

## Completing a Self-Study: A Guide for Local Associations

The objective of the local association in General Baptist life is to “promote unity, fraternity, fellowship, and co-operation.” Further, “the churches band together to engage in larger Christian projects than can be carried on by a single church.”<sup>1</sup> These statements seem like simple objectives to achieve, but sometimes the life of a group of churches called a local association begins to wane.

The signs are sometimes subtle, but they can be present just the same. Attendance at associational events declines. The average age of participants at the annual meeting increases dramatically. Few ministries are engaged in as a group.

When an association begins to decline, the leaders of those churches need to take a hard look at their purpose. Why are we together? What should we be doing? These types of questions are not attacks, but examinations to discover the vision and direction the churches should take together.

In 1996, the General Association adopted a new denominational structure because they had discovered the old system was simply not working. The new structure has developed a great sense of cooperation and common purpose among the various ministries of the General Association. Further refinements were addressed in 2004 with the report of the Progress Committee of the General Association.

Local associations need to take a look at themselves just as the General Association took a look at the entire denomination. Just as changes at the denominational level have created a much more positive atmosphere of cooperation and breathed new life into the various ministries, the local associations need to look for ways to define their purpose, discover their vision, and develop ministries that are effective in spreading the gospel. In short, they need to measure the health of the association.

Completing a self-study is not easy. It will take time, energy, and mental discipline to collect information, listen to leaders, and develop ideas. But the reward is an association with a new life, a new sense of purpose, and a new direction. The freshness which can be created by a self-study can increase interest in the association and help others see the need to participate.

The local association is important to General Baptist life. In order for a local association to continue to be significant in the Kingdom of God, a hard look needs to be taken and an accurate report given of where the association is and where it wants to go.

### Background.

There are four areas of associational life on which the committee needs to focus its attention. Purpose tells why the organization exists. Vision tells where the group is going. Grouping defines the parameters for participation. Structure is the framework through which individuals function

Purpose. Purpose defines why the organization exists and provides the overall goal for what is to be accomplished. General Baptists have defined their purpose through this statement, “Making Disciples for Christ.” Everything should be measured against the purpose.

Many local associations lack any sense of purpose. The participants don’t always

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<sup>1</sup> General Baptist Doctrine and Usage. 2001 Edition. Poplar Bluff, MO: Stinson Press, 2001. p. 26.

understand why they are doing what they are doing. When an association lacks purpose the member churches will begin to reduce their participation. Presently there are at least 50 congregations of General Baptists who do not participate in any local association. When asked why they are not affiliated the typical response is that they saw no reason for the existence of the association they were previously a part of.<sup>2</sup>

Vision. Most believers have heard the Scripture quoted, “Without a vision, . . . “ Vision provides the dream, the motivation, the enthusiasm for accomplishing the purpose. Vision provides a bit of the roadmap for accomplishing the purpose by suggesting goals and objectives. And, someone needs to be casting that vision before the group.

The pastor of the local church is expected to be the leader of the congregation. Being a leader begins with having a God-given vision for the congregation and the direction its ministry needs to take. Pastors are to be vision-casters to their congregations by communicating regularly where God wants His people to go. As long as the pastor is sharing the vision and daring the people to move on, the church has good prospects for growth.

On the denominational level, the Executive Director is expected to be the leader of the denomination. Being the leader begins with having a God-given vision for the direction its ministry needs to take. The Executive Director is to be a vision-caster to the denomination by communicating regularly where God wants His people to go. As long as the Executive Director is sharing the vision and daring the people to move on, the church has good prospects for growth.

On the associational level, who is the vision-caster? Who seeks the heart of God for the long-term ministry of the association? As long as no one is sharing the vision and daring the people to move on, the church has poor prospects for growth.

Grouping. Grouping has to do with the definition of the boundaries of the organization in terms of participation. If the objective is for churches to work together, are they able to work together in reality or is distance a concern? Are the churches similar enough in ministry that working together is meaningful? Should the association group be larger or smaller to more effectively do ministry together?

What determines which churches become part of the group we call a local association? A look at General Baptist history shows that when an association crossed over into another county, it was not long before a new association emerged. Liberty Association emerged in Vanderburgh County, Indiana. United Association emerged in Warrick County, but eventually led to another new association in Pike County. Though this may or may not have occurred by design, it does show a pattern around generally county-wide associations.

Why have General Baptists become a group of associations that overlap? A variety of situations have led to this condition. First and unfortunately, some churches have chosen to create a new association over a doctrinal dispute. Second, new associations were formed due to presbytery standards.

Billy Melvin has voiced a concept which applies to this question, “Churches must be grouped for ministry.” The gist of his comment was that churches needed to choose to join together in associations around the ministries they wished to pursue together. Some associations need to look at the composition of their association as it presently exists and what it ought to be based on a ministry focus. Some associations may wish to merge because the churches of each association exist in the same geography. Other associations may need to disband and reconnect

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<sup>2</sup> This information was gathered through the self-study completed by the Progress Committee in 2004. Should an association self-study committee wish to review the information, the documentation is available through the Executive Director’s Office.

according to the ministries they can do together. New associations may emerge because of common ministry programs and have nothing to do with geography.

Structure. Structure is the skeleton everything hangs on. The structure of an organization should help it accomplish its purpose and not impede it. The time involved in decision making should not cause ministries to miss opportunities for ministry. The structure should give permission for the work of a ministry to be accomplished.

Most local associations have followed the same organizational pattern that was set up in the time of Benoni Stinson. This 19<sup>th</sup> century pattern included every association should meet once a year. Every association should have a moderator, vice-moderator, and clerk. The association should have several committees including a memorial (obituary) committee, social issues committee, Home Mission Board, and other committees that are the same from one association to the next. Every association should have a presbytery for maintaining clergy and deacons. In the day of Stinson, every association looked exactly like the other associations.

After completing a self-study, some associations may choose to have a board system whereby the annual meeting is a time of celebration and the election of the board. Others may move to a system that has an Associational Director who becomes the vision-caster leader of the several churches. Still others may develop a system that focuses on a few joint ministries led by ministry teams who provide leadership and vision.

The bottom line is that new organizational structures which meet the needs of particular associations are needed. One size and shape will not work for everyone. A few associations are effective in assisting and leading churches. These need to be looked at to see what models they are using and how those models are helping local churches.

## How to Start.

A small group of pastors and lay leaders can usually effect the start of this process. Informal conversations with leading individuals within the association can help set the stage for a successful start. A simple resolution can be presented to the association at the annual meeting.

*“I move that this body create a Self-Study Committee to examine the purpose, vision, and ministries of this body and bring back recommendations to improve the health and vitality of this association.”*

## Step 1. Selecting a Committee

Local Associations are notorious for selecting persons for committees based on who is present at the meeting and is willing. Don't fall into this trap. The association needs to carefully select the committee who will complete this self-study.

Don't select “gate-keepers.” Gate-keepers are people who usually say no to new ideas. They don't want anything to change. Gate-keepers stifle creativity instead of encouraging it. If the committee has a strong-willed gate-keeper, no significant recommendations will be presented.

Don't select a “good ‘ol boy.” Good ‘ol boys are easy to get along with and are fun to be around. They will tend to go along with everybody else. Good ‘ol boys (and girls) don't provide much constructive input.

Don't select a “turf protector.” Turf protectors are people who believe in one particular ministry as more important than any other. They might be a “Camp” person or a “Missons” person. Turf protectors will make sure everything else gets changed, but will allow no one to touch their favorite ministry.

Select “Thinkers.” A Thinker is someone who has the spiritual gift of wisdom. They consider issues at more than a surface level. A Thinker is someone who comes up with solutions no one else considered. A Thinker will bring a different viewpoint into the study and help provide a variety of ideas.

Select “Leaders.” A Leader is someone who has the spiritual gift of leadership or administration. They know how to get things done and keep things moving in a positive direction. Sometimes committees get bogged down in a few issues. Leaders can help guide the committee into and out of rough waters.

Select “Ministers.” In this context, a Minister is not necessarily an ordained person, rather a Minister is one who is involved in doing ministry. Too often decisions are made by people sitting on the sidelines and watching the game. People involved in ministry know what the ministry needs are. People who are doing ministry need to be involved in decision making about that ministry.

Before selecting a committee, take the time to search out men and women who are “full of the Holy Spirit” and have personalities that will aid in the self-study. Give some thought to the spiritual gift mix of the committee. Find the very best people in the association and give them free rein to develop recommendations that will invigorate the association.

On the practical side, a committee of 5-7 persons seems reasonable although the size of the committee may need to reflect the size of the association. Select a mix of men and women, pastors and lay leaders, young adults and senior adults.

Finally, give them a budget that is adequate for the task. The committee will have expenses that the association should pay: mileage, meals, postage, mailings, phone calls, etc. Overestimate what they will need rather than underestimate. They need to be able to do their

very best work without worrying about the funds. If this committee is underfunded, the results will reflect it. In some situations, the committee will need to develop the needed budget, then get the approval of the association or its Executive Committee.

Before proceeding, the committee may want to deal with the question of whether or not to invite the participation of an outside facilitator. An outside facilitator can be utilized for the entire self-study process or only brought in when specialized training is needed, such as in conducting a listening session. A facilitator who is not in the association can also provide a third-person perspective to the group often seeing possibilities the committee members had not considered.<sup>3</sup>

## Step 2. Define Your Purpose

One of the best ways to discover what the purpose of your association should be is through Listening Sessions. This type of session with pastors, lay leaders, and delegates to the annual meeting may help discover the perceived purpose of the local association. The people of the association have many ideas of what they want the association to accomplish and focus on but seldom is there a general session that allows for such input.

A listening session is a kind of brain-storming session during which guided questions provide a framework to collect input from the participants. Open-ended answers allow the participants to share their thoughts in as complete a way as possible. No one should dominate the session, rather as many people as are interested in speaking should be given the opportunity.

The listening session is best assisted by two facilitators from the self-study committee. One will frame the question and moderate the responses. The facilitator will not express opinions but will insure that all are fairly heard. A second facilitator serves as a recording secretary. A formal transcript of the sessions will not be necessary, however, the recorder will want to accurately summarize or digest the responses offered. A tape recorder may be helpful if a large number of participants are expected to offer complex responses.

It is recommended that the committee host 3 separate listening sessions. Session 1 will include the pastors of the association. Session 2 will include lay leaders from the churches. Session 3 will include those who attend the annual meeting of the association.

A suggestion is for the committee to invite the participants to a dinner with the listening session to follow. A discussion over coffee and desserts may help create a relaxed atmosphere where people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas. Plus, the offer of food will help increase attendance.

It is highly recommended that the committee receive training in how to conduct an effective Listening Session. Consult the Appendix for a list of persons who are able to provide such training.

Plan for each session to last 90 to 120 minutes. This should provide ample time to address the following five questions. Carefully and accurately summarize their responses. Worksheets are provided in appendix A.

- 1. In your opinion what is the purpose of the local association? Why does the local association exist?*

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<sup>3</sup> Call General Baptist Ministries for a list of available facilitators who can advise about the process, provide specific training opportunities, or assist in completing the self-study.

2. *In your opinion what should be the purpose of the local association? Why should the local association exist?*
3. *In what ways does the local association assist the local church?*
4. *What must the local association do to survive and grow?*
5. *What other suggestions would you offer to the committee assigned to guide this self study?*



### Step 3. Evaluations

Once the committee has developed a purpose statement for the association, a series of evaluations needs to be completed. Some of the questions to be answered will be subjective meaning the answer may depend somewhat on the opinions or perspective of the evaluator. Other questions will be objective meaning the answer depends on some statistical measurement. Use some type of statistical measurement when possible.

#### A. Evaluate the Annual Meeting

Some participants may have addressed some of these questions during the listening sessions. A review of the responses may be helpful. The committee needs to take a considered look at how the annual meeting is conducted. Avoid making judgments about the ability of this year's moderator, clerk, musicians, etc.; this is not the point. The point is to look at the association meeting overall. Be as concrete as possible.

1. *How does the agenda of the annual meeting reflect the purpose of the association?*

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2. How does the annual meeting energize, motivate, or inform the churches?

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3. In your opinion is attendance at the annual meeting growing, declining or remaining about the same?

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4. Is time at the annual meeting used wisely?

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**B. Analyze Programs and Structure**

The committee needs to begin this process by listing all the ministry programs the association sponsors. Be exhaustive in your listing. Do not leave out any program, ministry, committee, or auxiliary. The list should include the Social Issues Committee, the Home Mission Board, the Executive Committee, the Presbytery, the Sunday School Convention, etc.

The committee may want to interview individuals who are involved in those ministries to get their perspective for answering the following questions. Explore what the ministries do well and what they do not do well.

Set aside any biases in favor of or in opposition to specific ministries. Take the time to dig deeper than a simple cursory examination. Play a bit of the “What if...?” game.

*1. What programs are offered by the association?*

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*2. Is adequate leadership available for associational programming?*

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*3. Are adequate resources available for associational programming?*

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C. Consider Geography and Church Grouping

This could be one of the most difficult issues to discuss. Groupings of churches are almost like family relationships and are difficult to change. But, the committee would be remiss in their responsibilities if they did not take a look at why the association is grouped the way it is. Be open to the possibilities. The association may need to be smaller. The association may need to be bigger. Consider all the different ways your churches could group for ministry.

*1. What is the greatest distance between churches in the association?*

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*2. In what ways are the member churches of the association similar?*

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*3. In what ways are the member churches of the association dissimilar?*

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*4. What is the common bond between the churches of the association?*

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*5. Are other General Baptist churches of another association in the same area served by your local association?*

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## Step 4. Recommendations

It is this point in the process that will define the success or failure of the committee's work. Specific recommendations should begin to take shape from the information gathered.

Don't let fear take over. After the committee develops recommendations that everyone feels should be implemented, it will be tempting to begin dropping some because it might be difficult for the recommendations to pass. Don't give in to fears.

It is no use doing this kind of evaluation if the committee is not willing to encourage passage of the changes which will help the association become more healthy. Most patients would rather avoid surgery, but surgery is extremely helpful under the right circumstances. For any organization to be at its best it must be transformed from time to time so the work of the Kingdom can progress.

Decide on the recommendations. State the reasons why the recommendations should be passed. Then let things happen as people are led by the Holy Spirit.

Make the recommendations specific. One of the worst things the committee can do is to create recommendations that are vague and unspecific. "We recommend that each of the churches give greater emphasis to evangelism." may be a true statement, but it won't effect any change in the churches. There are many proclamations in the church that are more like cheers for a sports team than instructions from a coach.

One way to measure the effectiveness of a recommendation is to compare it with the 3 P's. For each recommendation ask these questions.

Is it Practical? Does it call on the association to take a specific action. "This association should develop a Student Ministry Team to coordinate area wide activities for child and teen evangelism." This statement is practical. A specific action is to be taken.

Is it Possible? Is the recommendation within the ability of the association to accomplish. Asking an association of 3 small churches to raise \$1 million dollars is not usually possible. Though this amount of money may be needed, it may not be possible to raise that amount of funds. By the same token, don't make the action so simple that it does not stretch the faith of the members. Actions that the association can achieve are opportunities for celebration.

Is it Provable? This usually requires some type of deadline for implementation. After the deadline has passed, the question can be asked, "Did we do it?" If the recommendation is properly worded everyone should be able to tell when it has been accomplished.

Give responsibility to someone for implementation. Two faults commonly arise in local associations in relation to recommendations by the body. First, some actions are never taken because no one is given responsibility for the action. A recommendation passed but not implemented is useless and a waste of good paper.

Second, associations pass resolutions for some type of action by a committee, then the committee doesn't decide to meet until the day before the next annual meeting. Make certain the Moderator or the Self-Study Committee is given responsibility to hold accountable whoever is responsible for implementing the recommendations passed by the association. Then check up on those responsible on a regular basis until implementation has taken place.

Consider many possible recommendations. Not every idea should become a recommendation to the association, but every idea is worthy of consideration. Talk them over in great detail. Make sure everyone on the committee knows their input is valued. Never discount what any member of the committee says. The only way to develop the best recommendations for the health of the association is to consider many possibilities.

Consider which committees add nothing to the health of the association then recommend

they be dropped or modified to something useful. Consider whether there is a more effective means for accomplishing the purpose of the association than what is being done. Take a hard look at “sacred cows” and see if you need to have a bar-b-que.

Consider what types of ministries need to be created to assist churches in ministry. Be open to possibilities that have never been tried before or that no one else is doing either. Be creative. Start with the needs of the member churches and build something from “scratch.”

Consider what others are doing. In recent years, several associations have transformed the way they do ministry together. Some of these changes have proven very helpful. Take a look at other models of associational ministry.

Some associations may discover they need to hire someone to be a coordinator, director, or facilitator for some activity or activities of the association. Some associations have changed their means of ordination from a presbytery to an ordaining council. This will not be good for every association but it may be right for others. Some associations may need to merge and become bigger while others may need to consider their geography or ministry context and become smaller. The word new is not a cuss word. Even the Bible calls us to be “transformed.”

## Appendix A

### Conducting Listening Sessions

Listening Sessions with local churches or associations are more beneficial when they have some structure for the session. The alternative would be for there to be no structure or subject. Individuals or church representatives would then share random thoughts and suggestions without specific reference to a topic or agenda. While this may be helpful sometimes they just become complaint sessions. You certainly want to be open to hear complaints and receive feedback; however, you want the input to come in a productive way.

#### Identify the Purpose or Subject

The sponsors or hosts for the Listening Session need to identify a specific purpose or goal for the session. The goal may be to discover specific needs, to allow feedback on proposed plans, or identify priorities for the future ministry.

It is often helpful to provide a brief introductory presentation. For example, if the goal is to secure input on the priority needs, it would be helpful to provide a brief demographic overview of the community to target area for the ministry. If the purpose of the session is to secure feedback on preliminary plans, the introductory session would provide an overview of the proposed ministry plans.

#### Feedback & Discussion

Once you have provided an appropriate introduction, you will want to share any specific guidelines for the discussion time. These could include things such as: a limit on the time when an individual can talk about a specific topic, a suggestion that comments not be directed at an individual (no personal attacks), and a desire not to allow the discussion to become argumentative. It is fine for someone to express an opposing point of view, but you do not want people to argue with each other. You may have other guidelines to share as well.

#### Taking Notes

We believe it is important for people to understand that you are taking notes on their input and suggestions. Sometimes (with the help of a video projector) they can actually see the notes. This allows people to confirm that you actually "heard" what they meant to say.

#### Role of Moderator

The role of the person leading or moderating the session is to facilitate feedback and at times discussion. You will want to be careful to not make judgmental statements in response to the comments made. This will cause people not to share. It is not necessary to agree or disagree with each comment. The role is to make sure that you are hearing them. You may even want to state at the beginning-*it does not matter whether we always agree with each other, but we want to hear what you think.*











## Appendix B

### Models to Examine

Some associations have rebuilt their organizations in recent years to help improve the health of their associations. These are not listed in any specific order. These may prove to stimulate the creativity of a Self-Study committee in examining the best way to organize their local association.

**Evansville.** The purpose of this association is to “glorify God and to edify the church.” More specifically, their purpose includes contributing “to the development and spiritual growth of member churches.” They have made it a point to limit membership to those churches who are within Vanderburgh County in order to be more effective in their work.

Evansville Association utilizes an annual meeting along with a short list of standing committees. The Program committee is responsible for planning the program for the annual meeting. The Stewardship committee addresses the financial needs of the association and recommends the annual budget. The Resolutions committee addresses any resolutions submitted for consideration by the association at the annual meeting. The Nominating committee develops a slate of officers and committee members to serve for specific terms.

The Equipping committee is responsible “to provide at least one training event focusing on perceived needs” of the churches in the association. They also provide recommendations for materials of use to the local churches.

The Evangelism and Missions committee “shall promote evangelism and missions.” This is accomplished by recommending evangelistic events, mission opportunities, and any other activities that will promote the gospel. This committee also serves as the representatives to the regional church planting agency.

The Social Action committee is to “suggest approaches to deal with those (issues) having a direct bearing on Christian and family values.” This committee makes use of the booklet, “Social Principles of General Baptists.”

The final committee listed is the Ordaining Council. Under this model all deacons are trained and ordained by the local church with participation by the other congregations in the ordination service. This council establishes “the standards for the ordination of ministers” which are then presented for approval by the association. This council of 3 ordained persons maintains contact with licensed ministers and assists them in accomplishing the goals for preparation for ordination.

Evansville Association has also made use of an “Association Coordinator” at various times. This position is responsible for communication between the churches and for assisting the committees in the development of their respective programs.

**Freedom.** Freedom Association uses an Ordaining Council rather than the traditional Presbytery for maintaining ordination standards and credentials. Below is an excerpted description of this system.

The Freedom Association believes ordination is the recognition of those who acknowledge a

calling of God to minister the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Freedom Association Ordaining Council consists of a council of five (5) members, all being ordained, appointed by the Moderator of the association. This council shall receive, consider and take action on all petitions and requests from the churches through the association concerning the examining, licensing, and ordaining of persons desiring to enter the ministry. The ordained ministers of Freedom Association will meet annually to hear the report of this council.

A further description of requirements for ordination, the process of ordination, and the functioning of the Ordaining Council is available from Freedom Association.

**Liberty.** Liberty Association has developed a “board and committee” system for their ministries called the Liberty Association Ministries Board. The board meets twice each year and is composed of 2 members from each church. The work of this board is divided among a variety of committees: Worship, Evangelism, Fellowship, Discipleship, and Ministry.

The Worship committee plans the annual meeting of the association. The Evangelism committee leads the association in planting new congregations and assisting local churches with emergency needs. The Fellowship committee plans association-wide activities “to uplift both spiritually and physically.” The Discipleship committee works to provide training events for churches as well as providing assistance in the areas of Polity & Doctrine and Social Issues. The Ministry committee leads the association in the development of service ministries to the community.

**Portland.** Portland Association successfully maintains a more traditional model of associational life. Other than the annual meeting, they are organized into a series of committees and boards which are active throughout the year.

The Executive committee is composed of the Moderator, Vice-Moderator, Presbytery Moderator and other elected at-large members. This committee has authority in emergency matters and in appointing members to fill vacancies on committees and boards which occur during the year.

This association maintains several auxiliaries: Ladies Aid Conference, Presbytery, Sunday School Convention, and Women’s Ministries Convention. The association also maintains a Foreign Mission Board, Home Mission Board, Minister’s Retirement Board, Board of Trustees, and Youth Board, all of which are active throughout the year.

Unique to Portland Association are the association Field Worker and the Christian Training Institute. This job description for the Field Worker includes three objectives. Objective one is to work with pastors to provide preaching opportunities for licensed ministers and to give encouragement and advice. Objective two is to assist churches when they are engaged in a pastor search. Objective three is to establish good communication between the leadership of the association and the local churches. The third objective is accomplished through correspondence, meeting with pastors individually, and visiting churches.

Christian Training Institute is an effort to provide “college-type” training for ministers and other key leaders in the association. This ministry is an alternative to attending a university or completing the General Baptist LAMP program.

**MOARK.** MOARK Association has recently developed a system which makes use of a representative Executive Board. This board is composed of one representative from each of the

major boards along with the Association Moderator, Presbytery Moderator, and the Association Clerk. Three at-large members are elected by the association. Presently this Executive Board will have 13 members.

The Executive Board serves a variety of functions. First, the board meets quarterly to hear reports of the various agencies of the association and to prepare for the annual meeting. All reports to the association must be presented to the Executive Board first. Second, the board promotes the purpose of the association and works for the betterment of the association as a whole. Thirdly, the board provides accountability for the other boards of the association to ensure they are working to accomplish their various purposes.

The Missions boards of MOARK Association works to plant new congregations. The Finance Board maintains the financial records and makes recommendations regarding the expenditures of monies. The Christian Education Board works to develop programs for the total enrichment of the churches. Supposedly this means they will provide training events on various topics of interest to the churches.

The Ministries Board has the broadest purpose to accomplish. First of all, they are to coordinate the existing ministries of the association. Second, they are to develop new ministries of the association.