**Highlights of *Repaving the Road: The Future of Baptist Associations***

Josh Ellis, Union Baptist Association, Houston, TX, 2012

***“The passage of the Baby Boomers will mark the end of an era, the end of the membership association as we know it” (Sladek, 2011, para. 8).***

***“We are slowly dying, but refuse to admit that we are even sick” (Akin, 2009, p. 271).***

***“If denominations are to continue, it will largely depend on how their existence can be justified in relation to local churches and mission Dei: can they enable the former, promote the latter, and be subject to both?” (Stetzter, 2011, p. 38).***

***“If associations are going to have a chance to thrive, we must be able to question our community’s most orthodox beliefs” (de Cagna, 2012, slide 7).***

***“If our conventions are not careful to take into account a shift in the landscape, we shall find ourselves inessential after all” (Chapman, 2009, p. 241).***

Charging DOMs with the task of leading change is akin to asking them to lead a wide array of constituencies. They must simultaneously cast a vision their churches will endorse through formal permission and active participation, operationalize the vision in the form of a plan their paid and volunteer staff can implement, and align with or influence outside stakeholder agencies enough to maintain support through funding and other forms of support (p.10).

To some, it would seem presumptuous to consider the future of Baptist associations before considering the future of the SBC. While it is not an assumption of this study that Baptist associations require the existence of the SBC to ensure their own survival, it is nonetheless beneficial to present issues relating to the future of the SBC, as there is a significant correlation to some of these issues and the future of associations.

A common approach in forecasting the existence of something is to consider the consequences of inexistence. Junker (Rolfes, Oliveri, McNulty, & Junker, 2010) ascertain the voids that might be present in a world without secular associations: advocacy (mostly in the form of legislative lobbyists); education and certifications; awards and recognitions programs; and networking. Junker goes on to point out that the educational role currently performed by associations might be filled by for-profit companies and universities, as well as informal gatherings of smaller groups. However, formal accreditation and certification of “small subspecialties in larger fields or professions that are too small to offer much profit opportunity might find themselves missing the education their associations formerly provided” (Rolfes et al., 2010, para. 61). An online commentator of Rolfes et al., (2010) remarked that the functions of the association would carry on beyond the existence of associations, leaving a world without associations being merely a world without “associational buildings and hierarchies” (para. 68).

Just as Rogers’ (2003) diffusion of innovation curve demonstrates that innovations have life cycles, advances in social thought and technology have prompted the question of whether large institutions are now antiquated. Gallup has measured American confidence in various institutions since the early 1970s. Americans who felt significantly high degrees of confidence in organized religion fell from 65% in 1979 to 52% in 2009. Though the drop is notable, only 38% had high levels of confidence in public schools and 22% had confidence in banks; other business entities, as well as Congress, ranked even lower. In fact, only the police, small business, and the military were rated higher than organized religion (Saad, 2009). Confidence in particular institutions affects individuals’ willingness to be associated with those same

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“People today do not want to be categorized or identified with major institutions, and this invariably affects the religious sector as well” (Lindsay, 2011, p. 63).

The SBC suffers from negative feelings associated with the name “Southern Baptist.” Confirming earlier research (Stetzer & Stanley, 2006), respondents to a recent Lifeway Research study (2011) were asked:

"If you were considering visiting or joining a church, would knowing that the church was Southern Baptist impact your decision positively, negatively or have no impact?" Forty-four percent of Americans indicate that knowing a church is Southern Baptist would negatively impact their decision to visit or join the church, 36 percent say it would have no impact and 10 percent say it would positively impact their decision (para. 9) (pp. 11-12).

The restructuring of American Christianity along horizontal lines rather than in vertical silos such as denominations serves as both a comfort and a warning to the future of denominations. As Stetzer (2011) points out, “Like- minded people will always find a way to associate with each other” (p. 41). However, current associations and networks cross denominational lines with such regularity that if a particular denomination does not meet the needs of constituents, those people will not hesitate to seek out other networks of like-minded people.

A tempting target to blame for the decline of denominations is younger evangelicals and their apparent lack of denominational loyalty. More will be presented on this topic, but Stetzer (2011) reminds his readers that younger leaders are not running from denominations just to be free spirits, but rather they are “looking for rootedness in a fragmented society” (p. 44). Stetzer believes that younger leaders will find that stability in denominations, yet another reason to believe in their future existence.

Stetzer’s (2011) third reason to believe in the future existence of denominations is the wealth of experience, history, and solidarity that denominations can provide—particularly in matters of orthodoxy—to those without a stable network.

Denominations and their leaders have weathered many storms over the decades and even centuries. Denominations have more experience at handling conflict, engaging in mission, and fighting through crisis. While none of these resources guarantee the survival of a member church, they do increase the possibilities (p. 44).

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Lindsay (2011) adds that institutions have inherent accountability systems due to the membership protecting and self-policing the community, providing “vital buffers against our worst instincts” (p. 71). Lindsay also argues that institutions provide “convening power” or the ability to network people, and that they provide “institutional gravitas” (p. 73) to open doors and enable organizations to navigate and operate more effectively in a highly complex world.

Perhaps more than at any point in their history, denominations must make an argument to justify their existence. Networking, a sense of stability, and an orthodox community are not enough reasons to justify the immense bureaucracy that is the SBC. However, that same bureaucracy can be a strength over less robust networks. Denominations, not networks or individual churches, are responsible for the majority of world missions and church planting (Stetzer, 2011). Provided that denominations maintain a clear sense of outward-focused priorities and operate with the goal of helping churches accomplish the Great Commission, the *missio Dei* remains the standard by which effectiveness is measured. “Until we are assured of the role of denominations within the framework of God’s mission, we should assume them to flexible, malleable, and possibly even temporary” (Stetzter, 2011, p. 38).

Denominations cannot hide from the declining attendance numbers and the challenge of collaborating with future generations. The external pressures motivating denominations to clarify and operate according to their stated values may exactly what is needed to begin a change process: a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996).

Now is the time for leaders of all conventions to concentrate upon priorities of their organization’s very existence and determine that more shall be done for less. To fail to do so will bring the disadvantages of smaller budgets and reduced ministries. Now is the time to maximize our resources by creating leaner organizations and eliminating wasteful expenditures for failing and static ministries and programs. (Chapman, 2009, p. 173)

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Chapman (2009) suggests that the time is right for considerable change within the SBC by asking difficult questions and doubting traditionally held assumptions. Day (2009) alludes to the need for more streamlined organizations and to the enormous cost involved in maintaining subsidiary institutions as reasons that state conventions are ending long-time partnership or ownership of camps, colleges, hospitals, student centers, and missionary centers. In the not-too-distant past, conversations about whether to continue subsidiary ministries may have revolved around the issue of available funds, prompting a theological response and encouraging people to maintain an abundance mentality. Contemporary discussions are more likely concerned with purpose, and whether the ownership of such organizations distracts from the entity’s primary mission or whether subsidiary funds are not better spent in the service of more primary goals. Regardless of the reason, the end result is a streamlined structure supporting an outward, missional focus, which prevents the organization from turning inward and inadvertently elevating self-preservation to the position of highest priority (Stetzer, 2011).

The structure of the SBC prompts additional questions beyond the size of the bureaucracy. As an introduction to those questions, some background statistics might prove useful. The majority of SBC churches run less than 200 in attendance, but the majority of members attend larger churches (Rainer, 2012), even though churches having more than 1,000 in attendance constitute about 1.5% of all SBC churches (Rainer, 2011). Trends indicate that the disparity of membership in smaller churches versus larger churches is growing, creating the possibility that numerous small SBC churches will disappear in the next few decades. National entities, state conventions, and the majority of local associations all employ people proficient in similar tasks, something Day (2009) refers to as “duplicated effort syndrome.” (p. 231). The majority of leadership positions at associations, state conventions, and the national entities are held by white males over 55 years of age.

The most significant factor regarding the future of the SBC is demographic: Baptists, particularly those in charge, are not getting any younger. The average age of SBC pastors is approximately 48 years old (2010 Lifeway Compensation Study, 2011). An unsubstantiated yet commonly repeated fact within church consultant circles states a church will experience growth in the age demographic +/-7 years of the leader’s age. If the same were true for the SBC convention, should it surprise anyone that Millennials seem to be missing from our churches? Why are Millennials so underrepresented in the pews and pastorates of SBC churches?

The Millennial Influence

The Millennial influence on the future of associations is not just a concern of the SBC, but to secular associations as well. Sladek (2011) calls the convergence of three trends—demographic shifts, technological advancements, and the changing economy—the “three-headed monster” which threatens the future of associations and specifically points to the retirement of the Baby Boomer generation as “the end of the membership association as we know it.” A review of the literature indicates the predominant fear concerning the Millennial impact on the future of the association relates to the notion that Millennials are anti-institution, and therefore would not be interested in association membership. A more precise description of the prevailing Millennial approach to institutions is one of caution: Millennials are not joining institutions just for the sake of being able to call themselves members of something.

The trends alluded to by Brooks also align with research regarding the Millennial generation. As a generation, Millennials are extremely confident in their ability to make a difference in the world (Elmore, 2010). Millennials have the highest generational rate of volunteerism (Tapscott, 2009), and 75% say they want to serve others (Rainer & Rainer, 2011, p. 166). Millennials are cause-driven, loyal to people over institutions, ambitious, dependent on technology, highly educated, focused on leveraging technology to enable their pursuits, and open to change (Millennials: A portait of Generation Next, 2010; Rainer & Rainer, 2011; Tapscott, 2009).

With confidence comes expectation. Millennials expect to make substantial contributions in everything they do, and they expect the meetings they attend to cater to their needs (Fenich, Scott-Halsell, & Ogbeide, 2012). The Millennial generation has grown up in the age of the blog comment, the online rating, and Internet-based instant publishing. If Millennials like a product, they will promote it through social media. Conversely, they will use the same social media to spread negative publicity when the feel it is warranted. Institutions are slow to incorporate the sense of immediacy that Millennials expect, and conversely, Millennials are prone to impatience. Millennials are accustomed to leading through informal ways such as influence, and they desire that same leadership in their work activities. Rainer and Rainer (2011) state that 85% of Millennials felt they had unused potential at their jobs. In associations, where participation is voluntary, similar feelings will result in Millennials withdrawing their participation or ending their membership.

Dockery (2011) blames the likelihood of a person to change denominations during their lifetimes—rising from 33% in 1985 to 60% in 2009 (p. 22)—on two familiar victims: decline in denominational loyalty and affinity to special interest groups or parachurch organizations.

Loyalty is a subjective concept, and systems dependent on loyalty as the basis for engagement are doomed. Furthermore, if loyalty is treated like a continuum of behaviors and attitudes, it is difficult to measure. Can a church affiliated with Acts 29 that also gives to the CP but never attends an association or convention meeting be labeled disloyal, as opposed to a self- labeled “loyal” church that leads a charge for a new state convention, directs their CP giving to only a particular school, and attends every local association and national convention meeting?

Due to its subjective nature, loyalty is not a reliable driver for the future of associations.

There is an important distinction between a prediction of the future and a forecast of the future. Predictions are guarantees from the guarantor that a certain thing will happen. A forecast is an examination of the components determining change—drivers—and a range of estimates in the form of scenarios describing how different quantities of the drivers will interact to form different future outcomes. If one has working knowledge of the forces shaping change, one can better anticipate the outcomes. Preparing for the future as a range of options rather than a string of specific events allows people and organizations to better adapt to reality as it unfolds. As a result, scenario planners attempt to provide their clients with a mix of certainty and uncertainty, creating novel stories that allow their clients to imagine a wide range of futures and plan accordingly.

Trends are only one form of drivers that effect the future (Hines & Bishop, 2006). Long-0range futurists consider the interaction of trends in increments of 10, 20, or even 50 years. There are enormous complexities when forecasting a future using such a long time horizon. As the speed of

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information discovery and technological advancement increases, it seems the audience for longer time horizon forecasts grows ever smaller.

The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) (2006) conducted a survey of strategic practices used by associations and found less than 3 percent of the 459 respondents reported using planning horizons of 10 years or more. The majority of respondents reported horizons of two years at most. The ASAE determined traditional “strategic planning” efforts had transitioned to a constant process of adaptation called “strategic evolution” (American Society of Association Executives & The Center for Association Leadership, 2006, p. 3).

Before considering the time horizon most relevant to particular associations, a thought-provoking question may help. “What year is it in your association?” If your association and its members use current technologies, innovative methods, and operate from the perspective of contemporary paradigms, the year in your association is either the same as reality or possibly even a little in the future. In those associations whose members operate in older paradigms for whatever reason, serious effort should be expended to determine how old the mental models are, and what the implications of innovation might be. For instance, in areas of considerable ethnic diversity, if the association is just beginning to see diversity among its members or feel the need for services in languages other than English, the “year” in the association is in the past compared to other associations that have been addressing diversity for years. If the association has members just now considering an entity web page, it is doubtful that reaching them through means of social media will be successful.

There is nothing to fear about bringing the “year” in the association closer to reality, provided that sound leadership is exercised throughout the process. In fact, companies seeking to modernize have an advantage in that companies that modernized before them offer examples of successful and unsuccessful strategies. Those associations living in the current year have no such examples, and must innovate going forward with a higher degree of uncertainty. Leaders should take care to bring associations along at a speed that the members can handle, meaning there is a balance to be found between what the members will not tolerate—and thereby abandon the process—and a speed that is too slow to achieve the desired results. To borrow a horticulture reference, culture and paradigms have deep roots. Rather than leaving some of the old soil intact when moving a plant to a new location, simply pulling a plant out of the ground and attempting to plant it in completely new soil is traumatic to the plant and counter- productive to seeing fruit come from the transition.

Considerable work is done every year to scan the associational environment and discern trends that are shaping the future of associations (Alcorn & Alcorn, 2012; American Society of Association Executives & The Center for Association Leadership, 2001, 2006; Church, 2011; Dixon, n.d.; Drake, 2012; Funk, 2006). While a full treatment of each of the available trends is well beyond the scope of this work, three trends will be explored in depth. The selected trends each have implications to the future of secular and Baptist associations.

**1. The changing purpose of the association 2. Member-driven structures 3. The question of membership**

**The changing purpose of the association**

Perhaps the longest-standing reason for the existence of associations is networking and sharing information (Dixon, n.d.; Measures, 2000). With unique access to front-line practitioners, associations were able to produce resources pertaining to the latest models, approaches, and systems among their members. Associations were at one time the gatekeeper to associational information. Secular associations have also long been entrusted to represent the needs of their members to larger entities such as the government or the media (Dixon, n.d.).

Following the advent of the state and national conventions, Baptist associations were used to channel information from the larger entities to the local churches. Association personnel became representatives for the

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convention and advised churches on how to best use convention material or programs (Measures, 2000). This may still be the case in associations with smaller staffs, those where the staff positions are subsidized by the state or national convention, or where the DOM is an influential player at the state or national level.

Should the contemporary association exist only for networking, its future existence is unstable. However, networking should not be dismissed entirely. The ASAE (2007) produced findings stating that networking still ranked as the highest member benefit among Board members and the third highest among members. The findings suggest that active membership and participation leads to increased satisfaction. When leaders experience greater satisfaction, it may lead to the false assumption that everyone experiences the same level of satisfaction as they do, otherwise termed the “curse of knowledge” (Heath & Heath, 2007, pp. 19-21). When leaders are out of sync with the members, organizational direction may be set to benefit a subset of the membership, even if they are the most engaged members Drake (2012).

Dixon (n.d.) suggests three purposes for the association: thought leadership, community support, and collective action. Baptist associations must also adopt these purposes, even if only as a part of their overall foundation. Finn (2012) suggests that associations focus on “promoting local evangelism and mercy ministries, contextual church planting, church revitalization, gospel- centered fellowship for pastors, and collaborative missions and service opportunities” (para. 7). Other associations have found a niche by providing specialized research and consultation, disaster relief training, and leadership coaching.

Regardless of future strategic decisions regarding the association’s purpose, leaders would do well to remember three things:

**1. Associations are merely one form of networking open to their members.**

Social media outlets, intra-denominational groups, and affinity groups all exist to provide relationships, information, and development to their

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participants. The days of choosing one or two networks to belong to are over.

**2. Associations cannot rely on their roles as guardians of information.**

Internet search engines can provide more information at a faster rate than any person or organization. The Internet has conditioned people to search for free information first, and while content providers continue to search for an economic model whereby they can charge a fee for information, there is frequently a competitor providing the same quality of information for free. Furthermore, when there were fewer curriculum options, churches were considered presumed customers of denominational literature, and associations the presumed pushers of those programs. An ever-expanding array of curriculum options has relegated denominational publishers to the same competition for customers as mainstream publishers.

**3. Geographically-based associations are not the only game in town.**

Baptist associations were once solely responsible for their geographic context, but now state conventions and national entities deploy personnel to interact directly with churches. Some state conventions have done away with local associations. And other types of associations, like those that are affinity-based, have no ties to traditional geographic boundaries. If the SBC ever decides that churches can contribute directly to the CP without state convention channels, it will have profound impacts on the association, both positive and negative.

Chapman (2009) rightly reminds all levels of the SBC that pastors and their churches ultimately drive the changes within the SBC and the priorities of their ministries. It is a regrettable mistake for associations, conventions, or national entities to assume that because they launch a program or designate a need, it will be supported by the churches automatically. Should a squad leader leap from their trench without the support of his squad, that leader will find himself alone in the fight.

Day (2009) enumerates a variety of ways that associations will have to direct their energies to more directly support the day-to-day ministries of their member churches. Day provides several innovative thoughts—some of which will be presented later in this study—regarding the restructuring of the SBC and associations to better accomplish the Kingdom-purposes for which they were founded. Day (2009) also refers to the transition of current DOM responsibilities to a more “catalytic and facilitative leadership role” (p.

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238) that better supports the work of the churches. However, Day (2009) also speaks in extreme terms regarding the association of the future.

If the work of an association, or any cooperative body, consists of the work of the churches, then the ministry of that cooperative body must be focused upon providing the human, financial, and material resources that assist the church in accomplishment of their mission. The association of the future will work hard to resist developing associational programs and ministries. It will resist the ever-present impulse to become a “substitute” for the church. It will resist inviting the churches to support the programs of the association. Instead, it will work hard to generate support and resources that will assist the churches in fulfilling the mission that God has given to them.” (Day, 2009, p. 238)

In the event that all member churches approach their existence with the best theological intentions and methodological strategies, the association would count it joy to assist them in every way. However, what if churches are not aware of the needs around them, or privy to new methods and strategies that have proven successful in other locations? What if the association can rally member churches around a Kingdom-focused cause heretofore ignored? Are associations merely an avenue for resource accumulation by their churches?

Leaders who utilize the motivations of the followers in order to accomplish the shared goals of both the leader and the follower practice transforming leadership (Burns, 1978). As it applies to churches and associations, Burns’ definition seems elementary because it is assumed that both entities want to see the *missio Dei* accomplished. While associations were never intended to be the front-line of ministries, there is a tremendous leadership role to be played. The degree to which associations can balance meeting the explicit needs of their members and influencing them to consider new needs in the future will have considerable bearing on the association’s future efficacy.

The membership-centric model has come under scrutiny in both secular and Baptist circles, though for vastly different reasons. De Cagna (2012) and

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Drake (2012) question the business model implications of secular associations who rely on membership fees for the bulk of their income. Day (2009) alludes to the redundancy within associations and their state conventions, and questions the very need for different entities to exist when they only replicate services. Considering member-driven structures as a driver for the future of associations begs a variety of questions concerning membership in general.

Is a membership-centric business model still a viable model in the future (de Cagna, 2012)?

What is the best member/non-member distinction in terms of content and benefit delivery (Drake, 2012)?

If “collaboration is the new content” (de Cagna, 2012, slide 29), to what degree can associations collaborate with non-members in the production of content beneficial to members and non-members alike?

Regardless of the particular membership structure employed, Alcorn and Alcorn (2012) remind all associations that charging membership dues (or expecting churches to contribute support) before demonstrating the value of the association is a losing formula. “By flipping the construct from “dues to value” to “values to dues” we circumvent the “consumer” experience and gain access to the “co-creator” experience which is more sustainable over the long term” (p. 29). Associations must prove their relevancy and perpetuate their relevancy into the future with no comfort taken in historical relationships. Perpetuating relevancy will come into sharp focus through the scenarios contained in this study.

Scenario Construction

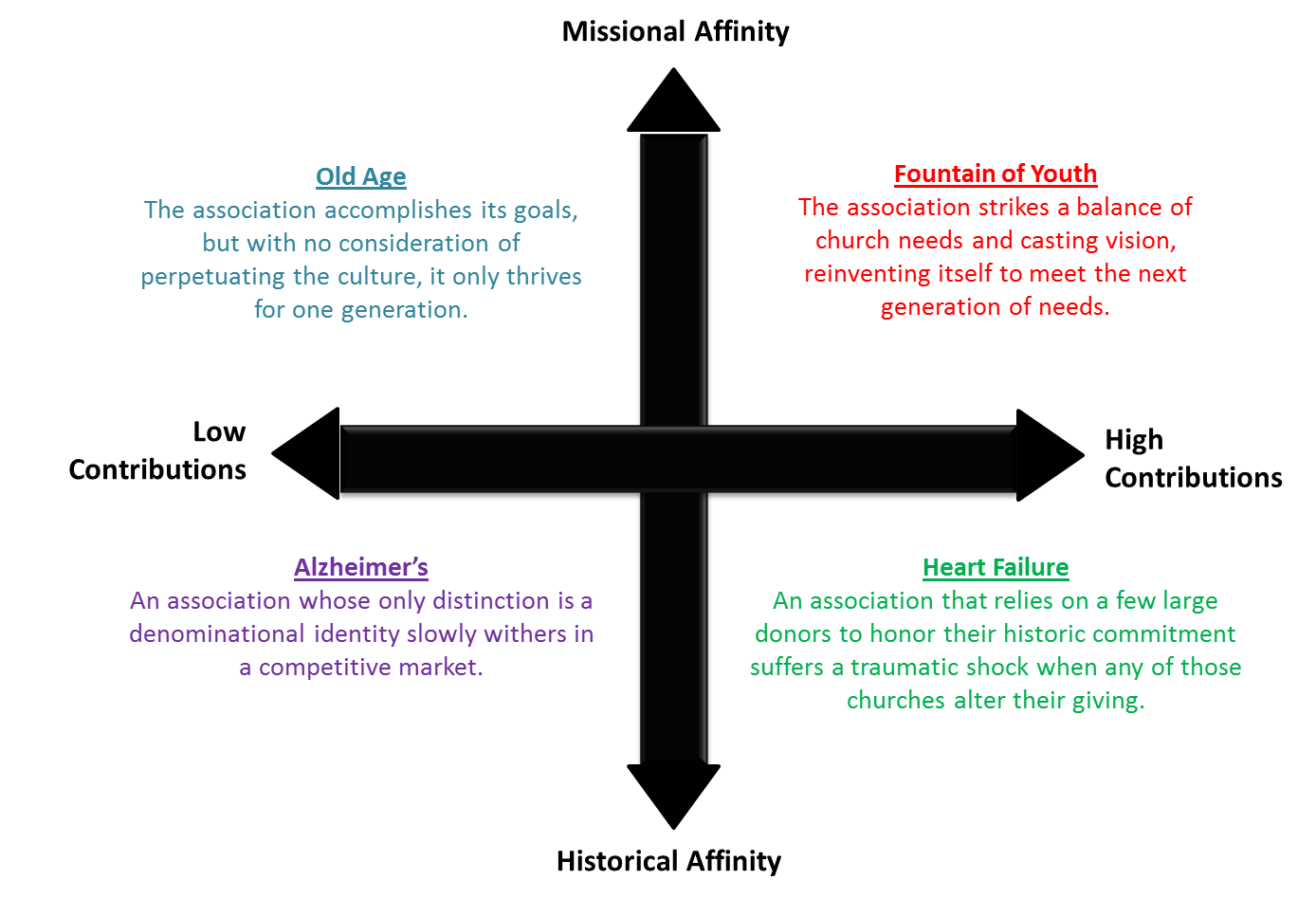
Unlike traditional scenario projects, this project does not hinge on the interaction of the most critical uncertainties, but rather extrapolations of baseline trends (Hines & Bishop, 2006) (Schwartz, 1991) (van der Heijden, Bradfield, Burt, Cairns, & Wright, 2002). The purpose of this scenario set is

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to demonstrate how even the various interaction of baseline drivers leads to different futures. Furthermore, this scenario set paints a disheartening view for the future of the association to prove a point: an interaction of novel, creative, and emerging trends may forecast a different set of futures for the association, but to neglect the contemporary issues that are clearly determining the future now is akin to adding a new coat of paint to a wall supported by termite-infested beams.

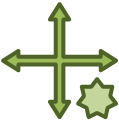
Though the terminology used is exclusively aimed at Baptist associations, secular associations are not immune from the principles that will be exposed through the scenarios. The design of the project has one underlying goal: spur conversation about the future of associations by confronting current reality.

The drivers chosen for this exercise are a slight modification of those trends presented above. Alluding to the membership-centric model, one driver will be based upon why a church chooses to become a member of the association? On one end of the spectrum, the church has an historical affinity to the association because the pastor or leaders have past experience with the denominational structure. On the other end of the spectrum, the church is drawn to the association based on their missional affinity—or agreement, alignment and support of what the association does. The other driver examines levels of contributions given by member churches, contrasted by low contributions and high contributions. By examining the interaction of these two drivers, the scenario set tells four different stories of fictional Baptist Association s.



**Heart Failure**

The Gotham Baptist Association (GBA) is one of the oldest associations in the SBC. It predates some of the state conventions to the west and has enjoyed long relationships with many of the churches that founded the association over 100 years ago. The annual meeting is like attending a family reunion. Some of the messengers are following in the footsteps of their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents who were also messengers to the annual meeting. The association held its first meeting in the sanctuary of First Baptist Church in the presence of seven pastors who served as messengers. During the first ten years of the association, Main



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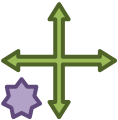
Street Baptist Church and Trinity Baptist Church joined the association. They were once small churches but now both run over 2,000 in attendance.

The GBA is considered a dynamic association by the annual influx of 10-20 new church planters that obtain coaching and assistance from the association. The GBA has led the SBC in new church plants each of the last four years, particularly in ethnic church plants, no small feat for an association outside of the southern region of the U.S. Church plant pastors come to the association building frequently. Some have meetings with consultants, some are learning how to plant new churches themselves, and some are there just to drink coffee, use the free Wi-Fi, and borrow an occasional book from one of the staff members. The association building is small, but a hub of activity from open to close.

The coffee, the Wi-Fi, the plush couches in the lounge, and the state-of-the- art video equipment used by pastors throughout the association are just some of the perks of association membership. The association staff are entrepreneurial thinkers, so they understand that the new pastors lead churches that cannot afford to provide for these services to their pastors independently. Some new church plants contribute $25 a month, but when the church is located in the city slums and ministers to the homeless, that’s a large sum of money to them.

The association could never hope to be the church planting association it is without the support of its longtime members.

**Alzheimer’s**



The Star City Baptist Association (SCBA) is a moderately sized association consisting of about 75 churches, which range in size from 10 to 3,500 in attendance. The association is located in a medium- sized mid-western city, which has steadily grown over the years thanks to local industry and two small colleges. The annual association meeting is well attended, and the association offers a variety of county-wide programs and direct interaction with churches. The DOM has two additional paid staff members and an army of volunteers that cover the administrative tasks of the office and interact with the state convention in the areas of disaster relief, men’s ministry, and the Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU).

The association plants churches, teaches English to immigrants, adopts a local elementary school every year, and conducts an annual clothing drive for the downtown homeless shelter. And all SCBA churches give about the same amount of financial contributions.

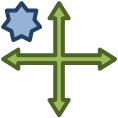
The SCBA had six full-time employees twenty years ago, and four full-time employees just ten years ago. The city’s economy was not crushed by the recent recession, but it has not bounced back to its historic norms either.

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Some doubt that it ever will. SCBA churches felt the impact of the economy, but most continued to give something to the association even through the hard times.

The real problem was the reality that steady declines, even if gradual, all end up in one place. SCBA churches were good churches. There just seemed to be a lot of good things to support out there. Some SCBA churches were self-sufficient missions agencies unto themselves: they were taking mission trips, sending missionaries to the places they visited, and starting fresh- water wells and elementary schools in the places their missionaries served. Some SCBA churches were so responsive to the prompts of their members that they divided their missions budget across more than a dozen worthy causes. Some SCBA churches had so little to give that their continued giving or lack thereof would have minimal impact on the association. At one time, the association was a primary player and influencer for ministries across the city. It just seemed that now the glory days of history were fading further and further away.

**Old Age**



The Central City Baptist Association (CCBA) was known throughout the SBC as a place of innovation, leadership, and Kingdom-wins. It was not one of the largest associations, but it had an above average number of churches, a healthy budget, and three generations of pastors working together across the city. The CCBA avoided significant denominational political dilemmas, and therefore, opened its membership to churches that supported either the 1963 or 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. In a state split by such controversies, the CCBA was seen as a model partner for both of the conventions present in the state. The explicit mission of the association was to help churches reach the lost, start new congregations without specifying the organizational model, and to pour resources into pastors rather than buildings or programs.

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In the latter part of the 1980s, the CCBA intensified its emphasis on church planting. CCBA was one of the first associations to champion the cause of using multiple models and abundant church planting to reach the needs of American cities. As a result, CCBA acted as a kind of recruiter, seeking out talented young leaders among their established member churches and directly from seminaries. CCBA planted more churches in 1989 than half of the state conventions within the SBC during the same year.

Throughout the 1990s, the CCBA focused on leadership development. They started a program called “Leadership Now” which eventually educated pastors on general leadership principles, spiritual disciplines, organizational behavior, systems thinking, strategic planning, and community development. The program was an intense three-year process, but the participants were wildly supportive of the program despite the rigor. The GBA focused on getting its younger leaders through the program, and provided small groups led by established pastors for them to learn from each other and hear the voice of experience. The end result was the equivalent of a Master’s degree in church leadership and served to fill an unknown gap in their seminary education.

The CCBA program achieved many of the intended results. Program graduates were experts at leading teams, casting vision, strategic planning, creativity, modeling authentic discipleship, and implementing practical ministries. Their churches grew and were known for their cultural relevancy and gospel-centered approach. What were once young pastors and church planters in a leadership program had grown up in the association and embraced the association staff as both close friends and mentors. Their churches were models for the next generation of young leaders.

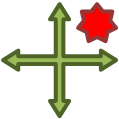
The unintended consequences of the system were not present at first. But one day at staff meeting, as the next year’s budget was being discussed, a staff member happened upon an interesting fact. “Did anyone realize Fred’s church only contributed $500 last year?” The other staff members quickly dismissed the number as a mistake. “That can’t be right, we’ve known Fred for 20 years. He’s been with us since “Leadership Now” was started. He’s been a moderator! His mission budget is almost six figures!”

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After some investigation, not only was the amount of Fred’s church’s contribution proven to be correct, but it was consistent with a ten-year pattern. And Fred was not alone. When contributions from churches were examined, the staff discovered many of the “Leadership Now” graduates were relatively low contributors. The final analysis prompted the staff to conclude that all the training and development given to pastors like Fred birthed a generation of highly competent, creative, missional, entrepreneurial pastors in lock-step with the heart of the association and its vision. Yet those same pastors developed ministries of their own, and between them and the association, no thought was given to how these pastors would be instrumental in helping the association raise up the next generation of pastors. The association played a tremendous role in producing a single generation of world-changing churches. But now the association had simply outlived its usefulness, a victim of the organizational life cycle.

**Fountain of Youth**

Making Celebration Church the setting for the annual meeting was a perfect choice. The sanctuary seating capacity of 800 was filled to capacity. The brightly colored stage was fully lit, and there was a party atmosphere in the air. Yes, this is the annual meeting for a Baptist association.



But, it wasn’t just any annual meeting. This was the 150th year of the association’s existence, and four generations of pastors, along with people from their staff congregations, crowded into both levels of the building to join in the celebration. There was only one item on the business agenda: passing a resolution celebrating all that the churches of the Metropolis Baptist Association (MBA) had accomplished together over a century and a half. The rest of the time was for worship, speeches, slide shows, and fellowship.

The DOM allows his mind to wander as he glances over the crowd. The first thing he notices is retired pastors sitting among established and younger pastors. He smiles. MBA pastors naturally gather by their cross-generational cohort as if it was the most normal thing in the world. Those men have breathed life and spoken truth into each other, seeing past methodological—and sometimes even theological—differences in an effort to grow healthy churches that are in place to reach the city and meet the needs of people. Pockets of ethnic pastors gather together from over 50 language groups. Their “grandchildren,” the third generation ethnic pastors who all have ethnic names but English fluency, cluster in the front right of the sanctuary. Most of them are proudly wearing their “MUTTS” t-shirts, the moniker they chose to describe their unique cross-cultural ministry niche.

The DOM knows he doesn’t deserve any credit for the last thirty years of MBA’s success. After all, he’s only been on the job for three years. But each of the leadership council pastors include him among the men sitting on the opposite side of the stage: the last five DOMs to lead the MBA. Together, the six of them created an ongoing culture of innovation, collaboration, spiritual and relational vitality, and an enduring sense of unity within the association.

Over the years, the programs have changed as the needs of the churches have changed. The association followed some of the convention’s trends, one decade focusing on healthy churches and the decade before focusing on church growth. In other times, the association cast a vision and called for approaches years ahead of anyone else in the convention. MBA had trained leaders and encouraged those leaders to take associational leadership positions and mentor other pastors.

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Wildcards are events that have a low probability but a very high impact. Wildcards differ from traditional leading indicators in two substantial ways: they need not be events or variables, and they most often signal a change in conditions requiring a new set of scenarios whereas leading indicators signal the increased likelihood of a particular scenario. While wildcards may strain

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What if?

the limits of plausibility in some scenarios, they would nonetheless be significant “game-changing” events should they occur. Some of these events are already happening in limited contexts, but if the ideas were to become more mainstream, they would increase the likelihood of certain future possibilities.

Wildcards to be watching for:

* Associations merging to either become regional associations or quasi-state conventions.
* Churches affiliating with associations outside of their immediate geographic context (Day, 2009)
* Current networks becoming formal denominations
* Baptist associations choosing not to partner with any state  conventions
* Baptist associations choosing not to partner with the SBC
* CP funds channeled directly to associations
* State conventions downsizing into regional bodies (Day, 2009)
* Merging state conventions and local associations to reduce  redundancy
* Associations delegating successful programs/initiatives to local churches  Scenarios provide a mechanism to imagine the consequences of particular interactions between drivers. Wildcards are most often change agents that happen outside an organization that in turn require significant adaptation from the organization. Taking a proactive approach, asking “what if” questions allows the asker to envision instituting changes and then forecasting the results of those changes rather than having to react to outside forces. The key to using “what if” questions is allowing the questions a chance to breath- do not dismiss them too soon or try to

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deduce their plausibility. Allow for the possibilities presented by the questions, and then consider the repercussions. “What if” questions are a simple way to imagine a future full of possibilities.

**What if... non-denominational churches affiliated with associations?**

**What if... associations had tiers of membership corresponding to tiers of services rendered?**

**What if... associations opened their leadership councils to 25% non-Baptist members, to ensure cross-denominational collaboration?**

**What if... participation was valued above monetary contribution? Relying on the thought that connection breeds contributions, member churches would be encouraged to participate above all else. The "least-valued" member churches are those that only send a check.**

**What if... participation in association life was required for membership?**

**What if... seminaries offered M.Div. or D.Min. degrees with a specialization in associational management?**

**What if... apprenticeship programs existed for aspiring association leaders?**

**“What if... associations had access to a pipeline of staff talent composed of individuals who are well-trained, acquainted with the association world and had temperaments conducive to success in this profession?” (Alcorn & Alcorn, 2012, p. 21).**

Nonetheless, associational leaders should

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consider the following macro-level strategies relevant to a wide range of associational scenarios.

**Prioritize thought leadership and sense-making** (Drake, 2012; Fabian, 2008; MCI Benelux SA, 2010).

In the information age, possessing information is less important than analyzing data, packaging the information, and making it easier to leverage. Any search engine can gather information, but associations can position themselves as the experts to turn to when their customers want to ask, “Now what does this mean?”

**Raise the status of the next generation** (MCI Benelux SA, 2010; Rolfes et al., 2010, Stetzer, 2004).

The next generation of leaders do not want to be placated, they want to be valued and they want to contribute. Next generation leaders need positions of leadership that offer real opportunities to influence the association and learn up close from others in leadership positions. Millennials have grown up in a world interwoven with technology, therefore if the association feels like going back in time 20 years, Millennials will not be involved. Rolfes et al. (2010) present the idea of mobile-based volunteerism that relates directly to Millennials who are looking to leverage technology and squeeze te most out of their work time in order to protect their non-work time. Associations must seek out, appreciate, and develop the talent of the next generation, not merely seek to fold younger members into existing paradigms.

**Emphasize “multi-“** (Drake, 2012; Fabian, 2008; Rolfes et al., 2010). Wherever there is diversity in the association, cater to it in some way. Offerings may need to be provided in multiple languages. Messages will need to be consistent and constant across multiple forms of media. Build systems whereby members from different generations can learn from each other. Offer programs targeting multiple audiences. Seek collaboration and participation from a diverse crowd consisting of members and non-members alike.

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**Conclusion**

**Provide community** (Fabian, 2008; MCI Benelux SA, 2010). Associations need to be places of safety for practitioners. Networking is a foundational purpose for associations, but members also need opportunities to share war stories, compare notes, exchange ideas, and develop friendships with people in similar positions. Although associations have mixed results when relational networking becomes the only reason to gather, it must be included among the reasons to gather.

*“The effective association of the future will remain conscious of its heritage, its traditions, and its denominational connections—but not at the expense of its kingdom-consciousness. It will support and encourage kingdom-focused churches within the context of their particular denomination and outside of that context. It will work unceasingly to forge new relationships and partnerships with a variety of churches of like faith and practice. Why? Not in order to grow bigger or better, but so that God’s kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven. May God grant us the courage to cooperatively “seek his kingdom.” (Day, 2009, p. 240).*

The future of associations is unwritten. Associations may be an outdated model, or they may be on the verge of a resurgent relevancy. Scenarios are powerful illustrations of what is plausible about the future. However, what happens when we step back from the picture and are not happy with the result? Answers to “what if” questions devised through scenarios are a good means of preparation, but what about plans? Shaping the future, rather than reacting and adapting to it, begins with the question, “What would we prefer to happen in the future?”

After careful examination of the assumptions, conclusions and thoughts that went into building this set of scenarios, and after reflecting on the future worlds that would result from these factors, it is now our responsibility to apply this learning to our current circumstances. If plans and decisions are not made now, then we will still be unprepared for a future that we understand. Therefore, the following questions are offered as a means of helping our readers digest the information presented in this report.

**Imagining the future to have unfolded according to each of the scenarios**

**above:**

* Am I happy with how the future turned out? Why or why not?
* How did the body of Christ enable the future to unfold as it did?  Was it helping or hurting the world through its actions?
* If the gospel successfully penetrated that world, what would that  look like?
* In light of that success, how was the church successful? What would  be the most effective strategies for presenting the good news of the  gospel to that world?
* What would be my responsibility in helping these strategies to be  effective? What is the role of my local church or my personal calling in helping to engage that world?

**In the event that the future did not unfold as you would have liked:**

1. In comparison to the worlds presented in the scenarios, what is my preferred vision of the future?
2. Given the current state of the world, what must change or begin to change now in order to help bring about the preferred future?
3. What would be my responsibility as an agent of those changes? What is the role of my local church or my personal calling in helping to enact those changes?
4. What can I begin doing today that will help realize the preferred future?

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