

**Boldly Going Where No Baptist Association Has Gone Before**

By

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**The Background of Baptist Associations**

Southern Baptists are a denominational movement with three dimensions or expressions – associations, state conventions, and national agencies and institutions. Associations in the South began to be organized in 1751 with the Charleston (SC) Baptist Association. The first state convention was the South Carolina Baptist Convention founded in 1821. It was not until 1845 that the Southern Baptist Convention was formed among Baptists primarily in the southeast region of the United States.

**Note:** The first formally organized Baptist association in the United States is generally accepted as

the Philadelphia Baptist Association organized in 1707.

Cooperation between the three dimensions of Southern Baptist life has experienced various seasons of emphasis. Deciding who is in the lead among the three dimensions is often debated. This debate is never static or settled because each dimension is autonomous and voluntarily chooses to cooperate and collaborate with one another. The reality is that none of the three dimensions is truly in the lead. Cooperation and collaboration – along with mutual respect – is an essential characteristic for all three dimensions.

Among the things that have happened in the approximately 270-year history of Baptist associations within the SBC movement is that as state conventions and the SBC were organized, some of the roles and functions of associations modulated to be conducted primarily in other expressions of the denomination. For this reason alone, a clarification of the role and function of a Baptist association is needed.

The three-dimensional approach to our denomination actually forgets that because of our congregational polity the local congregations are always in the lead. The various expressions of our denomination are intended to empower both individual congregations and the collective impact of the congregations to fulfill the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment.

Each dimension of SBC life must fulfill the intentions of their dimension one congregation at a time. This is rather than getting all congregations to accept one right way to do things. Voluntarily we choose to cooperate and collaborate for a greater synergy of efforts.

Each dimension of the Southern Baptist denomination has a unique and important role to play. Let’s visualize it as a three-lane interstate highway where all three lanes are headed in the same direction. One expression of the three dimensions of our denomination is in each lane carrying out their distinctive role.

When any expression of the denomination travels outside its lane, it creates a vacuum that cannot be appropriately filled by any other expression. The distinctive roles of the denominational dimensions are each of enough value that they need to focus on their lane, so no valuable resource is lost.

With that in mind, let’s look at fifteen principles that are important to define and understand the unique role of associations. May associations—as they understand their unique role—***Boldly Go Where No Baptist Association Has Gone Before!***

**My Word Usage:** When referring to an individual church or a collection of churches the words “congregation” or “congregations” are used to emphasize the people who make up a church, and the relationship they have with God, one another and their denomination.

**Associational Principle One**

Congregations and associations are *organisms*. State conventions and national agencies and institutions are *organizations*. At their best, associations are the only entity that can with faithfulness, effectiveness, and innovation serve congregations in an intimate manner. So, immediately we can declare that when the role and function of the association is missing that something significant is missing from denominations.

I first heard this expressed in a dramatic way in 1978 by Russell Bennett, a long-term Baptist association advocate, at the annual meeting of the directors of Baptist associations from throughout the country. He said, “There are churches, and there are associations. Then the ungodly are not so, and these are the state conventions and the national SBC agencies and institutions.”

The point is that the basic character and nature of Baptist associations are like that of congregations. Whereas the basic character and nature of state conventions and the national convention with its agencies and institutions are different. The former are *organisms*, and the latter are *organizations*.

Each has a unique role to play, but only the association has the character, nature, perspective, and mindset to clearly and closely identify with congregations. State conventions and the SBC agencies and institutions do not. Therefore, the role and function of the association is crucial to the overall vitality and vibrancy of the full collection of congregations.

Because associations—like congregations—are organic, they travel outside their lane when they seek to be like state conventions and national agencies. They travel outside their lane when they seek to promote the work of state conventions and national agencies and institutions. Why? Because that is not their primary purpose for existing, and it takes them through unnecessary potholes and construction barriers.

Associations should champion the character and nature of congregations to state conventions and national agencies and institutions. Why? Because state conventions and national agencies and institutions really do not understand the character and nature of congregations as much as they believe they do. They have difficulty getting outside of the framework of the “four p’s” of promotions, programs, projects, and processes to serve in the midst of congregations. Associations can have or develop the capacity to serve in the midst of congregations.

**Associational Principle Two**

The three dimensions of SBC denominational life each have a distinctive kinship relationship with congregations. Associations are *Family* to congregations. State conventions are *Friend*. SBC agencies and institutions are *Acquaintance*.

Associations are about adult-to-adult relationships within a family. It is not a parent-child relationship among congregations, but a sister and brother relationship. Associations engage all five senses in understanding congregations. The see, hear, touch, smell, and taste congregations.

State conventions have primarily friendship relationships with congregations. Some they may also know as family. Many—perhaps even most—they only know as a friend. They do not have the same intimacy of relationship with all their affiliated congregations as do associations. Only a certain percentage of state convention staff can know many congregations deeply enough to call them family.

National agencies and institutions have a relationship with the full collection of affiliated congregations only at the level of acquaintance. A few they know as family. Some their know as friends. Most they only know as acquaintance.

When associations talk about congregations it ought to be in right-brained relationship terms. Ideally, they should be able to talk in-depth about the qualities of their member congregations. When associations relate to their member congregations, they ought to highlight the nature of the gospels of Mark and Luke which are the more right-brained gospels.

State conventions plus national agencies and institutions are more left-brained, about task, and have the nature of the gospels of Matthew and John. They more tend to know congregations by statistical patterns, financial contributions, and their leaders who connect with the promotions, programs, projects, and processes of the state convention and national entities.

**Associational Principle Three**

The three dimensions of SBC denominational life each have a different economic position related to congregations. Associations are about *Solution*. State conventions are about *Scope*. SBC agencies and institutions are about *Scale*.

An example of an SBC agency expressing scale is the move of the Baptist Sunday School Board in the 1990s to become LifeWay Christian Resources. In the early 1990s the BSSB refocused its organizational vision to become the premier provider worldwide of Christian literature. This meant its focus would have to expand to be clearly Christian but no longer branded as exclusively – much less primarily – Baptist. In the late 1990s it successfully changed its name to LifeWay Christian Resources to reflect its vision.

Even though the BSSB was one of the leading printing organizations in the United States, it had to become larger to service the tens of thousands of SBC congregations. Many types of literature it needed to provide were not cost effective if sold primarily to SBC-affiliated congregations. They had to find new markets among Christianity in North America. This involved broadening and increasing their scale. But this move by LifeWay was just in time for the digital revolution that was a paradigm shift that derailed this new strategy before it could be fully implemented.

An example of state conventions expressing scope is seen in several larger state conventions who had enough congregations and various other ministries in languages for which the BSSB did not have literature that these state conventions produced their own literature in selected languages. Cost effectiveness was not an issue for them. Addressing ministry opportunities was what drove them to deepen their ministry scope within their context.

Associations desire to come alongside congregations to discover the best solutions for the opportunities and challenges congregations must address. Solutions are discovered one congregation at a time. State conventions plus national agencies and institutions focus on best price and best product or program.

Associations have a no-exit relationship with member congregations that is transformational in nature. Associations never leave their congregations. If their congregations wander away from their core values, they pray for them, yearn for their restoration, and nurture them as prodigal congregations who may come back home.

State conventions and national agencies have an affiliation relationship with congregations that can be ended if the rules are not kept. Congregations who wander away from core values may be discarded or become ones with whom they can no longer have fellowship.

**Associational Principle Four**

The three dimensions of SBC denominational life each have a different insight that is provided to congregations. Associations are about *Wisdom*. State conventions provide *Knowledge*. SBC agencies and institutions provide *Information*.

SBC agencies and institutions provide an enormous amount of information which is available not only to congregations, but to every individual Christian. Twenty-first century communication channels now allow a voluminous amount of information to be shared with congregational leaders. The issue is that so many thousands of channels now exist that it is difficult for the messages from SBC agencies and institutions to be heard.

Associations know their member congregations deeply enough that they know how to apply great wisdom one congregation at a time. State conventions and national agencies and institutions seek to engage congregations in their promotions, programs, projects, and processes based on various congregational typologies. At times typologies are ignored in favor of “one size fits all” promotions that test the loyalty of congregations to their state convention and the national Southern Baptist Convention.

Associations approach congregations to understand who they are under God’s leadership. State conventions and national agencies and institutions approach congregations with the promotions, programs, projects, and processes in which they want congregations to engage.

I recall an event in one of our state conventions where I was a speaker. The state convention person before me promoted a new church growth strategy he had designed and said that his goal was to get 500 congregations to embrace this strategy in the next one or two years. When I spoke, I suggested that every congregation for whom this new church growth strategy is a spiritual, contextual, and strategic fit ought to consider it, and if it results in 500 congregations embracing it then hallelujah. If it does not fit 500 congregational situations, then that is fine also.

**Associational Principle Five**

Over the decades since World War II there have been various viewpoints of associations with their state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention. For many years the idea was that associations ought to conform to the strategies and structures of the state convention and the national agencies and institutions.

Following the Gulfshores Baptist Assembly conference on associations in 1963, actions arose for associations to compete with state conventions and national agencies and institutions. A decade or so later a different spirit, one of collaboration, began to emerge. This collaboration unfortunately did not last more than a decade or two as the transformation in the Southern Baptist Convention changed to either pushing associations off the highway or squeezing them in a between two tractor trailers in a convoy as associations were pulled outside their lane. And this movement continues in various parts of the SBC.

When associations conform to their state convention and the national agencies and institutions, they lack clear vision. They have difficulty seeing the road ahead as they are letting the vehicles in the other lanes determine the destination and speed. When associations compete with state conventions and national agencies they drift outside their lane. When associations drift outside their lane the congregations are the losers.

When associations collaborate with state conventions and national agencies it is possible to create a strong synergy of Kingdom progress. The challenge is that many state conventions and national agencies and institutions do not get it and they desire conforming associations, or they will compete with them. Additionally, some associations have lost their own voice as they have simply moved in behind their state convention or a national agency and are drafting – as a race car would in a stock car race.

For associations to collaborate with state conventions and the national agencies and institutions, associations must see the wisdom in doing so. Further state conventions and national agencies and institutions must also see the wisdom in doing so. Competing and marginalizing associations is a short-term disruptive to destructive strategy. Collaboration is a long-term capacity-building and sustainability strategy.

**Associational Principle Six**

Congregations ARE the association. Associations are not an office to which we go or an event or meeting we attend. Associations are not a parachurch organization who are cherry-picking congregations for only a part of the mission of God. Associations are the relationship and the commitment to the full mutual *Missio Dei* (mission of God) that emerges out of the spiritual and strategic relationship of congregations with one another.

Associations are not a network because they are so much deeper than only one of the relationships congregations have. Associations are churches-in-association with one another. Like family, they are in a no-exit relationship with one another. At times strained or marginalized, but never broken.

Congregations are members of their association every day of every year. Congregations primarily affiliate with their state convention and with the Southern Baptist Convention. Associations exist every hour of every day of the year. State conventions and the SBC convene and only truly exist in their fully expressed movement form two days per year.

A few state conventions are trying to declare congregations are members of their convention to change the culture of connection with these regional denominational bodies. Those doing so have drifted outside their lane. To the extent they run associations off the road, they wreck a key function of congregational support and empowerment. These are destructive actions rather than disruptive or innovative actions.

The difference creates a distinct atmosphere for associations. For months each year state conventions and the SBC promote people attending to their annual meeting. It is an annual event of their organization. As each annual meeting approaches various agendas are announced, and candidates for elected offices are declared. Even some political activities take place to convince messengers who will be in attendance to support issues and candidates as if those in attendance were delegates rather than messengers from their churches.

For associations the annual meeting may actually pale in comparison to other events, gatherings, and ministry actions that occur during the year. There is very little, if any, legislation that happens at annual associational gatherings. It is more inspirational and fellowship. It is a time to celebrate what has been happening throughout the year in the congregations or churches-in-association with one another.

**Associational Principle Seven**

Associations are not a mission sending organization. They are a missional movement whose member congregations seek to be received in their Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the remotest part of the world. Associations help congregations fulfill the mission of God. Only when absolutely necessary do associations organize missions projects outside their fellowship area for member congregations or within their fellowship area in the place of congregations who are already doing so.

Associations are not parachurch organizations engaging in direct missions. Associations seek to help and support congregations to serve as missionary outposts. Associations should avoid organizational and institutional expressions such as camps, ministries centers, and other physical manifestations of ministry. They should encourage congregations individually and as family members to collaborate with one another to accomplish the mission of God through various forms of ministry.

State conventions and national agencies as institutional organizations are in a much better position to be mission sending leaders, and managers of institutional resources. These efforts are in their lane and should be affirmed as such – especially where done with clear, partnership communication with associations.

**Associational Principle Eight**

Associations need to determine their one priority. This one priority may have several aspects, but it is only one priority. Anything that does not fit that one priority should not be done by associations.

The word “priority” when in common use until the late 1940s was primarily used in a singular form. There was one priority. One thing came before other things. Following World War II when a whole new business planning vocabulary emerged, the word priority appeared more often in a plural form. Thus, there could be many priorities. The implication is that in planning and strategy multiple foci could be served. This diluted the concept of “priority”.

The one priority of associations should revolve around congregations serving as vital and vibrant missional communities seeking to fulfill the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment. The one priority is about congregations and cannot be to build up the associational organization.

The one priority in my association is *Starting and Strengthening Congregations to Serve as Vital and Vibrant Missional Communities*. Anything that does not fit this priority we do not do. Like the legendary story of Michelangelo when carving the statue of David, we seek to cut away the stone that does not fit so we can reveal of the beauty of the David statue as a symbol of our one priority.

**Associational Principle Nine**

The three most important currencies of associations are stories about pastors and staff ministers, stories about congregations and their laypersons, and stories about the fulfillment of the one priority of the congregations-in-association with one another.

These can also be stories about the fulfillment of the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment in and through congregational movements. Also important are stories that highlight, encourage, and challenge the family of congregations.

Numbers and statistics have their place in associations. But stories are like riding on the Autobahn in the associational lane in a new BMW.

Stories need to be shared in various forms such as personal storytelling at live events in the association, written storytelling distributed digitally and printed form, oral storytelling shared through podcasts, and video storytelling shared digitally and at live events.

**Associational Principle Ten**

The sources of associational financial support at a minimum are member congregations—preferably on a percentage basis, individuals who you ask to personally support the association, grants from various types of partners, funding from other denominational expressions, and business and organizational sponsors.

Associations should primarily remain a member-based organization regarding it finances. This accountability to congregations has significant value for the association. But associations must also develop at least a dozen funding streams to have the resources to do things which are transformational and solution-based for the mission of its member congregations.

Associations should not be hesitant to ask individuals, foundations, businesses, and other non-profit organizations to assist it with helping congregations to have the resources needed to journey toward their full Kingdom potential. At the same time, associations may need to be out of the real estate business regarding their office, camps, ministry centers, missionary houses, and other facility investments.

**Associational Principle Eleven**

Associations are a centered-set organism with flexible boundaries. State conventions and national agencies and institutions are bounded-set organizations. A few state conventions, national agencies, and institutions transcend their status and are a hybrid organization with some centered-set or movement characteristics.

For example, the center or core values of associations—particularly in urban areas—may be Southern Baptist, but they are not always bounded by their SBC identity. Congregations from other Baptist groups and other than Baptist groups may be member congregations of associations without the association compromising its core values.

State conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention may over the long-term more specifically define what it means to be in friendly cooperation with them, and thus define some congregations out of affiliation. This has both bad and good impacts on the regional and national expressions of the denomination. This is one of those tasks that once belonged to associations that over the decades of existence are now more the work of state conventions and the SBC.

Churches-in-association—particularly in urban areas—may define their membership in ways that define congregations “in” rather than define congregations “out” of the association. For example, the association I serve has congregations affiliated with six different national denominations. They are part of our churches-in-association for fellowship, leadership development, congregational development, and a common commitment to mission. Some are dually aligned, yet many values Baptist hold dear run through all these congregations.

**Associational Principles Twelve**

Because associations are organisms rather than organizations it is easier for them to lose their way or become directionless than it is for state conventions, and national agencies and institutions. State conventions and national agencies and institutions have visible purposes plus programs, projects, and processes that create a clearer focus.

Associations must remain proactive in expressing family relationships that are often invisible, but nevertheless crucial to their core nature. Associations must resist the temptation to develop visible programs, ministries, and activities that justify their reason for being. It is about relationships.

Associations – like congregations – must re-envision their spiritual strategic direction at least every seven years as they take a sabbatical in the spirit of Leviticus 25:1-12.

**Associational Principle Thirteen**

The call to be a director, strategist, or staff person in an association is a unique spiritual call within God’s constellation of calls. The same is true for state conventions, national agencies, and institutions, but the focus of the spiritual call is often different.

The call to serve in any denominational dimension should not be about praying the prayer of Jabez with hubris rather than humility. Denominational service is not about expanding ones territory. It is about a unique call to service that must understand all dimensions of denominational life.

For more than a decade I served as the key state convention staff person for relating to the lead associational staff person for more than 40 associations. I often worked with the search committees seeking to call a new lead associational staff person.

Because of this I regularly had pastors and some church staff come see me to present themselves as a potential candidate for a lead or ministry staff position in an association. Among the many issues I asked them to speak to were three. First, share with me your story of a spiritual call to serve as the leader or staff person in an association.

Second, describe for me your philosophy of the work and ministry of an association. Third, tell me about some of your role models of lead staff persons in Baptist associations.

This third question really exposed their lack of suitability for this role. Many would describe for me how bad the associational staff were that they had experienced in their ministry, and how they would handle the role so much better. Few had any positive images of associational staff persons.

I would generally ask them to accept an assignment to provide me with three things. First, redo the biographical sketch they had brought with them to not only highlight their congregational experience but also their associational roles they had held. Second, provide me with a one-page, typed explanation of their sense of spiritual call to associational ministry. Third, also provide in the same format a statement of their philosophy of the work and ministry of a Baptist association.

Too many times to count, these people would have one final question for me. It was to tell them were the office was located that referred people to pastor search committees. When they said this, I knew they were not called to associational ministry, but were only seeking to leave their current place of ministry.

Typically, I heard back from less than half of the people who visited with me to talk about associational staff ministry. Some I did hear from had their material placed at the back of my file cabinet after I reviewed it. I could always tell them it was in my active file. It was just at the back until I saw some evidence of a positive call to associational ministry.

**Associational Principle Fourteen**

Associations often hear the voice of God and feel the presence of the Holy Spirit coming to them in the midst of the congregations and the context that make up the fellowship area of the association. The real time missional actions by, affirmations for, and even the agonies of congregations and their leaders can empower a spiritual movement as congregations spring forward into action from the base of their Jerusalem context.

Leaders of state conventions and national agencies and institutions often hear the voice of God and feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in a very different way in their offices and on their campuses. Experiencing the Holy Spirit in the local context often alludes them. As such they determine that one right way of doing things – which either comes from their previous personal ministry or one successful strategy they encountered – ought to work everywhere. So, they develop promotions, projects, programs, and processes to deliver their subjective perspective on missional engagement.

I have often raised a question of – where is the voice of the Holy Spirit clearest? In the grassroots of the cities and counties of North America, or in an administrative office or conference room in a national agency or institution? To be fair the voice of the Holy Spirit can be clear in both places, but often contextually relevant only in the grassroots.

The Holy Spirit is speaking through the people at all dimensions of denominational life. According, however, to the principles already addressed there is a deeper contextual understanding in the grassroots among congregations-in-association with one another of how to apply the strategies and tactics spoken, inspired, and implied by the Holy Spirit.

**Associational Principle Fifteen**

Each dimension of the Southern Baptist denomination has a unique role when it comes to strategies for fulfilling the mission of God from the base of the three expressions of the denomination.

National agencies and institutions have the lead in providing strategic frameworks. State conventions focus on contextual frameworks. Associations on the only entity that can fully function on contextual strategies. Yet, the three expressions need one another for the greatest synergy of efforts that lead to an overall faithful, effective and innovative fulfillment of the Great Commission in the spirit of the Great Commandment. Collaboration is essential. To understand these principles, definitions are also important.

Strategic frameworks are frameworks that can be used by congregations-in-association to address the missional opportunities and challenges in their unique context. National agencies and institutions can develop strategic frameworks from research and study of best practices based on national or even global information. But strategic frameworks have no context that makes them the right strategy for any particular location. It is more of a theoretical framework than a contextual framework.

An example is that research and best practices point to the need for a church planting strategy in just about every context or location. This makes church planting a legitimate strategic framework to develop and continually refine. This does not mean that specific strategies and tactics developed nationally or internationally will serve well in a specific context.

Contextual frameworks are frameworks that recognize a state, province, or regional context. North American is full of a variety of contexts with patterns that differ from one region of North America to another. Contextual frameworks can be developed by state conventions in a way that recognizes the uniqueness of their region of North America, and the capacities that state convention might possess.

Contextual strategies are the real, grassroots strategies that take the theoretical and conceptual frameworks and apply them to real situations in real time in real communities. They learn from strategic frameworks and conceptual frameworks. They also learn from their relationship with the people in the context where they are seeking to apply effective Kingdom strategies. This is something in Baptist denominational expressions is best done by congregations-in-association with one another.

**Can Your Associational Boldly Go Where No Association Has Gone Before?**

* What will it take for your association to boldly go where no association has gone before?
* What does that mean in your context?
* What do you need to start doing different?
* Who needs to go with you on this bold journey?

**Some Background Reading**

**Your Background**

This material has been around in various forms for a while. Long enough that if you are reading this you are probably one or more of the following people. ***First***, you are currently a director or other staff person in a Baptist association who wants to know more about your role. ***Second***, you are thinking about pursuing a role as a director or staff person in an association and need to understand the uniqueness and value of this role. ***Third***, you are part of a leadership group in an association and need to understand how to best serve your association.

***Fourth***, you are a pastor or staff person in a congregation, you have had good experiences with Baptist associations, and desire to learn more about their unique role. ***Fifth***, you are a pastor or staff person in a congregation, you have had bad or no experiences with an association, and you are trying to figure out why you ought to express your ministry as a family member of an association.

***Sixth***, you are not from a Southern Baptist background and you want to figure out the difference between the various dimensions of the denomination and how relating to them will enhance your congregation and its ministry. ***Seventh***, you are from a Southern Baptist background, but you have never understood how the various dimensions of the denomination work. This material helps you to understand the denomination from an associational perspective. ***Eighth***, you serve on a financial group in your congregation and you are trying to figure out what happens with the money you give, and this is a place to explore the role of the Baptist association.

In the case of sixth, seventh, and eighth, this has not answered all your questions, it has focused primarily on Baptist associations, but will be a great beginning to understand your relationship to the other Baptist congregations as you travel around you city or county. The hope is that the more you know, the more you respect the role of the association and appreciate it potential to help congregations address their full Kingdom potential.

***Ninth***, you are a Baptist state convention, or SBC national agency or institution staff person, trustee, board member, or volunteer and you need to understand more about Baptist associations. On some days you are not sure why we have them when you can go directly to the congregation with which you desire to connect. On other days you wonder how you can get them to promote your program, project, or process, or allow you to speak to an associational meeting. Therefore, you want to use them when it’s convenient.

***Tenth***, you are a Baptist state convention, or SBC national agency or institution staff person, trustee, board member, or volunteer and you do not see the need for associations. They just get in the way. They do not embrace your agenda. They are ineffective. They only need to be kept around because you have bought into the big lie that they best serve smaller membership congregations.

***Eleven***, you are the pastor or a staff person in a very large or mega congregation, or a multi-site congregation, and you believe your congregations or multi-sites can do more to fulfill the *Missio Dei* (mission of God) in our area than can many of the other congregations put together. If this is your situation you are grossly mistaken concerning the potential of congregations-in-association with one another, but possibly partially right in your specific context.

***Twelfth***, you do not believe we need denominations to carry out the *Missio Dei*. Much less any Baptist associations you have ever encountered. Out of curiosity you see this material and decide to give it a quick look. ***Thirteen***, none of these reasons relate to you, yet you would like to learn about this organism known as a Baptist association. You are encouraged to dive into the deep end of the pool and learn some new things. Read. Set. Start learning about ***Boldly Going Where No Baptist Association Has Gone Before***.

**My Background**

It is legitimate to ask questions about George Bullard. Who is he, and what qualifies him to speak into the role of Baptist associations and their role in relationship to the overall Southern Baptist denomination?

***First***, during the more than five decades of my ministry, I have had the opportunity to work with denominational organizations in 50 denominations throughout North America. Of all the structural forms of denominational life I have experienced, my favorite is the Baptist Association as expressed within the Southern Baptist denomination.

***Second***, the foundation for this comes from growing up in the home at the father who was in ministry and who three times during his life served as the director of a Baptist association. From him I learned many things about the functioning of denominations in general, and associations in particular.

***Third***, while I certainly would not want to minimize the calling of God, it could easily be said that because of the admiration I had for my father, the joy I saw him express in ministry when he served in associational roles, that during my college years when I engaged in a process to craft a life story, I indicated that after ten years of pastoral ministry I hoped to become an associational director of missions.

***Fourth***, yet, it was definitely in response to the call of God upon my life and ministry that I've had the opportunity to serve on the staff or the director of three Baptist associations, with three state conventions where I had a key role regarding associations, and with one Baptist national agency in what was known as their Associational Missions Division.

***Fifth***, during a 20-year period in my ministry when I consulted full-time with multiple denominations, I had numerous opportunities to speak into the principles of a three-dimensional denominational structure. Virtually every denomination I worked with had three dimensions, although in some denominations the one closest to congregations was informal. Many denominations had little ability to understand the excellence of their local denomination expression.

***Sixth***, the failure to understand the local denominational expression is present in many denominations and results from a misunderstanding of the character, nature, and value of the local expression or dimension of denominations. Southern Baptists are no exception.

***Seventh***, the most beautiful of all denominational dimensions—the Baptist association—is unable to blossom because of this lack of understanding and appreciation for its beauty. This is even the case with the actual lead staff person of some Baptist associations. Many do not understand the pearl of great value which they have the opportunity to lead.