



Faith Pulpit

First Century Local Churches in Association, Part 2

The previous issue of the Faith Pulpit pointed to ways that First Century local churches were associated by proximity, pattern, people, and practice. This issue will describe ways that First Century local churches were associated by purpose, project, and procedure.

Associated by Purpose

The Apostle Paul led groups of churches, like those in Macedonia and Achaia (Romans 15:26), to contribute money toward the relief of the saints in Judea—saints who had suffered persecution and famine (Acts 8:1; 11:28). The churches who participated in this venture were united by purpose, by project, and by procedure. The Gentile churches were unified in their purpose “to minister” to their Jewish brothers and sisters in material things since they had benefited from them in spiritual things (Romans 15:27). The project had a biblical purpose.

Unity of purpose precedes effective enterprises. For this reason, it is essential that churches in association be united in purpose. Associational purpose statements must be the result of deliberate, prayerful, and biblical consideration. Purpose statements for associational existence and for specific projects should be widely publicized and uniformly understood. The previous issue of the Faith Pulpit mentioned the need for unity of practice. This issue mentions the need for unity of purpose.

Consistently implemented in tandem, both purpose and practice eventually distinguish a group of local churches in association. These “distinctives,” over time, can profoundly enhance the ethos, traditions, and trajectory of an association. Churches in association that are united in purpose and practice are “on the same page”—literally.

Associated by Project

Being united in purpose, the churches then were united by a project to accomplish their purpose. They stood solidly behind the “Jewish Believers Relief Project.” The Macedonians, not surprisingly, gave so sacrificially toward this project that Paul cited their pattern of giving as an encouragement for the church at Corinth (2 Corinthians 8:1–6).

The Apostle Paul also reminded the Corinthians that they had agreed to participate in the project and that, in their zeal, they had set a lofty goal for their local church’s contribution to the project. Their enthusiasm had motivated many others to give sacrificially, and Paul warned the Corinthians that they were behind in their giving toward their own goal (9:1–3). In addition, Paul did not want the Corinthians unprepared and ashamed when the project representatives from Macedonia arrived in Corinth to receive their project contribution. Therefore, Paul urged the Corinthians by reminding them that the time had come to achieve their own predetermined contribution goal (2 Corinthians 9:1–8).

In the days of the New Testament, the local church set its own giving goal for an associational project, individuals within the local church purposed in their own hearts what they ought to give, and the association of churches did not set a levy against any local church but merely assisted the local church by receiving the offerings toward the project (9:2, 5, 7).

In another instance, the churches of Macedonia were united in their “Assist the Apostle Project” as he ministered in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:8–11). The Macedonians provided for Paul so that he would not be a financial burden to those in Corinth.

Today, many churches participate in similar enterprises when they financially support church planters at home and abroad. Pastors of supporting churches, especially the commissioning ones, will sometimes write letters to other churches encouraging them to give toward the needs of the missionaries or their projects. The process binds churches together. They pray, give, and delight in project reports from the mission fields.

Today, groups of churches also support institutions like Bible colleges, seminaries, mission agencies, and social relief agencies. Institutions, in a sense, are on-going projects. Institutions refer to their supporting churches as “their constituency,” because the churches support them financially, and circumspect institutions view themselves as accountable to their supporting churches.

We praise God here at Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary because He has blessed us with a committed and growing constituency, and we pray that He will continue to work through us as we seek to assist the churches that support us. It is exciting to see churches stand united with us in purpose and also support us as an on-going project.

Associated by Procedure

New Testament churches were also united in their procedures for completing their projects. The Apostle Paul explained to the church at Corinth that they should receive offerings for the “Jewish Believers Relief Project” every first day of the week—just as he had directed the Galatian churches (1 Corinthians 16:1,2). This was a procedural directive, and it unified the believers in Corinth with their brothers and sisters in Galatia.

Also, Paul directed the Corinthians to approve one of their own as their church’s courier to carry their offerings to Jerusalem (16:3). Even if Paul were able to go up to Jerusalem, he expected the Corinthian designate to travel, too (16:4). This was an important apostolic directive. It means that not even an apostle supplanted the decision of the local church to send its own representative along with the representatives from the other churches. This procedure united the churches as they determined to complete their project and realize their purpose.

Often, we moderns think that we alone have highly developed policies for carrying out our projects. Such is not the case. The New Testament churches appointed their own delegates for transporting the relief funds to Jerusalem. Then, the churches at large also selected one man as the general overseer for the handling of the funds. This man, unknown by name, was “chosen of the churches to travel” with Paul and his apostolic ministry team (8:18,19). Paul wisely directed in this procedural move, because he did not want anyone falsely accusing his team of stealing funds from the relief project (8:20,21). Paul also wanted someone of his own choice to travel with the church-chosen men who would transport the offerings, and so he sent his own representative to travel with the “messengers of the churches” (8:22,23). On the basis of this carefully laid out procedure of mutual accountability and financial integrity, Paul exhorted the Corinthians to “get on board” with the other churches and to give toward the para-church relief effort (8:24).

These passages from 1 and 2 Corinthians are readily applicable to church associations today. Groups of churches are wise to establish and to follow policies that assure financial integrity and project accountability. These policies should be widely publicized and carefully followed. Churches trust associational leadership when the leadership sticks with stated policies. Associations are also prudent to allow individual local churches the autonomy to select their own representatives to associational meetings. Large groups of churches need standing leadership for the more mundane, day-to-day maintenance of the association, for the completion of agreed-to projects, and for the communication of project vision and doctrinal position. In these instances, the churches should select the associational leadership. Some leaders may be salaried, others may be volunteers. Well thought-through systems for checks and balances go a long way to enhance associational credibility and functionality. The leadership appointees should be known throughout the associated churches for their admirable conduct and for the integrity of their ministries (e.g., 2 Corinthians 8:18-19). They must represent all that is good within the association of churches.

Conclusion

True, the New Testament says little about multi-church, associational endeavors. Nevertheless, it does depict the local churches as associated by proximity, by pattern, by people, by practice, and by purpose, project, and procedure. Taken in their entirety, these biblical accounts do provide a surprising amount of guidance for church associations today.

Dr. John Hartog, III

Former Professor and Interim President at [Faith Baptist Bible College & Theological Seminary](#) | [Other Articles](#)

Dr. John Hartog III, (Th.D., Grace Theological Seminary) served as a professor and also as an interim president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa. With a deep passion for biblical education and leadership, he is committed to equipping students to serve Christ in churches, communities, and around the world.