

Hello NWIBA Pastors and Leaders:

We live in an era in Southern Baptist life when increasingly the validity and need for the local Baptist association is being questioned. For some, associations seem to be an outdated model...that the proliferation of other networks, especially generated through the internet, has created likeminded theological, ecclesiological, missiological, and even methodological groupings that doesn't exist in a diverse group of SBC pastors and churches. In addition, loyalty to denominational entities, including Baptist associations, has taken a huge hit among younger Baptist leaders. Whereas, in years past the local association was fueled by SBC loyalty, today that will no longer suffice. *Relevancy, not loyalty is the operative word among emerging pastors and leaders.* Unless the local association adds value to local church ministry and wider kingdom advancement, there will be little involvement and investment no matter how loud the loyalty trumpet is sounded. I agree wholeheartedly with that sentiment. As a local pastor, I would not want to invest my time or a portion of the church's budget in an entity solely out of denominational loyalty. Unless I thought it was uniquely adding value to my ministry, my church, other churches within the association, and being catalytic for kingdom growth, then I'd want to invest somewhere else.

Obviously, I believe the Baptist association can have significant relevance and add important value to the local church. Particularly, I desire to lead the NWIBA in such a way that we serve the local church by helping each church, and each individual member of the church be on mission with God.

Practically, the reasons why associational life is still relevant and is worthy of your church's involvement and investment include the following:

1. ***Face to face fellowship and sharpening*** – Networking over the Internet with people you never physically meet may have value, but it does not have the value of face-to-face fellowship. Affinity is important for association, but so is geography. The local association is a great vehicle to facilitate gospel-centered fellowship for pastors and church leaders and opportunities to sharpen one another's ministry skills. One of the ways we're creating more of a sense of community among our pastors and sharpening skills is through our Pastors Roundtables.
2. ***Diversity of fellowship*** – We tend to navigate to other pastors and leaders that think like us, look like us, do ministry like us, and are even of the same generation as us. The beauty and sometimes the challenge of the modern SBC is our diversity. The NWIBA is a diverse group (and we need even more diversity). However, meeting with others different than us is good for our churches, the kingdom, and us.
3. ***Contextualized understanding of ministry needs*** – I believe the association is better equipped to discover, understand, and meet the ministry equipping needs of the churches local to northwest Indiana than the state and national convention as well as any other national network (although they also play an important role). The fact is, associations remain the closest entity to their churches.
4. ***An antidote to radical local church autonomy*** – As Southern Baptists we believe in the autonomy of the local church. We believe it because the Bible clearly teaches it. However, there is an abuse of Baptist ecclesiology that says, "...*the local church is autonomous and independent and is in need of no one else...*" However, while the Bible supports local autonomy, it also supports being part of a larger body of local churches (Eph. 4:15-16). As an association, we want to work to keep our churches from isolating from one another.

5. ***Networking of resources*** – Another value of the association, and the Director of Missions role within the association, is that of networking the resources of the association so the churches can use their various strengths to meet needs of other churches in need. The association is in the unique position of discovering the strengths and needs of its member churches and connecting resources to need.
6. ***Facilitating Partnerships*** – A significant importance of a strategically focused association is that of facilitating reciprocal partnerships that will result in Kingdom growth. An association, like NWIBA, which is still very much part of a pioneer field, especially as it concerns SBC work, needs partners who will invest in various ways to see the Gospel advance. In the same way, the churches of NWIBA need to look beyond themselves to make Gospel investments in other regions. As a Director of Missions, one of my roles is to discover, develop, and facilitate these partnerships.
7. ***Elevate Awareness for Ministry Focus*** – An association, and the DOM's role within the association, has the unique position of seeing the significant ministry needs within the area, and focusing and targeting resources in that direction. For example, after doing the research, one of the substantial needs in portions of NWI are new church plants. We have areas of NWI that are underserved by evangelical works...and especially underserved in SBC work. The association acts as a field observer to uncover areas of need that an individual church may not see.

The culture of associations is changing and many are on the verge of resurgent relevancy. For the above reasons and many more, I'm convinced that the NWIBA is an indispensable resource in assisting our churches in fulfilling the mission that God has given them. Therefore, I believe the NWIBA is worthy of your involvement of time and investment of financial resources. Not because it's a denominational entity that we are duty-bound to support, but because it is catalytic in promoting Kingdom growth. My aim is to, by working with our leadership, make it even more helpful...even more relevant to our churches. My prayer is that each of our NWIBA churches, as they consider their budget of time, talents and finances - that an investment will be made in the mission organization closest to their church.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to serve as your Director of Missions. I am anticipating a hopeful future for the churches of the NWIBA!

In His Service,

Wes Rankin
Director of Missions
Northwest Indiana Baptist Association