

THE STATE OF
BAPTIST ASSOCIATIONS

PERCEPTIONS, PARTNERSHIPS, AND PATHWAYS FORWARD



**A REPORT PRODUCED
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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the *English Standard Version (ESV)*.

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Introduction

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."

Philippians 1:3-5

Churches have been partnering together to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ since the church was founded some 2,000 years ago. In more recent church history, the advent of the local association over 300 years ago introduced gospel partnerships into Baptist polity. Although things have changed considerably over the past three centuries, local associations are still a part of Southern Baptist denominational structures today.

And yet, these are challenging days for local Baptist associations. In an effort to be the best possible stewards of their time and resources, Southern Baptist church leaders are constantly evaluating the networks and organizations with which they choose to partner in order to fulfill the Great Commission, and associations are not exempt from that evaluation. In fact, there are some who question if the day in which associations are a relevant and vital partner to local churches has passed. In other words, while it is undeniable that associations have had a long and prosperous past, there are some who question if they have a promising future.

When I accepted the call to serve as an Associational Director of Missions, it is safe to say that I did not fully grasp the strengths of the association nor its challenges. During my tenure, I have had the opportunity to observe the good, the bad, and the ugly components of my own association as well as many others. And yet, there is no doubt that I have grown in my appreciation of the local Baptist association during that time. When the association is functioning effectively, it is still a glorious manifestation of a gospel partnership.

The Need For Study

As you can see, I personally believe that Baptist associations can still be a relevant ministry partner to the local church. However, I recognize that not everyone shares that opinion. In order to gain a better understanding of how Southern Baptist church leaders truly view the effectiveness and relevancy of associations, an anonymous survey was conducted in April 2017. The survey consisted of two sets of questions: one for church leaders and one for associational leaders. Both groups responded to similar questions in four categories:

Category #1: General **demographics** (age, geographic setting, etc.)

Category #2: **Involvement** of churches and pastors in the local association

Category #3: **Perceived value** of the local Baptist association

Category #4: **Financial support** of the local Baptist association

Results Of The Study

Over the course of a two-week period, 448 church leaders and associational leaders from all across the Southern Baptist Convention responded to the survey. Out of the 448 respondents:

- **159** were Senior Pastors (36%)
- **116** were Directors of Missions (26%)
- **42** were Church Staff Members (9%)
- **37** were Laymembers (8%)
- **37** were “Other” Respondents (8%)
- **33** were Denominational/Agency Staff (7%)
- **8** were Seminary Students (2%)
- **7** were Church Planters (2%)
- Another 2% did not indicate their ministry role

The responses were analyzed, and the end result of all of the analysis was a massive 208-page report. To spare you the time and significant effort it would take to read through the entire report, the following pages provide a summary of the most significant findings.

After a description of each of the findings, a brief section is also included that identifies a potential pathway that associational leaders can follow to lead their associations to remain a relevant and vital partner in the local church’s fulfillment of the Great Commission for many years to come. While each church and association must minister in its unique context, the research provides some common strategic elements that should be present in most (if not all) local Baptist associations.

Key Findings

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

Romans 12:3

While there are many interesting noteworthy items from the full report, the ten most significant findings are described below. The findings are not listed in any particular order of priority or importance. Rather, they are listed in order of logical progression. In other words, most of the findings will relate in some way to the finding that precedes it and the finding that follows it.

Finding #1: Associational Strengths

Associations are most effective in providing fellowship and networking opportunities among the churches in their geographic area. When asked how the association has effectively served its member churches within the past three years, the most popular answer among church leaders (58.4%) and associational leaders (87.1%) was “Fellowship/Networking” opportunities. Another popular answer among both church leaders (46.2%) and associational leaders (79.3%) was “Leadership Development & Training” opportunities.

Finding #2: How Churches Participate

According to the associational leaders who were surveyed, the most common way that churches participate in their association is through monthly financial contributions (75.7% of churches), followed by submitting an Annual Church Profile (73.7%). Slightly more than half of SBC churches are represented at their association’s annual meeting (57.3%) and 53.2% of SBC churches participate in events offered by their local association. The least common way that churches participate in their association is through attending regular Executive Board meetings (39.5%).

Method of Participation	Average %
Churches Financially Supporting Association Monthly	75.7%
Churches Submitted Annual Church Profile	73.7%
Churches Attending Association’s Annual Meeting	57.3%
Churches Actively Participating in Associational Events	53.2%
Churches Attending Executive Board Meetings	39.5%
Overall Participation	60.0%

Finding #3: Association Size & Financial Contributions

The research also showed that there was an "inverse relationship" between the size of the association and the percentage of churches that financially contribute to the association. In other words, smaller associations have a higher percentage of their churches that financially contribute to the association than larger associations. Consider the following percentages of churches that financially contribute to their association based upon association size:

Association Size	% of Churches Who Financially Contribute
Under 30 churches	86.3%
30-49 churches	81.3%
50-74 churches	70.4%
75+ churches	61.8%
All Associations	75.7%

Finding #4: Lack of Perceived Value

The research revealed that there is a significant number of church leaders who do not perceive their local association as valuable to their church. This finding was confirmed in several different ways on the survey:

- When asked to describe the most exciting aspect of their local Baptist association, the most popular answer among church leaders was "Nothing".
- When asked to describe the most frustrating aspect of their local Baptist association, two of the three most popular answers among church leaders were "The association is irrelevant" and "Lack of association strategy, vision, or purpose."
- Only **65.6%** of church leaders think that their local Baptist association is a strategic partner in helping their church to fulfill the Great Commission, meaning that nearly 1 out of every 3 church leaders do not think so.
- Only **58.5%** of church leaders think that their church would be negatively affected if their local Baptist association ceased to exist.
- **73.8%** of church leaders think that their local Baptist association is a good kingdom investment of their church's financial resources.

Finding #5: Perceived Value Influences Involvement

While correlation doesn't necessarily mean causation, it is safe to conclude from the research that the primary factor which influences the church and/or pastor's involvement in the association is the perceived value of the association. For example, when asked to identify the most exciting aspect of their association, you will recall from the previous finding that the most popular response was "Nothing". However, when the responses to this question are separated based upon the church involvement level, the responses reveal some differences:

- None of the church leaders from churches that identified themselves as “Extremely/Very involved” in the association responded that “Nothing” excited them.
- “Nothing” was the most popular response among those church leaders from churches that identified themselves as “Moderately involved”, although it wasn’t much higher than the second most popular response.
- “Nothing” was the most popular response among those church leaders from churches that identified themselves as “Slightly/Not at all involved”, and there wasn’t a close second.

This same observation was found in many other questions as well. When asked if the association was a strategic partner with the local church in fulfilling the Great Commission:

- **90.3%** of church leaders from Extremely/Very involved churches said yes.
- **66.3%** of church leaders from Moderately involved churches said yes.
- **39.1%** of church leaders from Slightly/Not at all involved churches said yes.

When asked if their church would be negatively affected if their local Baptist association were to cease to exist:

- **84.8%** of church leaders from Extremely/Very involved churches said yes.
- **66.3%** of church leaders from Moderately involved churches said yes.
- **31.0%** of church leaders from Slightly/Not at all involved churches said yes.

When asked if financially contributing to their local Baptist association was a good kingdom investment:

- **92.8%** of church leaders from Extremely/Very involved churches said yes.
- **74.1%** of church leaders from Moderately involved churches said yes.
- **54.2%** of church leaders from Slightly/Not at all involved churches said yes.

From this research, it is clear that while it is not the sole factor, the perceived value of the association is the primary factor in determining the level of involvement of the church in the association.

It is worth noting that other contributing factors for a church’s level of involvement do include geographic setting and average worship attendance (see Finding #3). In regards to geographic setting, churches are slightly more involved in rural/small town associations than urban/suburban associations. In regards to worship attendance, churches with less than 50 and churches with more than 500 in attendance are least likely to be involved in the local Baptist association. But again, the primary determining factor is the perceived value of the association.

Finding #6: Perception vs. Reality

There are significant differences in regards to the perceived value and effectiveness of the association between church leaders and associational leaders. Both groups were asked to identify if the association had effectively served the churches in the past 3 years in any of the following ways: (1) Church planting, (2) Counseling services, (3) Disaster relief, (4) Fellowship/networking, (5) Leadership development, (6) Local evangelism/community engagement, (7) Men’s ministries, (8) Mission trip planning, (9) Other, (10) Pastor Search Committee training, (11) Stewardship resources/training, (12) Women’s ministries, and (13) None of the above.

In each of these possible responses, the percentage of associational leaders who said yes was higher for twelve of the thirteen possibilities. The only possible response in which a higher percentage of church leaders said yes was “None of the above”. On average, 33.7% more associational leaders said yes to each possibility than the church leaders. The following chart breaks this down:

Category	% of Church Leaders	% of Associational Leaders	Difference
Pastor Search Committee Training	19.4%	87.1%	-67.7%
Church Planting	13.6%	63.8%	-50.2%
Disaster Relief	15.1%	63.8%	-48.7%
Mission Trip Planning	24.4%	71.6%	-47.2%
Counseling Services	15.1%	57.8%	-42.7%
Local Evangelism/Community Engagement	29.7%	71.6%	-41.9%
Women’s Ministries	19.4%	56.9%	-37.5%
Leadership Development & Training	46.2%	79.3%	-33.1%
Fellowship/Networking	58.4%	87.1%	-28.7%
Men’s Ministries	11.1%	33.6%	-22.5%
Stewardship Resources/Training	12.5%	33.6%	-21.1%
Other	12.5%	27.6%	-15.1%
None of the Above	19.7%	1.7%	18.0%

Finding #7: Involved Pastors = Involved Churches

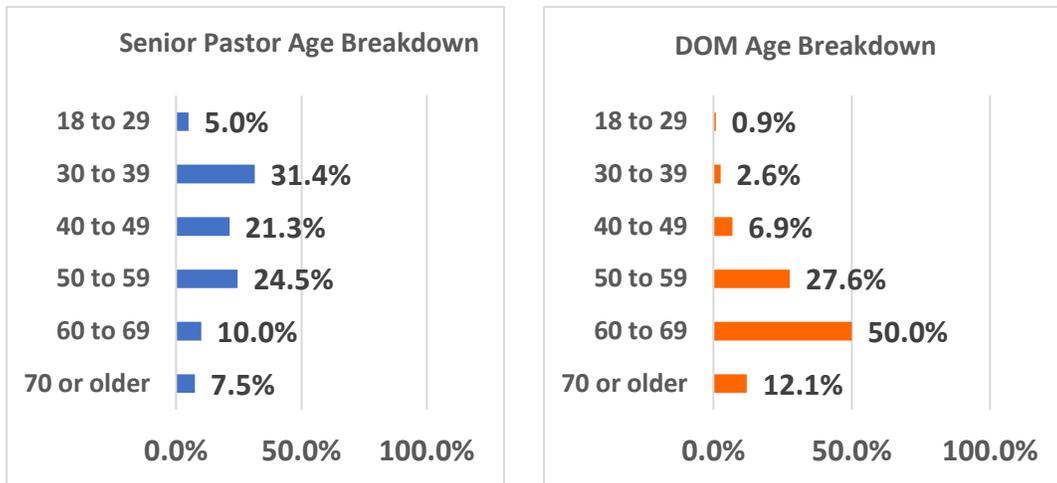
The Senior Pastor’s personal involvement in the local Baptist association corresponds to the church’s level of involvement in the association. If the Senior Pastor sees value and participates in the association personally, his church is more likely to be active as well. If the Senior Pastor does not see value in the association and does not participate, his church is less likely to participate as well.

On a scale of 1-100 (1=lowest, 100=highest), the average personal involvement level of Senior Pastors is:

- **87.25** in churches that are Extremely/Very involved.
- **58.50** in churches that are Moderately involved.
- **33.50** in churches that are Slightly/Not at all involved.

Finding #8: Significant Age Difference

Generally speaking, associational leaders are older than church leaders. According to the research, nearly 6 out of 10 Senior Pastors (57.7%) surveyed were under the age of 50 while only 1 out of 10 Associational Directors of Missions (10.4%) were under the age of 50. The graphs below show that the majority of DOMs are between the ages of 60 to 69 while most Senior Pastors are between the ages of 30 to 59.



Finding #9: Desire to Cooperate/Partner

Church leaders are definitely in favor of the opportunities for cooperative ministry that local associations provide. When asked to identify the most exciting aspect of their local Baptist association, the first post revealed that the most popular answer was “Nothing”. However, the second most popular answer was “Cooperative Efforts”. Therefore, the belief that we can accomplish more together for God’s kingdom than we can do on our own is alive and well in our churches and associations.

Finding #10: Cautious Optimism

The research showed that most church leaders do believe that associations can have a future. That is, if significant changes are made. When church leaders were asked what would motivate them or their church to increase their church’s financial contributions to the association, the top two answers were: (1) “Clear Vision/Strategy” and (2) “Demonstrated Relevance”. When asked to describe the most exciting aspect of their local Baptist association, several church leaders expressed excitement about a new Director of Missions or a new vision for the association.

Summary of Key Findings

The ten key findings are summarized below:

1. Fellowship/networking and leadership development are the most effective ministries of most associations.
2. The most popular method of participation in the association by churches is through financial contributions.
3. Smaller associations tend to have a higher percentage of churches who financially contribute compared to larger associations.
4. At least one third of church leaders do not perceive their association as valuable to their church.
5. The perceived value of the association influences an individual church's level of participation and involvement.
6. Associational leaders have a higher perception of the association's ministry effectiveness compared to church leaders.
7. Churches that are involved in the work of the association most likely have pastors who are involved in the work of the association.
8. Most DOMs are significantly older than most Senior Pastors.
9. There is still a strong desire among church leaders to partner together with other churches to fulfill the Great Commission.
10. Church leaders still believe associations can be effective, if significant changes are made.

Potential Pathway to Effective Associations

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

Proverbs 29:18 (KJV)

When asked to identify the one thing that most frustrated them about their local Baptist association, church leaders and associational leaders agreed: “Lack of Church Participation”. While lack of church participation is certainly an issue, it is only a symptom of the real problem. To discover the source of the problem, I had to dig deeper into the data. What I discovered was fascinating.

When just focusing on the Senior Pastors who responded to the survey, “Lack of Church Participation” was:

- The #1 frustration for Senior Pastors who are Extremely/Very involved in the association.
- Tied for the #1 frustration for Senior Pastors who are Moderately involved in the association.
- The #12 frustration for Senior Pastors who are Slightly/Not at all involved in the association.

A lack of church participation is a frustration for those who *do* participate, but not so much for those who *do not* participate. In order to discover why those churches don’t participate, we need to find out what frustrates them as well as what would motivate them to increase their participation and giving to the association.

When asked about their frustrations, the most popular answer among Senior Pastors who are Moderately, Slightly, or Not at all involved was “Lack of strategy, vision, or purpose.” When asked what would motivate their church to increase their financial gifts to the association, the most popular answer among all church leaders (especially in churches that are Moderately, Slightly, or Not at all involved) was “A clear vision and strategy.”

While there are other findings from the report that would further support this observation, the above examples should be sufficient to show that a lack of involvement is primarily due to a lack of perceived value in the association. And the lack of perceived value is due to a lack of a clear vision and strategy for the association.

Based upon this research, I believe that irrelevant and struggling associations can become effective once more and relevant associations can continue to thrive by understanding the following pathway: ***a clear associational visionary strategy leads to an increased perceived value and relevancy in the association which leads to an increased level of participation in the association which leads to greater kingdom impact both locally and globally.***

Or, to state it more simply:

Visionary Strategy → Perceived Value → Church Involvement → Kingdom Impact

Out of the four markers along this path, associational leaders really only have control over the first marker. The other three are dependent upon the development and implementation of a clear visionary strategy. It's kind of like a domino effect. If an association has a clear visionary strategy and begins to implement that strategy, it will lead to an increase in the perceived value/relevance among church leaders which will lead to increased church involvement in the cooperative efforts of the association which ultimately leads to greater kingdom impact. If an association lacks implementation of a visionary strategy, the perceived value/relevance among church leaders will decline which will lead to decreased church involvement which will ultimately lead to less kingdom impact.

Essential Elements of Associational Strategy

“Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.”

Proverbs 16:3

So, the big question is if the research revealed any particular elements that need to be included in the strategy of most (if not all) Baptist associations? While it is certainly true that every association’s context is unique, the research did reveal a few common elements that church leaders want to see as a part of their association’s overall strategy, regardless of context.

Element #1: Local Evangelism and Community Engagement Strategy

As has been previously reported, when asked what would motivate them to increase their church’s financial gifts to their local Baptist association, the most popular response among church leaders was “A clear vision/strategy”. This same question revealed that the most desired element of that strategy is for the association to increase their local evangelism and community engagement efforts. The details of how that looks for each association will be unique in each context, but church leaders want to partner with other churches to engage their local communities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. No one is better suited to coordinate those local efforts than the local Baptist association.

Element #2: Local Church Planting Strategy

Church leaders indicated that the association should lead, assist, or at least support local church planting efforts. While a small number of church leaders indicated that they wanted their association to spend *less* time in local church planting efforts, a far greater number of church leaders indicated that they wanted their association to spend *more* time in local church planting efforts. Most church leaders wanted to see their association take the lead on the establishment of new churches in their geographic area, while others indicated that they wanted their association to be (at the very least) supportive of local church planting efforts. Again, the details of this strategy will vary from association to association, but the research reveals that an element of local church planting should be included.

Element #3: Missions Strategy

In addition to local evangelistic efforts, church leaders indicated that they want their local association to assist in planning and coordinating missions opportunities beyond their local geographic region. This could include the development of an associational Acts 1:8 missions strategy in which associational churches can partner together to pray, give, and go on mission both locally and globally.

Element #4: Leadership Development Strategy

As has been previously reported, one of the most effective ways that local associations serve their member churches is through providing leadership development opportunities. It should be noted that the research did not indicate that associations need to add a leadership development element to their overall strategy, but this is most likely due to the fact that many associations already have a leadership development component. However, associational leaders need to make sure that they continue to provide opportunities to equip, train, and strengthen church leaders.

Element #5: Communication Strategy

When asked to identify what would motivate them to increase their church's financial contributions to the association, one of the most popular answers was an increased awareness of the association's ministry efforts among church leaders and lay members alike. Therefore, associational leaders must not only implement a clear strategy for helping churches partner together to advance God's kingdom, they must share the message of how they are doing so through multiple communication channels. Social media, newsletters, brochures, websites, and onsite church visits are just a few of the ways that associations can communicate with their member churches.

Possibly More, Not Less

It is certainly possible that local Baptist associations can include more elements in their strategy than those listed above, but they shouldn't include less. The research shows that these elements are what church leaders are saying that they want their association to provide. If associational leaders (including myself) want to increase our perceived value, church involvement, and kingdom impact, we would be wise to listen.



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