

# Ryan Jespersen: A ‘big tent Baptist’ who loves the church

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Ryan Jespersen recently was elected executive director of the [Dallas Baptist Association](#). From deep in the heart of one Texan, Jespersen shares his background and thoughts on the associational ministry of the church. 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 was a pastor for seven and a half years, a position I thought I always would hold, at Grace Temple Baptist Church (2006-2013) when God called me to a series of positions in denominational life.

I was director of urban missions for the Baptist General Convention of Texas from 2013 to 2017 and director of denominational relations for Dallas Baptist University from 2017 to 2021.

### Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Duncanville.

My grandparents on the Jespersen side were from Lincoln, Neb. After being moved around the country several times with the Kresge Company—later Kmart—they decided they needed to settle down.

The most logical thing to do would have been to move back to Nebraska

where both of their parents were, and where my great grandfather Jespersen was highly established in the community. Yet they chose to begin a Ben Franklin store in Duncanville on Main Street in 1964, which is still there today.

The street adjacent to the store now is named for my grandfather, and wherever I go in the Southwest Dallas area, I am asked if I am related to “the Jespersens of Duncanville.”

One of the interesting things about my life is I always have said to the Lord I would go anywhere he called, and yet, up to this point I never have lived further than about 10 miles from where I grew up. I hold that loosely in my life, realizing God could call me across the world, and I would be willing to go, but I am thankful to have been able to stay so close to home.

## **How did you come to faith in Christ?**

On Aug. 8, 1986, during Vacation Bible School, I walked down the aisle to give my life to Jesus Christ. I was 7 yearsold, so I didn’t know much, but I knew I had a need for a Savior, and Jesus could save me.

I grew in my faith and was not baptized until a few years later when I had a greater understanding.

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

- Duncanville High School was such an important part of my experience, and I am a proud Duncanville Panther, as are my dad, uncle, aunts, siblings and many cousins.
- Dallas Baptist University, Bachelor of Arts.
- Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Master of Divinity.
- Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, Doctor of Ministry.

# About ministry

## Why do you feel called to associational ministry?

For me, the call to associational ministry did not become evident until more recently. What I realized is the three full-time positions I held post-seminary, though incredibly important ministry in themselves, were preparing me to lead the Dallas Baptist Association.

DBA is one of the two largest local Baptist associations in the country. So, when the position first came open, I did not feel at all worthy to apply. I was approached by a few people I sent my resumé, still not feeling worthy but realizing the work of assisting and coordinating with churches to reach an area as populous as Dallas and Rockwall counties was an important work, one I was being moved to do.

## Tell us about your association—where it's located, the key focus of its work and ministry, etc.

Dallas Baptist Association is not a parachurch organization, as wonderful as those can be. We are made of more than 480 churches, with an office in East Dallas close to the geographic center of the association.

Our work as an associational staff is successful when our churches are reaching their communities with the gospel—carrying out the Great Commission to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

I am following in the footsteps of one of the most respected associational leaders in Baptist life over the last 20 years—Bob Dean. He never made the association about himself; thus, the association is strong. The lack of his daily presence did not create an unfillable void, because he made it about the work, not himself.

To meet the great need of reaching a large and diverse area with hundreds

of thousands of people who don't have a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, we need strong churches, including new, revitalized and replanted churches.

To get the number of churches we need, we need healthy and spiritually formed leaders. One of our major initiatives will be the identification and development of new leaders, paying close attention to the development and health of our existing church leaders.

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

I love working with our staff and our churches. We have some great staff who are passionate about what they are doing and have been so gracious to me as I have started. Long-time staff are helping me understand our work better.

The greatest joy for me is to be able to wake up in the morning and figure out how we will help our churches reach our two-county area best with the gospel.

Something else that always has been a passion for me is camp ministry. DBA owns what may be the largest Baptist encampment in Texas—Mt. Lebanon Baptist Encampment. I am actively involved in oversight of the camp, along with an on-site director and staff. Camp and retreat ministry can be life changing for so many people; thus, having a part of the job dedicated to camp ministry has been a real joy for me.

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

Jesus says the church never will be overcome (Mathew 16:18).

If I have one plan over the next 20 years, it is to tie the association as close

to the churches as we can. If a Baptist body moves away from its churches, then it no longer is fulfilling its ultimate purpose of combining resources to do what one church cannot do alone.

As I have been praying and thinking every day about our work, one of the things that keeps coming to mind is, “Look at the map.” We constantly are going to be looking at where we have people not being reached effectively by a church. We will look to start new churches and help revitalize existing churches in those areas.

We also will look to see where strong existing churches can begin new ministry. We are praying for the leaders and workers necessary to see those churches begun. I think if we focus on that, and pray God puts the right people in those areas, then we will see a gospel movement across Dallas and Rockwall counties bringing many to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

## **About Baptists**

### **Why are you Baptist?**

Winston Churchill once [said](#), “Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried.” The same can be said for Baptists if you think about it.

Our system of voluntary cooperation, autonomous churches, churches calling our pastors and leaders, and pooling our money to send missionaries certainly is not a perfect system, but I believe it is the best system.

### **What are the key issues—opportunities and/or**

## **challenges—facing Baptist churches?**

Churches face a number of challenges—such as declining attendance, declining respect in the community, dwindling resources—but perhaps the greatest challenge churches face today is the lack of spiritually formed, missional leaders desiring to step into or stay in ministry roles, particularly in the role of pastor.

## **What are the key issues facing Baptists as a church or denomination?**

Our greatest challenge is the need to be together and to be able to disagree without being disagreeable.

I am a “big tent” Baptist. I have a good relationship with people from a variety of Baptist backgrounds, and Dallas Baptist Association is made of all those backgrounds. If people who love Jesus and believe the Bible want to see a lost world come to faith in Christ, I want to try and work with them.

Are there issues we simply cannot compromise on? There certainly are. DBA has dealt with those in the past and will not compromise in the future.

However, I realize some are going to come at things like ministry style, church governance and certain areas of theology differently than I or fellow pastors would. That is not only OK, but it is to be celebrated. We can work together in the midst of our differences.

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

If I could change anything, I would get us in the room together more. The reason we see so little fighting at the local association level is we are together more. We know each other and care for each other. Therefore, when we have a disagreement, we do not put it on social media. We pick up

the phone, or we drive across town, and we talk about it.

Instead of using our phones to tweet, we need to use them to call a brother or sister and talk through our differences.

## **About Ryan**

### **Tell us about your family.**

I am married to Joanna, and we have two wonderful children, Rachel and Mary Kate.

### **What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?**

Right now, probably Ephesians 3:20-21. God can do so much through a church on fire for him.

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

Peter. He had great triumph and at times great failure, but God always used him. Peter reminds me God can use a person who is passionate, yet makes mistakes, to do his incredible work.

### **If you could get one “do over” in your career, what would it be, and why?**

I would pray more and worry less. That probably sounds like a “do over” in all of life, but when I spend time in genuine prayer—seeking after God not only in my personal life, but for the work of the ministry—I find myself to be so much more effective.