

Back to the future, as missionaries raise their own financial support

July 6, 2007

Posted: 7/06/07

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Missouri Word & Way

Career missionaries may be cutting the middleman from the flow of missions dollars, say experts in the study of mission trends. While denominational agencies and missions partners will not be out of the picture, their roles may change—and perhaps already are.

Larry and Sarah Ballew serve in Macau as affiliates in the [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) As You Go program. The Ballews raise their own financial support, relying on relationships with churches and individuals in the States to stay in Macau. The Ballews already had been in Macau several years before working with CBF.

“We were looking for a way to connect with CBF,” Ballew said. “They were just getting ready to introduce the As You Go program. We were one of the first to participate.”

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The Ballews like the program because it enables more people to serve. “Many don’t see themselves as ‘missionaries,’ but can be people in business who offer a Christian witness,” he said.

Bill O’Brien, retired director of [Samford University’s Global Center](#) and former vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Foreign Mission Board—now International Mission Board—feels the move to a more societal brand of missions already is occurring.

“The local church is taking back the initiative,” he said. “Many still cooperate with missions agencies, but churches are discovering each other and cooperating with each other.”

He described the change as quasi-societal or functional associationalism. Churches with a similar missions goal are partnering to meet those goals. “Like the Cooperative Program, churches know they can do more together than they can separately, but due to all the problems the last 25 to 30 years, they are finding other ways.”

The change is part of the cycle of missions, Keith Parks said. Parks, who served as coordinator of CBF Global Missions and president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board, said it is pretty clear the national organizations are weakening. He attributes this to cultural trends. “Younger adults tend to be hands on. They want to be more involved,” he said. “We have to adapt and change our methods, or we will lose support or numbers.”

Many people believe the denomination method is the way missions always has been, Parks said.

But according to Harlan Spurgeon, retired CBF staff member and vice president of the FMB, “modern missions began with societies. William Carey was supported by a group of committed friends who shared his burden for the lost world. American Baptist foreign missions was an extension of this method, and has continued to this day. In fact, it would be fair to say that the majority of missions historically has been done in this way.”

Though the method can be beneficial to the local church and missionaries, it also can cause difficulties—especially in a world still linked to denominations. Churches sometimes assume that because a missionary is partnering with a missions agency, their funds are provided.

“Giving needs to be above and beyond—in addition to—money given to global missions funds,” Ballew said. “We have good months and bad months in terms of support. Some churches or individuals will give for a time, then they are done. We have to trust that the Lord will provide what we need.”

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