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**SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONFERENCE OF  
ASSOCIATIONAL LEADERS (SBCAL)**

Associational Mission Strategist  
**Proficiency Papers**

# SBCAL AMS Proficiency Papers

## Associational Leader Proficiencies/Professional Development Process

**Vision Sub-team Two:** Rick Wheeler, Jacksonville, FL, Leader; Mark Snowden, Cincinnati, OH; Mark Dance, LifeWay, Nashville, TN; Ray Gentry, McDonough, GA, Ex-officio

Vision Sub-team Two focused attention on the development of a comprehensive document that will further clarify and define the various roles of an Associational Mission Strategist. We enlisted 17 practitioners and asked each one to compose a 1000-word overview of a proficiency of the Study Team Report. Plans are underway to expand each paper into a chapter on each proficiency. These chapters will be a major portion of a new book on effective Baptist associations edited by Ray Gentry to be published in 2020.

We continue to recommend that SBCAL be the central hub of advocacy and communication between associational leaders and the greater SBC family since we are the largest associational network. Having a single touch point in SBC life to access associational related topics serves Associational Mission Strategists, SBC entities, and state conventions well. We recommend that SBCAL remain closely tied and supportive of other groups such as Associations in Mega Cities (AIM), Network of Baptist Associations (NoBA), and Century Associations Network (CAN).

### Strategic

- A) Vision Caster - Ray Gentry, GA
- B) Strategist - Rick Wheeler, FL
- C) Consultant - David Bowman, TX
- D) Leadership Multiplier - Matthew Gullion, IN
- E) One with Contextual Understanding - Josh Ellis, TX
- F) Good Communicator - Mark Snowden, OH

### Foundational

- A) Called to Associational Leadership - Stan Albright, AL
- B) Person of Character - Dale Fisher, NC
- C) Spiritually Mature - Johnny Rumbough, SC
- D) Commitment to Learning - Stephen Parks, TX
- E) A Leader of Leaders - Tom Billings, TX
- F) Trustworthy - Mike Pennington, TN

### Relational

- A) Emotionally Intelligent (EQ) - Brian Nall, FL
- B) Active Listener - Bob Lowman, NC
- C) Supportive Coach - Jim Breeden, MO
- D) Authentically Vulnerable - Todd Robertson, KY
- E) Vocal Encourager - Bob Dean, TX

## Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Vision Caster

Dr. Ray Gentry

If you were not the leader of your association, would you want to be an active member of it? Are your pastors and churches glad to be part of your association? Do they see your association as a relevant partner assisting them in fulfilling the Great Commission? Carey Nieuwhof says the gap between how quickly you change and how quickly things change around you is called irrelevance.<sup>i</sup>

*Where there is no vision, the people perish... Pr. 29:18 (KJV)*  
*If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves...*  
Pr. 29:18 (The Message)

Just as churches need pastors to cast vision and clarify the church's mission in their community, associations of churches need an Associational Mission Strategist (AMS) to cast vision for churches to cooperate together to reach their local mission field for Christ. Churches need their AMS to cast vision and clarify the mission of the association. There is one mission, the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20). But each AMS needs to cast vision and clarify for church leaders what that means in their setting. There are always unique variables such as the AMS' spiritual gifts, the harmony and unity – or lack thereof – that exists among pastors and churches, the demographics, one county or multi-county, rural, suburban, urban context, etc.

An effective AMS needs to cast vision for his association in such a way that his pastors and churches see the lostness around them and the need for churches to be engaged in their local community as salt and light. In addition, they need to be made aware of the need for new churches, for revitalized churches, and for churches to collaborate together to accomplish the Great Commission in their setting.

No church can fulfill the Great Commission alone – though all are responsible to do their part. Southern Baptists have been voluntarily working together for over 170 years because we know

we can do more together than we can separately. We cooperate and collaborate together for evangelism and missions in our state conventions, nationally, and internationally, but it should start locally – in our associational mission field. Too many pastors, staff, and lay leaders do not see the need or benefit of collaborating together with sister churches to reach their Jerusalem mission field with the Gospel (Acts 1:8). It is our job to cast and keep casting the Great Commission vision...starting locally.

But how do we cast vision effectively, repeatedly, so that it motivates and moves the needle among our pastors and churches? Here are some thoughts as one who has seen associational missions from all sides – as a pastor, as an associate pastor of medium, large, and mega churches, as a leadership team member of rural and metro associations, as chairman of an associational leader search committee, and as the associational leader of five different associations.

1. Study God's Word and pray much. Ask Him to give you wisdom and discernment.
2. Seek wise, godly counsel. Do so from pastors/church leaders as to the greatest needs of your pastors/churches, as well as counsel from community leaders about the greatest needs of your communities/counties.
3. Read edifying books and blogs. Listen to podcasts on leadership, vision, and strategy. Leaders are readers. Leaders are learners.
4. Take time to pray, process, and plan based on what you have learned. For me, nothing beats going on my own personal prayer and planning retreat every year or so. I spend 2-3 days fasting, reading Scripture and helpful leadership books, and praying for wisdom about the needs of my pastors and churches. This quote from Craig Groeschel challenges me: "Innovation is born out of limitation. Innovation is seeing what everybody sees and thinking what no one else thought. We are the light of the world. When the world gets darker, the church shines brighter. What is the true, current state of your organization? Why? If you were starting now, what are you currently doing you would not do? Why are you still doing it? If you were starting over today, what would you attempt? When will you attempt it? Don't whine about what is. Create what is supposed to be." <sup>ii</sup>
5. Share with your key leaders what you have learned and the direction you believe the association should go. Dan Reiland, one of my favorite writers on leadership, says, "Your job as a leader is to help clarify reality according to the vision. It's your responsibility to help each person see the issue, problem, new idea, vision, etc., differently so they can

move forward... There is no need to sell or convince. Instead, inspire according to what you sincerely believe God is saying, and have agreement and alignment from the larger team.”<sup>iii</sup>

6. Be open to tweaking the vision as you receive new information and different perspectives. Be humble. You don't have all the answers. Be teachable.
7. Get buy-in from key leaders. You may form a Task Force to work with you in fleshing it out and developing a plan of implementation. Carey Nieuwhof says, “No church's passion for the mission will ever exceed the passion of its leader. A passionless leader is an ineffective leader. When your best days are behind you, it's time for a new future. Great leadership requires a syncing of the leader's vision with the organization's direction. If you're the only one who thinks it's a good idea, it's probably not a good idea.”<sup>iv</sup>
8. Remember that vision leaks! Once you cast the vision, you must keep recasting it on a regular basis to reinforce the vision and keep on track. Here are some things to consider: “No one cares about ‘the what’ before they understand ‘the why.’ Focused urgency is indispensable for getting stuff done. To create a culture, you have to celebrate your values. Rhythms of accountability determine what the team gets done. Be decisive, own your mistakes, correct quickly, and celebrate wins. Love the Bride of Christ.”<sup>v</sup>

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Ray Gentry (DMIN) serves as the Associational Mission Strategist of the Southside Baptist Network, McDonough, GA, and as the Executive Director of the Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders (SBCAL).

<sup>i</sup> Carey Nieuwhof, 10.20.18, *7 Church Trends Everyone Needs to be Talking About*

<sup>ii</sup> Brian Dodd on Leadership, 8.10.18, *50 Leadership Quotes from Craig Groeschel's Closing Session Of The 2018 Global Leadership Summit*

<sup>iii</sup> Dan Reiland, 12.19.18, *5 Positive Insights To Help You Lead Negative People*

<sup>iv</sup> Carey Nieuwhof, 4.4.18, *7 Signs It's Time To Leave*

<sup>v</sup> Trevin Wax, 8.6.18, *7 Leadership Truths I Learned from Eric Geiger*

## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Strategist**

**Dr. Rick Wheeler**

When I was first called to serve the Jacksonville Baptist Association in Northeast Florida, one of the first items our Administrative Committee desired to do was to change the title of my position. The title of Executive Director of Missions had served my predecessor well, but it was clear that the context of associational ministry had changed as well as the perspective and needs of churches. We landed on the title of “Missional Strategist” as it conveyed the role of one who would facilitate missions rather than direct the work of the churches. While no title is exact, it did seem to better fit the changing nature of the work of the person giving servant leadership to missional efforts of a family of churches within an association.

In essence, a strategy is a plan of action designed to achieve a major or overall aim. While the AMS does not own the strategy, he is responsible for making sure his churches are aware, focused on and making steps toward the accomplishment of the Great Commission within the missional reach of churches who relate to the association. In that sense, he stewards the mission strategy of impacting lostness within his city or region. Many times, these plans involve collaborative goals greater than what any particular church could or should attempt, since they encompass an entire geographic region.

In many ways the proficiency of “Strategist” is the sum of many other aspects within the role of the AMS. What makes one an effective strategist for his association is the combination of:

**A consistent and rich prayer life** – In God’s Kingdom, a strategist is not left up to one’s own creativity and designs but to follow in the pattern and guidance of the Designer. We often seek answers from people who really do not know, while failing to ask God who always knows. Any strategy to reach the lost that is absent of foundational prayer will be, at best, merely an expression of human wisdom and at worst, could actually do harm to the cause of Christ. The

AMS should infuse his daily, weekly and annual rhythms with meaningful times of conversation with the Father. Particular prayer emphasis should be given to how the Lord wishes to use the collective effort of churches within the association. While many things can be good, not everything is the right thing for the association. A prayerful strategy is not about being well-branded or flashy. The right strategy is the one given by the Lord as his revealed will. The AMS should pray, “Lord, as a family of churches, what is our specific part of the Great Commission here within our mission field?” Your emphasis as an association will be the response to these times of prayer.

**A brokenness for the lost in your community** – The engine of the soul is fueled by love and the energy behind an effective strategy to reach the lost with the gospel is a love for God and a passion for people to find the hope found only in the gospel. You can only reach people that you have loved enough to take the time to really see. You will never see them if you don’t love them, and you will never love them if you never see them. Care must be given to cultivate a heart that is tender to the spiritual condition of the community. A heart that is broken for lostness will sacrifice more, surrender more, strive more and stay in the field longer, especially when the going gets tough.

**A passion to steward Kingdom resources** – While the Lord has the cattle on a thousand hills, He has only entrusted a portion of those resources to each of His servants. A well-developed strategy that is birthed in prayer and developed through an intentional process is a response acknowledging God’s ownership of all we have and our responsibility to manage well all of the time, talent and treasure He has placed in our hands. A sloppy strategy will eventually waste resources. Many times, the AMS will play the role of connector helping churches efficiently find the people or tools that will help them advance in their mission. We also become the first responder to the churches when there is a gap in leadership or when they need outside

help. A local AMS can get there fast with “just in time” assistance. This helps facilitate the forward movement of churches to work efficiently and with greater impact.

**A willingness to evaluate and initiate** – When I first started on staff at a local church in Jacksonville back in 2003, the senior pastor handed me a book published by a megachurch that he admired, and asked me to duplicate the teachings of that handbook in our church. The book was called “The Miracle of \_\_\_\_\_.” In the blank was the name of the megachurch. I could not help but laugh at the attempt to put a miracle of God into a handbook but I was an obedient staff member of the church and tried to apply the practices and principles into our ministry setting. If ever there was a day when you could put the vision and strategy from one church into a handbook and implement it without rigorous evaluation, that day has passed. The mission field we face is complex and changing. An associational leader must be committed to the brutal and honest evaluation of existing ministries and to making course corrections based upon the results of that evaluation. Unfortunately, in church and associational life, much of what I see is doing what we did last year and try harder, or as previously mentioned, cut and paste ministry.

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Rick Wheeler (DMIN) serves as the Lead Missional Strategist, Jacksonville Baptist Association, Jacksonville, FL.



## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Consultant**

**Dr. David Bowman**

“I brought you here to help us create a mission statement that sings, and THIS AIN’T IT!”

Having consulted with a number of churches along the way, the Associational Mission Strategist (AMS) could honestly say this was his worst ever experience while wearing his consultant hat. Making matters worse, this was his home church.

At least it had been.

The pastor was not happy. He left for Sonic to purchase a Diet Coke, and the AMS hoped, to cool off a bit during the break.

The AMS wondered, “Has anyone ever been disfellowshipped due to a bad consulting experience? Has any association lost the gifts of its second-largest contributing church in such a case?” He feared he was on the way to setting an ignominious record.

Even so, he was convinced of the value of the process.

Never underestimate the power of a strategic outsider. Outside eyes and ears see and hear things others overlook. Outside noses also smell things. Consider a few examples.

- Guest parking which is far away from the main entrance and poorly marked
- A children’s building which smells like dirty diapers, mold, and mildew as soon as the exterior doors are opened
- Flowers long dead and tangled with weeds decaying inside the landscaping timbers

One church added a new set of restrooms in the middle of the last century but did not include ventilation. When the complications of this situation were addressed in the consultant’s report, the church became angry. It is a good thing the AMS was not on the premises that evening.

However, the church also decided to do something about the issue and updated the problematic facilities to the delight of every nose in close proximity.

The church with the stinky children's building also got angry and had an all-church workday and cleaned that building from top to bottom. They ripped out carpet. They discarded dirty toys and damaged furnishings.

And that angry pastor finally relaxed as the caffeine and sugar substitute hit his system. He enjoyed the ride as he and his staff put together a rock-solid and inspirational mission statement.

He also allowed the AMS to keep his membership in the church.

The pastor and staff were on edge that morning because a few of them had been up all night with a family whose young son died just before dawn. This came after a Sunday of two worship services, three Bible study hours, and multiple meetings. Energy was depleted. Adrenaline was spent. The capacity for intelligent thought and creative synergy was completely absent.

Months later, the pastor and staff rolled out their Vision Pathway to the congregation over eight Sundays. Sermons, Bible studies, and daily devotionals supported the focus on the new mission and vision. The pastor and staff talked for ninety days about the needs to be addressed in the church, the community, and around the world. They asked for a sacrificial offering above and beyond normal giving patterns to launch them toward the special future they believed God had in store for the church.

No fundraising team assisted in this process. No financial campaign materials were utilized. The pastor and staff simply talked about where God was leading them as a church family.

Over \$30,000 was given or pledged that day above what was asked. When the final tally was counted months later, the church had given over \$100,000 more than was asked.

A few years later, the next phase of dreaming, praying, and planning was completed. A stewardship consultant incorporated the church's Vision Pathway into the financial campaign which would provide a permanent second location for the church. The church raised more money

in that campaign than any in its history. The church family now worships in three services on two campuses while achieving an ever-broader ethnic diversity.

The pastor was right. Those first efforts at creating a new mission statement did not go well that morning. How could they, considering the challenging circumstances? However, with a few more hours of work that day, and several more months on the other parts of the process, the team struck gold when they landed on this:

*Guiding generations and cultures in God's story of transforming grace.*

Transforming grace is available to all people everywhere. We are commanded to communicate this good news to every people group around the world. Every man, woman, and child needs someone to guide them into relationship with Jesus. This church makes it clear they plan to do so with great intention.

The pastor was one year old when his parents joined the church. He has been part of this church his whole life. His mother is still a member. His children and grandchildren are members, and his family is not the exception. Many other families also include multiple generations.

What the church was not was diverse. They were lily-white. However, the pastor was president of the school board and saw the increasing ethnic diversity and felt God's hand leading him to reach out more strategically to the two-hundred people groups represented in the local schools.

The staff spent one morning of the consulting process sharing life-change stories they had experienced over the years. There were no dry eyes that day. They determined they wanted everyone to come to Jesus and to be changed forever by his transforming grace.

Nearly ten years after that awful morning, that church is still multi-generational, and it is also increasingly multi-ethnic. The elementary school where the second campus met until the new campus was completed is almost equally represented by students who are Anglo, African

American, Hispanic or Latino, and Asian. The second campus reflects this diversity. The main campus is progressing in that direction.

Multiply this story across an association and consider the impact of strategic outsiders with fresh eyes, ears, and noses. This could lead to many new personal stories of transforming grace.

AMS, learn the skills and do the work of a consultant.

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## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Leadership Multiplier (or Developer)**

**Rev. Matthew W. Gullion**

As an Associational Mission Strategist, I have been blessed with many leaders who have intentionally poured into my life and ministry. My father (Wayne Gullion) has had years of successful ministry and is a steadfast anchor and sounding board for me in ministry. There have been many others who have invested deeply in my life. In daily ministry I find that their words of advice and encouragement often ring out in my mind.

Looking at the role of Leadership Multiplier, the task is endless. It takes a lifelong commitment to developing leadership in oneself along with cultivating leadership in those around you in ministry.

The first commitment is to **develop personally**. Those who will be leaders as the Lord has called must first commit to becoming a leader. It is important to study other leaders and developers. There are many great leaders who have come before us who have a wealth of knowledge. It is important to study a leader's actions, not just his resume. A leader's actions tell the pure truth of his ministry, and this is where we can learn the depths of leadership. It is vital that a leader build a network of leaders around him who serve as counselors and hold him accountable. These counselors must have your best interest at heart and have freedom to be honest even when the truth hurts.

The second commitment in developing leadership is to constantly **be searching for talent** around us. If you look deeply enough, every person brings valuable lessons to the team. Leaders, to some extent, are in almost every pew in our churches. It is an important role to help develop the talent so that it may be beneficial in the local ministry. It is a great task to provide the tools and platform for their personal and spiritual growth. The goal must be to help potential leaders develop even when they don't see the potential in themselves. It is a joy to make leadership

advances in our ministry as well as in the lives of those new leaders. Investing and helping others advance in ministry creates harmony and momentum in the work.

The third commitment in developing leadership is to **be intentional in investing in the leaders around you**. Leaders rarely develop without directed effort. When the Lord gives a fresh vision, He often follows that with someone who will join us in that journey. In Ephesians 4:12 we are instructed to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. This takes an investment of time and resources. Use breakfast and lunch times to invest in small groups with local leaders. This becomes a great time in a non-threatening way to build relationships. Often, we can learn more from an hour meal than a month in the office. We must be willing to put time investment into our schedule. Set aside blocks of time weekly and/or monthly to meet with your leaders and staff. This time is essential for growing together as well as for moving forward in ministry. It will be helpful to intentionally bring training and cross training to them. It is important to make every effort count toward leadership development.

The fourth commitment in developing leadership is to **allow individuality**. Developing leaders need space to grow and learn. They will not be exactly like anyone else. This is the area where many leaders struggle. Often in our mind, it seems that something needs to get finished and there is only one way. Learning the principle, “That may not be the way I would have done it, BUT praise the Lord, I didn’t have to do it!” can be very valuable. It is not your job to do everything, but to help the team accomplish the task at hand. To grow and multiply leaders:

1. Be willing to share your tools...things you have discovered that work.
2. Give leaders parameters of where and how to function, then let them work.
3. Strive to employ and advance the spiritual gifts that God has provided for each one to succeed.
4. Learn the truth and the importance of not just leading the team, but of listening to the team.

5. Lead with enthusiasm. People will follow passion and true heavenly vision, and will develop passion of their own.

Remember that these leaders are not your pet project; you have been entrusted with their development as a leader. Intentionally create momentum in the leader's life and you will create momentum in your team's ministry as well. Developing leaders will maximize your impact by multiplication. Seize the opportunity to build and lead strong teams. Follow the simple principle of building up an area of ministry, equipping the next leader of that ministry, handing off that ministry, and repeating the process. Think of ministry beyond the here and now, and your leadership will continue well beyond your last breath.

Lastly, as Associational Leaders, we must be looking for leaders who have the characteristics, qualities, and competencies to become leaders of leaders. This is of vital importance for our associations to grow and thrive. One of the greatest gifts of leadership is not being on a higher leadership level than others, but of bringing others into a higher capacity of leading so that we might advance together. Our objective must be to unify without jealousy. It is important that we empower those around us as they will someday replace us, as well as multiply our footprint as AMS leaders. As a parent desires a child to have a better footing in life than they did, so must we for those who will walk beside us, as well as those who will walk beyond us in the future.

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Matthew Gullion serves as Associational Mission Strategist for the Northeastern Indiana Baptist Association, Ft. Wayne, IN.

## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: One with Contextual Understanding**

**Dr. Josh Ellis**

In ministry, context is everything. A verse of Scripture pulled from its context can lead to dangerous misinterpretations. Leadership principles that work well in a large, staff-led church can lead to disaster in a normal-sized, committee-led church. A youth pastor from California who moves to Texas and plans an event on a Friday evening in the fall is bound for disappointment if he thinks to himself, “Surely not everyone is going to the high school football game.” Context is everything.

### **A Responsibility Rooted in History**

Early in the eighteenth century, churches began to associate together, because meeting one another’s needs was necessary for those churches to accomplish the Great Commission. As churches united their different God-given capacities, their unity begged the question, “For what specific purpose is God bringing together the parts of His body in the area around our churches?” The answer was found in their context, but the question was always asked to the associational leader.

As other Southern Baptist organizations developed over time, associations remained closest to the lifeblood of the Convention: the churches. Associations need not have “field-based personnel,” because associations were always in the field. As such, leaders of associations have always been—in one way or another—tasked with understanding the two opposite sides of their field: what churches need to more effectively reach the people around them and what the people around them are truly like in order for churches to better engage them. For this reason, among many, associational leaders were a vital component in the heyday of denominational partnerships to start churches, schools, universities, and missions endeavors.



## **Seeing The Big Picture**

How many times does a pastor have to remind a typical congregation to set aside time for building relationships with non-believers? The pastor is right to point out that surrounding oneself with Christian relationships crowds out most opportunities for sharing the gospel. Associational leaders have a similar issue confronting their weekly calendar: they can be so busy focusing on the needs of the churches in their associations that they neglect to make time for understanding the context in which they minister.

The dilemma is real. One might ask, “How can I meet the needs of my churches if I’m unaware of what those needs are?” The response must be missiological in nature: How can you make the needs in your context known to your churches if they are unknown to you? How can you shine a light on unreached people groups, partnership opportunities, or social ministry needs if discovering them remains on the bottom of the to-do list?

It requires discipline to be a caretaker of churches and also balance that need with being an intentional mission strategist that lives proactively at the city, county, or regional level. Harkening to the past and even more importantly for the future, it must be someone’s job to stand in front of churches and—without any authority over those churches— point directly to a need. Someone must boldly ask the collective of churches, “God has put this need in front of us, now what are we going to do about it?”

## **Accessing Experts and Interpreting Data**

There was a time when gathering data on one’s context was a paramount challenge. However, we now live in a day when access to data is readily available and often free. As is often the case, more data does not automatically lead to clear conclusions. One must be able to interpret the data. Once again, we return to the importance of knowing the field by living in the field.

Countless pastors have amassed binders—and later digital folders—of polished demographics and psychographics thinking that the data will yield solutions. Data are necessary, but not sufficient for exegeting a community. First-hand knowledge of the field is also gained through relationships with experts: be it neighbors, principals, and business owners in a neighborhood context, or a wider assortment of elected officials, school district superintendents, non-profit leaders, first-responders, and chambers of commerce in a regional context.

Associational leaders do not—and could not—have all of the knowledge that these various sources possess, but they can be a bridge from their churches to those sources along with their corresponding knowledge by intentionally building a relationship with those people. In this way, associational leaders can also model for their churches how the larger context in which they operate and cooperate is a system of smaller interdependent systems. They can show that when the gospel penetrates one part, there will be consequences to other parts.

### **Seeing the Whole Field**

Leading an association is strategically and practically different than leading just about any other kind of ministry. Associational leaders have to be focused on regions and on what the summation of the churches can accomplish together to advance the gospel rather than what any single church brings to the effort. Helping churches engage and reach their context can only be done when the associational leader has Christ-centered compassion intermingled with a missiological, sociological, and strategic understanding of their context.

Imagine churches as players on a football field, each dedicated to devising and executing their play toward the ultimate goal of accomplishing the Great Commission. Now imagine the game is being played at night, and only the middle of the field is lit. The associational leader is the assistant coach in one of the boxes high above the field that can see a problem: the field is much larger than what the team is using. The associational leader reaches for a switch. The lights on

the right side of the field come on, and the players not only see the offensive possibilities that are there but also the defensive work that must be done. Another switch is flipped, and another section of the field is illuminated with greater possibilities coming into focus. A lot can happen when the whole field is visible.

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Dr. Josh Ellis is Executive Director (Associational Mission Strategist) of the Union Baptist Association, Houston, TX.

## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Good Communicator**

**Rev. Mark Snowden**

Over lunch, the pastor across the table became very interested in the evangelism training that the association was conducting. Then he said, “Shoot me some more details on that training. I’m really interested.” Another pastor sitting next to him said very diplomatically, “So, do you read things that the association sends out?”

Inwardly, I was groaning. For at least six months, constant messaging had been going out about the training. We’d already sponsored two of these events! Yet, this pastor had missed the word given priority in our newsletters, email blasts, and website posts.

It is possible to gush information like a fire hydrant and yet fail to communicate.

The Apostle Paul stressed that “faith comes by hearing” (Romans 10:17). That powerful word “hearing” means to receive a report in order to act. An Associational Mission Strategist becomes a good communicator when his pastors and church leaders receive messages in the way that they prefer in order to take action steps.

The life of King David helps us become good communicators that effectively bring changes that further the kingdom of God.

### **ATTRIBUTION – PUSH AND PULL**

Consider David and Goliath.<sup>i</sup> David threw a stone and Goliath fell down. Goliath’s death was attributed to David’s stone. And God was glorified!

The idea behind Attribution theory is literally “see coupon, buy pizza.”<sup>ii</sup> You bought the pizza because you attributed the coupon to the purchase.

It's easy to assume that everyone will see the postcard you mailed to each church and they'll show up at an event. That's called Push Marketing, by the way.<sup>iii</sup> On a bad day, it's intrusive and the church secretary can toss the card rather than junk up her desk with what she considers unwanted spam coming in over the wall.

Push and pull communications work best when they reinforce an existing relationship.

On a good day, the postcard gets passed along and the pastor shows up at your event. Pull Marketing happens when the video of your cat goes viral. It also happens when pastors want something from you and are ideally so delighted, they tell others as well.

## DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS

Now, jump about 20 years into David's future. King Saul is dead, the Israeli tribes are united, and King David wants Jerusalem as his seat of government.<sup>iv</sup> The problem is that it's occupied by hate-spewing Jebusites. So, does David walk up to the gate with a stone and a sling? He relied on his "research" having grown up down the street and advised his troops to use grappling hooks to scale the walls or possibly enter through the water gates below the walls. And he added the incentive that whomever killed the first Jebusite in Jerusalem got to be his general. And that's how Joab got his job.

Research helps you know what works and what doesn't. David knew Jerusalem. You don't have to hire a firm when all you have to do is listen and apply it.

New ideas are only accepted by about 2.5% of church leaders in your association. That's the starting point of adopting a new idea being "diffused" across the association.<sup>v</sup> If they adopt the innovation, then the next 13.5% will give it a shot. And, if you can get 25% of everyone to adopt the behavior, then it could become a sustainable movement. This is why it takes so long for Southern Baptists as a whole to adopt new things like FAITH or Three Circles. The innovators

and earliest adopters have to try it out before those in power, often considered laggards, will risk their reputations and give up what they're currently doing for the new-fangled idea they saw work somewhere else.

When I arrived in my association, only three churches were giving to our Baptist Association's Annual Missions Offering. The planning team developed posters, a prayer guide, and new envelopes. Ladies volunteered to call or visit key pastors. Based on the Diffusion of Innovations, we already had our 2.5% innovators in the three original churches. I challenged them to expect 14 churches. And we had 19 churches participate. So, the next year I gave them the challenge goal of 25 churches. And we had 29 churches participate. Talk of the associational offering is no longer a big deal in the association. Last year we distributed more offering envelopes than prayer guides and collected about \$8,000.

## PROTECTING THE MESSAGE

Full civil war was underway in Israel.<sup>vi</sup> Absalom's men were on the attack. King David released three divisions to meet Absalom's army head-on. When Absalom's hair caught in a tree, Joab speared him to death. Then Joab dispatched his messenger to give King David the news that the coup was over. But there was another guy standing there. Ahimaaz wanted to run, too. Now, Ahimaaz had already been a messenger and had helped King David escape an ambush, so he had high credibility. Joab finally relented, but then Ahimaaz "ran by way of the plain" (2 Samuel 18:23 CSB). He didn't protect the message and took the easiest route, outrunning the first messenger.

There is an important way to protect your message. If all you dish out is upcoming events, theological analysis, and business matters, you'll eventually wear out your church leaders' ability to listen. Your reputation will be a guy only wanting something from them. One well-researched

communications theory says that most people can only handle about 25% of what they receive to be work-related.<sup>vii</sup> The other 75% should be friendly and downright casual. This doesn't mean you need to be silly, but you can be warm. Do this best by providing testimonies from those who are implementing what you're wanting them to do. Celebrate baptisms, highlight new planting efforts, tell stories about backyard Bible clubs, and report on disaster relief experiences. Seek ways to share examples of God at work in their midst.

Becoming a good communicator brings glory to God. As David said as he charged Goliath, "This whole assembly will know that it is not by sword or by spear that the LORD saves, for the battle is the LORD's" (1 Samuel 17:47 CSB).

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<sup>i</sup> 1 Samuel 17:1-57, with particular emphasis at verse 49.

<sup>ii</sup> Attribution Theory applied to marketing and communications is covered in many scholarly journals. A brief overview is provided here: <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/attribution-marketing-35917.html> (cited 10-19-18)

<sup>iii</sup> Push and Pull Marketing are common in advertising. <http://marketing-made-simple.com/push-pull-marketing-strategies/> cited 10-19-18

<sup>iv</sup> See 2 Samuel 5:1-8, with attention to verse 8 and 1 Chronicles 11:16

<sup>v</sup> Diffusion of Innovations was developed by Everett M. Rogers. An overview: <https://www.ou.edu/deptcomm/dodjcc/groups/99A2/theories.htm> -- cited 10-19-18

<sup>vi</sup> 2 Samuel 18:9-33, with emphasis on verse 23.

<sup>vii</sup> The Play Theory of Communications was developed by William Stephenson. An overview: <https://www.communicationtheory.org/play-theory/> cited 10-19-18

## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Called to Associational Leadership**

**Dr. Stan Albright**

God's interaction with His followers throughout the Bible affirms that He places a high value on "calling." Abraham in the land of Haran, Moses at the burning bush, Samuel during a mid-night encounter, and Paul on the Damascus road...each encounter came with a call, a purpose, and a plan. These moments were significant landmarks...moments of truth in the lives of each individual. They were significant because it was God who was setting them apart for the mission, not man. Without the knowledge and understanding of one's calling, leading well is impossible. Calling is directly related to your willingness to listen to the **voice** of God as He **calls** you to the **mission** He has set before you. Calling is demonstrated by faithfully responding to God's invitation to fulfill His mission, using the abilities, wisdom, talents, and passion He has placed within you for His eternal purposes. Why spend so much time emphasizing a definitive understanding of the meaning of calling? Easy...if God has not called you to the role of an Associational Mission Strategist (AMS), there is a good possibility you will try to fulfill this task through human efforts based upon a poor understanding of the mission of the AMS. If so, that will diminish the effectiveness of your efforts, or at worst, will tempt you to seek to impose misdirected and/or personal priorities in order to fulfill selfish desires. It is critical to understand that the AMS role is unlike that of a pastor. It is not an extension of another ministry role. It is unique unto itself. So, what does it mean to be called as an Associational Mission Strategist?

The Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders (SBCAL) Study Team has defined the challenge and identity of the AMS as follows: "Leading an association is fundamentally different than leading a church or other ministry, but it requires no less a calling to a specific position. Leading a collaborative system requires someone desiring to build coalitions and rely on sometimes diffused leadership systems, rather than employing more directive leadership styles at



times.” If this mandate is to become a reality, the call of the AMS must include (yet not be limited to) several key factors.

**Time is critical.** Charles E. Hummel originally published a groundbreaking essay on this subject in 1967 entitled, *The Tyranny of the Urgent*. In essence, Hummel categorizes daily tasks according to two criteria—urgent and important. The premise of the tyranny of the urgent is that if we do not actively allocate or plan for our time, someone else will take it. The call of the AMS involves using time wisely and effectively.<sup>1</sup>

**Priorities must be set.** Any organization that fails to set priorities will fall to the cries of the loudest voices. Not to say those cries are not important to someone, but are they the true priorities identifying the mission and ministry of the association? The call of the AMS must include the intentional identification of associational goals, and the prioritizing of his tasks and responsibilities around those goals.

**Relevance must be defined and exemplified.** Everyone has their own set of criteria by which they define what is relevant. But, relevance in the role of the AMS is not defined by personal desires. It is relevance based on gospel direction and ministry effectiveness. It has to be understood that the churches of the association do not primarily exist for the ministry of the association. It is the association that primarily exists to assist the churches of the association in fulfilling their purpose of reaching their communities for Christ. The AMS’s relevance will be measured by his effectiveness to cast vision, equip leaders, and provide resources based on the association’s mission and the met needs identified within its scope of influence.

**Communication must be continual.** Anyone who has served on a church staff understands the extreme value of communication. If this is true for the church, then you can multiply that value many times over for the association. The AMS must understand his call includes a heart of

inclusion. If the churches are in the dark concerning the purpose, direction, and ministry of the association, then participation and partnership will be gravely affected.

**Trust is essential.** The call of the AMS must include the development of high levels of trust with key associational leaders so that ministry direction will maintain a unified degree of ownership and impact. In his text, *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen M.R. Covey states: “Low trust creates hidden agendas, politics, interpersonal conflict, interdepartmental rivalries, win-lose thinking, defensive and protective communication—all of which reduce the speed of trust. Low trust slows everything...every decision, every communication, and every relationship.”<sup>ii</sup>

**Christ is foundational.** No call to Christian service can survive without a clear understanding that Jesus Christ is the bedrock upon which every ministry must be built. It is Christ who calls us, and not we ourselves. As certain as when the Holy Spirit set Barnabas and Saul apart for their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3), the AMS must understand that his service to associational ministry is a matter of divine calling.

The call to associational leaders is to challenge the status quo of traditional associational paradigms and unlock the potential of churches and their respective leaders...working together to fulfill the mission of Christ, locally and globally.

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<sup>i</sup> Charles E. Hummel, *The Tyranny of the Urgent*, (Online) 1994, <http://www.olemissxa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Tyranny-of-the-Urgent.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Stephen M.R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything*, Simon & Schuster, 2006

## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Person of Character**

**Rev. R. Dale Fisher**

Consistent Christian character should be demonstrated by every follower of Jesus Christ, but particularly among those who are leaders of the Lord's church. Christian leaders are held to a higher standard, and should model for others what it means to be a person of character. A disciple of Christ is one who learns and then adheres to the code of behavior established by the Lord Himself. His teachings are not suggestions, but directives for living a Spirit-filled life. It is not enough for a person just to claim Christian character, it must be regularly proven in the arenas of private and public living. Being a person of character is a foundational proficiency for Associational Mission Strategists, and for all who serve as leaders in a family of churches.

Character is the combination of qualities that distinguishes one person or group from another. It particularly focuses on moral or ethical strength, integrity and fortitude.<sup>i</sup> Moral soundness, or purity, should be the norm for the AMS. He should be known as a person who is free of corruptness, always doing what is right according to God's perspective. He should be a person who is consistently walking with Christ in thought, word, and deed. "A primary characteristic exhibited by Daniel was purity of life. 'Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself' (Dan. 1:8). It is interesting to note that one of the first things God did at the dawn of creation was to divide the light from the darkness. That act symbolizes a great spiritual truth: you're either on one side or the other – there's no room for fence-straddling."<sup>ii</sup>

Associational leaders should be so consistent in word and deed that their family of churches develop a strong level of trust in their leadership. Trust is earned as leaders quickly do what they promise, treat everyone fairly, and speak consistently with all people. Congregations are willing to follow someone who has been proven in the soundness of their doctrine, solid in their leadership practices, and sensible in their dealings with people. Such a trustworthy leader will

find people more willing to accept, or at least try, innovative ideas, and to make changes when necessary.

Integrity is based on biblical principles for a follower of Jesus Christ. The Bible is clear on what is right and wrong for a Christian; whereas the views of people may change over time or vary according to different generations. The Associational Mission Strategist must stick to what the Bible says, even when that behavior goes contrary to popular opinion. One with a weak character can easily be swayed by the views of others, but the God-fearing AMS will stand strong on the Word of God in times of adversity.

The foundation for living a Christian life and leading others in their walk with the Lord is love. A Jewish scribe who, by his position, should have known the law well, asked Jesus what He considered to be the most important commandment. The Lord quickly responded that, “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment.” However, Jesus did not stop with the foremost commandment, but continued “And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30-31, NKJV).

Associational leaders who love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength will regularly talk with Him through prayer and faithfully seek instruction from His Word. The AMS whose life is full of love for God will find it much easier to consistently love and work with people. An associational leader who genuinely loves God and those created in His image will not be driven by selfish desires but by Godly character.

The Bible also says that “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:5-6, NKJV). Associational leaders need wisdom to work with churches and to reach their

communities for Christ. The Bible instructs us to ask God for wisdom “who gives to all liberally” (1:5). However, there is a requirement to “ask in faith” (1:6). If associational leaders are to be known as people of Christian character, then there must be the practice of faith in God, and not just talk about it. It will not take long for people in the pews or behind the pulpits to see an associational leader who talks, but does little to act.

An AMS must be a person of integrity, one who is consistently sound in what he thinks, says and does. As a Christian, one’s integrity is built on a strong relationship with God. He has learned what is right and wrong through the regular study of the Bible and persistent communication with God in prayer. However, character must continue to develop. Dr. Jeff Iorg says “The Christian doctrine of sanctification – the biblical process of growing in grace, of becoming a fully devoted disciple of Jesus, of continually learning the ways of God – clearly calls for lifelong character development. While personality is largely determined by genetics and early environmental factors, character continues to be shaped and developed over a lifetime.”<sup>iii</sup>

“It is character that enables a person to lead. The spiritual leader’s personal growth is the accumulation of God’s activity in his or her life.”<sup>iv</sup> Lifelong consistent Christian character makes for a great associational leader.

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Second College Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1985), 259.

<sup>ii</sup> Leroy Eims, *Be the Leader You Were Meant to Be* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1980), 27.

<sup>iii</sup> Jeff Iorg, *The Character of Leadership: Nine Qualities that Define Great Leaders* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, 2007), 8.

<sup>iv</sup> Henry T. Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 112.

## Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Spiritually Mature

Dr. Johnny Rumbough

Have you ever observed a spiritually mature associational leader in action? He was filled with the Holy Spirit. His responses were full of grace. His counsel was biblical. He spoke with wisdom and his guidance was trusted. Without question, there was a recognizable depth to his spiritual well!

*Are you spiritually mature?* One of the most important issues regarding your spiritual maturity as an Associational Mission Strategist (AMS) is whether or not you yourself are spiritually mature and can lead others into a mature, intimate relationship with Christ. Do you, yourself, have a growing intimate relationship with Christ? Do you know how to lead others into that intimacy with Christ? Your answer will directly impact everything else in your life and ministry. You must get this right!

The scriptures are filled with examples of men and women who are spiritually mature. For example, Titus (the man and the book) is an excellent model for associational leaders to follow in their pursuit of being spiritually mature. He was *trustworthy, faithful and wise...and more!* For these reasons, Paul apparently believed him to be spiritually mature enough to leave him on

### Spiritually Mature Lessons from Titus

- He was Trustworthy
- He was Faithful
- He was Wise
- ....and more!

the Isle of Crete with a special assignment to “set in order the things that are lacking (in the church at Crete)” (Titus 1:5). Needed there were spiritually qualified leaders in *every city*,<sup>i</sup> Christ-centered theological and doctrinal accuracy in *every church*,<sup>ii</sup> and grace-focused teaching that brings salvation and intimacy with Christ to *every person*.<sup>iii</sup> Question—Do you see from Titus’s example a modern-day application for today’s associational leaders?

*The spiritually mature are trustworthy.*<sup>iv</sup> The AMS must be prepared for his assignment each and every day. The option of pushing a pause button when the unexpected happens doesn't exist. Without doubt God can use *anyone* or *anything* He chooses to carry out His purpose. However, if we are spiritually prepared to take our pastors and church leaders into a deeper relationship with Christ than where they have ever been before,<sup>v</sup> then God can use us for His special assignments.

I remember one such special assignment as though it was yesterday. It was Tuesday at 8:30 am. A visitor stepped into my office and said, "I am here to inform you that one of your pastors left with my wife last night and I was told he would be calling you. When he does, tell him I love my wife and I want her to come home." Later that same day, the pastor's wife called and said, "I was told my husband is going to call you. Please tell him the kids and I love him and we want him to come home." Two days later, the pastor called. I told him what had been shared with me. He and I met later that day. The Holy Spirit brought upon him a great conviction. I have never witnessed a more genuine repentance. Some months later, I performed the marriage renewal ceremony for this pastor and his wife. It was beautiful. They remain happily married.

The SBCAL<sup>vi</sup> recently commissioned a study among churches and associations concerning their impressions of associational leadership.<sup>vii</sup> One of the key findings of the research was "ministry to pastors is perceived to be a very important component of associational work." The fact that many consider the associational leader to be a *pastor to the pastors* is significant. Question—What practices can you implement to help pastors see you as trustworthy?

*The spiritually mature are faithful.*<sup>viii</sup> Intimacy is a fruit of faithfulness. It's possible to be faithful and not have intimacy. However, it's NOT possible to have intimacy without faithfulness. The AMS must be faithfully engaged in a growing intimate relationship with Christ. Your faithfulness to Christ will give others reason to *seek* your counsel. Yet, it will be your intimacy with Christ that will wow them to *follow* your counsel.

I believe in and practice taking sabbaticals. Some are a few hours. Some are a few weeks. They vary with worship encounters, personal growth opportunities, spiritual retreats, and spiritual renewals. A few years ago, Lexington Association surprised me with a 3-month sabbatical as a 20<sup>th</sup> ministry anniversary gift. At first, I thought, “How can I possibly be away that long?” I soon moved on to a more important question, “How could I be a good steward of the gifted time away?” After seeking guidance from pastor friends, I decided to go with the counsel shared by one of our larger church pastors. He said, “Johnny, just do whatever you want to do. Rid yourself of stress and enjoy your time.”<sup>ix</sup> So I did. And, it was a wonderful renewal. Question—What steps can you take to increase intimacy in your relationship with Christ?

*The spiritually mature are wise.*<sup>x</sup> The AMS must pray for discernment and wisdom. My friend Rick Fisher<sup>xi</sup> shares, “*discernment* is understanding the ways of God and *wisdom* is knowing how to apply that understanding.” Titus teaches us that submission to God’s ways will highlight the work of God’s grace in our lives. May the words in that beautiful hymn, “Grace Greater than Our Sin”<sup>xii</sup> always stay close to our heart. Question—What role has wisdom played in you being spiritually mature?

Seeking to be spiritually mature is a noble act of *being* verses *doing*. It will not be easy and, if neglected, will diminish quickly. Quoting an Irish Proverb, John Maxwell says, “You’ve got to do your own growing, no matter how tall your grandfather is.”<sup>xiii</sup> Therefore, be intentional in your development as a spiritually mature follower of Christ. Remember this ... NOTHING could revolutionize your association more than having a spiritually mature Associational Mission Strategist! It only takes your willingness to obey Him and do whatever He asks you to do next.<sup>xiv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Titus 1:5

<sup>ii</sup> Titus 1:5-9



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iii Titus 2:11-14

iv Titus 1:5

v Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*

vi Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders

vii Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders: *2018 Study Team Report*

viii Titus 1:4

ix Dr. Ed Carney, Pastor – Riverland Hills Baptist Church, Columbia, South Carolina

x Book of Titus

xi Rick Fisher, Vice-President, Blackaby Ministries International

xii The Baptist Hymnal. Copyright 1991 – Convention Press. p.329. Words: Julia H Johnston, 1849-1919

xiii John Maxwell, *Living at the Next Level: insights for reaching your dream*

xiv Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*

## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Commitment to Learning**

**Dr. Stephen Parks**

“When you are through learning, you are through.” I don’t remember who said this, but it has stuck with me as valuable advice. Why be a continual learner? The following are my top ten reasons.

First, learning keeps your brain active. I cannot learn new things nearly as fast as my five-year-old grandson, but I want to keep learning so my brain doesn’t atrophy.

Second, an Associational Missionary Strategist (AMS) spends a good bit of time solving problems. Continual learning will help one become a better problem solver.

Third, the more you learn, the more you realize you don’t know. Therefore, learning should help keep you humble and willing to listen and learn from other people.

Fourth, continual learning helps one stay interested and engaged. It is easy to fall into a rut, such as relying on knowledge gained in seminary. But that can lead to staleness and boredom.

Fifth, learning helps make one more adaptable to change. In my life, I have seen the pace of change dramatically accelerate.

Sixth, lifelong learning serves as a reinforcing loop. As you learn one subject, it makes learning in other subjects easier. As the years go by, you gain knowledge that can help you in many areas of life.

Seventh, continued learning makes you more creative. Hopefully, you will study many subjects not directly related to religion. This will help you make applications and connections to your ministry that would have never occurred to you otherwise.

Eighth, continual learning will help you make better decisions. Generally, harder decisions

require more information and different perspectives. While we almost never have all possible applicable information, usually more is better, resulting in better decisions.

Ninth, an important role you have is teaching others. Continual learning gives you the opportunity to teach fresh material. It is often easy to spot the teacher relying on information learned years ago.

The final and most important reason to be a lifelong learner is that it will make you more relevant and valuable as a leader in your association. God can use a sharp tool much more effectively than a dull one, so stay sharp! When I started in associational ministry in 1993, a primary function of the association was to be the storehouse of information. Now a pastor can easily get much of that same information using the internet. With the development of artificial intelligence, I believe we are still in the early stages of the “information age,” so it is imperative to lead from the front—utilizing the ability to learn and apply relevant information to a specific context (a combination of leadership, understanding, and wisdom).

### **The Content to be Learned**

As an AMS, you will have the opportunity to help disciple and train pastors, staff and other church leaders. This requires you to be a model disciple or learner (another translation of the Greek word). Hopefully, your associational purpose revolves around the Great Commission command to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20 also notice the teaching participle). You should have a solid grasp of the Bible and its theology (2 Timothy 2:15) so you can multiply your ministry (2 Timothy 2:2). You should also become like the leaders of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32) in understanding your area and how to effectively reach it. It is important to not let your knowledge, strategic thinking, and other skills become a substitute for spiritual intimacy and

dependence on the power of God.

I always made it a priority to know the lay leaders of churches and get their input on issues facing their church. Those lay leaders will then call you in times of crisis and pastoral transitions. Often, they will turn to you for an understanding of church history and Baptist polity when facing difficulties.

These are the other subject areas that have proven to be most helpful to me in the past 25 years of associational ministry: church growth, health, and revitalization; church planting; leading change; conflict management; leadership and team building; systems thinking and theory; revival and discipleship; disaster relief; and consulting and coaching.

One can supplement this list with a list drawn from the “Associational Leader Proficiencies.” Don’t think that once you have mastered these subjects, you don’t need to study them any longer; they all call for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning is pivotal to the other proficiencies because if one is learning, then one can begin to master the others, and the converse is also true.

### **Accelerate Your Learning**

As you grow older, you become more aware of your personal learning style and the best ways for you to learn. Make the most of your preferred personal learning style to make the best use of your time. There are formal and informal ways of learning, and both should be pursued with intentionality. For many, picking up additional degrees and certifications will pay huge dividends.

There are huge benefits to attending conferences and networking. Take advantage of the good networks for associational leaders - including SBCAL. A good tip is to set aside one half of the length of the conference to digest and plan further action as a result of the conference. If a

conference lasts two days, then set aside one additional day when you return home to reflect on the material covered and what needs to be applied in your context.

Most of us will greatly benefit from a personal coach, mentor, and/or accountability partner. Finally, be sure to try to teach what you have learned. That will cement your learning as well as provide new insights on that subject.

At the bottom of every one of my emails I have the tag line “Ancora Imparo.” This phrase is attributed to the Renaissance genius, Michelangelo. He practiced it right up to the time of his death at age 87 (he wrote it on a sketch he was working on). Translated into English it means, “Yet, I am still learning.” May the same be said of us at the end of our lives.

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## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: A Leader of Leaders**

**Dr. Tom Billings**

As the Director of Missions for Union Baptist Association (Houston, Texas), I was privileged to work with many highly competent church, government, business and non-profit ministry leaders. I'll never forget the first time I met Dr. Ed Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston. I extended my hand and started to introduce myself when he cut short my introduction and said, "I know who you are. You're our new leader." Honestly, I didn't think of myself as a leader of Dr. Young's caliber, much less did I feel like I was his leader. Over time, however, I learned that to do my job effectively I needed to become a leader of leaders.

Leading leaders may simultaneously be the easiest and most difficult role you will undertake. Leaders are generally self-motivated, independent and assertive. Getting them to work is the easy part. They don't need to be inspired to act. Action is their default setting. Getting *independently* minded leaders to implement a strategy that requires them to work together cooperatively and *interdependently* will be the challenge.

As associational leaders, our responsibility is to lead our churches to advance the Great Commission. By working together interdependently, churches will accomplish significantly more than they could ever accomplish working alone. Getting them to work together requires that we be leaders of leaders.

Leaders can be intimidating. Typically, confident, assertive and independent by nature, they can be a challenging group to lead. Working with them requires confidence in oneself ... not arrogance, cockiness, or an "I-know-best" attitude, but the quiet confidence that comes from knowing you have been called by God and selected by the churches of the association to fulfill your role.

When I graduated from college, a friend gave me a gift with a note. The note read: “Tom, God believes in you.” Many times I was encouraged to press on in difficult situations by remembering not only that I believe in God, but God believes in me.

Confidence must be balanced with humility.<sup>i</sup> A well-respected denominational leader once told me, “Your job is like that of an orchestra conductor, but instead of leading musicians you must orchestrate people who have strong egos.”

Getting people with strong egos to work together requires leading them to put their egos aside for the greater good. The best way to do that is to manage your own ego.<sup>ii</sup> You can start by remembering that the group as a collective is smarter than any individual group member including you, the leader of the group.

Working with a small group of leaders on a key initiative, I was confident that an initiative I had spent hours working on and praying over before our meeting was the right thing for us to do. As our strategy session progressed, however, it became clear that what I envisioned wasn’t the direction the group thought we needed to go. As it turned out, the group was right and my best leadership move that day was not insisting on my plan but submitting to the wisdom of that group of leaders.

Leading leaders requires spiritual maturity and emotional intelligence. While these two concepts are not synonymous, they are closely connected. Before one can effectively lead others he must lead himself, a discipline sometimes called personal mastery.<sup>iii</sup> Personal mastery requires a high degree of self-awareness, the core component of emotional intelligence.<sup>iv</sup> A leader should know his own strengths, weaknesses and motives for acting. Effective leaders will maximize their strengths, find ways to compensate for their weaknesses and carefully monitor the motives behind their actions.

Despite our best intentions we will sometimes operate from immature and lesser motives. Disciplined leaders set up safeguards against it. Failing to do so may prove disastrous. The authors of *The Ascent of a Leader* suggest the sinking of the Titanic may have had more to do with the poor decisions the captain made out of a desire to salvage his damaged reputation than striking an iceberg.<sup>v</sup>

Never is the leader's spiritual maturity and emotional intelligence put to the test more than when leading through conflict. Leaders are notoriously independent thinkers. They have their own ideas and typically believe their ways are best. The idea that you can bring a group of independent thinkers together to develop a strategy or work on a project and believe there will not be conflict is unrealistic. Most disagreements can be easily managed. The challenge comes when conflict becomes outright opposition.

Even a cursory reading through the gospels reveals that Jesus was at His best when He encountered strong resistance and opposition. Whether dealing with oppositional religious leaders or betrayal and abandonment by His closest followers, Jesus responded appropriately showing wisdom, courage and humility...as must we.

As an associational leader who desires to do his job effectively, you must become a leader of leaders. Leading leaders requires confidence balanced by humility, emotional intelligence and spiritual maturity. Though being a leader of leaders may be the most challenging thing you do, it can also be the most rewarding.

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Tom Billings (DMIN) is Executive Director Emeritus of the Union Baptist Association, Houston, TX. He served for many years as the Executive Director (AMS), retiring in 2018.

<sup>i</sup> Philippians 2:5-11



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<sup>ii</sup> Jesus modeled what it means to put aside one's ego in the Garden of Gethsemane when he put aside his personal desires and prayed to his heavenly Father "not my will but thine be done."

See Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:40-46

<sup>iii</sup> Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*.

<sup>iv</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*.

<sup>v</sup> Bill Thrall, Bruce McNicol, Ken McElrath, *The Ascent of a Leader*, 7-8.

## Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Trustworthy

**Dr. Mike Pennington**

When I think of *trustworthy*, I think of the most important word in the English language. When Dr. Oscar Thompson, author of *Concentric Circles of Concern*, asked our Evangelism class what was the most important word in the English language, outside of proper nouns, most in the class responded, love. Dr. Thompson, however, begged to differ. The most important word in the English language is *relationship*. Without a relationship, love has nowhere to go!

In associational ministry, without doubt, relationship is an incredibly important word. As Associational Mission Strategists, we have no authority. Any authority we have is based upon goodwill. Therefore, everything we do is based on relationships – good relationships. That’s why trustworthiness is so crucial. It’s indispensable.

Trustworthy is defined as “deserving faith and worthy of confidence, dependable.”<sup>i</sup> In preparation to write this chapter, God continually reminded me of Paul’s words in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians, “we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.”<sup>ii</sup> God examined Paul’s heart and found him worthy of trust. 1 Thessalonians 2 reveals great insights regarding trustworthiness. These insights apply to us since we have been entrusted with the hearts of pastors and churches. In our ministry, we must be deserving of faith and worthy of confidence.

Paul, the first “area missionary,” had a pure heart. His love was pure and his motives were pure (v. 3, 5, 8, 10). As an AMS, I work with churches in times of challenge, struggle and vulnerability. My best ministry happens when they know I love them and my only motive is God’s best for them.

Both gentleness and strength (firmness) characterized Paul’s ministry. Paul was gentle like a nursing mother (v.7) and challenging like a discipling father (v.11-12). There are many times the AMS must do the same. This quote from Oswald Chambers helps me: “The main characteristic

which is the proof of the indwelling Spirit is an amazing tenderness in personal dealing, and a blazing truthfulness with regard to God's Word." <sup>iii</sup> If amazing tenderness is ever missing, my exhortation, encouragement and imploring (challenge) may be ineffective.

Without doubt, Paul valued and developed relationships. He did not work from afar but was transparent and intimate. "We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us" (v.8). My trustworthiness with a church depends greatly upon how well I know them and they know me. I seek to have a deep relationship of trust with the pastor. I also am intentional in knowing two or three key lay people in the church as well. How can they follow leadership and respond to exhortation if they don't know me?

A trustworthy AMS is steadfast in the face of opposition. Even though Paul was "treated outrageously . . . we were emboldened by our God to speak the gospel of God to you in spite of great opposition" (v.2). Paul continued boldly and lovingly proclaiming the gospel and making disciples. Scripture declares that: the "steadfast love of the Lord never ceases." <sup>iv</sup> It continues: "Faithful love and truth will join together; righteousness and peace will embrace." <sup>v</sup> The trustworthy AMS is steadfast in the face of difficulty, rests in the love of the Lord, continues to love people and never quits. Not everyone is onboard with the Great Commission, but we continue on, praying that faithful love and truth will be embraced.

One final insight from Paul: "we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel" (v.4). Note he says "we" not "I". God approved his whole team! That gives me hope that God can trust me, too, with the gospel, with pastors and with churches.

### **What do you do when trust has been broken?**

Have you ever had a broken relationship? I have, and the pain is excruciating. In ministry it's not only painful, it affects the kingdom. We can't afford the luxury of broken relationships.

Restoring relationships requires great humility, love and perseverance. In humility, I “own it.” I accept my responsibility and ask God’s wisdom concerning my next steps.

Then I seek to be proactive toward reconciliation. Most importantly, I seek to take restorative action as soon as possible. I’ve found that things rarely (never?) get better on their own. Andy Stanley has said, “We don’t drift in good directions!”<sup>vi</sup> Drifting and hoping things get better is fruitless. Hope is not a strategy.

After owning it and confessing it, the following are good steps: 1) Don’t make excuses. “To excuse yourself is to accuse yourself.” 2) Make it right. Restitution is always appropriate. 3) Give it time. 4) Continue steadfast love. 5) Continually pray Psalm 139:23, “Search me, O God, and know my heart.” “You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, O God.”<sup>vii</sup> Restoring trust and trustworthiness is not easy but it’s worth the effort.

In my research, I came across an article by Henna Inam: How to Restore Broken Trust With One Simple Tool.<sup>viii</sup> Henna is a C-Suite Coach and says, “I don’t have many talents, but I do have a super-power. People somehow feel safe to open up to me about their challenges.” Sounds like she’s *trustworthy!*

What makes this article gold is the chart from *The Anatomy of Peace* by the Arbinger Institute.<sup>ix</sup> The chart contains 4 boxes for self-examination the next time conflict arises. It examines my: View of Myself, View of Others, View of the World and the feelings experienced. Am I in: The *Better-Than* Box, The *I-Deserve* Box, The *Must-Be-Seen-As* Box or The *Worse-Than* Box?

I am in the midst of a restorative situation right now. Even though I thought myself to be mostly innocent, I found myself in EVERY box and experiencing various unhelpful feelings. This tool has helped me. I pray it helps you, too.

As Associational Mission Strategists, everything we do is based on good relationships. Trustworthiness is crucial in developing and maintaining those relationships. Because without a relationship, love has nowhere to go!

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<sup>i</sup> Merriam-Webster.com

<sup>ii</sup> 1 Thessalonians 2:4 CSB. All Scripture references are from the CSB unless noted.

<sup>iii</sup> Oswald Chambers, *Disciples Indeed*, p. 386. From My Utmost for His Highest email, 1-13-2019.

<sup>iv</sup> Lamentations 3:22 ESV, Psalm 52:1,

<sup>v</sup> Psalm 85:10

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/857655-we-don-t-drift-in-good-directions-we-discipline-and-prioritize>

<sup>vii</sup> Psalm 51:17

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hennainam/2018/06/06/how-to-restore-broken-trust-with-one-simple-tool/#1e4371d34f4d> Accessed on 1-25-2019. Henna Inam is a C-Suite Coach – coaches CEOs, CFOs, etc.

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Anatomy-Peace-Resolving-Heart-Conflict/dp/1626564310>

## Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Emotionally Intelligent (EQ)

Dr. Brian E. Nall

In the center of my Jeep's dashboard is a tachometer. I monitor its rise and fall carefully as I shift my way through the gears. The gauge is giving me information about the speed of my engine in relation to my gear selection. As it rises and falls to reveal various revolutions-per-minute, I up-shift and down-shift accordingly. Like my Jeep's tachometer, Emotional Intelligence (EI) must serve as the tachometer for the proficiencies of the Associational Mission Strategist (AMS).

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is the ability to recognize and understand emotions in oneself and in others, the ability to use this awareness to manage one's behavior and relationships and understand the effect one's emotions have on others.

"I'll call you if the problem is a 'five-alarm fire'." Those were the words I heard from one pastor when conducting my monthly check-up call. In other words, "if a problem becomes bigger than me, I'll call you." These remarks remind me that the AMS must be always ready to engage in emotionally charged environments. Consequently, he must have the intelligence to deal with both the emotions within the presenting situation as well as any emotions that arise within himself.

A first step toward emotional intelligence is *taking emotional control from within*; or better yet, vertical dependence. Whether you are experiencing Jesus' words that "in this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33), or straightening out the "rebellious" people that Paul described to Titus (Titus 1), a fight for one's emotional wholeness will be waged. To cope, as well as to lead, the emotionally intelligent AMS must intentionally raise and lower the speed of ministry so to recalibrate his ministry back to the will of God. After the highly energized feeding of the five thousand, Mark 6 informs us that Jesus lowered the emotional temperature of the moment. He sent His disciples on ahead in a boat so that He could get alone to pray. Similarly, the AMS must

know when to take the necessary steps to recalibrate his heart back to God. This shift can mean intentionally removing himself from what might be viewed by some as non-negotiable expectations of the public eye, or even a smaller leadership circle, so that the Father's voice can be heard. Modifying a Maxwellian-like principle, "Before you can help the church grow up, the AMS needs to go up."

A second step toward emotional intelligence is *demonstrating the needed emotional cue*. When my children were small, trips and spills were frequent and inevitable. Their first reaction to the "crisis" was often to look at me or their mom. Uncertain as to how they were supposed to react, still learning that skill, they would look to my face for clues – upset, anger, should they cry, was it no big deal. Thus, *my* emotional response informed *their* emotional response. In the plethora of associational ministry, churches will often look to the AMS for emotional cues as to how they should respond. For example, if they are without a pastor and experience a challenge in the transition, do they see worry or strength expressed on the AMS's face; if a deacon disagreement has gone from private to public, do they hear peace or pain in the tone of your voice? The emotion by which you choose to handle a given situation (and your emotion *is* a choice) will often become the gauge by which the situation is handled. Subsequently, unnecessarily escalating an emotionally level two issue into a level eight, or vice versa, through giving misplaced emotional cues, can generate undesired results. Watch your tachometer.

Jesus knew His emotions well, perfectly, and leveraged them throughout His leadership. When the Temple was reduced to a market and a back ally pass-through, He appropriately escalated the situation to express anger (Matt 21); concerning the death of Lazarus, a friend, Jesus demonstrated that sorrow and weeping was appropriate (John 11). These examples point to the range of emotion the AMS may exude without concern that a stoic countenance is demanded for every context; or a volatile demeanor permitted.

A third step toward emotional intelligence is *mindfulness of internal emotions*. Ministry concerns in the church and moral decay in society can quickly “rev” the emotions of those involved and affected. The AMS must be sensitive to what is going on within themselves as well as within their surroundings so that they can give a measured emotional response. The AMS’s job will cover a range of topics; thus, some will be nearer and dearer to his heart than others. For instance, some AMSs have a greater affinity toward administration while others toward discipleship and still others toward missions. Thus, when a topic is brought to the AMS, it will be natural for him to be more energized for those items by which he has an affinity while unintentionally communicating apathy or emotional distance for those items where he has lesser. It is the emotionally intelligent AMS who recognizes his emotional propensity and brings the emotion that the situation and hearer need instead of the emotion that he might otherwise prefer.

This skill is tightly connected to the fourth step toward emotional intelligence, *picking the right emotion relative to the setting*. For instance, financial mismanagement at Church A could be viewed as more or less serious than Church B; because, while both need to embody biblical financial principles, Church A might be experiencing this issue for the third time, be dealing with a significantly greater amount of money and be in a different state of health than Church B. Consequently, the emotion needed for the setting is not merely connected to the presenting topic; rather, the holistic context. Such need for emotional relativity, perhaps “fluidity or subjectivity,” should not worry the AMS; rather they should be driven by prayerfulness. The Holy Spirit has promised to guide those who seek Him, and His guidance includes the emotions as well as the actions. (Matthew 10:19, Ephesians 3).

Emotions are hard-wired into the DNA of our humanity. We don’t turn them off when we accept the call to ministry. Rather, we must steward them, redeem them, for His glory and His bride’s good. That is emotional intelligence.



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## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Active Listener**

**Dr. Bob Lowman, Jr.**

Associational leaders are sometimes the only safe place available to pastors, but the ability to listen will play out in environments beyond counseling settings. Pastors often have no sounding board for ideas or out-of-the-box strategies, and active listening from associational leaders can often be a welcome source of help.

When I began associational ministry in 2006, the association I serve had been through a very difficult season. Churches and pastors had become disconnected from the association, and a serious lack of trust hindered any progress in building unity and partnership in mission and ministry. A retired pastor in our area, Reid Keiger, told me when I began work with the association I needed to take the first five years and have lunch with pastors, listening to them, hearing their perspectives, and building relationships. Active listening had to be much of what I did if I wanted to succeed in this calling of serving a family of churches. It did not take just five years, but became an on-going process of connecting and listening to pastors and leaders, trusting God to build relationships for Kingdom-focused efforts in Jesus' name.

Too often, I am aware that I am not the active listener I need to be. There are many opportunities I have missed, failing to listen to someone who needed an ear to hear. But I hope this will be as helpful to you as it has been to me. We should practice active listening and learn to listen to help, to encourage, to coach, and to serve our pastors, leaders and churches.

Active listening is important because associational ministry is built on relationships. There is no contract or hierarchical structure to cause churches to work with their associations. It is a voluntary partnership. So, in order to see associational ministry flourish, much time and energy is required to build relationships with pastors, leaders and churches. To build genuine relationships, we must know how to listen with care, demonstrating the love of Christ.

James 1:19 says, “Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (ESV). To really hear, we must be ready to listen, ready to pay attention to what is being said to us. To be quick to hear shows someone really cares about what is being said.

One of our challenges is that the average person has an eight second attention span. With smartphones and other electronics competing for our attention, along with many responsibilities, active listening can be a difficult task. To help in the process, we can identify specific ways to become a better listener:<sup>1</sup>

**(1) Listen to learn, not to be polite.** Listen out of curiosity and not generosity. Be interested in what someone is saying and pay attention in order to learn from them. The lesson might be information needed, or it might be a greater awareness of a need they carry that no one else pays attention to. Pastors very often play the Lone Ranger: they have no one outside their church that they can talk to on a regular basis, or if a crisis arises. The associational leader can be that person that listens, learns, and finds ways to support. We need to be life-long learners, and we can do that by listening well to those we serve.

**(2) Quiet your agenda.** Do not think about what you want to see happen, instead, intentionally listen to the person speaking to you. If you ever finish a conversation and learned nothing new, were you really listening? Associations exist to serve the churches, not vice versa. One way to demonstrate this mission reality is by truly listening to the pastors and churches. Then, strong relationships and active partnerships can be developed.

Listening in this way requires humility. Philippians 2:3 says “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” (NKJV). Active listening requires denying self so that you can hear, respect, and encourage others to keep sharing as you hear what they have to say.

**(3) Ask questions.** To listen actively, ask more questions than you give answers. Asking questions demonstrates curiosity and a readiness to hear more, opening the door for honest communication. When I meet with a pastor, I will often write down some important questions to ask that will help me listen better and learn more as we meet.

**(4) Notice your talk/listen ratio.** Scott Eblin says that we have two ears and one mouth for a reason. Therefore, aim for a 2 to 1 ratio of listening to talking. If you take notes during a meeting, keep track of how much you listen versus how much you talk.<sup>ii</sup> You will be able to learn much more by listening more, thus you will be able to help more effectively when the listening is done.

**(5) Wait until someone is done talking before you respond.** “The most difficult component of listening effectively seems to be waiting for a period at the end of a sentence before formulating a reply.”<sup>iii</sup> If you are not ready to wait, you are prone to interrupt the person you are supposed to be listening to, thus keeping real communication from happening. This takes us back to the need for humility, and the reminder to consider the importance of what the person is sharing.

Since the role of the association is to serve the churches, the role of the Associational Mission Strategist is to serve the pastors and leaders of those churches in the most effective way. This service begins at the point of listening well. So, if we have ears to hear, let us hear, and learn to listen in the best ways possible.

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<sup>i</sup> Stephanie Vozza, 6 Ways to Become a Better Listener. [www.fastcompany.com/3068959/6-ways-to-become-a-better-listener](http://www.fastcompany.com/3068959/6-ways-to-become-a-better-listener), January 2, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Scott Eblin, *Overworked and Overwhelmed: The Mindfulness Alternative*. (Wiley & Sons, 2014). Page 158.

<sup>iii</sup> Leslie Shore, *Listen to Succeed*. (CreateSpace, 2012). Page 9.

## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Supportive Coach**

**Rev. Jim Breeden**

Associational Mission Strategists (AMSs) are often called upon to come alongside pastors and churches for a variety of reasons. This privilege and task is one of the primary functions of an AMS. The question is, “What is the best approach to come alongside a pastor or church during a time of need, and to provide encouragement and support to their life and ministry?”

Most associational leaders come alongside church leaders by providing conferences, consultation or coaching. While all three approaches can be helpful, coaching is most effective, and one of the best skills an Associational Mission Strategist can develop.

By coaching, we mean meeting with a person or a group of people over a period of time. The time is spent intentionally listening, asking questions, and helping the pastor or church leader to discover or rediscover who they are in Christ, their calling, best choices, and next actions needed to fulfill God’s plan for their life and ministry.

One of the reasons coaching is most effective is because it is relational. The coaching approach allows the AMS to get up close and personal with pastors and churches. Sometimes it is easy to forget that ministry is about people and caring for them as a person, not just helping them accomplish professional goals or fixing problems in the church. The coaching relationship builds trust and a real relationship that results in real heart and head discussions that strengthen people.

Coaching is coming alongside a person or church, not just for a few hours with information (conferences) to share or a few visits to show how much a pastor or church needs to change (consultations), but walking with a pastor or church through a process. It is a process where the AMS is invited to go on the journey with them; an organic process that is driven and paced by

the pastor or church. It is an intentional process that can and should be stopped when no longer needed or healthy.

Another argument for more coaching by the AMS is that the process allows for more discussion and interaction around specific topics and issues that pastors and churches are facing. Pastors and churches are best served when they can face and deal with the specifics of their lives and ministries instead of just general conditions. Often lost in large group conferences and general consultations is the working through of specific issues with specific people in a particular way. When it comes down to specifics, and the timing of those specifics, one size does not fit all. The coaching relationship allows for custom plans to be developed that can be adapted quickly based on specific dynamics.

Beyond specific issues pastors face, there are several things the AMS as a Supportive Coach can enhance in the lives of those he is coaching. The first is the level of **clarity** pastors and church leaders have concerning their lives and ministries. A leader often needs help from his coach gaining clarity. Clarity is needed on the problems he is facing, on best solutions for those problems, and on the best way to implement those solutions. Many leaders know the problems around them, but need help from a coach determining the seriousness of those problems. Which problems are most serious? Which problems are worth fighting? Which problems should the pastor handle?

Second, is helping **discover solutions**. If many know the problems, fewer know the solutions to those problems. The AMS trained as a coach is well suited to help pastors and churches brainstorm and prioritize the best solutions to problems. A good coach can help church leaders not just “get rid of a person,” but also provide wise and effective solutions to problems. Leaders need coaching to help discover solutions that not only deal with the problem, but that are also biblical and enhance the culture of a healthy ministry.

Third, coaches are able to **provide ways to best implement solutions**. Great time should be given to this area in the coaching discussion, as God cares not just about what we do as leaders, but also how and why. Too many church leaders have confusion in these three areas. AMSs that choose coaching can help bring clarity and therefore enhance the mission of many churches.

A fourth area where an AMS coach can enhance those he serves is by **helping pastors and churches face change**. It is no secret that church leaders and churches struggle with change. Often church leaders and churches only know what they have done and are doing. They know no other way to plan for the future except to look back.

Good coaching can encourage pastors and churches to ask new questions, to look around at their community like a missionary, and to figure out the best way to connect with people in relational and relevant ways. Jethro got his son-in-law, Moses, to change his approach to ministry by coaching him. Moses only knew one way to accomplish his task until Jethro came alongside him, asked some good questions, listened, and then gave wise counsel of a new method.

Leaders of churches need coaching to gain clarity, change, and finally courage. The final way an AMS can coach those he serves is by **fostering courage**. One of the natural results of the coaching process addressed above is for the pastor/church leader to be filled with courage. By knowing they are not alone and having someone who is intentionally walking with them through specific issues and processes, courage surfaces in their heart, voice, and interaction with others. God told Joshua to “be strong and very courageous” (Joshua 1:7). In I Corinthians, we are all told, “stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong” (16:13). The church today needs courageous leaders, and one way that will happen is through coaching relationships. One of the best resources for learning the practice of coaching is Tony Stoltzfus’ *Coaching Questions: A Coach’s Guide to Powerful Asking Skills*.

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## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Authentically Vulnerable**

**Todd Robertson**

“If you don’t think this association is a good missions investment, then don’t send us your money. You would be irresponsible to do so.” I shared these words with the messengers at our Annual Meeting last October. It seemed like the right thing to do. I wasn’t sure what the response would be. There sure were some interesting looks from the crowd as they heard those and other candid words from their Director of Missions. By God’s grace the feedback following the meeting reflected thankfulness for being authentic and even vulnerable.

Two helpful and powerful words make up this proficiency, but together they form a vital character quality for the effective Associational Mission Strategist (AMS). I hope that, like me, you can come to value the depth of what the phrase truly means and how it can shape a much deeper component to your leadership. The word ‘authentic’ is largely read as a positive quality, while the word ‘vulnerable’ often has negative connotations implying weakness. Let’s figure out how these words together accentuate the character of the AMS.

As we strive to understand ‘authentically vulnerable’ in a deeper way, it might be helpful to consider some synonyms and antonyms for the phrase as a whole. Words that bring this proficiency to mind include: truthful, relatable, open, warm, real, accessible, self-aware, empathetic, and transparent. Words that are antithetical to the concept include: cold, unapproachable, closed, fake, masked, guarded, judgmental, self-absorbed, and insensitive. It is not difficult to see that a leader who exemplifies the first list will be far more effective with and useful to others than the second list leader. If we do not work towards nurturing the qualities that mark being truly ‘authentically vulnerable,’ we might find ourselves drifting towards the negative behaviors that no true leader intentionally sets out to reflect.

In Scripture there is no greater example of being ‘authentically vulnerable’ than Jesus himself. We never see Christ putting on airs or interacting with others in a less than truthful way. Jesus never wore a mask and never lacked integrity, whether He was dealing with back stabbing religious leaders or the broken sinners with whom He so often shared His life. Jesus constantly put Himself at risk for the good of those for whom He was called to be the Good Shepherd. He wept with and for them, touched them, shared His disappointments with them, loved them with abandon, and stepped into their burdens. But, while risking vulnerability, He never abandoned who He truly was. He was in every moment All Mighty God, yet through grace He incarnated transparency, empathy, and approachability.

Paul exemplifies this throughout his ministry. To his disciple, Timothy, he writes, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—and I am the worst of them.”<sup>1</sup> Now that’s vulnerability! To the believers in Philippi he models this kind of character. He expresses his pedigree in things religious, but also strips himself bare to declare that all of his merits are of no consequence because of Christ. He has one passionate longing, to know and display Christ. He both acknowledges his lack of full maturity, but then encourages the Philippians to follow his example.<sup>2</sup> Paul can be transparent with his weaknesses and lack, while still knowing he has much to offer because of Christ’s work in him and calling upon his life. Jesus has “made Paul [and you] His own.”<sup>3</sup> Paul knows that he and the believers in Philippi can be both imperfect and mature at the same time.<sup>4</sup> They are in the already and not yet of the faith. It is as we embrace this truth as leaders that we truly begin to serve. Brother AMS, you have the power of Christ in you and the Holy Spirit working through you. You are pursuing the fullness of Christ. Therefore, you have much to offer as you passionately engage with church leaders, all the while being honest about what you may not yet have figured out.

If ‘authentically vulnerable’ is a proficiency, then it is something that can be pursued and sharpened in our lives. So, what does it look like to seek to be more self-aware, more accessible, and more transparent?

A key first step towards growth is to pursue intentional gospel relationships that will allow you to be more fully known and where you are able to receive feedback on your possible blind spots in life. Seek the gospel as the center of your life and the relationships you build. This will nourish a deeper understanding of grace and transform the way you interact with others. Hear the truth in love so you can speak the truth in love.

Another step is to be honest about your failures. This takes vulnerability. Dan Allender writes, “Being honest about your failures will also marginalize your influence—if *influence* is defined as always getting your way...”<sup>5</sup> While this sounds intimidating, he adds, “Openly acknowledging our weaknesses allows other people to join us on the healing path.”<sup>6</sup> Laying down the facade of perfection with those we love and serve will open up great opportunities to know and hear their hearts and nurture ministry on a far more significant level. This is true influence. Be open with the Lord (He knows anyway), your spouse, your gospel community, your associational leadership, and those you are blessed to lead.

Finally, commit to be the leader people need you to be. Your churches don’t need someone who reigns from above or by the power of position. Al Mohler, before quoting a study by Kouzes and Posner heralded, “credibility as the single most important issue in establishing effective leadership.”<sup>7</sup> I would argue that credibility is not possible without ‘authentic vulnerability.’ If the AMS is to have a true impact on the churches he serves, it begins with the grace-filled integrity to serve from our knees, not from on high.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 1:6b

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 3:12, 17

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 3:12

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 3:12, 15

<sup>5</sup> Dan Allender, *Leading with a Limp* (Waterbrook Press, 2006), p. 172

<sup>6</sup> Allender, p. 174

<sup>7</sup> Albert Mohler, *The Conviction to Lead* (Bethany House, 2012), p. 84

## **Associational Mission Strategist Proficiency: Vocal Encourager**

**Dr. Bob Dean**

When Moses stood on Mount Pisgah looking at a land that he would not be allowed to enter, God commanded him to “commission Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, for he will lead this people.”<sup>1</sup> The Associational Mission Strategist (AMS) is in a position to be an effective vocal encourager to pastors as they lead their congregations. This relational proficiency can provide important support to a pastor, instill trust, and enhance the relationship. A good relationship between the AMS and pastors leads to greater collaboration and partnership among associational churches.

The role of a pastor in a local church is a demanding job and can be very stressful. O. S. Hawkins wrote, “There is no other position in any other profession that knows the pressure that comes the pastor’s way.”<sup>2</sup> Lifeway Research conducted a survey in 2015 of 1,500 pastors and discovered that “80 percent expect conflict in their church” and “54 percent find the role of pastor frequently overwhelming.”<sup>3</sup> Pastors often talk with their AMS when they feel frustrated and discouraged.

The focus of encouragement should point the pastor to the Lord who is the source of our hope. Moses encouraged Joshua by reminding him, “The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.”<sup>4</sup> When the Amalekites took captive the women and children of David and his men, “David was greatly distressed . . . but David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.”<sup>5</sup> The purpose of our encouragement is to equip the pastor to find his strength and hope in the Lord.

Being an effective vocal encourager is more than just telling a pastor that, in spite of what some member or deacon may have said, you think he is a great preacher, pastor, or leader. Although it is good to regularly affirm a pastor because he likely has members who excel in

criticism, the most important encouragement that you can give him is to direct him to the only One who provides hope that “does not disappoint us.”<sup>6</sup> Hope in Christ is what will sustain pastors when they are discouraged.

What are some ways that we can encourage pastors and other leaders so that they are spiritually strengthened? Encourage them to trust God in whatever they are going through. One afternoon, I received a call from one of my pastors who was struggling. He shared with me a Job-like list of problems at the church, concerns about his own health, and dire personal financial difficulties. He was praying faithfully, but it seemed that God was silent. He asked me, “Bob, can you promise me that God will come through and meet these needs in time?” I told him that I did not know how or when God would answer his prayers. But I did know that God is faithful, and he could trust God in the midst of all of this. When Jairus heard the news that his daughter had died, Jesus told him “Don’t be afraid, just believe.”<sup>7</sup> Jesus’ admonition to Jairus is still essential to our faith today.

Encourage pastors to abide in Christ. One of the great “I AM” statements of Jesus is found in John 15. Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches.”<sup>8</sup> He repeatedly invites his disciples to “abide” in Him. Dallas Willard describes spiritual formation as a “process” in which we are transformed “in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> I can testify that at times in pastoral ministry, I have attempted to do the deeds of Christ in my own strength only to discover the truth that we can do nothing of eternal significance without Jesus.

Encourage pastors to give proper attention to their spouses and children. The demands of ministry are such that a pastor must intentionally protect time with the family. My relationships with my wife and children were the most encouraging and strengthening to me as a pastor. I served a church for 28 years, and Ellen and I reared our two children from birth to adulthood

during that time. I often reminded myself that there would be a day when I was no longer a pastor of a church, but I would still be a husband and a father.

Encourage pastors to follow the Holy Spirit's leadership. Paul taught the Galatians to "live by the Spirit" and to "walk by the Spirit."<sup>10</sup> When we seek to live by the Spirit, we will see God arrange things that we never could have planned. Ezra looked at the amazing things that God did in his day and said, "The gracious hand of our God is on everyone who looks to him."<sup>11</sup> We are not very good at figuring out what we should do. We are most successful when we follow the Holy Spirit obediently, and He is central to our lives.

Encourage pastors by sharing scripture and praying for them. Ask them, "How can I pray for you?" I will never forget when we asked our young children how we could pray for them. That question opened such a door to their needs that we have done it ever since. A good example is when Paul shared scriptures with the church in Rome and prayed, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> God's Word and prayer are the best sources of powerful and effective vocal encouragement.

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 3:28, NIV

<sup>2</sup> Hawkins, O.S., *The Pastor's Primer*, 269.

<sup>3</sup> Green, Lisa Cannon, *Despite Stresses, Few Pastors Give Up on Ministry*, viewed 01/27/2019, [www.lifewayresearch.com](http://www.lifewayresearch.com).

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 31:8, NIV

<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 30:6, KJV

<sup>6</sup> Romans 5:5, NIV

<sup>7</sup> Mark 5:36, NIV

<sup>8</sup> John 15:5, NIV

<sup>9</sup> Willard, Dallas, "Spiritual Formation: What it is, and How it is Done", viewed 01/27/2019, [www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/spiritual-formation-what-it-is-and-how-it-is-done](http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/spiritual-formation-what-it-is-and-how-it-is-done).

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 5:25, NASB

<sup>11</sup> Ezra 8:22, NIV

<sup>12</sup> Romans 15:8-13, NIV