

Reinventing Rural Old Convention Baptist Associations

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For the past almost 11 years I have served a rural association of Baptist churches. We now have 36 congregations, most of which are in a single county, Pickens, which lies between Columbus, Ms., and Tuscaloosa, Al. The county has about 20,000 residents of which about 11,000 are anglo. The county bridges the plains of the Black Belt and the foothills of Appalachia. The churches report slightly more than 4,000 resident members. They contribute nearly 4% of their undesignated offerings to the association, or about \$115,000. The total income of the association will be nearly \$150,000. Most of the churches are bivocational and have less than 100 in worship. Since we have no dominant town, we do not have any dominant churches. As I looked at the data for Mississippi associations I was impressed that most of them are pretty much like ours.

In October the annual meeting of the association will be hosted by the Bethlehem and the Stansel congregations, both rural. This will be the 173rd anniversary meeting. The association has reinvented itself four times across these years. Let me describe and date each of these forms taken by the association, believing that the story of many of your associations will be very similar to mine.

1. Frontier Stabilizer and Extender. 1835-1870

All 19 of the churches which formed our association were open country churches. Even as towns were formed along the Tombigbee River and in Carrollton as a county seat, Baptists were very slow in forming churches within them. But our early preachers were active in forming congregations in the rural communities as they developed. Early conflicts over support of mission boards and over Calvinism brought losses which were addressed by the formation of more new congregations and evangelism. Brush Arbor revivals were common. Annual meetings dealt with inspiration, encouragement, doctrinal questions and related business. Often one of the pastors would be hired to do mission work within the bounds of the association for a part of the year. Typically, while the messengers were meeting in a church house, a brush arbor revival meeting would be in progress nearby.

2. A New Cause Replaces the "Lost Cause". 1870-1890

With the exodus of the freedmen from the churches, membership was cut by about 1/3rd. While from the beginning some of the churches had Sunday Schools, they became a passion during this era. Both long time moderators of this period and beyond, one a pastor and one a layman, were strong Sunday School men. Apparently, in order to keep Sunday School before the

people the association added quarterly district Sunday School conventions and formed an Executive Committee. This was a major reinvention. The association passed from being a 3 or 4 day reunion of the missionary Baptist in our area to being an ongoing, year around, organization. And the programs of the annual meetings came to be increasingly filled with representatives from state and national Baptist organizations promoting their work and collecting funds.

3. Industrialization and Resettlement of the South. 1890-1925

During this era four railroad lines were built across our association. This killed the rough river towns where we had been slow about starting new congregations. But the railroad formed six new towns in the territory served by the association in this era. With some help from the state convention congregations were formed in four of these towns. Rural churches moved to the other two towns. Further, new churches were formed in four sawmill towns. However, they did not last longer than the towns. And later two mill town churches were formed as second churches in two of the new railroad towns. Interestingly, the Primitive and the Free Will Baptists continued to be totally rural.

Several of the old open country churches closed during the period, apparently as the result of their members moving to the villages and towns. Others were severely weakened. Another lasting result of this period was greater diversity among the churches of the associations. Probably because of competition with other denominations, the town churches sought pastors with some formal education. These churches seemed to be more responsive to the several new programs—Brotherhood, WMU, and BYPU-- that were being introduced by the denomination.

And the association, like many others, responded to the encouragement of the denomination to reformulate itself from being essentially a centered affinity group to being an association of the cooperating Baptist churches in a particular county. In 1924 the name was changed from Union to Pickens and soon the several churches in surrounding counties moved to the dominant associations in their counties.

4. Transformation of the Open Country Churches. 1945-1990.

My position was created in 1947 with help from the state convention to implement the Long Range Rural Church Program. Its purpose was to help the many rural churches in the old convention have worship every Sunday, the basic programs of the denomination, a pastor on the field, support missions, and become more closely tied to the Baptist denomination. This happened in the first decade of the effort, for the most part. For many of you, your position has a similar origin and history. Down to the present most rural old convention associations kept folks like you and me employed to be promoters of new programs and products being published by the boards and agencies.

To the north and west Southern Baptists were actively become a national denomination with significant gains in the west. Directors of Missions were deployed to coordinate and direct

these efforts.

This reinvention of Old Convention rural churches was a wonderful thing. And much of the success of Southern Baptists was in small town places in the North and the West. Bivocationalism made it possible for us to stay and to expand in country places while the mainline denominations had to close and combine congregations.

5. Expediting Great Commission Work. 1990----

About 1990 while I was working with the rural church program at the old Home Mission Board, I began to hear questions being raised first about the cost-benefit ratio of having a Director of Missions and later about having associations at all. Since the purpose for which the position of DOM had been created had been accomplished, other than to have a place for a broken down old preacher to slip into retirement, why continue it? Further, some began to suggest that with the communications revolution, the conventions could now go directly to the churches, so the association was not needed.

When I came to Pickens Association, I felt that it needed a fourth reinvention. I took my clues from Rick Lance our state convention leader who soon set as his focus helping every Alabama Baptist be a Great Commission Christian. I could see that most people in our small churches could not address many of the tasks set forth in the Great Commission as we then operated. Their church lacked the resources to do many ministries. They lacked the resources, and perhaps the vision, to try innovative approaches to evangelism. And they did not have within their congregations enough persons and skills to put together a team to do mission work in some other venue.

Attached you will find a list of the cooperative ministries we are currently working on. My driving value is that with 4,000 resident members we can do most anything that a mega church can do for the Kingdom.

The Baptist of our area are proud of their association and its efforts. I am aware, however, of at least three potential dangers:

- *Continuing Industrial Age Thinking—These new initiatives become the property of the association, not of the churches and their members.

- *Overload—trying to do too much and expecting everyone to help and participate.

- *Resistance by me to a church taking something that the association got started and “doing their own thing”.

Story of Mack and Jeanie and Hickory Grove.

Four other concepts have informed my efforts in Pickens Association.

- *Be a mission strategist. Commuters, Prisons. Hispanics. Retirees.

- *Be a centered, not a bounded association.

- *Be proactive in training newly called to ministry.

- *Realize that money follows ministry.

Underlying and informing the analysis that I am sharing with you is one of the most important contributions of the social sciences. It is that any social organization—a business, an army, a government, a family, a church, or an association must successfully address four issue areas.

1. *Adapt to a changing social environment.* The four reinventions of our association, as well as its origins, have been prompted by changes in the socio-economic environment. Missionary Baptists did so well and have prospered. Primitives and Free Wills did not and have declined.

2. *Goals and their achievement have driven the association in each era.* While we honored our traditions we were not limited by them. We focused on goals that addressed the challenges of a changing social environment

a. Evangelize and plant new churches on the frontier. Provide some social order through keeping the covenant.

b. Chose Sunday school as a way to reaching, teaching, and keeping the children and their families.

c. Planted churches in the new towns.

d. Helped weak congregations become full-program congregations.

e. Making the Great Commission something that every Baptist can do personally. We are facing new opportunities and challenges.

3. *Organize an appropriate structure, to deal with each version of the area association.*

The associational organizations that the conventions helped associations develop in the 1950 and 1960s served us well to meet the challenges of that era. But we need to restructure for our current times. This will call for true creativity because no longer can we expect “one size to fit all”. In Old Convention States, like Mississippi and Alabama, there are at least half a dozen different kinds of associations, each needing a somewhat different structure.

a. Mega

b. Mega fringe

c. metro

d. metro fringe (rural with growth)

e. rural in decline

f. Old time way

I see my association as a “d” with a “c” to the east and to the west, an “f” to the north east and to the south and two “d”s to the north.

Our “d” association has identified four opportunities, perhaps five, to address in our refocusing and restructuring:

- a. Hands on mission opportunities
- b. Responding to the settlement of commuters from Columbus and Tuscaloosa
- c. Ministries in the new prison
- d. Retirees on the Tenn-Tom.
- e. Partnering with our Missionary Baptist Brothers.

4. *Maintain Your Borders/Market.*

Competition and conflict are reality, even in church life.

- a. Attacks by the enemies—Satan, Secularism, and Wolves in Sheep’s clothing.
- b. Invasion by other “Christian” denominations.
- c. Expansionist colleagues.

Cooperation and mutual submission should be the Christian, Baptist way. Seek it.

I hope that you will spend some time reflecting upon what I am sharing here with you. I invite you to look at other resources on our webpage www.ruralchurch.us. I will be glad to discuss any of this in greater detail. I would welcome suggestions for improvement.

Two other topics I want to address with you today are—

1. Funding a rural Old Convention Association
2. Supporting the current and future pastors of your association.