

## What Does an Association Need More: Centrality or Community?

*“Test all things; hold fast what is good.” (1 Thessalonians 5:21)*

*cen-tral-i-za-tion - noun 1. the act or fact of centralizing; fact of being centralized. 2. the concentration of administrative power in a central government, authority, etc. 3. Chiefly Sociology. a. a process whereby social groups and institutions become increasingly dependent on a central group or institution. b. concentration of control or power in a few individuals.<sup>1</sup>*

What does our Association need more – centrality or community? Should the pervasive characteristic of an association focus on pulling influence and ideas to the center (centralization) or should an association seek to be an enabling force for local churches, encouraging them to work together on their own at a local level (community)?

As a bi-vocational pastor, I manage a computer network. Centralization is key to such a network. Why? Centralization brings control, conformity, and some collaboration, but at the cost of independence, creativity, and flexibility. Centralization is great for a computer network, but it is detrimental to local churches. An association of churches should not seek centralization but should rather encourage decentralized community activity.

I begin by stating that some central gathering and collaborating within an association of churches is not altogether wrong. There are times when combined minds and efforts are valid and helpful. Certainly a central gathering may be helpful to fellowship and encouragement. However, what of the centralization of identity, ideas, and initiative? Should this be the norm? Is such practice best? More so, is it biblical? *Are we seeking to grow and support a central association identity, or is the goal of any association to encourage churches to grow strong on their own and to directly assist other churches in doing the same?*

The IARBC is not an entity unto itself. It is a group of local assemblies, each with its own identity. There is a common statement of faith but not a common protocol. There is a common fellowship, but no one individual or assembly can rightly represent the Association. The same is true of the Association's central office or public identity. The IARBC's identity is by nature a collective identity. The emphasis should not be, cannot be, on the central organization but on the churches themselves.

### **What Is Currently Practiced**

From my own observation and experience as one who grew up “in” the IARBC, and one who has ministered as a leader “in” IARBC-associated churches, the focus of the Association clearly points towards centralization, and the Association framework continues to evolve as “center” and the hub of ideas and activity. The Council of 10 (C10) and C10 committees initiate programs, and programs are largely controlled by means of these C10 mechanisms. Information comes from and through the central identity. Local churches and leaders are not polled apart from electing the C10. The state representative does the PR at special events, representing “the Association” (in all seriousness, how does one represent an association of diverse churches?). Loyalty is largely measured by response to and participation in centrally held, Association-initiated (or Association-approved agency-initiated) events. Every effort is made to insure the fiscal survival of the central entity (or its affiliated agencies). You may view the picture differently, but one cannot evade the primacy of and the focus on the central organization. *The overriding objective of the Association seems to be the survival and strengthening of the Association's central organization, rather than the Association itself, which is made up of churches.*

### **Is Centralization Helpful – or Hurtful?**

Is centrality a strength or a weakness? The IARBC is largely centralized, initiating, running, and controlling the majority of activities of our group of churches through the state representative, the C10, or its committees. This has been the *modus operandi* for my lifetime, and there is no evidence that that we are heading in any other direction. ***(Please be clear that this article is not addressing the men in these positions, but the concept of centralization itself.)*** Though there are some arguable benefits of larger combined efforts, it may be that central “control,” communication, and the initiation of efforts from the “top down” are more hurtful than helpful. It is my own opinion that, after considering and observing this for twenty years as a pastor within the Association, the centralization of our association actually weakens or *hurts* most local churches in the long run, instead of helping them. The Association is not made stronger by weaker churches.

There are many examples where centralization simply doesn't work, works poorly, or has adverse effects. Two examples of misdirected focus are rather recent in their consummation. The first, a long-contested issue on the national association level, is ***the GARBC's approval system for parachurch ministries*** (education, missions, and service organizations). Regardless of most arguments, this “system of approval” effectively removed the responsibility of local churches to evaluate organizations on their own. This had the effect of degrading the autonomy of local

assemblies by their own yielding of this control), and it virtually eliminated scrutiny of such organizations at the local church level for many churches. This same supra-church logic eliminated any consideration of any potential individuals or organizations outside the realm of those formally approved, regardless of quality or qualification. (Many churches probably still have what are now *obsolete* restrictions in their church constitutions which permit only the support of GARBC-approved agencies, or missionaries from the same.)

The second illustration of “over-centralization,” something that came full circle at the state association level in recent years, was the creation (and eventual dissolution) of **the state youth representative** position. Having been at the state meeting in Muscatine where this was initiated and recommended by the Council of 10, I saw this first-hand. The position was recommended, without a job description per se, to help churches equip their youth leaders. With some combination of working from the state office, from FBBC, and from camp (the combination was required to fully support this youth rep financially), the person in this centralized position was somehow expected to do what the local church or local church pastors apparently could not do themselves. Two men eventually gave their efforts to this position, and afterwards it was dissolved (I would guess because of financial shortcomings required to maintain this centralized position). The explanation given regarding the dissolution was that the churches could reassume responsibility for the duties this youth position had attempted to fulfill. What is most interesting is that the very arguments that were offered at that meeting *against* the position were later used by the Association and C10 to argue *for* the dissolution of the position.

Without discussion, there is no Scripture to substantiate such a position, and no logic that would expect one man to equip youth leaders in local churches in a way that the local church pastors could not. Centralization of such an effort might have been well-meaning, but such efforts are not local-church centered, are not logical, and are not biblical. According to the Scriptures, local church pastors are given to equip the local church for ministry, not state youth representatives, however well-meaning the men or well-orchestrated the appeal.

As a young pastor, I participated in the meeting and the discussion. During the meeting, I was given the opportunity to ask the one leading the meeting if he, as the C10 representative (the C10 was making the motion for the state youth rep) could help us understand the biblical process by which they followed to consider such a position. The response was that “we really didn’t approach it from that direction.” *Centralization requires foggy logic and the devaluation of the local church, the wasting of effort and resources, and the ignoring of the Word of God.*

### ***The Problems that Can Stem from Centralization***

Centralizing efforts, discussions, programming, and central sponsorship can easily lead to more dependency of local churches on the Association and more de facto control over local churches by the Association. Churches and pastors learn to wait until “someone from above” develops a program to disciple teens, to generate fellowship between men or women, to train leaders, etc. I believe that this is largely a description of our Iowa Association already. Churches are either large enough not to need or benefit significantly through the fellowship of other assemblies, or they are waiting for the state association’s program or push. Neither position seems Scriptural.

Each step towards centralization potentially removes active responsibility from the local congregation, and creates more and more dependency upon the Association. Instead, should not the Association encourage the strengthening of local churches? Should the Association not work more to fill gaps in local churches, doing what they cannot do, and encourage churches to do what they can do (and should do) for themselves? Why does the Association need to initiate a state-wide evangelism campaign or church-planting effort (both have been done in recent history)? Why not encourage local churches to be the Church in their own communities?

Centralization encourages less independent activity, less creativity, and less independent initiative in each local church. It can also displace the efforts that may be generated by local churches that are geographically near each other. Instead of communication developing between churches that are close to each other, we remain aloof, being connected through the Associational headquarters and through the programs and communications from that center entity. Churches that are close to each other relate only through the central programs. They might be better off helping each other, or the stronger helping the weaker, without a state-wide program. When too much is directed from above, churches are not helping other churches as they ought. They participate in state-sponsored programs (maybe), but do they interact apart from that? *How many churches are initiating fellowship with the Association church next door?*

There is even the argument that a centralized entity can distract the church (or its leaders) from focusing locally in their own communities. We can get so busy with the mechanics of this supra-church organization or affiliated ministries that we are not evangelizing our own communities, discipling our own flocks, or equipping our own leaders. I have no way of knowing, but based upon the demands of the pastorate in my own experience, I often wonder how those serving in the Associational leadership can effectively evangelize and disciple in the realm of their own ministries. I can see where it would be easy to lose sight of one’s local church in the struggle to keep the central entity alive and well, busy, and well-funded.

There is also an inherent danger in becoming too centrally focused, whether it is an association, convention, or government, so that a drift of the whole causes the drift of all that make up the whole. Historically, it is interesting to look at our predecessor, the Northern Baptist Convention. The NBC was built on a philosophy of “unite and control.” Modernists gravitated toward the central offices, while conservatives were out working. The central control effectively pulled the entire convention down with it. Too much centralization removes the safety of independent function.

### **Community – Working With Neighboring Churches**

I suggest that the strength of our Association should be developed by churches helping other churches that are nearby, much more so than focusing efforts centrally, or trying to maintain a central entity (with centrally focused efforts and finances).

The passage of Scripture that often is used to support a centralized associational relationship actually seems to support the opposite. In Acts 15, the church at Antioch was experiencing internal struggles over doctrine. They attempted to hash it out themselves, but failed to come to an adequate solution on their own. What was their next step? *They requested assistance from a single, more established neighboring local church.* They did not call a meeting of multiple congregations but instead contacted only one. The smaller, younger church was assisted by the larger, more established church. Maturity and proximity were obvious factors in this consultation.

To be sure, the apostles were there. However, they did not hold an apostolic council. Instead, the apostles and elders headed up the meeting. The church at Jerusalem ultimately came to a conclusion based upon the Word of God, and sent word to Antioch by joint representation. Though the apostles were there, the elders were involved as well, and the conclusion was not a result of apostolic authority, but Scriptural authority. Multiple churches did not meet and vote on a resolution. The Word was resolute enough.

In Acts 15, no person had a central place. Paul and Barnabas spoke. Peter spoke. James spoke. All the apostles were present. However, the clincher was not any central figure but the Word of God itself (recall that James quoted from the OT to show that Gentiles, as Gentiles, would follow God, without becoming Jews).

In Acts 15, centrality was not the issue. Jerusalem was indeed the “first church.” However, it did not retain any central authority or influence beyond what any church had. Further in Acts, there was no central figure apart from the Apostle Paul, and his efforts were limited to writing, physical visits, and the transporting of funds at least once. *The Word was central, not a central church or central figure.* Geographical proximity, not centralization, was much more logical, and much more readily available.

*If anything, Acts 15 should encourage larger, more established local churches to assist beyond their own borders to younger or less stable churches nearby.* It should also encourage those younger or less stable churches to seek assistance from more established, mature churches that are nearby (more on this in a future Seer article dedicated to discussing this type of relationship). Such a principle should remove altogether our passive waiting upon our central office or C10 to suggest such an official program or even to formally communicate a need. Churches helping other nearby churches provides assistance that stems from proximity, maturity, and ability. Assistance comes from those that would have a more direct involvement and influence, and even a vested interest. *Is your local church doing anything to help other local churches struggling nearby? Are you, as a struggling church, willing to receive help from a more established assembly?*

### **Some Brief Suggestions**

*Ultimately the true strength of our association is real only when each church is strong, regardless of how organized, programmed, and financially viable the central office is or may become.* Instead of orchestrating central initiatives, the IARBC should encourage community fellowship – nearby churches assisting churches. The IARBC should encourage churches to train and excel in the areas which God has developed them, or matured them, rather than seeking to become a surrogate on its own. Further, the IARBC should encourage churches to be proactive and creative, taking responsibility for their evangelism, training, fellowshiping, etc., without waiting for the next rally, program, or push. Finally, the IARBC, instead of trying to meet the many needs of the churches in the state, should encourage larger, established churches to open their eyes to the needs of smaller, struggling works, and encourage the smaller, struggling works to be open to such help.

Are there reasons for and benefits from centralization? There are some. However, the greatest ministry that a centralized Association can have would be to deflect such ministry back to the local churches of the Association. 

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<sup>1</sup> centralization. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/centralization> (accessed: August 22, 2007).