

Visionâ€”not just geographyâ€”unite associations of churches

April 24, 2008

Posted: 4/25/08

Vision-not just geography -unite associations of churches

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FORT WORTH—Want to know what an association looks like? Don't use a still camera, because the image and functions are constantly changing as associations try to be what the churches they serve need them to be, said Tarrant Baptist Association Director of Missions Tom Law. And to fit all the churches into the same window will take a wide-angle lens—a very wide-angle lens.

“I think the association we have been familiar with is going to change drastically over the next few years,” Law said. But change is nothing new for associations, he explained.

“When the first associations formed in the early 1600s, most were started for theological reasons,” Law said. “The associations helped them maintain theological integrity.”

From about 1925 until the late 20th century, the association served

primarily as the communications mechanism for state and national conventions, he said. That's still true to some extent, but fellowship also has become a major part of associations' reason for being.

"I think we are seeing the churches change how they relate to one another and the conventions, and the associations are likewise going to have to change to remain relevant," Law said. "That's one of the things we're struggling with. What is the association of the 21st century going to look like?"

As Law ponders the question, he starts with what he sees Tarrant Baptist Association as today—a resourcer and orchestrator.

"Really, we're talking about knowing where the resources—the money, time and talents of people and organizations—are and pointing churches in the right direction," he explained.

"We're trying to help churches know where the best sources are and how to pull those together to accomplish the things they see as their mission as a church."

All of which has led to a new phenomenon, he noted.

"Associations are becoming galvanized around vision and around direction rather than geography," Law said.

While most associations still maintain a geographical cohesion, Tarrant is one of several associations that is expanding. In addition to churches in Tarrant County, the association also counts as member churches Iglesia Eliacim in Matamoros, Mexico, International Baptist Church in Sofia, Bulgaria, and International Christian Fellowship in Portimao, Portugal.

Communication advancements have made the world a smaller place, Law said. When a click can send a message around the world instantaneously,

geography becomes far less a factor.

While there is not a geographic relationship, there is a more traditional kind of relationship that engendered the link with the association.

“All three are built on relationships with the pastor, but they have bought in to where they see us going as an association,” Law said.

While they may be farther away than the other churches that partner with the association, not much else is different in the way they interact.

“Our relationship with these churches is not much different than with the others. It’s built on communication, and that ebbs and flows depending on the leadership at the time,” Law said.

While that communication is largely through e-mail, leaders from the Matamoros church have come to Tarrant County the last three years to participate in Vacation Bible School and other leadership training.

Law regularly communicates with the two European churches about ways they and the Texas churches can partner together.

“They help us to think beyond ourselves, beyond the borders of Tarrant County,” he said. “We are helping our churches to broaden their perspective of what their role in the kingdom is, and having these churches involved helps our local churches to remember their responsibilities extend to the ends of the earth.”

The churches outside the United States also are members in their local associations as well. “We’re not trying to take, we’re trying to add to their relationships and add another layer of connectedism,” Law said.

Whether the church is in Fort Worth, Arlington, Bedford or Sofia, Bulgaria, Law, said the association faces the same task.

“Our purpose is to help our churches as they are fulfilling the Great Commission. Our role is to let them know where the resources are to make that happen, challenge them with opportunities around the world for reaching the lost and encouraging them to be the churches God has called them to be,” he said.

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