

SBCAL 2021 President's Report

Thank you to those who were able to attend our 2021 Annual Conference. We had total attendance of 440, which is the largest attendance in probably 14+ years. Over 50 participated in our Prospective and New AMS Pre-Conference.

Thank you, also, for the privilege of serving as your President & CEO. I consider it a joy, an honor, and a great stewardship responsibility to serve you in this role since July 1, 2015, in addition to serving my own association in metro Atlanta.

The SBCAL is the oldest and largest associational network in the SBC, founded in 1960. We had planned to celebrate our 60th anniversary last year in Orlando. Even though we were unable to do so, we included an historical chart on page 20 of the Program. It is the best data we have been able to find, but if you know of any corrections, please email them to me.

Thank you to those of you who have been praying for our daughter, April, and our family. Many of you know, but some do not know - just before this meeting two years ago our older daughter, April Gentry Witkowski, was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer that had metastasized to her bones before being correctly diagnosed. She just turned 38 Saturday. She is married to Pastor Peter Witkowski of Amissville Baptist Church, Amissville, VA, near Culpeper, VA. They have three children, 7, 5, and 3. She was doing remarkably well until mid-March when we found out the hormone therapy had stopped working and her cancer has spread to her liver. She began chemo May 14, but is having trouble tolerating it. We would

greatly appreciate your prayers for wisdom about treatments, for healing, and for God to strengthen our faith and to be glorified in each of our lives during this trial that He has allowed.

Thank you for being a member of SBCAL! Our membership is now over 350. Praise the Lord! That is probably the highest it has been this century. Since costs to offer conferences and resources keep rising, the Executive Team voted last month to raise the annual membership from the super low rate of \$25 a year, which is what it has been for several years, to \$50 a year beginning in July.

In case you did not know, SBCAL is an autonomous 501c3 association, organized by and for associational leaders. We are not part of any SBC entity, and we are not funded by the Cooperative Program. However, we do greatly appreciate several SBC entities who support us each year, in addition to several other ministries. We could not have this conference, keep the cost to AMSs low, and do what we do without that support.

Though the last year or so has been tough on all of us, SBCAL has much to celebrate.

- We were very disappointed to have to cancel our scheduled 2020 Orlando Conference, but on April 30, 2020, we had a wonderful Virtual Annual Conference featuring Ben Mandrell and others who would have been in Orlando. Registrants were 374, and initial attendees were 285.

- At our 2019 Conference in Birmingham, we agreed that there needed to be a new book on effective associational leadership based on the 2018 Study Team Report of 17 Proficiencies of an Effective Associational Leader. Praise the Lord, He enabled us to publish “The Baptist Association: Assisting Churches, Advancing the Gospel,” in July 2020! Thank you to each person who had a part in contributing to the book. Special thanks to Dr. Kevin Ezell and NAMB for funding the first 2000 copies, and to Sam Ranier and Ranier Publishing for publishing it. Over 4500 copies are in print.
- We held two virtual conferences in August 2020 and in January 2021. All virtual conference sessions are available for members to view on our website. This year’s conference sessions and workshops will also be available by late June or early July.
- A new partnership with Alliance Defending Freedom enables members to receive the benefits of ADF membership at a discount, as well as the churches in your association.
- A new partnership with RightNow Media allows SBCAL members (and their families) to receive RightNow Media free, as well as big discounts for your association and your churches.
- Our monthly newsletter, *The Encourager*, reaches over 1700 each month. It is the best source for news about associational openings, retirements, new Associational Mission Strategists, and helpful resources.
- SBCAL has built - and continues to build - bridges and relationships with key leaders to further associationalism in the SBC.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I want you to know that some of your pastors, some denominational leaders, and others, may not respect you or care about you, but I care. The leadership of SBCAL cares about you and your association, and we want to assist you and help you to be the best associational leader you can be. It does not matter if you are a volunteer, bivo, covo, or full-time leader. We want to help you steward this role and responsibility well.

I want to first challenge you with a simple, powerful, but often ignored, Scripture. **“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a person sows, this he will also reap”* (Gal. 6:7 NASB). You reap what you sow. Do you really believe that? Are you doer of that word or a hearer only?

Like some of you, I answered God’s call to the Gospel ministry over four decades ago. I can say based on observation and personal experience that yes, Christian leader, you reap what you sow. Too many have sown to the wind and reaped the whirlwind. I, like you, am not perfect. I have my regrets. But in the last several months especially, God has blessed me with person after person from various churches, associations, and ministries who have confirmed that what I sowed years ago is still bearing fruit even today. So my question for you is this:

What have you been sowing? What are you sowing now? The Gospel, or a false gospel? Hard work or Slothfulness? Unity or Division? The Golden Rule (Mt. 7:12) or who has the most gold rules? The fruit of the spirit or the lusts of the flesh? Rom.

12:17-18, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Give careful thought to do what is honorable in everyone's eyes. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." (CSB) AMSs should be Christian statesmen.

I challenge you to always submit to and stand on the Word of God, but in addition, always place great value on relationships. Build and value each one within your association, among your peers, and in your state convention and the SBC eco system. The apostle Paul was a great networker. We should be, too. Network, network, network! Take whatever cooperation you can get and maximize it for the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom. Some will keep you at arms-length. Don't get bitter. Don't get cynical. Love the Lord with all your heart and your neighbor pastor or denominational leader as yourself. Work with those who are willing to work with you.

I challenge you to be yourself. Don't try to be someone you are not. Be authentically you. Operate out of your spiritual gifts. Know your context. Do all things for the glory of God and not for your glory or for the credit of the association.

I challenge you to keep your focus on Christ and the Gospel. Be a godly leader who is Gospel-centered, Gospel-driven. Seek to be a holy, humble leader of leaders.

Finally, I challenge you to consider Phil. 1:3 as it relates to our partnership in the Gospel. "I give thanks to my God for every remembrance of you, always praying with joy for all of you in my every prayer because of your partnership in the

gospel...(CSB)." Every association cannot do so, but there are many associations who could partner with us by including SBCAL in your association's 2022 budget. I believe SBCAL is one of your best advocates, friends, and voices in the SBC. We are your tribe. We are here for you. Please help us to strengthen this network with your prayers and support us as God leads. Encourage peers in your state convention to join us. We could do so much more for you and for other associational leaders if we had more resources. We operate on a shoe-string budget when you consider the convention-wide, nation-wide influence and impact SBCAL has.

In the last several years, SBCAL has moved from being a once-a-year conference to a year-round organization equipping, encouraging, and networking associational leaders in the SBC.

My goal, as your President & CEO is to help equip you, inspire, you, and encourage you to be the best associational leader you can be for the glory of God and the advancement of His kingdom. I also want to see us partner together to raise the bar across our convention as to what an effective Associational Mission Strategist (AMS) looks like.

I am so thankful for your support. Please pray for me that I will bring glory to Christ as I serve you and represent you to Convention leaders. May God bless you as you faithfully serve our Savior.

Ray Gentry, President & CEO
June 13, 2021