

by Eddie Pettit

How many times have you felt like you needed a partner? Perhaps you were cutting down a tree, plumbing under the sink, or even trying to land a big fish. It would have made your task a lot easier to have a helper to assist you with a tool, an extra set of hands, or some much needed advice.

In a real sense that is the function of Baptist associations. It is good to know we are not alone. We have someone who can assist our church in missions, with ideas, and even give us a helping hand when we need it. Perhaps you have been thinking that your church can do whatever is needed without the help of others. You can do missions alone, you can reach your community alone, you can minister to the hopeless alone, and you can reach beyond our nation alone. But you will never be able to do this as well as you can when you work together with others to accomplish the mission.

That independent spirit is popular these days, but it is not realistic, nor effective. In our efforts to reach our community, it is wise to have partners who can assist us as we discover needs and meet these needs. That is the function of the association.

The association is a group of churches banded together in a spirit of cooperation to reach a community for Christ. These churches share a common goal in missions and ministry, realizing that when banded together their strength far surpasses what they can accomplish working alone.

Recently, I was trying to trade my tractor to a local tractor dealer. In the course of the conversation, we began to discuss several men we both knew who were not Christians, and what we were doing to share with them. In the middle of the conversation, he asked if I disliked independent Baptists. (I knew he was independent.) I explained that I believed all Christians must work together to reach our world, and that we can work together to witness to these men.

Immediately his whole demeanor changed. "I do not like to work together with any other church," he said. "I like my independence."

In a real sense we are a denomination of independent churches which choose to work together to do things we could never do alone. We have realized that alone we do not have enough money, enough people, enough time, or enough resources to reach our world.

My friend had a burden for these lost men, but he did not want any help in reaching them. Paul wrote, "Some planted, some watered, but God gave the increase." That is cooperation with other people. I am certain that if these lost men were reached today by one of another faith group my friend would be elated, yet he has not seen the effects of churches working together to accomplish a God-given task.

Southern Baptists have a different motivation than other groups. We have chosen to give money in a concerted effort to reach our world. It is called the Cooperative Program. Churches decide how much they want to give to help reach our world, realizing our world begins at home, travels through our community, across our state, across our nation, and then to the ends of the earth.

We also share information that helps keep us informed about needs from all these areas. It is the association that helps us discover local needs, shares with us state and national needs, and helps us become informed about needs around the world. Monies given to the association by the local church enable the association to promote needs in our area that we may not know about, or may not have the resources to meet.

The association also serves to coordinate the work of local churches to minister on a much larger level than one church. Many associations have food banks, free medical clinics, clothes closets, resort ministries, disaster relief units, and meetings that assist local churches in missions.

In recent history many associations are suffering from a lack of funds because churches have not been supporting their work as we once did. In the past churches gave 3 percent of their budgets for the local associational missions efforts, instead of giving a dollar amount. Many churches have switched to a dollar amount, and continue to give that same amount even though their budgets have risen sharply. This has had an adverse effect on the local missions efforts.

Without realizing it we have decreased our effectiveness on the local front, and have neglected our local opportunities. The strength of the local church lies in the strength of the association. The local association makes all of our churches stronger and more effective because of our working together. Remember, "A cord of three strands is not easily broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12). Together we can reach our communities more effectively by cooperating in our efforts to win our world.

One of the best examples of this relationship is the one between the York Baptist Association and Dakota Sonshine in Sisseton, South Dakota. Many years ago the North American Mission Board began conducting World Changers in the York Association among the Catawba Indians. These projects continued for many years among the Catawba Indians near Rock Hill, South Carolina. The York Baptist Association was very active in these projects, and a vision to reach Native Americans was cast among its churches. The Red Path Baptist Church was started by World Changers and was funded through the offerings of World Changers all over the country. When the York Association decided to continue to reach Native Americans through the work with Dakota Sonshine the pastor of Red Path Baptist Church, Ken Fugate, was on the first team traveling to South Dakota.

This vision has now carried many people from South Carolina half way across the country to help reach another Native American group through Dakota Sonshine. This is an example of people helping people reach people in areas where we have failed to reach them. What a great model. One association benefited from outside folks reaching some of their people. Now they are reaching out to help another association reach its people. I would venture to say that everyone who has gone to South Dakota to help reach the Dakota Sioux has returned with a greater sense of God's love for people, and a greater understanding of their own association.

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