

Imagine Texas without the Cooperative Program, Liebrum urges

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DALLAS—Asked how he plans to inspire churches of different sizes, various levels of denominational loyalty and diverse missions philosophies to support Texas Baptists' Cooperative Program unified budget, Chris Liebrum answers honestly: "Nobody said it was going to be easy."



Chris Liebrum Indeed, Texas Baptists have approved decreased budgets at [Baptist General Convention of Texas](#) annual meetings each of the last two years, after three years in which total budget requirements remained essentially unchanged.

Even so, Liebrum believes it's worth the effort. He considers himself a product of Cooperative Program-supported ministries.

His parents grew up at Buckner Children's Home in Dallas. Liebrum graduated from Howard Payne University and Southwestern Baptist

Theological Seminary. He served as a youth minister in Texas Baptist churches and worked three decades on the BGCT Executive Board staff in a variety of roles.

Effective May 1, Liebrum moved into his new post as director of the [BGCT Cooperative Program office](#).

He plans to visit the top-giving churches in the state to thank them for their generous support, identify churches with the potential to give more and encourage them to increase their financial support, and provide information and resources about what the Cooperative Program does.

Informally, he sees himself in a role similar to Clarence the angel—the character in *It's a Wonderful Life* who earned his wings by helping George Bailey see what his community would have looked like if he never had been born.

“Many Baptists have taken the Cooperative Program for granted,” Liebrum said. “If the Cooperative Program went away today, what would Texas look like?”

Baptist Student Ministry on about 110 college campuses across the state would diminish, he noted. Funding to help churches start new mission congregations would disappear. Baptist students preparing for ministry would lose scholarships. Some Baptist universities and ministries to children would suffer significantly.

Liebrum sees the story of cooperative missions and ministry as compelling, but he recognizes not every Texas Baptist shares that conviction. And he realizes events in Baptist life over the last 30-plus years quenched many churches' passion for



cooperative giving.

“When the Cooperative Program worked best, it was built on a foundation of shared vision and mutual trust,” he said. “In the 1980s and 1990s, both of those things eroded.”

- Opposing groups in the Southern Baptist Convention battled for control. Supporters of the group that emerged victorious called it a “conservative resurgence.” Opponents—many from churches that historically led the convention in Cooperative Program giving—called it a “fundamentalist takeover.”
- In Texas, some churches no longer wanted to support institutions or agencies from which they felt disenfranchised, but they still wanted to cooperate with the BGCT. Some wanted to support groups such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist World Alliance. So, in 1994, the BGCT broadened its definition of Cooperative Program giving and offered congregations four options—expanded to five giving plans in 1999.
- In 1998, churches that believed the BGCT was distancing itself from the SBC broke away from the BGCT to form the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. In the years that followed, some SBC-supportive congregations cut all ties with the BGCT to join the new convention. Others chose to align with both state conventions, dividing financial gifts between the two groups.

For 70 years, cooperative churches followed one unified giving plan. By 2000, those congregations faced a wide array of choices regarding where they invested beyond their local congregations. And increasingly, some chose options other than the Cooperative Program.

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“It seems like we have missed a generation, or maybe two, in talking about the practice and power of cooperation—especially cooperation of Baptists through the Cooperative Program,” BGCT Executive Director David Hardage said. “The principle of doing more together than one can do alone still seems to have practical truth in it, and as Texas Baptists, we want to emphasize this.”

That’s where Liebrum faces his challenge.

“Some church leaders today ask, ‘Why give through the Cooperative Program?’” he acknowledged. “Some of them are asking, ‘What have you done for me—for my church—lately?’”

Liebrum hopes he can encourage some of those church leaders to ask different questions. He wants them to think in terms of Acts 1:8—Christ’s command to his disciples to be his witnesses, beginning where they were in Jerusalem and expanding outward to the ends of the earth.

Liebrum recognizes many churches directly support missionaries and ministries, but he hopes they also recognize the kinds of ministries no single congregation can support alone, such as theological seminaries and ministries on multiple college campuses.

He also hopes they will recognize even the largest congregation cannot send missionaries to as many countries and people groups as Baptists can when they work together.

And while some churches may be able to start new missions congregations without support from the BGCT or any other Baptist group, those churches that give cooperatively invest in supporting new churches far beyond the scope of a single congregation.

“It’s not either/or. It’s both/and,” he insisted. “I believe they will recognize there are things worthy of support they can’t do by themselves.”