Day (2009) enumerates a variety of ways that associations will have to direct their energies to more directly support the day-to-day ministries of their member churches. Day provides several innovative thoughts—some of which will be presented later in this study—regarding the restructuring of the SBC and associations to better accomplish the Kingdom-purposes for which they were founded. Day (2009) also refers to the transition of current DOM responsibilities to a more "catalytic and facilitative leadership role" (p.

The issue of membership

"Everyone is a member, just some ain't paying their dues" (Charles Rumbarger, as cited in Drake, 2012, para. 18).

A prevailing issue among secular associations is that of membership. The vast majority of associations charge a membership fee in return for services to the members, member networking, and any prestige that may come from being a member. As such, associations put extraordinary effort into acquiring new members that will both increase their budgets and their social capital. Unfortunately, membership-centric business models are labor intensive resulting in diminished returns (de Cagna, 2012).

Baptist associations have no membership fees. Theologically-aligned churches apply to membership within the association and commonly offer financial support, though it is not required in the purest sense. Churches apply for membership within state conventions separately, though the association may expedite the process. Baptist associations are commonly a mix of high---value relationships—those that contribute significant financial or material support—and low---value relationships, churches that contribute little and rarely participate in associational functions.

DOMs are more often called upon to cultivate and retain churches as invested members than they are expected to recruit new churches to the association. In some parts of the country, DOMs have an unspoken agreement to relate to churches only within their county, while in other parts of the country, the association consists of churches according to affinity or theological stance. Typically, new Baptist churches with a denominational heritage join the local association almost as a matter of course. Conversely, new churches with no history in the denomination must be solicited like any potential recruit. It is important to understand that new churches are under no obligation to join the association, even if the association was instrumental to the church being founded.

The membership-centric model has come under scrutiny in both secular and Baptist circles, though for vastly different reasons. De Cagna (2012) and

Drake (2012) question the business model implications of secular associations who rely on membership fees for the bulk of their income. Day (2009) alludes to the redundancy within associations and their state conventions, and questions the very need for different entities to exist when they only replicate services. Considering member-driven structures as a driver for the future of associations begs a variety of questions concerning membership in general.

Is a membership-centric business model still a viable model in the future (de Cagna, 2012)?

What is the best member/non-member distinction in terms of content and benefit delivery (Drake, 2012)?

If "collaboration is the new content" (de Cagna, 2012, slide 29), to what degree can associations collaborate with non-members in the production of content beneficial to members and non-members alike?

Regardless of the particular membership structure employed, Alcorn and Alcorn (2012) remind all associations that charging membership dues (or expecting churches to contribute support) before demonstrating the value of the association is a losing formula. "By flipping the construct from "dues to value" to "values to dues" we circumvent the "consumer" experience and gain access to the "co-‐creator" experience which is more sustainable over the long term" (p. 29). Associations must prove their relevancy and perpetuate their relevancy into the future with no comfort taken in historical relationships. Perpetuating relevancy will come into sharp focus through the scenarios contained in this study.

Scenario Construction

Unlike traditional scenario projects, this project does not hinge on the interaction of the most critical uncertainties, but rather extrapolations of baseline trends (Hines & Bishop, 2006) (Schwartz, 1991) (van der Heijden, Bradfield, Burt, Cairns, & Wright, 2002). The purpose of this scenario set is
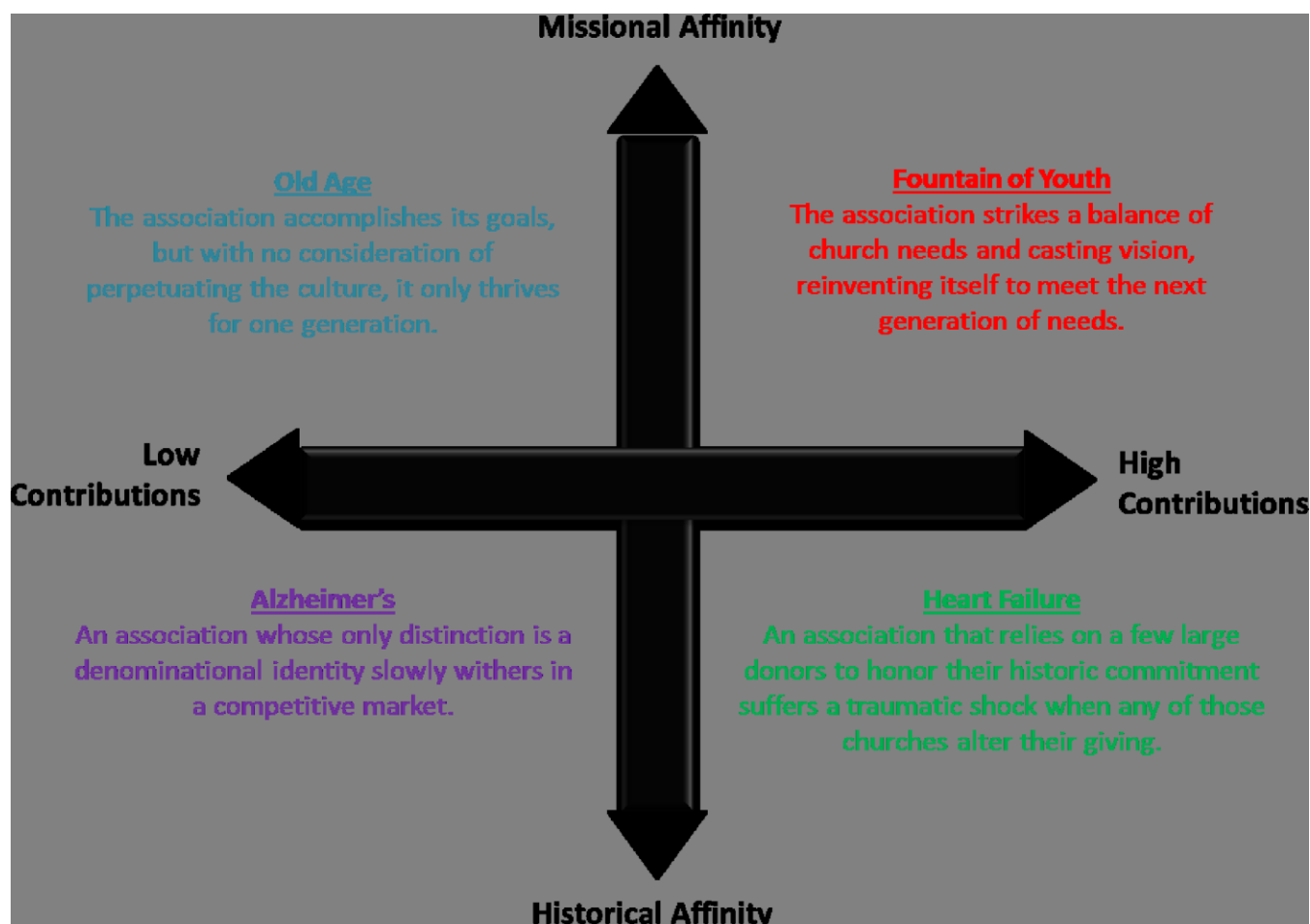
to demonstrate how even the various interaction of baseline drivers leads to different futures. Furthermore, this scenario set paints a disheartening view for the future of the association to prove a point: an interaction of novel, creative, and emerging trends may forecast a different set of futures for the association, but to neglect the contemporary issues that are clearly determining the future now is akin to adding a new coat of paint to a wall supported by termite-infested beams.

Though the terminology used is exclusively aimed at Baptist associations, secular associations are not immune from the principles that will be exposed through the scenarios. The design of the project has one underlying goal: spur conversation about the future of associations by confronting current reality.

The drivers chosen for this exercise are a slight modification of those trends presented above. Alluding to the membership-centric model, one driver will be based upon why a church chooses to become a member of the association? On one end of the spectrum, the church has an historical affinity to the association because the pastor or leaders have past experience with the denominational structure. On the other end of the spectrum, the church is drawn to the association based on their missional affinity—or agreement, alignment and support of what the association does. The other driver examines levels of contributions given by member churches, contrasted by low contributions and high contributions. By examining the interaction of these two drivers, the scenario set tells four different stories of fictional Baptist Association s.

Missional Affinity

Old Age
The association accomplishes its goals, but with no consideration of perpetuating the culture, it only thrives for one generation.

Fountain of Youth
The association strikes a balance of church needs and casting vision, reinventing itself to meet the next generation of needs.

Low Contributions ← → **High Contributions**

Alzheimer's
An association whose only distinction is a denominational identity slowly withers in a competitive market.

Heart Failure
An association that relies on a few large donors to honor their historic commitment suffers a traumatic shock when any of those churches alter their giving.

Historical Affinity

Scenario Narratives

Heart Failure

The Gotham Baptist Association (GBA) is one of the oldest associations in the SBC. It predates some of the state conventions to the west and has enjoyed long relationships with many of the churches that founded the association over 100 years ago. The annual meeting is like attending a

family reunion. Some of the messengers are following in the footsteps of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who were also messengers to the annual meeting. The association held its first meeting in the sanctuary of First Baptist Church in the presence of seven pastors who served as messengers. During the first ten years of the association, Main
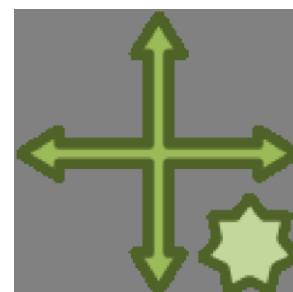
Street Baptist Church and Trinity Baptist Church joined the association. They were once small churches but now both run over 2,000 in attendance.

The GBA is considered a dynamic association by the annual influx of 10---20 new church planters that obtain coaching and assistance from the association. The GBA has led the SBC in new church plants each of the last four years, particularly in ethnic church plants, no small feat for an association outside of the southern region of the U.S. Church plant pastors come to the association building frequently. Some have meetings with consultants, some are learning how to plant new churches themselves, and some are there just to drink coffee, use the free Wi---Fi, and borrow an occasional book from one of the staff members. The association building is small, but a hub of activity from open to close.

The coffee, the Wi---Fi, the plush couches in the lounge, and the state---of---the art video equipment used by pastors throughout the association are just some of the perks of association membership. The association staff are entrepreneurial thinkers, so they understand that the new pastors lead churches that cannot afford to provide for these services to their pastors independently. Some new church plants contribute $25 a month, but when the church is located in the city slums and ministers to the homeless, that's a large sum of money to them.

The association could never hope to be the church planting association it is without the support of its longtime members. First Baptist, Main Street, and Trinity alone contribute approximately 50% of the association's annual receipts amounting in more than $500,000. The megachurches participate in association programs and offerings occasionally, usually serving as a host venue for training. The pastors and the DOM have a good personal relationship. The DOM was once a megachurch pastor himself, so they speak the same organizational language, are roughly the same age, and are all products of Baptist seminaries. In short, they have all been Southern Baptists most of their lives.

Therein lies the problem. The DOM had just been informed by his business administrator that the fourth largest church in the association, River Baptist

Church, had just sent in a revised pledge amount for next year's budget: they would only be contributing $10,000. In many other associations, that size of gift would be substantial, but the GBA had five churches contributing over $75,000 each, and that number just decreased to four churches.

The DOM was afraid this might happen. Every time an older pastor retires or moves on and a younger pastor replaces him, the association contribution takes a dive. Sometimes the new pastor had no denominational heritage, and diverts the mission fund to causes he is more familiar with. Sometimes the change happens in the interim before the new pastor is hired, when well-intentioned committee chairs who fret about budget shortfalls in the absence of a pastor and who are unfamiliar with the association, see an opportunity to trim the budget. New pastors generally don't ask about historical giving patterns to the association, and the change can go unnoticed.
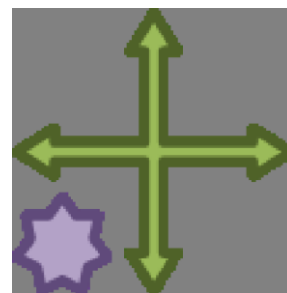
River Baptist Church utilized a contemporary model, but was a very missional church, and they had hired a young, missional pastor. The pastor became a Christian during college through the ministry of Young Life, and his previous church was known for church planting across the country and for coaching young leaders. The DOM would have no problem building a relationship with the young leader, but proving why the dynamic church needed the association would be a far tougher task. The church could clearly plant churches without the association, but the church could never hope to penetrate the areas of the city with the speed and contextualization of the association's smaller church plants.

The sudden decline in contribution would not ruin the association, but the effects would be obvious and instantaneous. The pastor might come around, and he might prevail upon his finance committee to change their contribution, but the process would take time. And in that time, what if another megachurch pastor retired?

Alzheimer's

The Star City Baptist Association (SCBA) is a moderately sized association consisting of about 75 churches, which range in size from 10 to 3,500 in attendance. The association is located in a medium-sized mid-western city, which has steadily grown over the years thanks to local industry and two small colleges. The annual association meeting is well attended, and the association offers a variety of county---wide programs and direct interaction with churches. The DOM has two additional paid staff members and an army of volunteers that cover the administrative tasks of the office and interact with the state convention in the areas of disaster relief, men's ministry, and the Woman's Missionary Union (WMU).

Baptists have been present in this city for decades. It even hosted the SBC annual meeting once. The association office is a large suite in a downtown high---rise. In fact, the Methodist Conference of that area has a suite in the building, as does the region's Habitat for Humanity. The ground floor has a large open area, a Starbucks, and the city's best deli. The central location makes it easy for SCBA pastors to attend the annual meeting, and they love the proximity to Starbucks.

Behind the scenes, the staff of the SCBA calls it the EBA: "Egalitarian Baptist Association." Everything about the association seems to be average. It's not located in the southern Bible belt, nor in the largely unchurched northwest. Their fair city isn't New York or Chicago, but it's not Gainesville, TX either. And the churches all have an equal share in the future of the association. The association plants churches, teaches English to immigrants, adopts a local elementary school every year, and conducts an annual clothing drive for the downtown homeless shelter. And all SCBA churches give about the same amount of financial contributions.

The SCBA had six full---time employees twenty years ago, and four full---time employees just ten years ago. The city's economy was not crushed by the recent recession, but it has not bounced back to its historic norms either.
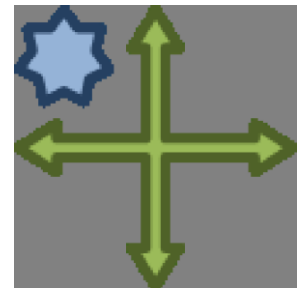
Some doubt that it ever will. SCBA churches felt the impact of the economy, but most continued to give something to the association even through the hard times.

The real problem was the reality that steady declines, even if gradual, all end up in one place. SCBA churches were good churches. There just seemed to be a lot of good things to support out there. Some SCBA churches were self-sufficient missions agencies unto themselves: they were taking mission trips, sending missionaries to the places they visited, and starting fresh water wells and elementary schools in the places their missionaries served. Some SCBA churches were so responsive to the prompts of their members that they divided their missions budget across more than a dozen worthy causes. Some SCBA churches had so little to give that their continued giving or lack thereof would have minimal impact on the association. At one time, the association was a primary player and influencer for ministries across the city. It just seemed that now the glory days of history were fading further and further away.

Old Age

The Central City Baptist Association (CCBA) was known throughout the SBC as a place of innovation, leadership, and Kingdom---wins. It was not one of the largest associations, but it had an above average number of churches, a healthy budget, and three generations of pastors working together across the city. The CCBA avoided significant denominational political dilemmas, and therefore, opened its membership to churches that supported either the 1963 or 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. In a state split by such controversies, the CCBA was seen as a model partner for both of the conventions present in the state. The explicit mission of the association was to help churches reach the lost, start new congregations without specifying the organizational model, and to pour resources into pastors rather than buildings or programs.

In the latter part of the 1980s, the CCBA intensified its emphasis on church planting. CCBA was one of the first associations to champion the cause of using multiple models and abundant church planting to reach the needs of American cities. As a result, CCBA acted as a kind of recruiter, seeking out talented young leaders among their established member churches and directly from seminaries. CCBA planted more churches in 1989 than half of the state conventions within the SBC during the same year.

Throughout the 1990s, the CCBA focused on leadership development. They started a program called "Leadership Now" which eventually educated pastors on general leadership principles, spiritual disciplines, organizational behavior, systems thinking, strategic planning, and community development. The program was an intense three‑‑‑year process, but the participants were wildly supportive of the program despite the rigor. The GBA focused on getting its younger leaders through the program, and provided small groups led by established pastors for them to learn from each other and hear the voice of experience. The end result was the equivalent of a Master's degree in church leadership and served to fill an unknown gap in their seminary education.

The CCBA program achieved many of the intended results. Program graduates were experts at leading teams, casting vision, strategic planning, creativity, modeling authentic discipleship, and implementing practical ministries. Their churches grew and were known for their cultural relevancy and gospel-centered approach. What were once young pastors and church planters in a leadership program had grown up in the association and embraced the association staff as both close friends and mentors. Their churches were models for the next generation of young leaders.

The unintended consequences of the system were not present at first. But one day at staff meeting, as the next year's budget was being discussed, a staff member happened upon an interesting fact. "Did anyone realize Fred's church only contributed $500 last year?" The other staff members quickly dismissed the number as a mistake. "That can't be right, we've known Fred for 20 years. He's been with us since "Leadership Now" was started. He's been a moderator! His mission budget is almost six figures!"

The slide show runs and traces the association's history, including times of robust church planting, individual missionary support, revival meetings, and online training courses. Pictures of pastors standing in front of repurposed buildings fade in and out of the frame. Scenes of disaster relief come next, reminding the crowd of weeks when pastors were more likely to hold a shovel or chainsaw than a Bible. In times of need, the association rallied together. A map flashes on the screen, showing MBA churches across four different states, more than two days driving distance from east to west. MBA never solicited churches from other states, but as word got out, churches came to the association.

Only moments from now, the DOM will address the crowd. He starts to wonder if he should use a different lead in sentence. What about how different generations of pastors had contributed to the association for the needs of the pastors coming behind them? What about calling attention to how the churches valued the association's culture, wanting it to endure beyond their individual tenures? What about how megachurches had sent people to help plant downtown simple churches, or how young professionals had lent their services to more established churches in order to upgrade their technology and equipment?

"No," he thinks, "I'm going to stick with what I planned originally."

The slide show ends, the house lights come back up, and the eyes of every person in the sanctuary are on him. Stepping into the spotlight and placing his open Bible on the podium, he utters a single phrase without raising his head to see the crowd. The room erupts in applause as the crowd hears, "Soli Deo Gloria!"

Wildcards

Wildcards are events that have a low probability but a very high impact. Wildcards differ from traditional leading indicators in two substantial ways: they need not be events or variables, and they most often signal a change in conditions requiring a new set of scenarios whereas leading indicators signal the increased likelihood of a particular scenario. While wildcards may strain

the limits of plausibility in some scenarios, they would nonetheless be significant "game---changing" events should they occur. Some of these events are already happening in limited contexts, but if the ideas were to become more mainstream, they would increase the likelihood of certain future possibilities.

Wildcards to be watching for:

- Associations merging to either become regional associations or quasi---state conventions.

- Churches affiliating with associations outside of their immediate geographic context (Day, 2009)

- Current networks becoming formal denominations

- Baptist associations choosing not to partner with any state conventions

- Baptist associations choosing not to partner with the SBC

- CP funds channeled directly to associations

- State conventions downsizing into regional bodies (Day, 2009)

- Merging state conventions and local associations to reduce redundancy

- Associations delegating successful programs/initiatives to local churches

What if?

Scenarios provide a mechanism to imagine the consequences of particular interactions between drivers. Wildcards are most often change agents that happen outside an organization that in turn require significant adaptation from the organization. Taking a proactive approach, asking "what if" questions allows the asker to envision instituting changes and then forecasting the results of those changes rather than having to react to outside forces. The key to using "what if" questions is allowing the questions a chance to breath--- do not dismiss them too soon or try to

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