

## **New Life for an Old Association**

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"Wolf Bayou Association is a family of churches connected through fellowship for ministry, focus, and training." This is the new vision statement for Wolf Bayou Association adopted in March, 2007 at the annual meeting. With the adoption of this vision statement and other significant changes this 100+ year old Association has discovered new life and energy among its people. Attendance has soared, fellowship has increased, and vision is shared.

It began at the 2006 annual meeting. The motion was made and approved for the moderator to select a committee to complete a self-study of the association to see what changes might help the organization to be healthy and grow. After the meeting the moderator selected seven people to lead the Association through the process. A guidebook, developed by the General Baptist Progress Committee and endorsed by the Council of Associations, served as the outline for the process.

The major part of the project was gathering information about the association's past and present. The committee began by scheduling four listening sessions. The first listening session was conducted within the committee itself. The second was held for pastors to give their input. Two additional listening sessions were held to accommodate lay members of the churches: one in the northern geographic area and the second in the southern geographic area of the Association.

The remainder of the evaluations were conducted by the committee through a review of the association records and their own experiences. They evaluated the officers, committees and boards, how they function and what they have accomplished. Finally, they looked at the overall geographic makeup of the Association.

The result of this information gathering was that the committee determined the Association was stable; however the health of the body could be improved. The committee worked to develop significant changes based on the vision statement. The vision statement placed the emphasis of the life of the Association on fellowship. Every activity of the association should have as part of the function an element of fellowship. It is through fellowship the Association is made strong as a body.

The first major recommendation had to do with the function, purpose, and order of the annual meeting. The annual meeting was changed from a business meeting which focused on reports of past activities to a fellowship gathering to celebrate the past and dream of the future. Since Christians already gather on Sunday for worship, the meeting time was changed from Saturday morning until early afternoon to Sunday early afternoon through the evening. This allowed for business to be conducted from 3:00 pm to 5:30 pm and a Celebration Worship service to be held at 6:00 pm.

This change of focus in the annual meeting also called for a change in the role of the moderator. The committee concluded there was no vision for the Association because the Association lacked a leader to cast the vision each year. Just as the Executive Director casts a vision for the denomination and pastors cast a vision for their local church, someone was needed to cast a vision for the Association. The decision was made to change the moderator's role from one of conducting business to being that of visioncaster for the association. The term of office was changed to a two year renewable term. This would allow for one person to hold the position of Moderator for several years and maintain continuity of vision for the body.

The committee also concluded the association needed a strong event to provide training to our local churches. The Executive Committee was charged with developing an annual training event. Since the annual meeting was held in March the committee chose to have the training event in October. The schedule is similar to the annual meeting. The event begins at 3:00 pm on the first Sunday in October in the afternoon and continues until 5:30 pm. This period of time is used for workshops from leaders who have not just written books, but have actually led their churches to health and growth. At 6:00 pm the Association comes together for a Celebration Worship service.

One final change was made in how the Association gathers. In the past the annual meeting and other associational events would be rotated among the churches. However, due to the distance between the northern-most church and the southern-most church, the decision was made for all events to be centrally located. The annual meeting is now held in Heber Springs every year with all the churches bringing in food for an evening meal. The training event is always held at our church in Searcy.

What are the results of all of these changes? Interest in Wolf Bayou Association has exploded in a very positive way. The first event held under the new design was a training event. In the past when training events were scheduled only a handful of people would participate. At the first event 107 participants attended. The second training event had attendance of 108. Interest in this training event continues to grow since the topics are relevant to the local churches.

The greatest observable change has been in the enthusiasm and energy of the annual meeting. In the past attendance would range from 50 to 70. The first annual meeting to be held on a Sunday with the new format had 150 in attendance. The second annual meeting had an attendance of 200 with several being children and teenagers. Under the old format, the same people attended the annual meeting every year, now most of the faces are new and younger.

The program for the annual meeting is also completely different. Brief reports are still heard from the Home Mission Board and the Youth Camp Board, along with other committees of the Association. In between the usual reports, which are limited to five minutes each, there are opportunities for the delegates to celebrate. Each year churches are encouraged to bring all new converts from the past 12 months to attend the meeting. These new converts are all recognized and celebrated. New pastors, deacons, and licensed ministers are also celebrated. And the churches challenge one another to be more effective in evangelism.

During the evening Worship Celebration, churches are recognized for their achievements in the past calendar year. Recognition certificates are given out by the Moderator to churches who lead the association in conversions and baptisms, Sunday School growth, membership growth, and worship attendance growth. Pastors of growing churches are given the opportunity to share the “secrets” of the growth and health of their churches

Instead of printing minute books which contain old information, we now produce our own Ministry Magazine which is given out at the beginning of the meeting and contains current information from boards, committees, and churches. The Ministry Magazine is printed in full color with an attractive design layout.

One of the highlights of the annual meeting is the dinner after the worship service. Every church is challenged to bring their best pot of chili and compete for the coveted Wooden Spoon Award. Everyone is encouraged to vote for the best chili by putting money in a donation can beside each pot. The chili which receives the most money is declared the winner and the church receives the wooden spoon. The money raised goes to our youth camp and our Home Mission Board.

The response to all of these changes has been overwhelmingly positive. Any time a group tries to bring about major changes the leaders can anticipate a significant number of people being opposed to those changes. It is rare to make changes like this with little or no negative feedback. Only one negative comment has been received by the Executive Committee. At the end of the first annual meeting with the new format the decision of whether to continue with this format was placed before the body. One pastor stood and said this was the first time in years that he has actually enjoyed the annual meeting of the association. The vote to continue in this direction was unanimous.

Resources:

Association Self Study Handbook is available in hard copy from Congregational Ministries, 100 Stinson Drive, Poplar Bluff, MO 63901

The resource is also available by download from [www.generalbaptist.com](http://www.generalbaptist.com) on the Congregational Ministries page.

Wolf Bayou Association’s web site [www.argbchurch.org](http://www.argbchurch.org).