

A photograph of two hikers on a rocky trail at sunset. The hiker on the right is reaching down to help the hiker on the left up a rock. The scene is backlit by the sun, creating a warm, golden glow and lens flare effects. The hikers are silhouetted against the bright sky.

CHARTING A NEW COURSE

GOING BEYOND SURVIVAL

PILOT MOUNTAIN BAPTIST ASSOCIATION • 2022 VISION



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Making plans is an essential part of a productive life. Whether you are trying to maximize investments in order to retire comfortably or seeking to coordinate schedules so as to get the most people present during a holiday celebration, planning is a life skill that helps to reduce stress and boost enjoyment.

But there are times when your best plans don't materialize. It really doesn't matter if you fall short of your goals or simply experience unexpected turns on your path, there is a good part of life that has to do with how you respond when things don't go as you expected. John Lennon was famous for saying, "Life happens while you are making other plans." All of us can relate on one level or another to this pithy statement when it comes to things not working out as we preferred.

Paul was thrust into such a dilemma when the Spirit of God twice prevented him from going into Asia. No explanation was given. All we are made aware of is that what Paul and his missionary band intended to do was thwarted, not by failure on their part or unforeseen circumstances, but by God. I am sure at first blush this didn't make sense. After all, weren't they simply just trying to fulfill the Great Commission?

As we have emerged from a Pandemic, we have run into similar roadblocks. Many of us were seeking for things to return to normal. We longed for greater stability and some semblance of predictability. We weren't looking for things to snap back into place exactly as they were before. We just wanted to breathe a sigh of relief and hit the ground running with a renewed sense of recovered productivity.

But it hasn't worked out that way. Not by a long shot. The Pandemic was replaced with a wide-ranging set of challenges. We are now at a level of inflation we haven't seen in decades. Employers have scrambled with the challenge of finding and keeping qualified people to plug into needed slots. Those who are employed have run into the burden of having to do the work of two to sometimes three people. Now that

schools are fully re-opened a record number of teachers are calling it quits. A large percentage of hospitals are now staffed by travel nurses. One tumultuous and divisive voting cycle seems to be replaced by another. Even violence looks like it is still on the rise. Suffice it to say, the understandable hope we have had for some level of relief seems to be now short-circuited by the low-grade anxiety of wondering what awaits us around the turn of the bend.

I am sure Paul and his friends experienced similar feelings when their plans for good were turned on their ear. They were seeking to be faithful. They were laying everything on the line for the Gospel. And yet, their efforts to go into Asia were thwarted by the God they were serving, mind boggling and discouraging for sure.

But the God who said no twice did eventually say yes. One perceived priority was eventually replaced by a greater need. The "Macedonian Call," as we now know it, eventually unfolded into incredible opportunities to see the seed of the Gospel planted into deep and rich soil. Without this switch, we wouldn't have had the letters to the Philippian and Thessalonian believers that have been a source of encouragement and wisdom for two thousand years. Interruptions and a change of plans can lead us down the path of new adventures and greater effectiveness.

What dead-ends and detours have you experienced? How have your plans for a restart of certain ministries fallen short of your expectations? Who has disappointed you? How are you addressing the general malaise you have about ratcheting up your energy to do new ventures? These are the questions many people are asking themselves during our tumultuous times. Your Association is aware of your challenges. That is why we are seeking to pivot towards letting go of what is not essential and doubling down on what is working well.



**A RENEWED
VISION**

After many hours of discussion, the Leadership Team has seen the need to revamp our vision. This takes into consideration what is happening in the culture and in our churches. As the Staff has interacted with pastors and churches what we have encountered are stories of persistent faithfulness, adaptive successes, continuing decline and ministerial exhaustion. With that in mind, we have landed on a renewed vision that takes all these things into play. It reads as follows:

But it goes much deeper than having 33% less people attending Sunday Morning worship. Lifeway Research's 2022 Greatest Needs of Pastors study revealed that 75% of pastors reported that apathy or lack of commitment is a dynamic they find challenging in their churches. This is like a double blow to normative-sized churches. Not only has there been a significant reduction in attendance, but those that remain are less likely to be fully engaged.

Our vision is to help churches go beyond survival by igniting a movement of revitalization, **encouraging** pastors/ministry leaders to lead from a place of health while **equipping** churches to re-discover their missional genius by taking the Gospel to broken people locally, regionally, and globally.

This renewed vision encompasses one declaration and two affirmations. The declaration is that things need to change. A large percentage of our congregations are seeking to keep their heads above water. A March 2022 Pew Research study found while only 5% of U.S. houses of worship remained closed for in-person services, only 2 in 3 regular attenders had returned.

A previous Lifeway Research study found 97% of U.S. Protestant churches met in person in January 2022. Yet the reported average church attendance was at 74% of their pre-COVID levels.¹ In Southern Baptist churches, approximately 95% have a membership of 200 or less. This means that this percentage of reduced attendance had a deeper impact in giving and staffing of pre-existing ministries in most churches.

What is the typical response to such challenges? For most, there is a tendency to hunker down, cut back and reduce overall ministries in order to keep the doors open. But is that a Great Commission mentality? The answer from the witness of Scripture is a resounding "NO!" This would be akin to a person not leaving the house for almost three years in order to prevent them from getting COVID. Fear is never a good foundation for survival. We should go beyond this anxiety-based motivation for merely existing and dive deep into the current of revitalization.

That leads to the first affirmation: Healthy pastors help to build healthy churches. In other words, the path towards entering the current of revitalization comes from helping pastors/ministry leaders operate from a place of health. We

1 Aaron Earls, "Some Previous Church Goers Are Still Missing Post-COVID," Lifeway Research, June 23, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/06/03/some-previous-churchgoers-are-still-missing-post-covid/>.



live in unprecedented times. Pastors/ministry leaders are having to deal with less attendance, greater apathy, political foment, cultural decay and a major uptick in mental illness. The pressure has taken its toll. In a January 2021 Barna Poll 3 in 10 pastors in the U.S. say they have seriously considered quitting in the past year.² From my experience I think that rate is higher.

While the ministry is not easy and involves sacrifice,³ this does not infer leaders should operate out of an ever-diminishing reservoir. You cannot minister effectively if you are burned-out and bitter. Healthy leaders not only have more to give over the long haul, they also help to determine whether or not an organization can stay on mission.

The connection between healthy leaders and healthy congregations brings us to our second affirmation: Healthy churches know how to apply their God-given missional genius. Jesus is the head of the church. This means that he has a plan for each congregation. He just doesn't use churches that have dynamic communicators, state-of-the-art-facilities, huge staffs, and millions of dollars. The Lord wants to use each congregation for his glory.

Since this is true, a church has all that it needs to obey and be used by our risen Lord. The key is that each church must be on mission with him. The opposite is equally true: A church's decline is directly correlated to its disconnection to that mission. Revitalization is not complicated. But it is difficult because self-protective practices have replaced the sacrificial joy of taking the Gospel to our neighbor who lives next door, resides in our country and dwells across the globe. The Association is dedicated to equipping churches in this missional enterprise.

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² Packiam, Glenn, *The Resilient Pastor: Leading Your Church in a Rapidly Changing World*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing) p. 57.

³ Mark 8:34-36; 10:45



REALIGNED STRATEGIES

With this updated vision comes an enhanced strategy. Vision is about where we seek to be going. Strategy is focused upon how we will get there. A dream is just an unfulfilled wish unless we have a plan to make it come to pass. We need both the inspiration of vision and the clarification of strategy to flow in the current of revitalization.

Six years ago, we sought to simplify several disconnected and ineffective ministries into a cohesive approach centered around helping our member churches build lifelong followers of Jesus Christ. That looked like this model:

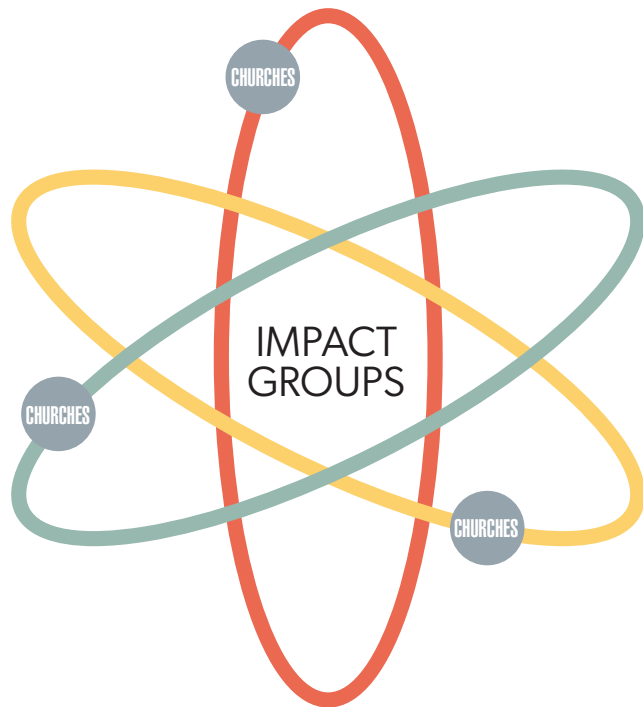


We saw a great deal of success in following this new strategy and structure. It enabled us to do many good things including the following selected highlights:

- Helped to plant nine churches
- Assisted in replanting three churches
- Supported two church planters
- Sponsored a church planter training initiative that helped three church planters begin the process of launching locally
- Facilitated revitalization training for eleven churches
- Trained eight men in transition pastor skills and processes.
- Conducted four pastoral prayer retreats
- Provided leadership training for dozens of pastors
- Granted free counseling and coaching to several pastors, their family members and ministry leaders
- Offered two marriage retreats that brought in eighty-four couples
- Provided five pastor appreciation banquets
- Created partnerships with four local ministries that quadrupled our outreach to the poor and marginalized in our communities
- Doubled our outreach to needy children through launching four new Toy Stores.

Much of what he had planned was curtailed due to the Pandemic. Yet as we moved through COVID, we began to learn some things. Perhaps the greatest lesson was not only to simplify and focus our approach, but to also amplify what was really bearing fruit.

What we discovered was twofold. First, we needed move pastors/ministry leaders out of isolation into a broader community of sister churches whereby collegial relationships could be leveraged into collaborative ministry:



Thus, our first step in building up the health of our leaders was to try and get as many of them as possible into **Impact Groups**. The strategy for the implementation of these groups goes as follows:

We will first help our pastors/ministry leaders go beyond survival by facilitating regionally-based or affiliation-linked Impact Groups designed to build godly friendships, offer effective learning platforms, and inspire ministry partnerships between churches.

Healthy pastors and ministry leaders need mutually-beneficial relationships. Serving God is an exhilarating and awe-inspiring enterprise. But at times, ministry can become a lonely work that involves continually giving with little relief or replenishment. One of the keys to remedy this is to practice the regular rhythm of gathering together with fellow servants of Christ for friendship, learning and collaboration. Our Impact Groups are designed for that very thing. They provide a place for support which nourishes both trust and partnership. In 2023 we are investing more to make this strategy a wider and deeper reality in our Association.

We not only need the regular rhythm of pastor/ministry leaders gathering together to help ensure personal resilience and Kingdom effectiveness, there are times when what is needed is an even more customized form of care. For our Association this looks like the following:

Second, we will help our pastors/ministry leaders go beyond survival by providing free services and events designed to heal hurts, maximize talents and boost marriages.

Pastors and Ministry Leaders are human. While no one would argue with this point, there is a functional heresy operating in churches that supports the false idea that those in vocational ministry are free from the same struggles that vex everyone else. This unfortunately leads to ministers being consigned to suffer in silence.

Granted, those who teach God's Word are under greater scrutiny,⁴ and those who lead others have more responsibility attributed to them.⁵ But this does not mean they are immune to the vicissitudes of everyday life. Some might even argue that from a spiritual warfare perspective that there are even greater pressures for those who lead others.

⁴ James 3:1
⁵ Hebrews 13:7, 17

Armed with this understanding, three years ago the Association created what we call **LeaderCare**. The first iteration of this approach involved providing free counseling services for pastors/ministry leaders. This confidential intervention strategy has been used by many, but we know it needs to be used by many more. That is why in 2023 the Association is planning to provide additional resources for those who need it.

Coupled with that intervention approach in 2022, we added a free coaching element to our **LeaderCare** services. This is an online eight-session assessment, training, and coaching program designed to help folks think about their lives in a more holistic fashion. Nine people have already used this service and have claimed it was one of the most positively impactful things they have experienced. We are hoping more will use it in 2023.

Along those same lines, the Association is launching its **MarriageCare** initiative. The first part of this is reviving an investment we have had in the past. A few years ago, we offered two heavily discounted Marriage Retreats. Several people have commented that this is the best thing the Association has ever offered. This year, we are planning to offer a retreat in April, free to the first fifty couples who register.

Connected to that investment is an additional offering beginning in 2023 for couples who need assistance or those who are simply looking to get a check-up. These couples can receive up to six free sessions with a local Christian Clinical Psychologist. We know healthy leaders have healthy marriages, and we want to do all we can to see this happen with every leader at every church in our Association.

For the Association to fulfill its vision we realize that we not only need to encourage leaders to lead from a place of health, but we also need to equip churches to embrace their

missional genius. How do we do that? I think we do it in two major ways:

First, we will help our churches move beyond survival by connecting them to missional opportunities locally, regionally and globally.

For many years the Association has ministered through such ministries as Toy Stores and Hunger Initiatives in order to practically share the love of Jesus with those in need. Not only thousands of families have received free food and free toys, many have received deep encouragement and several have trusted in Christ as their Savior. We plan on continuing and even expanding these tried, trusted and true ministries.

In the last few years, we have added other ministry partners so we could expand our reach to those in multi-family housing, the rural poor, at-risk inner-city children/youth and an unreached area of Canada. This expansion gave churches further hands-on experiences with how the Gospel connects to all kinds of people. We will continue to support these partners and will look at scheduling a trip to Canada for folks from our churches to serve alongside our NAMB Missionaries to Calgary, Dustin and Jill Connor.

Secondly, we will help our churches move beyond survival by offering various resources to help them either revitalize or become a revitalization partner.

The Association has invested a lot of resources into helping churches revitalize over the last six years. Several churches have gone through revitalization cohorts; dozens of pastors have been trained in leadership skills; eight leaders have been equipped in the process of becoming Transition Pastors; and many have received scholarships to attend revitalization conferences. We will continue to offer these wide-range of approaches that can be customizable to the size and need of any church.



Link all our churches together not only for collaborative missional enterprises, but also greater ministry effectiveness.

In addition, we will connect struggling churches with healthy churches to create a Revitalization Covenant. This agreement will be fully volitional on the part of the struggling church with regards to a stronger church with whom they will choose to connect. This agreement will be focused on areas of interest and will typically last for one year. At the end of that year, the struggling church can decide what they wish to do next in the revitalization journey. This approach helps to link all our churches together not only for collaborative missional enterprises, but also greater ministry effectiveness.





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Over the last 137 years, the name of Pilot Mt. Baptist Association has been recognized in our region, state and beyond as a brand that represents faithfulness to the Gospel, compassion for the broken and partnership for missional activities. As we move forward, we recognize that in order to bridge our past to our future we not only need to adjust our vision and strategies, we also need to refine our name.

To do this, we wanted to find a way to honor our past and embrace our future. The best solution we came up with was to create a name that reflects who we are and how we want to move forward. Our current name was drawn

customers based on their current needs and requirements. We can mourn the passing of old ways, but in the end, we need to adapt and improvise in ways that reflect an ongoing faithfulness to the Gospel while embracing innovative approaches to ministry.

To depict a collaborative movement that represents who we are and where we seek to go, we have come up with the following name and graphic:

This change does not mean that we will abandon our Baptist distinctive. Far from it. We will retain our historic doctrinal commitments and general partnerships with



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from our regional history that hearkened to a time when various Indian tribes would descend upon the area for a big pow-wow at the foot of Pilot Mountain. Our founders used that word-picture to depict the idea of gathering and marshalling our resources for Kingdom advancement.

But the older model of Associational work whereby people came to us for whatever they needed to do their work has passed us by. No longer are we like the old General Store where people traveled in from every hamlet to get everything they needed. Rather, we are more like an Amazon Distribution Center that moves products out to

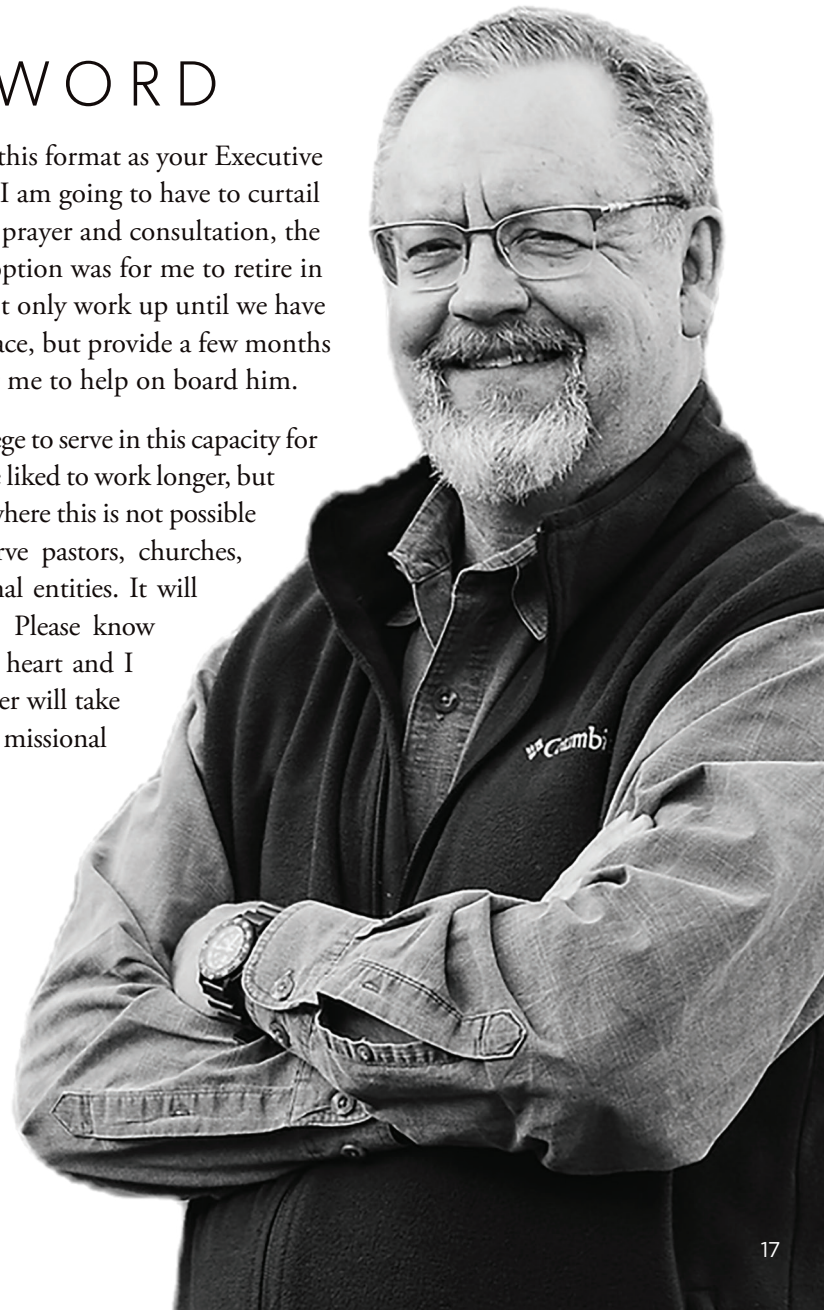
the Baptist Convention of NC, North American Mission Board, International Mission Board, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, and other SBC institutions.


What this new name change does mean is that we will seek to branch outward in our region and beyond for Gospel saturation, church multiplication and missional collaboration. We believe that this new name is more accurate of the direction the Association has already been heading towards for several years.

A FINAL WORD

This is my last contribution in this format as your Executive Director. Due to health issues, I am going to have to curtail my activities a bit. After much prayer and consultation, the Board and I felt that the best option was for me to retire in 2023. Our plan is for me to not only work up until we have a new Executive Director in place, but provide a few months of cushion that can be used for me to help on board him.

It has been my honor and privilege to serve in this capacity for almost seven years. I would have liked to work longer, but the Lord has orchestrated it to where this is not possible for me. I will still seek to serve pastors, churches, associations, and denominational entities. It will just be in a different capacity. Please know that you all will remain in my heart and I am confident that the next leader will take the Association to new levels of missional effectiveness. Sola Gloria!





Let the word of Christ dwell
in you richly, teaching and
admonishing one another in
all wisdom, singing psalms
and hymns and spiritual
songs, with thankfulness in
your hearts to God.

COLOSSIANS 3:16



**PILOT MOUNTAIN
BAPTIST ASSOCIATION**

407 Petree Road
Winston-Salem, NC 27106

P.O. Box 11843
Winston-Salem, NC 27116-1843

Phone: 336-830-8189

www.pmba.org