

Editorial: The Cooperative Program never was sufficient

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The Cooperative Program was a marvelous creation. But it never was sufficient to pay for everything Southern Baptists wanted to do. Now, it's even less so, leading Baptist leaders throughout the Southern Baptist Convention to ask how long the Cooperative Program will last.

Before they answer that question, they need to be honest about just how much the Cooperative Program has actually paid for. It's less than you may think.

A marvelous creation

Baptist missions and education were funded through the society method prior to the creation of the Cooperative Program. Each missionary and school had to raise their own funds. It required a lot of time and travel and wasn't always successful.

The Cooperative Program promised to improve on that funding approach by pooling receipts from local SBC churches throughout the convention—no travel, no fundraising. A portion of individual tithes and offerings given to each local church would be sent to a central SBC office, which in turn would distribute those funds to mission boards and seminaries.

The idea worked pretty well, so much so that state-level conventions adopted the Cooperative Program for themselves. But the programs never received enough funds—even at their peak—to pay for everything.

For instance, even though Southern Baptists could attend seminaries and

camps and could buy educational materials at greatly reduced prices, they still had to pay something for all those things.

Additionally, the existence of the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for international (foreign) missions and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American (home) missions further proves the Cooperative Program didn't completely rid Southern Baptists of the society method.

I have direct experience with this.

How far the money goes

Southern Baptists embarked on Bold Mission Thrust in 1976 to evangelize the entire world by the year 2000. A year later, the Home Mission Board—now North American Mission Board—created Mission Service Corps.

MSC was to be populated by short-term volunteers—people who could pay their own way for as long as four months. By the time my wife and I finished seminary, young graduates were being recruited to serve as full-time, career MSC missionaries. We were recruited to start a Baptist Collegiate Ministry in the Northeast, and we believed God called us to go.

It was made clear we had to secure our own funding. The Baptist General Convention of Texas provided a one-time gift so my wife and I could fundraise full time. How did we fundraise? The society method. It often generated a crisis of belief among faithful Southern Baptists we asked to support us. They thought they already had.

Each spring, Southern Baptist churches were flooded with Annie Armstrong Easter Offering promotional material. The material always stated 100 percent of the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering goes to support NAMB missionaries.

While that is true, what was not said in the 2000s—or still—is that fewer than 100 of the 5,300-plus NAMB missionaries were fully funded. The rest of us were funded partially or received no funds at all from the Easter offering.

The Northeast effort didn't materialize. So, we moved our assignment to the University of New Mexico, where we served several wonderful years.

We educated a lot of people about how Southern Baptist missions were and are funded, and we encouraged a lot of people to give to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering **and** to us. Through those individuals and churches, God faithfully provided sufficient and direct support for our collegiate mission work.

Transparency

The problem isn't that it costs more to carry out missions, education and other ministries than the Cooperative Program can fully fund. The problem is transparency.

The problem is people being led to believe the Cooperative Program, combined with two annual mission offerings, keeps missionaries, seminaries and ministries from needing to raise any additional funds through direct donor appeals. That simply isn't true and hasn't been true.

And this isn't unique to the Southern Baptist Convention. State conventions aren't always as clear about the limits of their own Cooperative Programs.

The tendency is to trumpet all the things Cooperative Program dollars are paying for and to leave off there. What is left unsaid is every part and partner of the convention has to secure at least some of its own funding beyond Cooperative Program receipts.

At the departmental level, that additional funding may come through event and advertising fees, booth rentals and book purchases. At the institutional level, it comes through direct donor appeals and grants.

In Baptist life, we've been very careful not to say too much, if anything, about this. Perhaps we think it smacks of ingratitude or that it gives the impression we're not growing. Whatever the reason for not talking about what Cooperative Program funds don't cover, we've defaulted to giving a false impression.

Honesty and hope

Before we worry about the future, we need to tell the present like it is. In the words of editors who proceeded me, "Tell the truth and trust the people." Even more, tell the truth and trust the Lord.

Costs have soared. Local financial obligations are more. Denominational loyalty is less. Churches have reduced what they are sending to their state and national conventions. For these and other reasons, the Cooperative Program is declining in both the national and state conventions, despite [today's positive report](#) out of the SBC.

And yet, I am grateful to report: Many people are still giving—faithfully, joyfully and sacrificially—to support the advancement of God's kingdom. They are giving through Cooperative Programs—state and national—and they also are giving directly to churches, ministries and other Christian organizations. You may be among those giving. And we are grateful.

The Cooperative Program never was sufficient to pay for everything. And I suspect that is just how the only sufficient One wants it.

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expressed are those of the author.