

Thoughts on the Pickens Pastors Sustenance Network  
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February 10, 2004  
A talk with Pastors in the Lamar Baptist Association

It has been six years since I became the associational missionary down in Pickens. I moved there from Atlanta where I had directed the rural church program of the Southern Baptist Convention for nearly 13 years. Six months before that in the summer of 1997 I had lost that job due to the reorganization of the denomination. I was hurt and felt betrayed. I knew that the original plan for reorganization had me continuing in my old role and the program expanded with an associate. But in the final plan I was out. Some colleagues, perhaps to save their own jobs, had done the "Brutus thing" to me.

My first event in Pickens was an over-nighter pastors' retreat at a remote cabin. About 17 or 18 of us attended. There I met Ray. He is one of those "what you see is what you get" guys. As we chatted, I made some cliché statement about him being able to trust me about "that." His reply knocked off my socks. He said, "Why should I trust you?"

I have thought about this many times. Ray was right. Trust must be earned. Let me hurry on to say that through a number of events and experiences across the subsequent years Ray and I have learned to trust one another. The basic truth is we need trusting relationships with others. Religiously, we come to trust a trustworthy God. In a good marriage we learn to trust our spouse. And in our ministerial role we need colleagues with whom we can develop trusting relationships.

Ray is not the only one among the pastors of Pickens Association I have learned to trust and with whom I have formed a relationship of mutual trust. A key factor in this development is our weekly Tuesday morning Pastors' Prayer Breakfast.

These breakfast meetings began a couple of years before I came to Pickens. The early days were discouraging. But the men persisted and now in a month's period almost all of those who can come in the day time do participate. I believe that they have come to realize that they need a "backstage", a "band of brothers", a safe place to express their deep feelings and needs. Further, the continuing core knows of the effectiveness of the group in providing support for one another. The bonds of indurated trust have become very strong, so strong that many of us try to keep our Tuesday mornings inviolable.

Thinking back I would cite five central critical events that have shaped the relationship across the past six years:

\*Steve was diagnosed with a brain cancer. We prayed. We loved. We supported. We filled in for him when he needed to be out of the pulpit. The cancer shrank. Steve went into remission. We saw a miracle. We rejoiced.

\*Ben's wife suffered from deep, life threatening depression. We listened. We prayed. Ben moved to another church. His wife got appropriate treatment. Things are better. We are thankful.

\*Marc was in a church with a history of problems. Again and again he seemed to be under a Job-like Satanic attack. We listened. We prayed. We helped as we could. He weathered the storms and things got much better. The church transitioned into health. Then he went to another church. But as he was leaving, he told us that he would not have stayed in ministry if it had not been for the support of his fellow pastors.

\*Paul was shaken when he learned that his volunteer youth director, a married man, had had an affair with a minor. The man went to jail. Two major family groups in the church were angry with one another. The man's family blamed the girl. The girl's family blamed the man. Paul was caught in the middle. Again the pastors gave good counsel to Paul. And we watched as God worked through this mess.

\*Hershel, after 34 years at his church believed that God wanted him to leave it. Things were fine. No pressure. So he did. Within four months another church in the association split and an independent minded pastor started a new congregation up the road. The shattered church turned to Hershel, a man of great capacity to love folk, and he is working healing there. When

Hershel told us that he was leaving his old church, no one in the group really understood. But now we see that God was at work. And He has brought a fine young pastor to the old church who is leading it well in new ways.

Perhaps it goes without really saying that the group has also brought healing in my life. For I have found brothers whom I can trust—men who love me and whom I can love. Through my "rear-vision mirror" I can see how God brought me to this group to minister to the hurts I had experienced from the old Home Mission Board.

(Parenthetically, the pastor's in our group have observed that those who have come to the association and have functioned as loners have not fared well.)

I wish that every Baptist association had such a group. I wish that every pastor could be a participant in such a group. So, while realizing that our model cannot be packaged and transferred to every other place, I think that the components and the learning from our experience should be shared with the hope that they might encourage others to do something similar in their setting.

First, the focus is relational, not task or programmatic.

Second, it is the pastors' meeting, not the associational missionary's. The elect their own leaders. They set the activities. They run the events. I attend. I sometimes ask for their help and their counsel. I share in the prayer request time. But I respect the fact that it is their meeting.

Third, we eat well, tease one another, we share prayer requests and we pray fervently. Then we often follow up with addressing needs that were expressed in the meeting.

Fourth, we normally limit programs by outside speakers to once a month. For example, for the past several months we have had a staff person from the state Baptist convention come and talk to us about their work. This is taped and shared with those who cannot attend, as requested.

Fifth, it is a diverse group. Often there will be a dozen who attend. One third will be over 60; one third will be under 40 and the others will be in between. We try to encourage students and those newly called to minister to participate as they can. Most of the pastors are from our larger churches, none of which will have over 250 in worship. But some are from those with fewer than 50.

Sixth, the focus is on sharing praise, information, needs and distresses. Little ego is ever evident. The climate of the event is one of caring and support.

Seventh, conversations tend to be free flowing. While we tend to be pretty conservative on most issues, there is a freedom for one to express a contrary opinion. Real confrontation or anger has been very rare. Frankly, there are some topics on which we have not had consensus, but we have not allowed this to fracture the fellowship.

For example, increasingly, the churches are asking to use the time following the prayer breakfast as a time for an ordination counsel to be called. One young man who had been divorced before he was saved, after serving a church well for a year, was asked to be ordained. The week before the counsel was held the group conducted a long and spirited discussion. Some said they could not participate in the process. They did not come the following week. The candidate was questioned carefully and thoroughly. The counsel voted to recommend that the church proceed with the ordination. It did. No one got mad. We are all still friends. The bonds that had been established through the years in the group made this possible.

One concern that has often surfaced in the group has been regarding those bivocational pastors who cannot participate in the prayer group because they are working when we meet. The group has several events in the evenings during the year to which the bivocationals can come.

\*January pastors' retreat.

\*February pastors and spouses sweetheart banquet sponsored by the WMU

\*March Gideon banquet

\*July family picnic

\*September Deacon appreciation banquet

\*December banquet for pastors and spouses

And, of course, there are other events when many of them get together.

The men in the weekly prayer breakfast were pleased last year when the Center for Pastoral Excellence at Samford University asked me to serve as their consultant for pastor sustenance groups in rural associations across Alabama, and for them to be the model. Building on this we will launch a second group on March 6th. It will meet at 6am on the first and third Saturdays of each month. It is aimed at our bivocational brothers. Several have indicated that they will participate.

Initially, the cook and some of the fellows from the Tuesday group will participate. This will provide something of a critical mass for getting the group up and going. We plan to meet until about 8:30 and build in some training components. We will see how these are received.

With all of this said, I hope that your group will be successful. You surely head how much it has helped me and others in the Pickens Association. I think that Tim Maherg wanted to get your group organized in part because he had had good experiences with us while he served at Union Chapel. Certainly, I will be open to helping you again.