

## **Yes, Virginia, We Need Baptist Associations** *Or, Other Forms of Local Denominational Organizations*

By  
George W. Bullard Jr.  
[BullardJournal@gmail.com](mailto:BullardJournal@gmail.com)  
[www.BullardJournal.org](http://www.BullardJournal.org)

My denominational tradition—Baptist—and specifically my denominational tribe of heritage—Southern Baptists—has three dimensions of denominational structure. They are known as associations, state (or regional) conventions, and national agencies and institutions.

Associations are the local entity which I categorize generically as dynamic spiritual and fellowship organisms. State conventions and the national expressions are organizations.

In historic order associations came first. The initial association of Baptists in my tradition was the Philadelphia Baptist Association established in 1707. The first association in the South that was ultimately part of my tribe was the Charleston (SC) Baptist Association established in 1751.

The first state convention in my tribe was the South Carolina Baptist Convention established in 1821. Finally, the Southern Baptist Convention came into existence in 1845. These two entities did not replace local associations, but carried forward the work of Southern Baptists from a different dimension and with somewhat different foci.

With the transformation of denominations in the past 40 years, it is a legitimate question to raise as to whether all three entities of my tribe's denominational structure are still essential and needed. It is certainly a question discussed in formal and informal settings, and acted on by congregations in an autonomous denominational movement such as Southern Baptists.

With significant transition and changes in how congregations and individuals financially support the three dimensions of denominational life among Southern Baptists, one observation can be made without fear of successful contradiction. Southern Baptists are unwilling to financially support all three dimensions of denominational life unless they see added value expressed by each for the fulfillment of the mission of God.

If three dimensions of denominational life are not sustainable, and one needs to disappear, which one is that? My initial response is to suggest it is not any of the three. It is important to understand the distinctive role of each. Without a distinctive role for each dimension that adds value to the mission of God carried out through various congregational expressions, at least one dimension may need to disappear.

Because it is the softer and more flexible dimension, some have suggested it is the association that needs to disappear. My conviction is that this is wrong. At the same time, I challenge associations to demonstrate their worth and value to the movement of God's Kingdom.

Associations do not have the right to exist just because they were first and have been around for so long. They must continually prove their value and worth.

## Distinctive Roles of a Three-Dimensional Denomination

I look at the dimensions of denominationalism through three lenses regarding their relationship with the movement of congregational expressions. The first lens is the kinship relationship to congregations. Second, is the economic relationship to congregations. Finally, is the insight provided to congregations.

**Kinship Relationship to Congregational Expressions:** National denominational expressions have an **acquaintance** relationship with congregations. Certainly, national leaders know some congregations intimately. However, if one steps back and looks at the full collection of congregations, many are acquaintances with national leaders and the leaders with them. At best national expressions have face familiarity with the totality of affiliated congregations.

State or regional denominational expressions have a **friendship** relationship with congregational expressions. State or regional leaders know congregational expressions better than national leaders, but not as well as associational leaders. As friends they have some common stories and experiences with a generous number of their affiliated congregations. In some denominations regional leaders may have annually been in the fellowship of many of their congregational expressions

Associations—when at their best—have a **family** relationship with congregational expressions. They know many of their congregational expressions like sisters and brothers, or at least as cousins. They have a no-exit relationship with their congregational expressions.

As an aside, in my tribe it is only the association where congregational expressions are members. With the state or region, and the national convention they have an affiliation relationship. Thus, it is only with the association that there is an organic 24/7/365 relationship. At best this leads to a mutual caring relationship even when—like with sisters, brothers, and cousins—there are from time-to-time strained relationships.

**Economic Position Related to Congregational Expressions:** National denominational expressions focus on **scale** when considering resources they offer that add value to congregational expressions. The larger the denomination, the more resources are needed in various languages and cultures, diverse demographic segments, numerous geographical and cultural settings, and a broad spectrum of theological perspectives. It is impossible for almost—if not all—denominations to do this.

In my tribe, our publishing house—once known as the Baptist Sunday School Board—beginning 25 years ago changed its vision, repositioned its business, and ultimately changed its name to LifeWay Christian Resources to broaden its scale to provide resources for a very large and diverse denomination. It was only partially successful. It was a noble effort.

The vast majority of denominations have figured out if the Southern Baptist publishing house could not do this, they could not either. Thus, they moved to brokering resources from various sources or stopped trying to meet the resource needs of their congregational expressions as thousands of new resourcing organizations that emerged in the past 40 years.

**Scope** is the focus of state or regional denominational dimensions. They move deeper into the contextual needs of their state or region by brokering resources from various sources, offering service choices to various types of congregational expressions, and deploying staff resources closer to congregational expressions.

Associations—who typically may cover one to three counties—although there are exceptions at both ends of this spectrum—provide **solutions**. At their best associations have long-term relationships with their congregational expressions, and can provide solutions that match each congregational expression with sensitivity to their spiritual maturity, cultural distinctives, and contextual characteristics.

Associations have the advantage of offering solutions that start with an understanding of each congregation. State and national dimensions start with the programs they offer and too often seek to make those programs fit all congregational expressions, which may mean they fit only a few congregational expressions.

**Insight Provided to Congregational Expressions:** Because of their contextual and conceptual distance from congregational expressions, national denominational expressions at best provide **information** to the typical congregational expression. They often have a lot of good information, but it is difficult to apply that information with helpful accuracy to a diversity of congregations.

State or regional denominational expressions have both hard and soft information which they offer to congregational expressions as real, authentic, and meaningful **knowledge**. They can contextualize the information of the national denominational expressions and the cacophony of noises from the thousands of parachurch and business entities, plus national personalities seeking speak into the lives of congregations. They can re-form this information into meaningful and helpful knowledge.

But still that is not enough. At best this creates various segmented networks of congregational expressions.

As a result of the potential depth of relationship with their various congregational expressions, it is feasible the best source of **wisdom** for congregational expressions is their association. Wisdom is knowing why, what, how, where, and when to apply the insights available from a myriad of sources.

To do this takes a family member who speaks truth into congregational expressions, and starts the dialogue from the perspective of the congregational expression. Only associations can do this consistently with a full collection of congregations. Such an association is not a network, but a family deeply passionate about long-term solutions for congregations and not short-term fixes.

## **A Pause**

There is so much more to write on this subject. At this juncture, I choose to pause to wait for some feedback, and another few days or weeks to ponder this subject.

Let me not move into full pause mode without affirming the title of this article: “Yes, Virginia, we need Baptist associations.”

Also, how do you see these ideas relating to your denominational tribe?

# What Are the Distinctive Roles of a Three-Dimensional Denominational Structure?

By  
**George Bullard**  
[BullardJournal@gmail.com](mailto:BullardJournal@gmail.com)  
803.622.0923  
[www.BullardJournal.org](http://www.BullardJournal.org)

| <b>Denominational Dimension</b> | <b>Kinship Relationship to Congregations</b> | <b>Economic Position Related to Congregations</b> | <b>Insight Provided to Congregations</b> |
|---------------------------------|--|---|--|
| <b>National International</b>   | <b>Acquaintance</b>                          | <b>Scale</b>                                      | <b>Information</b>                       |
| <b>Regional</b>                 | <b>Friend</b>                                | <b>Scope</b>                                      | <b>Knowledge</b>                         |
| <b>Local</b>                    | <b>Family</b>                                | <b>Solution</b>                                   | <b>Wisdom</b>                            |