

# Strengthening Our Connections Through Church Clusters

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## INTRODUCTION

The churches of the North American Baptist Conference have adopted the Mission *“to make disciples of Jesus Christ at home and abroad.”*

The association of NAB churches is driven by a **Kingdom perspective**, which acknowledges and celebrates the fact that making disciples is a responsibility that goes far beyond the activities of the local church. Faithfulness to Christ’s commission means that helping a sister church make disciples is part of carrying out Christ’s commission in my church.

## CORE VALUES

Five core values frame the scope of our churches associating/connecting with each other.

- We value connecting to **SERVE ONE ANOTHER**.  
Churches connect with each other so that they can serve one another. Jesus taught that the key to greatness is to be a servant.
- We value connecting to **PROVIDE COMMUNITY**.  
The Christian life does not grow in isolation, but in community, be it individuals or churches. Developing strong Godly bonds between believers and among believers of sister churches is a clear Biblical understanding of the Body of Christ.
- We value connecting to **EMPOWER THE LOCAL CHURCH**.  
The function of our associating with each other is to empower the local church to confidently and effectively make disciples of Jesus Christ in their own context.
- We value connecting for **MULTIPLICATION OF MINISTRY**.  
Churches connect in order broaden their outreach through multiplying new ministries and new churches, at home and abroad.
- We value connecting for **MUTUAL ACCOUNTABILITY**.  
As a voluntary association of churches, we look to our sister churches to assist us in following through with our commitment to make disciples.

## **CONNECTING TO SERVE**

*So where do our values lead us?*

*NAB will connect its congregations with churches and resources for the growth of God's Kingdom.*

### **CLUSTERS**

The purpose of Clusters is to connect churches through their pastors. These Clusters are characterized by encouragement, resourcing, and accountability.

#### ❖ **ENCOURAGEMENT**

This addresses the “relational” aspect of connecting our churches. Congregations will be more specifically informed about the other churches in their clusters, so that they can pray for each other, celebrate each others victories, and at times even worship together. There will be genuine caring for each other.

#### ❖ **RESOURCING**

This addresses the “partnership” aspect of connecting our churches. It allows the needs of local churches to be identified, shared and linked to the greater pool of resources in the other churches of the network, or to the resources within their area. It leads to sharing people, expertise and tools. It connects ministry leaders with leaders of the same ministries in the other churches. It leads to shared training and joint ministry events, outreach events, even church planting together. In essence, the cluster becomes a partnering network, connecting the right resources to the right needs.

#### ❖ **ACCOUNTABILITY**

This addresses the “ministry focus” of our churches. It allows the insight and perspective of ministry peers to sharpen each others’ focus and effectiveness of their day-to-day ministries. It invites ministry leaders to help each other keep their ministry goals on track. In essence, the cluster becomes a place to be challenged and to work together toward greater ministry effectiveness.

## **HOW DOES THIS HAPPEN**

It is not our intention to dictate a set structure for clusters. Churches and Associations will find what works best in their situation. Our primary direction is to follow the purposes and values as presented above. Having said that, here are some suggestions:

### **1. GETTING INTO A CLUSTER**

- We think the ideal cluster is 4 churches, but a cluster may be as large as 6 or 7 churches.
- Getting into a cluster seldom happens on its own and usually involves some direction from the Regional Minister and Association leadership.
- Churches should feel comfortable with the churches in their cluster. However, remember, this is not a cluster of pastors, but a cluster of churches through their pastors. This is intended to be a long term relationship among these churches.
- It is preferable that there be a certain amount of affinity with the churches in the cluster.
- Geographical proximity is helpful, but not an impossible factor.
- In some instances, it is impossible for a church to cluster with other NAB churches, so we encourage clustering with BGC churches, or with other churches of similar theology.

### **2. MONTHLY PASTORS' MEETINGS**

- Pastors meet monthly for 2 to 6 hours.
- In some clusters staff are part of these meetings, but that will depend on the desires of the pastors or the topic of discussion.

### **3. AGENDA FOR CLUSTER MEETINGS**

- A Cluster that is just beginning will spend the first meetings allowing the pastors to get familiar with each others' church and ministries. This may again be the case when a new pastor arrives at one of the churches.
- Prayer will be a central part of the Cluster meetings.
- Although the agenda will vary from cluster to cluster, some suggestions toward accomplishing the purpose of clusters might be:
  1. Talk through the "Church Health Checklist" and come to a common understanding of each indicator.

2. Chose an item of joint concern in the “Church Health Checklist”, assessing the health your churches, and discussing how you might move toward greater health.
3. One church presents an issue or challenge. Spend some time asking enough questions for everyone to get as good a grasp of the situation. Then explore all the options, solutions and plans, including how the other churches can assist. The pastor will then presents a specific course of action to take. The other members of the Cluster agree on how best to help the pastor follow through on his plan.
4. Some meetings may be an exchange of ideas and resources.
5. Where there is staff, arrange for them to meet with staff who have similar ministries in the other churches in the Cluster.
6. Work through a book or a resource together.
7. Bring in a pastor from another church, or visit another church that has gone through some of the issues or barriers your churches face.
8. Have social times with the families.

## **CLUSTERING WITH LEADERS AND CONGREGATIONS**

Clustering churches depends very much upon the pastor connecting with the pastors of the churches in the cluster. However, for a cluster to become effective, it must move beyond the pastor. Here are some of the ways these connections can take place:

- The leadership of the church will come together and become familiar with the vision, mission and goals of the other churches.
- People involved in similar ministries will come together to learn from each other, share resources, assist each other, enter into joint training, and share expertise.
- Leadership will come together for joint ministries, including the possibility of planting a church together.
- Congregations come together for Concerts of Prayer, Celebrations, or Worship.
- Leaders will come together during times of crisis to pray together, support each other, and to provide guidance.
- Churches will have joint support of a missionary, or a missions project, or a send a joint Gateway team.

There will be many more opportunities for the people of the church to come together with the specific purpose of helping each other in the work of making disciples for Jesus Christ.

## **GATHERING OF CLUSTERS**

In Regions where it is possible, we encourage 2 or 3 gatherings a year of all the clusters (pastors and staff) for a whole day.

- It allows for clusters to learn from each other.
- This larger event provides the opportunity to bring in resources and speakers that the smaller cluster couldn't afford.
- The day must be well planned, carried off with excellence, well worth the time it will take those traveling from a distance. Here is what the day could look like:

9:30 a.m. Coffee and fellowship

10:00 a.m. Worship

10:30 p.m. Message – may be a quest speaker or one of the pastors

11:15 a.m. Prayer groups

12:00 noon Catered dinner and fellowship

1:00 p.m. Skill development

3:00 p.m. Closing Prayer

## **CLUSTER LEADERS**

- Each cluster will have a Leader, appointed by the Association Leadership and/or Regional Minister.
- The responsibility of the leader will be:
  1. Initiate the meeting of the Cluster
  2. Moderate the Cluster meeting
  3. Report to the Regional Minister regarding needs and issues in the Cluster.
- Cluster Leaders will receive resourcing and guidance coordinated by the Regional Minister.

## **ASSOCIATION IMPLICATIONS**

The structure of the North American Baptist Conference comes out of churches associating or connecting with each other for the purpose of together carrying out the Commission Jesus gave us of making disciples. To accomplish this, churches have agreed upon certain structures that created our Associations, Regions, and Conference. To support these structures, we have appointed or hired the needed personal. However, Clusters will be the primary Conference connecting point for most churches. Hired personal and whatever necessary structure is there to carry out the mission and vision of the connected churches. It is therefore important that the Association and Conference be directed by what is happening at the church and

cluster level.

- Conference and Association leaders must find a way to hear what is happening at the church level, to know the needs and issues of the churches.
- At the Association level, Cluster Leaders will regularly come together to bring reports from their Clusters, to address needs and issues that are surfacing, and give spiritual leadership to the focus of the churches in the Association.
- In some larger regions, there may be a need to have overseers of 3 or 4 clusters represented at the Association level. It will be these overseers that will meet with the Regional Minister and the Association leadership.
- In some Associations these cluster leaders or overseers become the primary leadership of the Association.
- The Regional Minister and the Association General Council Representative will give guidance to the Conference leadership in how best to support our churches and clusters.

## **CONCLUSION**

We have often heard that the reason Conferences of churches exist is so that “we can do together what we could not do alone”. The greatest blessing for our churches comes when they understand that their mission of making disciples of Jesus Christ is a collective mission, and extends to what we can do to help other churches multiply disciples. A Conference is churches serving one another.

## **The Vision**

Over the next few years, a significantly increasing number of spiritually lost people will come to faith in Jesus Christ through the ministry of NAB churches as a direct result of the support, guidance and encouragement churches have given each other within their Cluster of churches. A church will not be just a name in the bulletin as the "Church of the Week", but people will know the goals and challenges of the church. They will have prayed for specific ministry events in that church, and some will have assisted in that church's effort of reaching out to the lost and discipling the believers. People in one church will be celebrating and rejoicing over God's work in another NAB church.

All this is a direct result of all NAB churches connected in a cluster of 4 to 7 churches. Through the regular meeting of their pastors, they have come to know the mission, goals and ministry strategies of each other, and so are able to encourage one another, pray for each other, exchange ideas, and suggest resources. They have together strengthened and supported the training of their workers and leaders, shared their resources, and even their people. They have prayed together, visioned together and challenged each other. Churches have actually done all they could to make a sister church stronger, healthier, more effective in ministry. When God gave the increase, it was known and celebrated in sanctuaries around the Cluster.

They struggled together and cried together in the hard times. They helped each other see through their blind spots. They pushed each other when they went too slowly. They cautioned each other when they went to fast. And where they needed to, they minded their own business and let the sister church make up its own mind. They celebrated their victories and told each other's stories.

Together they started a new church. They gave some of their best people and pooled their financial support. Together they had a daughter church that didn't start weak and struggling, but a daughter that was strong, and talented, and full of ministry for all that came to her. An established church that could never have planted a church on her own, now enjoys the thrilling personal renewal that planting a church brings to mother churches. This daughter quickly gave wonderful strength to the whole Association, and she too would soon become a contributing member of her Cluster.

They joined together to sponsor a missionary of their own. They sent teams from their churches to work along side this missionary. When the missionary come back on home assignment, they had this missionary work in their churches as a joint staff member, teaching and promoting cross cultural ministry. Young men and women were mentored by this missionary, and a new generation of missionaries came from these churches.

Then out of the strength of their own Cluster, they went to the other Clusters and asked for partners in a dream that was bigger than they. A dream that needed them all - the whole Association. A dream that swept way beyond their boundaries, but a dream that God had given them, for the harvesting of souls and the raising up of leaders.