

Editorial: Church in 21st century looking more like 19th

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After a century of glory days, the church in 21st-century America is looking more and more like its 19th-century ancestor. Given the vibrance of American Christianity through the 20th century, perhaps we should welcome the return as a precursor to a new vibrance.

While I was with a group of pastors recently, we discussed trends in church life. Pastors do this kind of thing. A lot. Two trends we talked about stand out for me.

We talked about the return to the society method and what may be a return to circuit preachers. I'll explain.

Mission funding

If you're a Southern Baptist or an offshoot, you likely know about the Cooperative Program.

If you're not or you don't, the Cooperative Program was a genius idea launched in 1925 through which local churches, local associations and state conventions could send money voluntarily—whatever amount they determined—to the Southern Baptist Convention, and that money would be used to educate ministers and missionaries and to send them around the world.

A lot has been accomplished through the Cooperative Program.

Whatever you know about it, you may not know the Cooperative Program is a good 80 years younger than the SBC. In other words, not even Southern

Baptists have always funded missions through something like the Cooperative Program.

Before the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists and many other evangelical groups funded missions through the [society method](#).

Before the SBC Executive Committee became the central recipient and clearinghouse for funds to support the SBC seminaries, publishing house, ethics commission, thousands of missionaries and otherwise, each missionary, missionary couple or entity solicited funds directly from local churches. They depended heavily on this direct funding.

What many Southern Baptists don't know is the return to the society method started in practice in 1976 with Bold Mission Thrust and Mission Service Corps that came out of it.

Society method

Originally intended for volunteers—typically self-funded retirees—by the early 2000s, young seminary graduates were being recruited to serve as full-time career Mission Service Corps missionaries. My wife and I were two of them.

Mission Service Corps is part of the North American Mission Board—one of two mission boards receiving Cooperative Program funds.

We were recruited to collegiate missions. From the beginning, we were told we would have to raise our own support. We spent much of our fundraising helping Southern Baptists understand we did not receive any of their Cooperative Program *or* Annie Armstrong Easter Offering giving.

I could say a lot about that, but it's enough to know here that my wife and I were returned to the society method more than 20 years ago. And the number of missionaries doing the same has only grown since that time.

Though the society method requires more work of each missionary and certainly feels more tenuous, there is an upside. Missionaries and funders are directly connected, and there is direct accountability. My wife and I really enjoyed knowing every one of our supporters.

The Cooperative Program was a fantastic idea. As effective as it has been, it hasn't removed the need for direct support. Direct support is likely to become the norm again for Baptists in the 21st century. Let's make the best of it.

Filling the pulpit

One thing the Cooperative Program enabled was training tens of thousands of ministers. This is one reason the SBC grew into the largest Protestant denomination in North America.

But the number of people training for pastoral ministry has dropped precipitously over the last 20 years. There's coming a cliff of sorts. The pastors trained in SBC seminaries during the 1970s through the early 1990s are retiring or approaching retirement. And there are precious few pastors to follow them.

Think about this for a moment. The number of churches proliferated in the mid-20th through early-21st centuries. Seminaries cranked out pastors for them all. Not all the new churches survived, but many of them did. Now, we have fewer and fewer pastors ready to serve those churches.

There also is the matter of full-time pastorates. They're becoming fewer and fewer. So, the fewer being trained to serve as full-time pastors are finding fewer full-time pastorates. More and more churches—especially rural churches—are looking for part-time or bivocational pastors because they can't afford a full-time pastor.

And now, I'm starting to hear about churches sharing a pastor. Two or more churches sharing a pastor might sound strange to some Baptists, but only because we're not old enough to remember when it was common. [My great-great-grandfather](#) was a circuit preacher.

Circuit preachers

Circuit preachers, for those unfamiliar, travel(ed) from church to church to preach and possibly teach a Bible study.

In some places, a circuit preacher will spend one Sunday at each church on the circuit. In other places, a circuit preacher will spend Sunday morning in one church and Sunday evening in a different church.

There are obvious drawbacks to this arrangement, but they can be overcome by the church members adjusting their expectations. They also can be overcome by church members taking on ourselves ministry roles we've delegated to "the paid professionals."

For example, there is a difference between a pastor and a preacher, and not every minister is called or gifted to be both pastor and preacher in one person. But a body of believers—a church—should have within it those gifted to carry out pastoral ministry and others to teach and others to administrate and so on.

We need to develop these gifts in each other, and we need each to employ their gifts for the upbuilding of the church.

If the majority of churches in America—Baptist or otherwise—become unable to find or afford a full-time pastor, which seems increasingly likely, it would behoove every church in America to imagine the day when that scenario is not imagined but is reality for them.

And we shouldn't be scared or embarrassed by these kinds of changes. The

church thrives under these conditions. Just ask our forebears. Just ask churches around the world now that are leading people to Jesus, discipling them and sending out missionaries by the tens of thousands.

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