

AN EFFECTIVE WAY

Making Provision



“We are taking this precaution so no one can criticize us about this large sum administered by us. For we are making provision for what is right, not only before the Lord but also before men” (2 Corinthians 8:20-21, HCSB).

Almost every day we receive appeals from charities seeking financial support. Each is competing for our attention and response. They all have a story to tell and a cause that seems ever so worthy. To which shall we give? Wherein is the greatest need? Which charitable organization is most effective in administering our gift?

Years ago, Baptists were faced with this same dilemma. Representatives from different ministries stood before congregations, talking about their work and receiving an offering of financial support. However, this practice took a toll on church budgets and lent itself to an uneven distribution of funds.

There had to be a more effective way of providing for the carrying out of the Great Commission. The Southern Baptist Convention found a better way in May 1925, when it adopted a plan called the Cooperative Program. Churches would voluntarily contribute through a single unified budget from which these various ministries would receive a proportionate amount for the funding of their work.

Now, nine decades later, the Cooperative Program has proven to be an effective way to fund state, national and international missions efforts, Baptists universities and theological seminaries, children’s homes and myriad other endeavors in which Southern Baptists are involved. As individual Baptists give through the Cooperative Program, their gifts are inclusive of all that we do together in carrying out the Great Commission of our Lord.

This more effective way is strikingly similar to Paul’s instructions: “Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and store it up, as he may prosper so that there will be no collecting when I come” (1 Corinthians 16:1-2, ESV).



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I am currently a member of a large metropolitan church whose annual gifts through the Cooperative Program are in the six-figure range. Of the nearly \$2 million of undesignated budget receipts received each year, 12 percent goes to the witness of Christ beyond the walls of our church.

These dollars support the work of our state convention as well as the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board. Further, they provide funding for higher Christian education at the college and seminary levels and other ministries like children’s homes, senior adult care facilities and student organizations on college campuses.

However, the vast majority of Southern Baptist churches are small in membership, having an average Sunday School attendance of fewer than 100. (In my state, approximately 70 percent are in this category.) Many of these congregations are led by bivocational pastors and are limited in resources.

The challenge of the Great Commission—taking the gospel to the nations and ministering to the multitudes in the name of Christ—is overwhelming. The small church may see it as “mission impossible.” Neither can the large metropolitan congregation, with all its resources, accomplish so daunting a task. However, by pooling their gifts through the Cooperative Program, both large and small churches can accomplish more than if they tried to do it alone.

The Cooperative Program is right before God and man because it is inclusive. All churches, regardless of size or financial ability, can participate. Every member of every Baptist church, whether rich or poor, young or old, can have a part in obeying the Great Commission.

Galatians 3:28 reminds us: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (ESV)



A COMPREHENSIVE WAY

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Some years ago, I attended a national meeting of the Evangelical Council of Financial Accountability in Washington, D.C. Representatives from almost every major religious organization, including various para-church groups and well-known religious broadcasters, were in attendance. Although the participants shared a common commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ, the group was denominationally diverse.

Over the course of the three-day conference, one main topic of concern emerged. It had to do with fundraising. The very survival of these ministries was dependent upon securing financial support. In many ways, they were competitors for the same dollars.

I also observed that these good men and women of God were for the most part independent ministers detached from a supporting organization and subject to the ebb and flow of economic conditions. They could not fully focus on their spiritual mission because of the distraction of raising funds for material needs.

Southern Baptist missionaries who receive Cooperative Program dollars do not have to be concerned about raising their own support. They can give themselves wholeheartedly to their divine calling.

The Cooperative Program is a better way because it is comprehensive. It is multifaceted. Gifts through the Cooperative Program fuel the fires of evangelism at home and around the world. They also provide for facilities and faculties at Baptist colleges and seminaries, enable benevolent ministries to people in crisis and assist state conventions in equipping pastors and churches for greater effectiveness.

The apostle Paul, speaking of the generosity of the Macedonian church, said: “For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints” (2 Corinthians 8:3-4, ESV).



COOPERATIVE PROGRAM

AN EFFICIENT WAY

Making Provision



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Baptists are often reluctant to try anything new. So it was when the Cooperative Program was adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention. Before 1925, churches had supported various ministries and missions causes through special offerings. Now they were being asked to contribute through a unified budget that would fund all areas of Baptist work.

Less than one-third of the Baptist churches in my state gave through the Cooperative Program in 1926. They had to be convinced that this alternate method of funding would provide greater financial support to kingdom causes, so they watched and waited.

Now, more than nine decades later, the Cooperative Program has proven to be a more efficient way of funding missions and ministries. Consider some of these efficiencies:

- Approximately 46,000 Southern Baptist churches contribute to the Cooperative Program. Together their gifts to state, national and international missions approach \$500 million annually.
- Gifts through the Cooperative Program are distributed and at work expediently. The administrative cost is minimal compared to the administrative fees of other nonprofit organizations.
- The Cooperative Program supports the ministries of nearly 5,000 missionaries who work with nearly 1,000 people groups in more than 100 countries. During the first decade of the 21st century, some 25,000 new churches were started and five million new converts were baptized.
- Nearly 8,000 full-time students enrolled in six Southern Baptist theological seminaries are beneficiaries of lower tuition costs because of the Cooperative Program. There are approximately 1,200 seminary graduates annually.

Efficiency is further measured by transparency and accountability. Reports of income, expenses and distributions, as well as other statistical data about the Cooperative Program of the Southern Baptist Convention are available at www.sbc.net.

“Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2, ESV).

