

Bryan Houser: Look at the potential of associational ministry

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Since 2006, Bryan Houser has served as the missions coordinator of the [Amarillo Area Baptist Association](#) in Amarillo, Texas. From deep in the heart of one Texan, he shares his background and thoughts on church and ministry. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated leader to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Background

Where else have you worked, and what were your positions?

I served as an International Mission Board missionary in Southern Africa (Botswana and Namibia) from 1984-2000, and I also served as minister of missions at Shiloh Terrace Baptist Church in Dallas for six years.

I pastored at Dial Baptist Church, up near Bugtussle and Honey Grove, Texas.

Where did you grow up?

In Kenya, where my parents were IMB (FMB at the time) missionaries

How did you come to faith in Christ?

I realized at an early age that I needed Christ as my Savior, mainly through the strong Christian influence of my parents and the myriad of “uncles and

aunts” missionaries who impacted my life. I accepted Christ at ten years of age.

Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?

Bachelor of Arts from Baylor, and a Master of Divinity from Southwestern Seminary

Ministry/Profession

Why do you feel called to your particular vocation?

It’s a huge privilege to be able to use my calling to missions to help churches focus their energies on fulfilling the Great Commission. I appreciate being able to use past experiences from overseas and in the local church to continue making an impact in assisting churches multiply their kingdom effectiveness.

Please tell us about your association—where it’s located, the key focus of its work and ministry, etc.

The AABA is pretty much in the heart of the Texas Panhandle, covering approximately seven counties, with the city of Amarillo roughly in the middle, and reaching to the New Mexico border. All the Texans who go to Colorado to ski drive through our area and help the economy, thank you.

Our focus is: 1) church starting 2) church health 3) leadership development and 4) cooperative ministries, such as the Hope Welcome Center, a hospitality center for families visiting local incarceration facilities, and the High Plains Retreat Center.

Amarillo has the highest percentage of resettled refugees of any city in Texas, so there is a need for ministries and new churches aimed at a

diverse population.

What do you like best about leading your association? Why?

I like the wide variety of ministry that it involves. Even assisting churches in the middle of difficult transitions is something I count a privilege. And West Texas people are the best!

What aspect(s) of associational ministry and/or its mission do you wish more people understood?

I think every ministry has to recreate itself on a constant basis in order to maintain a level of relevance, and the association is no different. New generations of leaders and church members either understand that the association is a wonderful cooperative tool to enhance church ministry ... or they don't.

I wish that more leaders would actively look at the potential of associational ministry and base their views on personal experience rather than word-of-mouth.

How do you expect your association and/or its mission to change in the next 10 to 20 years?

We will change demographically to reflect the changes of our communities. We will also change generationally as new leaders take their place; that is already happening and will accelerate in the next few years.

While I can wish for more new leaders to have a vision for associational effectiveness, I am very grateful for some excellent (and younger) leaders who are already making a positive impact.

Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your association.

1. The very nature of cooperative work is increasingly difficult across all walks of life as society seems to become more polarized; that is something which has a detrimental effect on Baptists who claim that we are champions of cooperation.
2. Many churches are facing financial hardship due to declining membership, and this directly impacts the association.
3. All Baptists (and evangelicals in general) are struggling to reach younger generations. Since the association is a reflection of what's happening in our churches, this is a major concern.

About Baptists

What are the key issues—opportunities and/or challenges—facing Baptist churches?

Pretty much the same as listed for the challenges facing the association: cooperation, declining attendance and generational challenges.

Many “solutions” from the past are not adequate to answer the problems of our culture and climate today, yet many of our church members think those older methods hold the key to returning to the good old days. That often makes it difficult for church leaders to engage their members in looking and planning for the present and future in a radically changed and sometimes hostile culture.

What are the key issues facing Baptists as a people or denomination?

Quite honestly, whether we are even a denomination anymore is open to question; we seem more a collection of fiefdoms still bound by a few relics

from the past which we think bring unity.

In reality, if there is no way to engender more unity of purpose and belief, it is difficult to be optimistic about “Baptists as a denomination” because there will be multiple Baptist denominations. However, there is still some really excellent cooperative work that is being done in missions and ministry, and I regret seeing that work sacrificed on the altar of increasing competition for scarce funds.

I believe a key issue is becoming the identification of our culture as hostile to the gospel and the subsequent circling of the wagons to keep said culture out of “our” churches. Jesus lived in a culture that was hostile to his message, yet he consistently engaged his own culture and remained involved in it, only occasionally withdrawing for spiritual nourishment.

Given the pursuit into the realm of partisan politics which we see many Baptists and other evangelical leaders exhibiting, I tend to join the skepticism of the younger generations in their views of these leaders. Unfortunately, that tarnishes the whole denomination since no distinction is made by the outside world.

What would you change about the Baptist denomination—state, nation or local?

You didn’t ask me to write a book here, so there’s not enough space.

About Bryan

Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?

Primarily early in life, my long-lasting mentors were the “aunts and uncles” I was raised around, our missionary family in East Africa.

While it's trendy today to say that early missionary methods were not very enlightened (and sometimes they were not), that was a different time and era, and I believe some of the strength of the African church today can be attributed to the hard work of those early missionaries (and the Holy Spirit, of course).

Plus, by and large, they identified in language and culture with the local people in a way that is rarely seen today. Seeing that influence impacted my life for the better.

Current mentors include pastors and some laypeople that I have the huge privilege of serving with and who continue to enrich my life. I can't mention them all, but Charles Davenport was here before the pilgrims and knows more about Texas Baptist churches than anyone alive. I'm sure he will be the Area 1 congregational strategist long after I have gone to heaven, but, fortunately, I can still beat him at golf.

Charles Lee Williamson and Richard Faling taught me a lot about local church ministry.

Howie Batson and Robby Barrett from FBC Amarillo are models of excellence in ministry, as well as Bill Brian, a member there.

Really, every pastor in the Amarillo Association is a mentor in one way or the other.

John Thielepape, the DOM at the Parker Association, is one of my mentors, but he doesn't know it. Many of my DOM colleagues fill that role as well.

And my parents, who have long service in Baptist life, continue as mentors in many ways. Mom has been Mrs. WMU (no, not the official title) and Dad still serves as a DOM in the Bosque Association.

Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite books or authors, and explain why.

This is already getting too long so I'm going to pass on this, but I enjoy reading books that deal with the church relating to our changing culture. And Clive Cussler.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

Micah 6:8: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Why? Because that's all that matters.

Who is your favorite Bible character, other than Jesus? Why?

David, because of his sheer humanity and failings ... and greatness in God's eyes. If God would use someone as enormously imperfect as David, there is hope for all of us.

Name something about you that would surprise people who know you well.

It probably would not surprise anyone, but my heart has never left Africa, and I return there at every opportunity. I have been privileged to have friends who own a large ranch in Namibia, which is an incredibly beautiful wilderness area with a lot of wild game. I go there because the solitude and sometimes savagery of nature feed my soul.

If you could get one "do over" in your career, what would it be, and why?

I would have pursued my passion for flying. I think it would have been

useful and fun.

Write and answer a question you wish we had asked.

I wish you had asked about my beautiful and brilliant daughters: Myra is a professor at Ouachita Baptist University, and Jason, her husband, also teaches there and works for the Alliance of Baptists. Heather is a veterinarian near Bremerton, Washington. Alicia is finishing a master's degree at the University of Pittsburgh. It's tough to get together.