

## **Associational Mission Strategist's**

### **Annual Report**

**October, 2019 – September, 2020**

The past twelve months have been extraordinary for all of us, and especially for those involved in ministry. From October into the middle of March, we were as busy as ever in the Bethel Baptist Association with meetings, events, and ministry projects. But from mid-March through September, the COVID-19 pandemic forced us all to hit the “pause” button on many traditional and seasonal activities, and to re-evaluate and even re-design our entire approach to ministry.

Our associational year got off to a promising start in October with our **187<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting** (held at Arlington Baptist Church) and another good collection for our **Georgia Baptist Children's Homes**. In November, we conducted our “Baby Comfort Station” outreach ministry at “**Christmas at the Fort,**” and took the 286 **Christmas Backpacks** we had collected from Bethel Association churches to Albany to be transported, with others gathered from the Mallary Association, to children in Harrogate, Tennessee. These, along with 150 backpacks which Shiloh Baptist Church prepared and delivered to their ministry partners in Corbin, Kentucky, made a total of **436 backpacks** from Bethel Association which went into the hands of needy **Appalachian** children during the Christmas season.

Also in November, we completed the transfer of ownership of the **Freeman Road property** (former home of the Mt. Ararat Baptist Church) from the Bethel Baptist Association to New Zion Baptist Church of Blakely.

December was dedicated to our own **Christmas Backpack distribution events** in each of our six counties. Baptist churches and associations from throughout Georgia graciously donated and delivered over 2,000 backpacks to be shared with needy children in our own area. Some of them even sent volunteers to assist with the actual distribution events. At these “Birthday Parties for Jesus,” children and their families all heard a simple Gospel presentation and were given the opportunity to respond to the real Christmas message, before receiving these sanctified backpacks filled with Christmas blessings. We gave out a total of **2,062 backpacks** at our local events in December! Then, we were able to bless some more families in the Eufaula, Alabama area with our excess backpacks after Christmas. God is so good!

In January, we held our regular Winter **Executive Committee** meeting at the Associational Office, and made final preparations for our big **On Mission Connection** (World Missions Conference) which happens only once every five years.

February 22-23 was our On Mission Connection weekend. We hosted **14 missionaries** representing three fields of cooperative Southern Baptist mission work – the International

Mission Board, the North American Mission Board, and the Georgia Baptist Mission Board. They all did a great job of presenting and interpreting their respective mission fields at a **Missions Fair** held on Saturday morning at Edison Baptist Church. On Saturday evening, we heard stirring testimonies from three of them at a **Missions Banquet** at the Lodge at Bagby State Park. And then on Sunday, our missionaries spoke in **20 different churches** throughout the Bethel Baptist Association. It was a wonderful weekend of missions education and inspiration!

On Sunday, March 8<sup>th</sup>, a **Vacation Bible School Clinic** was held at New Bethel Baptist Church. Several of our BBA churches sent their teams to get ideas and inspiration for leading VBS this Summer using LifeWay's "Concrete and Cranes" curriculum. As always, **Gay Crowdis** and her team of VBS specialists did a great job of presenting the material and stoking our enthusiasm for reaching kids through VBS.

What we did not know was that this VBS workshop would be the last associational event we would have for several months! On Thursday, March 12<sup>th</sup>, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp announced the first public health restrictions affecting SW Georgia for the purpose of mitigating the spread of **COVID-19**, the novel coronavirus that had just entered the United States. That Sunday (March 15<sup>th</sup>) many of our churches suspended their worship services to comply with government mandates and CDC recommendations. And the next day (Monday, March 16<sup>th</sup>) many "non-essential" businesses throughout our state shut down in an effort to slow the spread of the virus.

Over the next six weeks or so, activity was very limited in the associational missions program due to the pandemic. We were forced to **cancel** our annual Spring Meeting, which had been scheduled for March 22<sup>nd</sup>, as well as an "Everyday Disciplemaking" Conference which had been planned for April 3-4. Then, as the weeks of public health restrictions and "social distancing" evolved into months, our Camp Planning Committee had to make the difficult decision to also cancel our Children's Summer Camps in June.

During the quarantine period, I hosted and participated in several "**Zoom**" (videoconference) **meetings**, and we managed to keep the routine functions of the Associational Office going. About the middle of June, some of our churches began having live, in-person worship services again, and we began to (very carefully) resume church visitation. By August, most of our congregations were meeting again for worship on Sunday mornings.

On May 21<sup>st</sup>, I announced to our Administrative Team my intention to **retire** at the end of the current associational year (September 30, 2020). This was not a hasty decision, but one that we have been discussing and praying over for the past couple of years. I have served in this position with the Bethel Baptist Association for over 21 years now, and have been doing full-time associational ministry for a total of 32 years. We believe that it is now time for me to relinquish this leadership role to another, and that the Lord has a gifted, energetic, and creative person "waiting in the wings" for just such a time as this. We are very grateful to the churches

and all the wonderful people of the Bethel Baptist Association for the opportunity to serve among them for these many years.

During the past 12 months (from October 1, 2019 through September 30, 2020) I have driven my own personal vehicles **4,075 miles** in associational ministry, and preached **11 sermons** in Bethel Association churches. In the same period, I have taken **13 days** off for **vacation**, and missed **5 ½ days for illness** or medical reasons. In addition, I had to be away from the Associational Office for a total of 8 working days due to **COVID-19 “shelter at home” restrictions**, although I was still able to conduct a good deal of associational business from home during those days.

I believe we will all remember this past year as a time when the Lord protected and upheld us by His might and grace, and compelled us all to reconsider what it means to be and do “church.” Through it all, He has remained faithful, and His Word has continued to go out in power throughout our Association, and around the world.

To God be the glory!

Respectfully submitted,

James Holloway

Associational Mission Strategist