

Benefits of Belonging to an Association of Churches

Reformed Baptists who are not accustomed to the idea of an Association of churches frequently ask, “What are the benefits of membership in an Association of churches?” From the time before the London Baptist Association adopted the Baptist Confession of Faith in 1689, Particular/Reformed Baptist churches have profited from such a formally organized relationship among churches. Below are some of the benefits that readily come to mind, many of which have come from ARBCA pastors who have articulated these biblical and historical principles and benefits in their writings and sermons through the years.

1. Your Church Receives a Conscientious Commendation from Sister Churches

- This commendation identifies your church publicly as a Reformed Baptist church that holds fully to and is ordered after the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689.
- This organized forum of confessional Baptist churches provides a conscientious affirmation of every member church, a public assurance of credibility. Otherwise, who could provide such a recommendation, and how would it be made known?
- This identifying affirmation enables people everywhere to have a confidence in what your church believes, and to a large degree know what it is like, though all Reformed Baptist churches have their own personalities.
- This union of churches is a viable means to articulate a consistent Reformed Baptist theology and witness.
- If people are moving to your area or if they are traveling through and are looking for a Reformed Baptist church, they will know of your church.
- Churches do change over time. As long as they belong to an Association that faithfully holds to the truth, they can be commended and will be known as such.
- The Association’s office staff are a contact source and provide an information network for member churches as well as for those outside who are interested in various aspects of our churches and ministries. The office is a place people can call with questions of interest in our Association and in Reformed Baptist causes worldwide, without any one church having to bear the burden of that volume of contacts and response needs.
- The Association’s Coordinator is able to visit non-member churches where there is interest in membership or in our ministries, in order to represent and explain our Association.

2. Your Church Holds a Formal Communion Of Relationship with Sister Churches

- Your church may enter into an identifiable family of churches of like faith and order, demonstrating a biblically-mandated, visible unity of God’s people (John 17:20-23). While the Association is a mechanism for unity, it does not insure the essence of unity, nor does it have the power to attain it. However, it does put a structure in place whereby committed churches can pursue such a lofty and lovely oneness.

- This family of churches is more than an organization. It is an organic union of filial life, a larger expression of the Body of Christ. After the example of churches in the New Testament (Galatians 1:2, 22; Colossians 4:13-18; Revelation 1:11), churches today may be so linked that they may share in regular communication of fellowship and counsel, to the end that intelligent prayer can be offered and meaningful care can be given.
- Your church would be able to apply a full subscription to the 1689 Confession of Faith by being a part of an Association. The “communion” spoken of in the London Baptist Confession (chapter 26, paragraph 14) was understood as including a mutual recognition among sister churches, mutual action with and for one another, and a mutual accountability to one another. This interchurch communion necessarily requires a formal organization as churches in membership together. Our Baptist forefathers understood it to be such and stated that churches “ought to hold” this kind of communion among themselves (LBC 26:14). Churches working together must have mutual agreement for their corporate activities. As with the necessary orderliness of the local church, so an association must do all things “decently and in order” because “God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40).
- The framers of our Confession speak (LBC 26:14) of a peace, an increase of love, and a mutual edification as benefits which come to all the churches as they continually pray for one another and work to further the good and prosperity of all their sister churches.
- An association ordered after the historic examples of confessional Baptists constructs a biblical interdependency among the churches, while maintaining the independent self-government of every local church. The only authority an Association holds is that of acting to exclude disorderly churches from its membership and to publish a report to all the churches as to the reason for such action.
- All the churches watch over one another with a loving consideration and mutual care for the sake of purity of doctrine, for tangible demonstrations of love, and for edifying communication. The responsibilities given to members of a local church (1 Corinthians 12:12, 29) is the pattern to be applied to the relationships between churches. Confessional Baptists have historically practiced this type of inter-church care. As no Christian is an island, so no church is an island. We need one another in a vital connection of fellowship.
- A formally organized association of churches has a formal bond that will hold it together when difficulties arise. It stays organized as a family of churches. This bond is seen in the difference between an informal Bible study, that can disintegrate in a moment, and a constituted church, that may lose some members during times of trial, but continues as a church because of those committed in covenant together.
- This organized relationship and fellowship provides a constancy of privileges, responsibilities, and accountability for member churches that otherwise cannot be experienced. The Association does not organize only for special occasions or projects, nor is the flow of information to be unplanned or occasional. We are a family that has a continual relationship in Christ.
- The churches meet annually in the General Assembly to enjoy fellowship in a way that enhances relationship, order, and a corporate vision to serve the Lord faithfully.
- Every church may participate in all levels of fellowship and cooperation in the life of the Association. There is to be no dominating church or groups of churches in the Association. Each church is of equal value in Christ Jesus.

- The information network of the Association includes news of every church. It goes to all the churches so that a mutual care may be given to all.
- This mutual care among the churches is like the care to be given between members of the same local body of believers. As member churches, we are “members one of another” in need of mutual, sustained, Christlike care. The necessity of this formal communion is set forth by our Baptist forebears in the Confession, chapter 26, paragraph 14. In this communion is the responsibility and privilege of every church to bring sanctifying growth to the larger body as each participates in the giving and receiving of such care, growth that will come as fully in no other way but that of an associational relationship of accountability to one another in love.
- Our churches of common confession are able to confront current theological issues together. We need one another in order to distinguish between truth and error, and to strengthen one another as we earnestly contend for the faith that was once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). This was worked out effectively in the days of the Apostles as recorded in Acts 15.
- By having a Coordinator, all of the Association’s churches have a contact person upon whom they may call for connecting with the whole. None of the pastors of churches must field all the inquiries and requests, nor are any pastors in a dominant role. Our Coordinator is chosen by the churches, as were Titus and another unnamed brother (2 Corinthians 8:16-24), and he serves the churches as a facilitator. He holds no authority over or among the churches, and his work is guided by the churches on behalf of the Association.

3. Your Church Participates in Cooperative Efforts of Ministry with Sister Churches

- Historically, confessional Baptist churches formally joined together after the examples in Scripture in order to have a forum for providing one another with advice when questions and controversies arose (Acts 15:1,6,24,28; 16:4ff.), for giving and receiving during times of poverty (1 Corinthians 16:3; Romans 15:26), for sending gifted brethren for the edification of the churches in need of the same (Acts 11:22), and for choosing messengers to accomplish work for God (2 Corinthians 8:19). Together they could have associational staff, church planters, and funds for serving the churches in ongoing, specific ways approved by the churches. Your church would be a part of such a present-day cooperation among like-minded churches.
- Churches in an Association have opportunities to serve Jesus Christ through cooperative efforts. This larger family provides churches the opportunity to submit to one another in love and to cooperate in significant ventures for Christ’s Kingdom.
- Churches may participate in the work of home church planting, foreign missions, ministerial training, and publications in an organized and ongoing way. This holistic approach for accomplishing the Great Commission serves to cover the major aspects of getting the task done. Committees made up of individuals from the churches focus attention on developing and servicing cooperative efforts in these major ministries. By pooling our resources and efforts, there is less duplication.

Foreign and Home Missions

- An Association provides member churches with opportunity for exciting and confident involvement in worldwide missions. It is such for every church, even the smallest, because we work together. We can do so much more together than we can separately.
- Having an established, incorporated missions organization opens doors of opportunity around the world, especially with foreign governments. Missionaries often benefit greatly from being attached to such an accredited organization. A Reformed Baptist missions organization is able to build relationships with other mission agencies and groups around the world and to benefit from those relationships as we do the work of missions internationally.
- Every missionary church planting effort, whether domestic or foreign, is under the direct oversight of a member church, with sister churches assisting that church in working to accomplish the Great Commission. ARBCA exists to coordinate those efforts of the churches, not to control the churches or to do the work for them. We refuse to become a top-heavy denomination.
- The missionary has a direct relationship with his home church as his primary sending agent. A missionary's own elder board is his mission board. Through our cooperative effort, the missionary is spared the task of raising his own support through deputation. His own church is responsible for the sending of their missionary and the raising of his support, and needed assistance for a sending church comes from sister churches to whom that church is also responsible. The missionary remains primarily responsible to his own church. The Association's office communicates needed information among the churches as to what assistance is being requested by a sending church.
- Through the Association's office the needs of adopted church planting and missionary efforts are communicated, assistance is coordinated, and accountability is provided. Policies mutually agreed upon and adopted by the churches guide these corporate activities. The purpose of the Association's office is to coordinate and facilitate, not to dominate such efforts.
- Assistance in missionary endeavors is available from the accumulated reservoir of experience and expertise of ARBCA as we work together. The very complicated area of foreign missions is doable for the member congregation who desires to send a gospel laborer to the mission field with the step-by-step assistance of the greater associational family. This includes missionary evaluation and training, as well as assistance with ministry and family issues that arise in the course of these efforts. Assistance, along with a careful monitoring of the care of the missionary's needs, is provided in cooperation with the sending church, always recognizing that church as the primary care-giver.
- Through a corporately adopted approval process, the churches of the Association are assured that there is more of an objective approach to approving a missionary candidate and the plan to send him than just the assessment of the one home church.
- Accountability in missions is always needed where there are large sums of money involved. This involves a uniform support structure and, in the case of foreign missionaries, individual financial accounts are maintained in the ARBCA office. Each missionary, along with his sending church, stipulates the number of accounts for his support package and determines the amounts of his salary to be placed in each account. The office also makes helpful personal transactions for the missionary, such as payments to pension funds and to college-age children living away from home.

- Financial accountability was a major concern for the churches of the New Testament as they worked together (2 Corinthians 8:16-24). Contributions to mission causes are received, held, and dispersed to the missionaries or special projects using computer software designed for missionary services. Tax deductible receipts are issued, and reports are supplied to the missionaries, to the sending churches and to member churches; regular audits are performed, and policies and practices are set up in conformity with the many tax laws of our land.
- A sending church designs the entire support package of their missionary with the assistance of the Home Missions Committee or the Foreign Missions Committee. This provides a broad base of knowledge and consensus for the purpose of knowing exactly where funds are to go and how they are to be used. Working together in this way ensures that one missionary is not inordinately funded more than others.
- The Association's office is able to expedite research and provide financial counsel to the missionaries, especially regarding the ever-complicated area of missionary tax issues. The Association, through the office, is able to issue W-2 forms and act as co-employer with the sending church--albeit in a subordinate status in deference to the local church's authority with the missionary.
- Regular visits to the mission field by the Association's Coordinator provide encouragement for the missionary and his family. This brings assurance to the missionary that he has an entire family of churches supporting him back home. He has a national organization as a support structure.
- The Coordinator is also able to visit all the member churches, presenting informative missionary reports and preaching messages that teach missions. This also connects all the churches and the missionaries in a vital relationship.
- The Association's office is available to assist the missionary and the sending church in forming a schedule and arrangements for the missionary's furlough, should they choose for him to do some traveling while home from the field to visit supporting and interested churches.
- Photographs and biographies of each missionary are available upon request from the Associational office, along with information as to which missionaries' support levels need more assistance.
- With these services provided, the sending church is less encumbered with details and is able to give themselves more to the shepherding of their missionaries and to their own local ministries.
- Any member church is able to request a **Special Project** and to sponsor it, with the help of sister churches. Special Projects are created in the context of a cooperative consensus of need and are set up according to IRS standards for tax-exempt organizations.
- Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been pooled by our churches since the formation of the Reformed Baptist Mission Services and ARBCA for the accomplishment of Special Projects. Because our priority is always the sending of missionaries, whenever a man is ready to be sent to the mission field, the start-up costs to get him there are always met in the form of a Special Project. These start-up costs can amount to \$25,000 - \$35,000 per missionary. Our churches work together to accomplish this in partnership with one another, and the needed funds have always come in.
- Many other Special Projects have been accomplished through the years, which include the translation of the 1689 Confession into nine different languages, the publication of

much-needed theological books for distribution in a variety of countries, the sending of our men around the world to provide pastoral training, provision for benevolence and disaster relief, etc.

Ministerial Training

- We also cooperate in training men for the gospel ministry, a work that is often beyond the abilities of individual churches. The various areas of theological training needed to prepare men for the Gospel ministry require some who have devoted themselves to concentrated study in order to school future pastors and missionaries in these disciplines.
- ARBCA sponsors the Institute for Reformed Baptist Studies. We have a Reformed Baptist professor on the faculty of Westminster Seminary California supervising theological training on behalf of the churches of our Association. The theological seminary setting provides quality ministerial training in the Reformed Baptist faith, with our course credits applying toward the Master of Divinity degree of Westminster Seminary California.
- This distinctively Reformed and Baptist training at IRBS also assists the sending church by providing theological students with personal mentoring and practical experience in the Gospel ministry.
- We also have the privilege of sending our theology professor to different places of the world for the purpose of providing Reformed Baptist theological training to nationals of various countries.

Publications

- The Association's quarterly newsletter, the *ARBCA Update*, provides news of all the churches, missionaries, and associational ministries in an inclusive way. The monthly "Mission Prayer Focus" and the weekly e-mail update also provide in a timely fashion news and prayer requests pertaining to all the Association's family for the purpose of promoting prayer and fellowship.
- ARBCA member churches also work together to publish helpful literature for Reformed Baptist churches. Theological books already published include *Associations or Denominations?* (edited by Dr. Jim Renihan), *The Baptism of Disciples Alone* (by Dr. Fred Malone), and a republishing of *Baptism in the Early Church* (by H.F. Stander and J.P. Louw). Benjamin Keach's *The Baptist Catechism* has also been published in a slightly modernized version. The original document was first published by order of the London Baptist Association General Assembly which met in London in 1693.
- A Sunday School curriculum is being created by our churches as they pool their gifts to design this helpful aid to the churches. A graded Reformed Baptist Sunday School curriculum has been a great need in the churches for many years.

4. Your Church Shares in the Benefits of Mutual Counsel Among Churches

- Holding communion together also means having a basis for settling differences and difficulties together. Differences and difficulties do arise, affecting multiple churches in general or a single church in particular. Our Confession recognized this inevitability and states that churches in association should address these problems in an orderly fashion (Chapter 26, Paragraph 15). The Association provides a forum wherein problems within or between sister churches can be mediated and recommendations can be made.

- An individual church may struggle with legitimate disagreements which have the effect of harmful division within that local body. If a church so desires and makes a request for assistance in resolving the conflict, brethren of sister churches would have a structured approach available to provide necessary help. This intervention would happen only at the request of the local body.
- Good and true churches at times can wrongly use their authority and can injure individual church members. These individual church members are so important that our Confession gave warrant for a process of appeal in order for the churches to know who was to be held in commendation - the church or the individual. A Diotrephes (3 John 9, 10) is able to wreak havoc in an assembly and injure innocent saints, and all the churches needed to know of his authoritarian and divisive ways.
- This same forum is available for maintaining doctrinal accountability among the churches by identifying and dealing with heresy and error.
- Clearly, the messengers of the Association can have no other authority with a local church than to give advice and offer assistance. But they do have the right to investigate difficult matters and to publish their findings in the interest of all the churches in association with one another, for the good of that larger body.
- This provision, to which churches voluntarily placed themselves accountable, did limit the authority of the local church, as envisioned in the Confession, chapter 26:15. It also gave the churches the right to publish a report of their conclusions and recommendations in the matter. The Puritan theologian, John Owen, strongly states concerning this formal attachment of a local church to others, “The church that confines its duty unto the acts of its own assemblies cuts itself off from the external communion of the church catholic; nor will it be safe for any man to commit the conduct of his soul to such a church.”

Conclusion

These are many of the benefits that churches enjoy as they join themselves together with other churches of like mind in such a family of churches. It is our commitment in ARBCA to maintain the independency of each local church while being formally connected in interdependency with one another. We believe we need one another. We have also found all the blessed benefits mentioned above to be real, and not merely theoretical. If your church is fully committed to the system of doctrine found in the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith and if you desire the kind of Commendation, Communion, Cooperation, and Counsel here described, please contact us to learn more about how your church can be a part of the Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America.

Other ARBCA Publications

Associations or Denominations? edited by Jim Renihan

Available through: Calvary Press
P O Box 805
Amityville, NY 11701
1-800-789-8175

Baptism of Disciples Alone by Fred Malone

Available through: Founders Press
P O Box 150931
Cape Coral, FL 33915
239-772-1400

Baptism in the Early Church by H.F. Stander and J.P. Louw

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Reformed Baptist Publications
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The Baptist Catechism
What is a Reformed Baptist Church?
Why You Should Join a Church
The Means of Grace
Church Attendance: Is It Important?
Baptism & Covenant Theology
Paedoism or Credoism
A Critical Evaluation of Infant Baptism
Baby Dedications: Are They Biblical?
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To God be the Glory
The Myth of Free Will
The Lord's Day
A Tale of Two Associations
The Legitimacy & Use of Confessions
Covenant Theology: A Reformed Baptist Overview