

GUIDING THOUGHTS FOR WRITING THE FUTURE STORY OF THE MONTGOMERY BAPTIST ASSOCIATION

THE GOSPEL IS FOR ALL PEOPLE EVERYWHERE:

Every person, regardless of race, class, education or social status, deserves to hear the gospel in a context understandable to them, with an opportunity to respond to the grace of God expressed in Jesus Christ.

Our cultural constructs and our inability to recognize them for what they are often hinder our ability to share the gospel with people who are different. We often seek to convert them to our culture or our cultural constructs (e.g. middle class family values) instead of to Christ where they can be uniquely who God created them to be.

To discover hindrances to our effectiveness in sharing Christ, we must first prayerfully look inward in serious self-examination, reflection and repentance.

THE CHURCH IS GROUND ZERO FOR KINGDOM ACTIVITY:

Associational structures and organizations are merely means to assist churches in fulfilling their God-given vision of Kingdom work. All meaningful Kingdom work must begin and end in the local church, must be owned and managed by the local church and must be developed in the local church.

Associational activities apart from the local churches, while they may be catalytic, encouraging or helpful in assisting churches, are doomed to failure without ultimate adoption and ownership by local churches.

Bringing about changes that result in significant Kingdom growth and community transformation in Montgomery cannot be done through merely "tweaking" existing structures or by devising new programs of work. This task calls for bold new approaches to addressing key community issues of race, crime, schools, poverty and the influences of affluence and consumer religion mentality.

These "bold new approaches" may not seem bold to the world or the prevailing culture, but they will significantly challenge the existing mindset and structures within most current SBC churches.

SIGNIFICANT CHANGE MUST BEGIN WITH A CHANGE OF HEART:

Any change that does not grow out of a Christ-transformed heart will be short-lived and ineffective. Churches will be revitalized when believers rediscover their calling to live as missionaries and begin to live out the exercising of their spiritual gifts, leading their churches in discovering church vision and giftedness for meaningful ministry.

The Future Story of the Montgomery Baptist Association

DATELINE: MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA, NOVEMBER 7, 2018

Montgomery is not the same city it was just ten years ago. A tremendous transformation has taken place. While long-time residents speak most glowingly of the changes, almost everyone who had lived in the area has taken notice. This transformation found its origin in a vision that developed among Montgomery Baptist church leaders and a commitment to see that God-given vision fulfilled.

CHALLENGES - Of course, there have been significant challenges. When the areas north of Montgomery saw continued migration of Montgomery residents to Prattville, Millbrook and Wetumpka during the 1990's and early years of the 21st Century, many anticipated Montgomery's demise, but a group of committed church leaders back in 2008 were not content to simply watch a slow decline in population and in church membership. They were willing to seek a new vision, to dream a new dream. This group, brought together under the leadership of Montgomery Baptist Association, began to pray, and dream, and pray, and dialogue. Out of prayer triplets meeting during the spring of 2008, ideas began to surface that congealed into a new vision for Montgomery Baptist Association and her then 57 member churches, now numbered at 72. An ongoing dynamic strategic prayer effort helped to jumpstart the process and sustained it throughout the decade.

A strong concern for involving all churches in reaching the unchurched in the greater Montgomery area characterized the beginning of the transformation. Working alongside churches, the association assisted in identifying critical life issues of those needing Christ. This process was carried out under the theme of "Churches Living Out Their Biblical Mandate." The association helped form multiple networks of churches and church leaders to facilitate actions based on calling and interest.

A vision team saw the need for churches to address from a biblical perspective five key issues that were often characterized as problem areas in Montgomery - crime, poverty, schools, race and abused or misused affluence. This was no easy task given traditional Baptist polity that affirms each local church as autonomous. Neither the association nor any other body can dictate to any church what direction it must take. Armed only with prayer and belief in the power of a God-given vision, these church and associational leaders began to challenge one another to a greater effectiveness in sharing the gospel and making a difference in the lives of people. Recognizing that many church members were ill prepared for community mission work, they called for a heart transformation among members and a deepening effort to become committed Christ followers. Only that effort, they believed, would lead to church and community transformation. One pastor commented, "We can't impact our community without deeply committed believers in our churches who live their lives with a strong biblical focus on making an impact in everyday life." But with so much to do and so little people power, how did it happen?

POWER OF PRAYER - In reality, through prayer the process had already begun in the lives and ministries of some of the vision team. One minister who lived outside his church community began prayer walking and visiting with the residents of the church neighborhood. His visits began to build relationships with the people who came to see him as a friend willing to help. He challenged his church to reach out and soon many children and youth in the community were getting involved. He looked for partners and found them in an independent evangelistic ministry, neighboring churches that were not Baptist and, eventually, even city leadership.

Another larger church involved in ministry for a long time in a declining community saw her ongoing efforts at community transformation bear even more fruit through meaningful partnerships with a new storefront church in the area that offered hope through the gospel. Lives were changing. Neighborhoods were changing. It took a long-term commitment of a key church to get this change process started and while it has not come easily, progress has come.

SCHOOLS, JOB TRAINING AND REFERRALS - Several other churches found new connections through local schools. Church members began by reading to students, and later began tutoring sessions. Some sought out areas of special need from school administrators and established ongoing partnerships with schools. Parents and teachers were among the first to notice the difference in improved grades and student behavior. Three churches even began sessions for helping parents help their school age children. In a matter of two to three years, six neighborhood schools that had failed to meet their progress goals were now achieving them. It was as if the church members had now become stockholders in the school enterprise.

Four MBA churches networked together to form a job training and referral network, helping those who were seeking employment through training and life skill development. Many of those who benefited will tell you how grateful they are, but for them coming to faith in Christ is what brought about the greatest life change. This network turned an empty storefront into temporary housing for students until they were able to earn enough from their new jobs to establish themselves in their own housing. Money management classes helped participants learn for the first time how to plan their spending and manage to live within their means. Over 150 have graduated through this process since its inception in 2009. Of this number, the network reports that over 130 are still gainfully employed.

Efforts like the school partnerships and the job training have borne a key additional benefit - significant reduction in crime. Juvenile crime statistics have dropped 50% and overall crime is down 45%. School truancy rates are also down by a whopping 60%. This growing effectiveness has brought even greater participation. Several of the school partnerships are currently being assisted by grants from individuals and churches.

NEW VISION - If you ask one of the church leaders who was here in 2009, they will tell you that the biggest difference is not just in the life of the community, but in the lives of their congregations. Churches that were on the verge of closing have found new vision and new hope through spiritual renewal and through discovery of their calling and giftedness. Baptist churches affiliated with the Montgomery Association reported over 1,300 baptisms of new converts. This is more than double the number baptized in 2007. One long-time church member described the change this way, "I was brought up in church with the idea that we were only to be concerned about saving 'souls' and not to worry about social issues. We soon realized that if we didn't discover the issues of the people in our community, if we weren't willing to listen to them, they would never hear the gospel we went to proclaim. It wasn't that they didn't need it, for they did. They were just overwhelmed with issues like schools, poverty, crime and violence and weren't particularly interested in our invitations to come to our church. When we began to listen and show our interest in their concerns, and when we partnered with them to work on those overwhelming issues, they were more than willing to listen to our testimonies and invitation to new life because they knew we cared." Another commented, "The biggest change I have seen is in the life of my church. People seem more authentic, more interested in sharing, more involved in ministry. It's like we all began experiencing a new Great Awakening and didn't even realize it."

RURAL CHURCHES - Rural churches were not left out of this significant transformation. Though many of those churches in the rural areas back in 2009 were substantially connected with their communities through schools, rural service or community organizations, they found new ways to connect with those they were not reaching, particularly among the poorest and the minorities. Some of those residing in the rural parts of Montgomery or eastern Lowndes County but working in Montgomery also found ways to be involved in ministry in the city. New community ministry networks were established in Ramer, Hayneville and Ft. Deposit, partnering Southern and National Baptist churches with Methodist, Assembly of God and other denominations. These centers have become true community ministries.

RACIAL HARMONY - Perhaps the many significant changes that the casual observer notices is how "together" the people of Montgomery are. In a city torn by racial strife in the 1950's and 60's, a city known as the cradle of the Confederacy and the birthplace of civil rights, such a change is truly miraculous. Early efforts had been made by the associational leadership in the 1980's to promote racial harmony through joint evangelistic services. By 2008, eight predominantly African American Baptist churches were members of the association. Numerous others had some or significant African Americans on their membership roles. But still, there was an underlying uneasiness about the race issue. Three churches and their leaders decided to try to do something about this uneasiness, believing that the gospel they preached declared that all persons, regardless of race or social rank, deserved to hear the good news. They knew that if their people could not overcome this uneasiness, they would not be successful in proclaiming this gospel. They piloted a serious church and individual self-awareness experience that led to increased interracial interaction and greater understanding. Instead of being the taboo subject, race became a way to bring people together to explore their common benefits as children of God.

INTERNATIONAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS - This transformation was significant in the treatment of persons from other countries or other ethnic groups. The new work among Koreans and Hispanics have flourished, as well as, the start of five new language or ethnic churches. Sixteen associational churches are now holding ESL or Conversational English classes in their buildings and four others hold classes off site. There are now two fully autonomous self-supporting Hispanic churches and one mission, two self-supporting Korean language churches and one Chinese church. All of these are now members of the Montgomery Baptist Association.

Montgomery Baptist Association is quite different than it was in the years leading up to 2008. Fifty seven churches were then members. Now that number is seventy-two. The association in this process served primarily as a catalyst, encouraging and putting together networks to help churches fulfill the vision, rather than being a promoter of programs and events. Baptists are now viewed as team players with others, working together for the Kingdom vision they share with their fellow believers. As a result of these and other efforts, churches' mission gifts are up significantly, most notably in giving to local associational missions. Montgomery is quite different too. It is a place people want to move to instead of a place they are trying to escape. Thank you, Montgomery Baptists! Or, perhaps, we should all get on our knees and say our thanks to God Almighty, for such a transformation could only have taken place with God's guiding hand.