

The Future of Associations – [www.KYandBeyond](http://www.KYandBeyond.com) Blog, June 28, 2016

The following came from a June 21, 2016 blog post by Ed Stetzer. It addresses the importance of associations demonstrating their value to local churches and was part of a series on the “future of the SBC”. If associations are going to exist in the future we must ask the hard questions now and that is why I’ve chosen to share his thoughts with you.

Ed Stetzer - As geographic concerns lessen through the use of technology, churches are forming networking partnerships that unite churches around theological and missiological concerns. That’s generally called associationalism.

These networks did not, and could not, exist 20 years ago—due to technological limitations—have exploded now. This generates questions for denominations whose structural model has remained the same since pastors traveled by horses to meetings.

We have to ask exactly how effective we have been over the last 100 years when many horse riding pastors would recognize today’s structures.

Currently, in Southern Baptist life, there is a direct link between the state conventions and the national convention through the funding mechanism of the SBC. It’s called the Cooperative Program (or “CP” for my non-SBC readers).

Baptist associations have been historically left out of that by their request, actually. This causes them to function as free agents of sorts—each is autonomous. While the state and national conventions desperately need each other, they draw from the same CP dollars. Strategies like the [Great Commission Resurgence](#) called for tightening of state belts to fund the national body ever more fully. This, for some states, has been a challenge, but has had little impact on associations.

Local associations predate the larger organizational structures, but pastors in the next 20 years are not going to continue using a methodology simply because “it has always been that way.” Because of this, a squeeze is coming that will cause the local church to evaluate the partnerships they are engaged in to determine the ones that are the most beneficial to their stated goals.

Clarification of roles

Churches that have multiple layers of partnerships will often choose between them—and they will do that based on their stewardship focus. If a church is financially partnering with a theological network, a local area association, a state and a national organization, it is investing a significant amount of its resources in these groups.

The question then becomes: “Who does what?” If the local church has multiple overlap between all of their partnerships, why should they continue to keep them all?

Each partnership should have a clear and established role that benefits the local church. Most denominations do not have a long successful track record of accomplishing this. Often there is

duplication key roles. Many church leaders, especially those with business or leadership training, become frustrated by the perceived (or actual) waste of resources.

This is where networks have frequently stepped in and provided a much more flexible solution for the churches. Not having decades or even centuries of bureaucratic weight, networks have organized themselves to be as lean as possible to meet the needs of churches in the current context.

So, in some ways, networks are replacing associations. But, it does not have to be that way.

Future of local associations

I'm in favor of the new networks that have developed. Any network that pushes people to greater mission and partnership is a great thing. But local churches need to decide how best to connect with them—when to partner and when not to partner.

There can be a place for these smaller geographic connections for churches to continue, like associations. A far spread network may share your passion for church planting, but they don't share your zip code. There are roles local leaders can provide that a national organization will not be able to mimic.

Also, you can meet and connect with local pastors who are, yes, different than you. That's good for you, your church, and the kingdom.

Local associations need to look at the involvement of their churches. In my non-scientific observation, the majority of local associations have well-connected relationships with churches that are 75 years and older, moderate connection to those around 50 years old, but minimal connection to churches less than 20 years old. If that is the case, the future does not look bright for those associations. They, like many of the older churches that comprise them, will die from attrition.

The key to sustained ministry in associations is discovering the needs of the churches local to your area and meeting them. Theological networks, along with state and national organizations cannot possibly know all of the ministry needs of the people on your street. But your association may. Those closest to the ground can have the strongest partnership if they involve more churches, engage faithfully, and connect pastors.

Different tools to reach the same goal

Central to the purpose for every church should be the Great Commission.

We exist to making disciples. For the different levels of connectivity to remain, they need to demonstrate to the local church how they can help them further that goal in unique ways.

When resources are wasted through various partnerships all offering the same thing, churches become discouraged and the goal is hindered. However, when each partnership of the church meets a need and provides a service the others cannot, the church is encouraged to do more and the Gospel is advanced.

Associations can most definitely be one of those beneficial partnerships.