

## COLLEAGUES:

The business term, "strategic alliance" describes one of the hottest trends in the marketplace. But when we clergy use the term "ministerial associaiton," there is a hint of nostalgia, and even embarrassment. In the minds of most, these relics certainly aren't what they used to be.

Whether ministerial associations were ever as influential as some perceive them is open to debate. What may be of more interest is whether the business community's fascination with strategic alliances can be instructive to those of us in religious leadership.

A strategic alliance involves two or more companies that pull together to share resources in a new enterprise on a long-term basis. General Motors and Toyota, for example, have built a small car together they can each market under their own brand name.

Why the urge for business alliances? John Harbison, co-author of *Smart Alliances* (Jossey-Bass, 1998), notes that companies face intense competition, they are being asked to operate globally, and they must cope with industry convergence.

The similarities are obvious. Congregations are competing for shrinking resources-members, money, facilities, and volunteers. At the same time congregations, judicatories, even government agencies have expanding expectations about the involvement of clergy in their communities.

This issue of Clergy Notes explores the role of ministerial associations in Indianapolis. Some support the emotional and spiritual needs of clergy, while others help religious leaders or congregations come together in a common goal. A few have moved from a "ministers-only" club to an alliance of laity and clergy. Interestingly, there are few examples of truly interfaith associations in Indianapolis.

We may dispute the benefits of, or even the need for, these associations. It could be worth exploring, however, whether the current business model of strategic alliances can be instructive to clergy.

Are you part of an association? Have you tried to organize one? Or have you opted for a better alternative? I'd like to hear from you. Let's keep in touch.



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# MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATIONS IN INDIANAPOLIS

This is not the best of times for ministerial associations.

Early in this century, ministerial associations were important in the crusades against gambling and prostitution and in support of Prohibition. Leaders of the Methodist Ministerial Association were often quoted in local newspapers, giving a unified and public voice to the city's strongest Protestant denomination.

In the '50s and '60s, the interdenominational bridge building that made the Billy Graham crusades a national success also provided fertile ground for cooperative efforts among ministers.

Today, the Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis estimates that about 25 ministerial associations exist in the city. But there is no longer a single group speaking with the same authority that the Methodists once did. There are no sweeping moral crusades to galvanize the city's ministers, and the ecumenical spirit has largely faded.

The Southside Ministerial Association of Perry Township (SMAPT) is one of the oldest surviving associations in the city. Attendance at its monthly meetings has declined sharply in recent years.

"There was a day when our churches wanted and expected us to be involved in community leadership," said Fred Oaks, pastor of Southport Baptist Church. "Now it's changed, and no one in my church would know or much care that I was the president of SMAPT. We're all manning our own boats."

Chester Mayflower, pastor of Speedway United Methodist Church, described his neighborhood's ministerial association as "fragile." However, Mayflower believes that the group will survive to take on several projects that are now in the planning stages.

The Irvington Association of Ministers, which dates from the 1960s, remains actively involved in the life of its community. It sponsors a chaplain for the Marion County Guardian Home, a temporary shelter for children, and a part-time social worker to coordinate the poverty relief efforts of member's churches.

There are also new associations forming. The Indianapolis Pastors' Gathering was started in 1996 through the efforts of Bryan Hudson, pastor of New Covenant Church (see related interview). The Gathering's monthly meeting attracts about a dozen ministers from all over the city, bringing together white and African-American pastors primarily from medium-sized charismatic churches.

Some associations include both lay people and clergy and are primarily oriented toward congregations. The Mid-North Church Council, for example, is a coalition of churches advocating on behalf of the Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood. The most active of these organizations have been those representing the black community. Since the early 1990s, a group called Concerned Clergy has raised its voice in some highly public controversies. CC protested against the privatization of the city's public transportation system, and called for the dismissal of Indianapolis Police Department officers involved in an off-duty brawl. In 1998, the group began hosting a live, weekly town hall meeting on local radio station WTLC.

Ministerial associations still play an important role in the city, though their individual fortunes wax and wane over the years. The associations are strongest when they have some cause or program to rally around. What keeps SMAPT going, though in weak health, is its role in providing pastoral counselors for Perry Township schools. The Irvington Association is held together by its support of the Guardian Home chaplain and its poverty relief program. The Indianapolis Pastors' Gathering unites around its support of the Jesus House, a refuge for men recently released from prison.

In general, ministerial associations are not the city-wide, denomination-based organizations they once were. They no longer coalesce around broadly based social causes and crusades, but carry on doing

important work at the neighborhood level.

"Ecumenism is at a low ebb right now," said Fred Oaks. "It's not a high priority for anybody in the churches. But I think the tide is going to rise again."

"If you look at the big picture, we're entering a post-denominational age where our churches are going to be very resourceful in networking with other churches. There's a time coming when the value of ministerial associations will be more apparent to people than it is right now."

## **STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE**

### A CONVERSATION WITH REV. BRIAN HUDSON

Rev. Bryan Hudson of New Covenant Church, 4625 N. Keystone Ave; founded the Indianapolis Pastors' Gathering in 1996. In addition to monthly meetings, which average about 15 ministers attending, the organization sponsors an Annual Praise Gathering that brings together parishioners from the churches represented at the monthly Pastors' Gathering. The Gathering has also sponsored seminars on subjects of interest to pastors, such as tax and legal issues and dealing with the Y2K bug. In this excerpt from a recent interview, Hudson discusses his view of the role of ministerial associations.

**Clergy Notes:** Why did you start the Indianapolis Pastors Gathering?

Hudson: Many of us who pastor churches are doing very well. The churches are growing; we have nice buildings, nice programs. But overall in the city, the church unified is in ruins. We don't do much together. We are building our own little kingdoms. But Christ called his church one, as opposed to many. So I wrote a letter to many of my friends in the ministry and asked them, 'Is it time for us to consider coming together to pray for our city and our leaders?' I said I didn't need any more meetings, and if they didn't feel like we should do this, that was fine. I sent 40-some letters and received 23 responses that said, 'It's time.'

**Clergy Notes:** Is there anything about the Gathering that makes it different from other ministerial associations?

Hudson: Prayer is a big emphasis, as opposed to just talking about stuff. We pray for our mayor, our governor, our police chief, our schools. We probably spend three-quarters of our meeting praying.

**Clergy Notes:** Why do you think ministers keep coming back?

Hudson: With our group, they know that here is a place where we'll do some business, but not a whole lot. This is a place to be refreshed and pray. It's like an oasis, so pastors look forward to it. There's no sense of dread of having to sit there and wade through a lot of idle conversation.

**Clergy Notes:** Why do some ministerial associations decline in attendance or fold?

Hudson: One reason is a lack of clear purpose. Every organization has to have a guiding mission so the people involved stay motivated. Sometimes an organization will lose that sense of mission; they can't define in one sentence what they are doing. In a ministerial fellowship, we presume that God is helping us. It's difficult for a ministry to survive without divine direction. Second, the leadership of the organization has to communicate the mission, and be passionate about the organization. A sense of purpose and leadership are critical factors.

**Clergy Notes:** How would you sum up the purpose of the Gathering?

Hudson: Our first purpose is prayer. Our second purpose is to offer support to one another. Third, to work together to enhance the life of our communities. We're bold enough to think and believe that our prayers can affect the whole city.

## RESOURCES

The Directory of Congregations and Ministers (\$20), published by the Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis, is the most complete listing of its kind. The Federation is actively working to organize meetings for local ministers, and will work with any minister interested in organizing a new association or reviving a dormant one.

Church Federation of Greater Indianapolis  
1100 West 42nd St., Suite 345  
Indianapolis, IN 46208  
(317) 926-5371

Indianapolis Pastors' Gathering  
Rev. Bryan Hudson  
(New Covenant Church)  
4625 N. Keystone Ave.  
Indianapolis, IN 46205  
(317) 257-1266

Irvington Association of Ministers  
Rev. David Yoder  
(Gethsemane Lutheran Church)  
6810 E. 10th St.  
Indianapolis, IN 46219  
(317) 357-7368

Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church  
Rev. Clyde Jetter  
3801 Forest Manor  
Indianapolis, IN 46226  
(317) 545-8253

Southside Ministerial Association of Perry Township  
Rev. Fred Oaks  
(Southport Baptist Church)  
2901 E. Banta Road  
Indianapolis, IN 46227  
(317) 787-8236

Speedway Ministerial Association  
Rev. Chester Mayflower  
(Speedway United Methodist Church)  
5065 W 16th St.  
Speedway, IN 46224  
(317) 241-1563