

LEADING THE SBC ASSOCIATION:  
A MODEL FOR EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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## INTRODUCTION

After the local church congregation, the Baptist association is the second oldest entity in Baptist life. Local associations pre-date the Southern Baptist Convention by one hundred and thirty-eight years. The COVID-19 pandemic challenged churches but highlighted the value of the local association.<sup>1</sup> Churches received vital training, resources, and counsel from their association as they scrambled to adapt to the guidelines and challenges of conducting worship in the midst of a pandemic. If churches are to continue to benefit from associational membership, then effective leadership is vital for local associations. What is the most appropriate leadership model for a local association in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)? A proper understanding of the leadership context of an SBC local association reveals that a proper leadership model is that of the servant leader, described in terms of the associational leader's heart, head, hands, and habits.

## LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

Many people have only a surface understanding of their local Baptist association. Much of the work of the association happens behind the scenes and goes unnoticed by the typical church member. A proper understanding of the context of an SBC association requires an understanding of the history and role of Baptist associations and the role of the associational leader.

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1. Jason Lowe, "The Recent Resurgence of Baptist Associations," *SBC Life* (October 15, 2020), accessed May 10, 2021, <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/sbc-life-articles/the-recent-resurgence-of-baptist-associations/>.

## The Baptist Association

The first Baptist association in America was formed in Philadelphia in 1707. Four factors drove the creation of that first association: (1) the need to protect Baptist doctrine, (2) the longing for churches to fellowship together, (3) the passion to reach the lost with the gospel, and (4) the desire of scattered congregations to belong to the same church.<sup>2</sup> The Philadelphia Association became a model for Baptist associations, and by 1814 there were 125 associations in America. Today there are over twelve hundred local associations in Southern Baptist life. Two keys to understanding the role of Baptist associations are the nature of authority in interchurch relationships and the cooperative aspect between churches in missions activity.

One of the foundational guidelines for Baptist polity is that the local church is self-governing. Christ is the head of the church, and each congregation follows the Lord's lead in ministry decisions.<sup>3</sup> Associations are made up of autonomous churches that share a common faith and are on mission in their common setting.<sup>4</sup> While the local association has no authority over the individual churches that make up the association, the churches of the association can withdraw fellowship if an individual church acts in a way that contradicts the agreed upon doctrinal practices.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of the association is to serve the church in carrying out the Great Commission.

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2. Paul Stripling, *Turning Points in the History of Baptist Associations in America* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), 4-5.

3. James L. Sullivan, *Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1974), 113.

4. Glenn Davis, "What is a Southern Baptist Association? Association was Biblical Before it was Baptist," in *The Baptist Association: Assisting Churches, Advancing the Gospel*, edited by Ray Gentry (Spring Hill, TN: Rainer Publishing, 2020), 21.

5. Sullivan, 70.

Inspired by William Carey, Baptists in America developed two different models for funding and carrying out mission work. The societal model of missions bypassed churches and involved support from individuals, while the associational model focused on support and involvement of churches. From its beginning, the Southern Baptist Convention has funded and sent out missionaries using the associational model.<sup>6</sup> Southern Baptist churches give to the Cooperative Program and to their local association in order to plant new churches and to revitalize struggling churches. The funding is also used to send missionaries throughout North America and the world and to fund seminaries that educate and train pastors, missionaries, and church leaders.

### **The Associational Leader**

The leader of the local association goes by many names, such as Associational Missionary, Associational Director, Director of Missions (DOM), Executive Director, and Associational Mission Strategist. According to Ray Gentry, “The effective associational leader casts a vision for member churches to do something bigger than any one church can do on its own.”<sup>7</sup> The typical associational leader focuses on missions and church planting, church revitalization and replanting, and church consulting (coaching, church conflict, pulpit supply, search team training, etc.).<sup>8</sup> Within those general areas of responsibility, the Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders (SBCAL) identifies three main areas of proficiency for the

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6. Stripling, 10-11.

7. Ray Gentry, “The Importance and Role of the Associational Mission Strategist,” in *The Baptist Association: Assisting Churches, Advancing the Gospel*, edited by Ray Gentry (Spring Hill, TN: Rainer Publishing, 2020), 37.

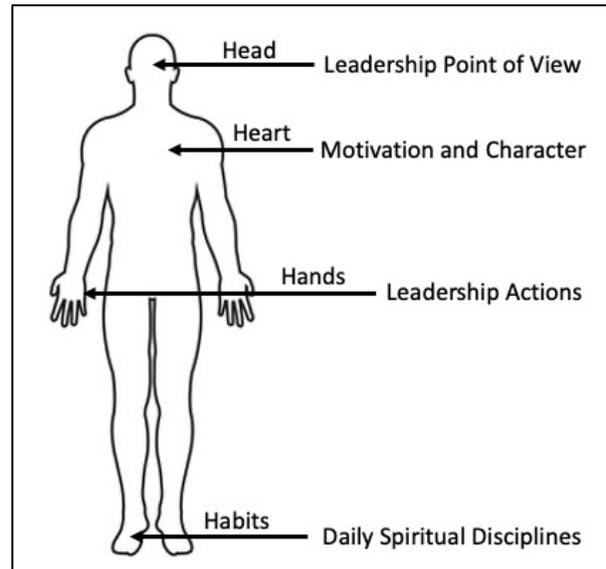
8. SBCAL Study Team, *Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders Study Team Report* (Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders, 2018): 8, accessed April 30, 2021, [https://www.sbc.org/uploads/6/2/2/2/62227119/sbc\\_al\\_study\\_team\\_report.pdf](https://www.sbc.org/uploads/6/2/2/2/62227119/sbc_al_study_team_report.pdf).

associational leader: (1) foundational (calling, character, spiritual maturity, commitment to learning, leader of leaders, trustworthiness), (2) relational (emotional intelligence, active listening, supportive coach, authentic vulnerability, encouragement), and (3) strategic (vision casting, strategy, consulting, leadership multiplication, contextual understanding, good communication).<sup>9</sup>

### PERSONAL LEADERSHIP MODEL

The title “Executive Director” in the secular world gives the impression of a CEO who is atop a large corporation that is organized hierarchically. While the GCBA is like a large corporation in that it has thousands of members and a world-wide reach, there is no top-down hierarchy. The member churches are autonomous, so the Executive Director does not have direct authority to the churches or their leaders. The

most appropriate leadership model for the Executive Director of the GCBA is that of the servant leader. Blanchard and Hodges provide a helpful framework for describing this leadership model using four leadership domains: heart, head, hands, and habits. The heart and head are internal domains that define motives and perspectives on leadership, while



the hands and habits are external domains seen and experienced by others.<sup>10</sup> Mapping the AMS

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9. SBCAL Study Team, 10-13.

10. Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *Lead Like Jesus: Lessons for Everyone from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 31.

proficiencies identified by the SBCAL Study onto the four domains of heart, head, hands, and habits produces a contextualized personal leadership model for leading the GCBA.

| <b>Heart</b>       | <b>Head</b>              | <b>Hands</b>      | <b>Habits</b>                      |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| Calling            | Vision Casting           | Leader of Leaders | Solitude and Prayer                |
| Motivation         | Strategy Development     | Supportive Coach  | Study and Application of Scripture |
| Character          | Contextual Understanding | Pastor to Pastors | Continuous Learning                |
| Spiritual Maturity | Vision Implementation    | Church Consultant | Involvement in Relationships       |

### **Heart**

The servant leadership journey begins with the heart.<sup>11</sup> Gene Wilkes maintains that the heart of a servant is what “allows the leader to put aside her own agenda in order to carry out that mission.”<sup>12</sup> For Eugene Habecker, the heart is all about who leaders are rather than about what leaders do; the heart focuses on being over doing.<sup>13</sup> The leadership heart needed by the SBC associational leader can be described in terms of calling, motivation, character, and spiritual maturity.

Associations are inherently collaborative—churches cooperate or do not cooperate as they desire. Leadership in this environment “requires someone desiring to build coalitions and

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11. Blanchard and Hodges, 31.

12. Gene Wilkes, *Jesus on Leadership: Discovering the Secrets of Servant Leadership from the Life of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 1998), 21.

13. Eugene B. Habecker, *The Softer Side of Leadership: Essential Skills That Transform Leaders and the People They Lead* (Sisters, OR: Deep River Books, 2018), 89.

rely on sometimes diffused systems, rather than employing more directive leadership styles.”<sup>14</sup>

This means that effective change often happens at a much slower pace than the associational leader desires. When associational leaders become frustrated or discouraged with a lack of progress, they may leave their position and actually further delay the process of change in the association. A clear calling to associational ministry is key to persevering in this slow changing environment. Although “leading an association is fundamentally different from leading a church or other ministry...it requires no less a calling to a specific position.”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to a clear sense of calling, the associational leader must focus on glorifying God and building up God’s kingdom rather than enhancing personal reputation and status.<sup>16</sup> God calls each servant leader to a specific mission; without that mission “there is no need or motivation to lead.”<sup>17</sup> Blanchard and Hodges define a model (EGO Model) which is helpful in discerning the heart of a leader. Leaders who are improperly motivated are “Edging God Out.” Such behavior is driven by either fear or pride. Leading out of fear reveals a need for self-protection while leading out of pride points to a desire for self-promotion. Fear and pride edge God out by putting self at the center instead of God, and so divert the leader’s focus from building up the team and accomplishing the God-given mission.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, a properly motivated leader is “Exalting God Only.” This servant leader rightly places God at the center instead of self and correctly understands that God is Creator and the leader is creation. In

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14. SBCAL Study Team, 10.

15. Ibid.

16. Don N. Howell, Jr., *Servants of the Servant: A Biblical Theology of Leadership* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 300.

17. Wilkes, 77.

18. Blanchard and Hodges, 49.

completely trusting God, the leader replaces fear with confidence. With a right perspective of God as Creator, the leader forgoes pride for humility.<sup>19</sup> A leader who desires to glorify God and benefit others is leading from a right motive,<sup>20</sup> which is the proper love for God, self, and others. As Maxwell asserts, the extent of a leader's influence "depends on the depth of your concern for others."<sup>21</sup> In her theoretical model for servant leadership, Kathleen Patterson includes *agapao* love. By this Patterson means "to do the right thing at the right time and for the right reasons."<sup>22</sup> When leading with this *agapao* love, a servant leader thinks first of the team member, then of the member's gifts, and lastly of what the member can do for the team.<sup>23</sup>

The associational leader must be a person of character. Howell defines character as "a person's moral constitution, in which is embedded a stable set of values."<sup>24</sup> The behavior of the associational leader must be above reproach, and that can only happen when his heart is focused on Christ. The character required to lead the local SBC association is outlined in the scriptural requirements for biblical leadership (1 Timothy 1:1-13, Titus 1:5-9). This type of character is necessary for the associational leader to gain the trust of churches. At times churches must be vulnerable in order to expose their weaknesses, but they will not be willing to do so if they believe the associational leader may take advantage of the situation. Like patients with a doctor,

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19. Blanchard and Hodges, 64.

20. Joseph Maciariello, "Lessons in Leadership and Management from Nehemiah," *Theology Today* 60, no. 3 (2003), 400.

21. John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 138.

22. Kathleen Patterson, "Servant Leadership: A Theoretical Model," *Servant Leadership Research Roundtable*, August, 2003 ([https://www.regent.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/patterson\\_servant\\_leadership.pdf](https://www.regent.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/patterson_servant_leadership.pdf)), 3.

23. Ibid.

24. Howell, 296.

churches must trust their associational leader will not hurt them based on their trust.<sup>25</sup> Character is the foundation of trust; without trust, leadership will not happen.<sup>26</sup>

The final component of the heart of the associational leader is spiritual maturity. First and foremost, he must be a committed Christ-follower; being a Christian is not enough.<sup>27</sup> The role of associational leader sometimes requires serving in conflict situations where emotions are highly charged. In such situations, spiritual issues are often confused with personal preferences. The associational leader must show composure by exercising discernment and wisdom in helping churches through such troubling times.<sup>28</sup> This composure is a “consistent display of appropriate emotional health or maturity that sets a positive ministry mood.”<sup>29</sup> Tod Bolsinger calls this composure the “blue zone.” In the blue zone, the mission is the priority, and blue zone decisions are focused on effectively carrying out the mission.<sup>30</sup> Such spiritual maturity is formed through experience. Paul wrote, “Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”<sup>31</sup> For Paul, suffering includes “physical hardship, emotional distress, and persecution encountered in

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25. SBCAL Study Team, 11.

26. Aubrey Malphurs, *Being Leaders: The Nature of Authentic Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 50.

27. Malphurs, 15.

28. SBCAL Study Team, 10.

29. Malphurs, 66.

30. Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* Expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 145.

31. Rom 5:3-4, ESV.

obedience to God's mission."<sup>32</sup> The associational leader must be spiritually mature, having grown in Christ through his own successes and failures in ministry.

### **Head**

The second inward domain of the leadership model is the head. According to Blanchard and Hodges, servant leadership begins with the heart, but then it must pass through the head. The head is what the leader believes about leadership and is described in two roles: the visionary role and the implementation role.<sup>33</sup>

The visionary role of the associational leader is about painting a clear picture of God's vision for the association. With each of the association's churches pursuing its own individual vision, casting an overall vision for the association is a daunting task. Gaining agreement from the churches makes the task easier. The proper perspective of the visionary role in the local association is one of facilitating development of the vision and then continually communicating that vision through conversations, speaking engagements, writing, and other media.

Casting the vision is just the first step. The implementation role of vision involves strategy, a complete understanding of context, and serving the implementation team. The associational leader must help churches develop tailored strategies to carry out the vision in their own context. For that to happen, he must spend time developing a big picture view of the county and the individual communities within the county.<sup>34</sup> While it is tempting to become intimately involved with implementation on an ongoing basis, the associational leader must remember that

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32. Howell, 297.

33. Blanchard and Hodges, 83-84.

34. SBCAL Study Team, 12-13.

his role in carrying out the vision is to serve the churches by helping to provide strategy, accountability, and resources as needed to be successful.

### **Hands**

The hands of servant leaders are the actions they take as they are guided by their heart and head.<sup>35</sup> Within the local association, the associational leader acts as a leader of leaders, a supportive coach, a pastor to pastors, and a consultant.

Because of the nature of associations, the associational leader is by definition a leader of leaders. Pastors, elders, staff members, and lay persons all serve as leaders, and the associational leader works with each of them at some point and in some capacity. He must use an array of leadership tools including the basic functions of a manager, donor development, and team building.<sup>36</sup> A large part of leading leaders involves coaching. For Blanchard and Hodges, coaching is of primary importance in helping people reach their goals.<sup>37</sup> Coaching involves understanding the learner's development stage and then providing what he/she needs to progress through the process from novice, to apprentice, to journeyman, to master.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to being a leader of leaders, the associational leader acts as a pastor to pastors. Pastors are selfless shepherds at heart and are used to taking care of the people in their congregation, often at the expense of their own personal care. Who visits pastors when they are ill? Who can pastors go to when they are struggling? This is part of the role of the associational

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35. Blanchard and Hodges, 32.

36. SBCAL Study Team, 10.

37. Blanchard and Hodges, 124.

38. Ibid., 126.

leader. He will serve as a safe place for pastors, whether they are seeking help or looking for a sounding board for new ideas.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the broadest range of actions taken by an associational leader is in the role of consultant. Consultation occurs in various situations such as pastor search team training, church conflict mediation, church health assessment, church revitalization and replanting, developing missions strategy, and interim pastoring. Each of these situations is a specialty in and of itself, and the associational leader must secure the appropriate training or connect churches to those who are trained for the consultation they need. In a way, consultation is a toolbox within the larger toolbox of the responsibilities of the associational leader.<sup>40</sup>

### **Habits**

The final piece of the personal leadership model is the leader's habits. Habits are those disciplines and behaviors that help the associational leader succeed and protect him from the pressures of ministry and life. He will practice habits that include solitude and prayer, the study and application of Scripture, continuous learning, and involvement in relationships.

In today's busy world, solitude is the most elusive habit.<sup>41</sup> Technology connects people 24-7 to their electronic devices, information, and other people. Solitude is countercultural, but people need to periodically unplug from the world both digitally and relationally. Wayne Cordeiro defines solitude as "a chosen separation for refining your soul."<sup>42</sup> Solitude is time spent

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39. SBCAL Study Team, 11.

40. Ibid.

41. Blanchard and Hodges, 155.

42. Wayne Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2009), 71.

with God without any agenda except to be still and know He is God (Psalm 46:10). As R. H. Barton puts it, “Another reason we are so tired is that we are always working hard to figure things out rather than learning how to cease striving... We’re busy trying to make stuff happen rather than waiting on God to make stuff happen.”<sup>43</sup> Solitude reminds leaders that they belong to God; He is the one who makes things happen. The associational leader will practice a daily habit of solitude and prayer for the purpose of hearing from and speaking to God.

Second in importance only to spending time with God in solitude and prayer is spending time in the study and application of Scripture. This time is separate from the study and application of Scripture that is necessary to perform tasks such as preaching and leading in worship services. As with solitude and prayer, this habit is all about getting to know God at a deeper level. This habit involves hearing, reading, meditating on, memorizing, studying, and applying Scripture to life. The associational leader will find delight in God’s Word and will meditate on it day and night (Psalm 1:2-3).

Today’s world is described as VUCA—volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. That means that leaders must continue to learn new skills.<sup>44</sup> “Leading requires learning, and continuing in leadership means continuing to learn.”<sup>45</sup> The associational leader should have a combination of formal and informal education and training, accompanied by a passion for seeking new information and exploring innovative ways to use it.

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43. R. H. Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 41.

44. Bolsinger, 27.

45. SBCAL Study Team, 10.

The final habit that the associational leader needs to practice is the habit of relationships. Since he does not wield positional authority over churches and pastors, influence comes through relationships. Without relationships it would not be possible to lead or coach leaders, to understand community context, or to pastor pastors. For this reason, the associational leader must be proactive and intentional in meeting new people and developing existing relationships. This habit involves phone calls, meetings, and meals. Most of the work of the associational leader is done outside the walls of the office. For the associational leader, relationships are the most valuable currency used to carry out the mission of the local association.

### **CONCLUSION**

The local association is the closest entity to the local church. Churches in the local SBC association count on their associational leader to understand the diverse context of the area and to lead them to cooperate and carry out the Great Commission not just in their local community, but across their state, North America, and the ends of the earth as well. Due to the collaborative nature of the association, the associational leader must have the heart, head, hands, and habits of a servant leader.

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