

# Mississippi associational mission strategists encouraged and equipped

*By Tony Martin*  
*Editor*

The Baptist associations in Mississippi are the closest organizations to the local church. Each association is led by an associational mission strategist, individuals who are often unsung heroes in Baptist life.

From March 3-5, the Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders (SBCAL) held a retreat at Dollywood's Heartsong Lodge and Resort in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

The SBCAL has a rich history, serving, networking, and equipping associational leaders since 1960. The organization has a long-standing relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), its agencies, institutions, and associations. The SBCAL is recognized as the foremost networking, fellowship, and equipping organization for the 1,100 Southern Baptist associations across North America.

Nine associational leaders from across Mississippi attended the retreat, including:

- Ronnie Hatfield, Prentiss Association
- Brian Rushing, Gulf Coast Association
- Warren Jones, Alcorn Association
- Jeff Mann, Winston Association
- Mark McArthur, Tri-County Association
- Ray Burks, Tishomingo Association
- Philip Price, Jackson Association
- Chris Barrow, Webster Association

- Corey Fontan, Lauderdale Association

Jon Martin, chief strategy officer of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board, also attended the retreat.

“The retreat consisted of presentations and a Q&A time from some of our entities, as well as various breakouts on topics that directly affect the work of the AMS,” he said. “For me, it was also a good opportunity to fellowship and learn together with some of our AMSs.”

Mark McArthur of Tri-County Association noted, “They broke us into three categories. There was normative, which was 40 and under if you had 40 churches. And then there was the mid-size, which was 41 to 70 or 80, and then the large from there up. You had breakout sessions for your size group. I thought that was a neat way of doing it. Just like with the association, in small churches, what’s going to work there is not necessarily going to work in the large church. So this was good.”

When asked about his main takeaway from the retreat, McArthur said, “As an associational leader, we tend to put all of our effort into building relationships with the pastor. But the fact is, the pastor could be gone anytime. And so there’s the need to build relationships with the lay leadership because they’re going to be there. The pastor could be there three years or 10 years or whatever, but they’re going to eventually leave. So it’s critical to build relationships with the lay leadership. And I guess I’ve known that, but I’ve just never really focused on that.”

Warren Jones shared a similar perspective.

“My biggest takeaway was from a gentleman, an AMS in Arizona. He has over 600 miles to cover. Most of his churches are in Arizona, but he’s got six or seven in California. He travels doing training and things. Takes him hours and hours,” Jones said.

“So he’s got these groupings. My biggest takeaway is I’m going to take advantage of a group that’s forming in each of our association directions. There are some churches in the west, the east, in town, and in the south too. They are having these area revivals, and when they get together, they’ll take turns preaching. I’m going to capitalize on that and start some groupings with these churches, start to get them together. So I’m going to see if I can focus on that right there—different groups, not the whole group at the time.”

Philip Price echoed the importance of collaboration.

“I think the most important thing for me is the importance of the association in guiding the churches to work together,” Price said. “The idea is for our churches to support each other.

“And there was also Brian Nall, who was the director of missions at Pensacola Baptist Association. He is now associational regional director for the Panhandle of Florida for the Florida Baptist Convention. His breakout was one of the most valuable to me because he gave some specific tools or guidelines for facilitating discussions, again to encourage pastors to support one another.

“One of the things that he did was to divide up just by the supervisor’s districts in his county. He divided them up and saw how many churches he had in each. So he had these groups, and then he focused on getting those pastors just to get together and fellowship and talk encouragement.

“Once I got back, I told my secretary to break down our association like that because I think it’s very important. But one thing that encouraged me about this was it encouraged me to see the direction Mississippi Baptists are headed.”

Jon Martin also emphasized the value of the retreat.

“I especially appreciated the breakouts that focused on the

core essentials of the association and mission strategist,” Martin said. “It is always good to hear from other guys who are called to a similar role and learn what they have found to be the most effective way to do ministry. Associations have long been a critical part of our cooperation, and anything that Mississippi Baptists can do to help strengthen the work, we are glad to be able to do it.”