

The Cooperative Program: Keep It Going!

by Morris H. Chapman

[The following is the President's Report by Morris H. Chapman, president and chief executive officer of the SBC Executive Committee, delivered to the SBC Executive Committee on February 22, 1999.]

As you are aware, the Executive Committee is working with SBC entities, state conventions, and the president of the Southern Baptist Convention, to challenge Southern Baptist churches to reach a goal of \$750 million for Southern Baptist causes during the year, October 1, 2000, to September 30, 2001. The Convention will be celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the Cooperative Program, a unified plan of giving adopted by Southern Baptists in 1925, the same year the Convention adopted the *Baptist Faith and Message*.

What is our Cooperative Program heritage? Prior to 1919, great financial confusion prevailed in Baptist life. Special fund drives were conducted in the churches twice a year - one for the Southern Baptist Convention and one for the state convention - but they were inadequate. Churches had begun to revolt under the flood of appeals for denominational needs. They were all worthy appeals but the churches were forced to ignore denominational needs or their local needs, and sometimes both. There was a financial crisis within the SBC. The need for money was urgent. Something had to be done quickly.

Some of the most influential men in Southern Baptist history gave their energies wholeheartedly to the Seventy-five Million Campaign. At the convention in 1919, in Atlanta, J. B. Gambrell's presidential address "was one of the inspiring causes of the beginning of this great movement." During most of the five-year period of the Seventy-five Million Campaign, George W. Truett, Chairman of the Executive Committee from 1927 to 1929 and pastor of the First Baptist Church, Dallas, was chairman of the fifteen-member Campaign Commission. L. R. Scarborough was granted a leave of absence from the presidency of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to serve as general director. He traveled far and labored long for what he called "the largest and most far-reaching and most expansive movement ever undertaken by Southern Baptists in all their history."

When all the people's pledges came in, they totaled \$92,630,932! People from every corner of the

denomination were ecstatic! But shortly afterward, economic problems struck. Meanwhile, the debate on evolution had erupted. These influenced giving so that actual receipts were only \$58,591,713. The agencies had tended to spend and borrow against the expected receipts; now they found themselves in worse condition than before. Many Baptists declared the Seventy-five Million Campaign a failure.

In 1925, the Future Program Commission, with Louisiana pastor M. E. Dodd as chairman, recommended the Cooperative Program to the Southern Baptist Convention. Many messengers in that day thought the convention to be rather routine and uneventful. After the Convention, one pastor said, "Happiness of former Conventions was not evident on the faces of the delegates. This was due, perhaps, to the depressing effect of our huge debts." Another said, "The Convention was the least satisfying of all I have attended in twenty-five years." Still another said, "The Convention struck no high tide. We seemed not to be together."

They had not grasped the historical significance of what the Convention had done. Our forefathers were determined to learn from their efforts. George W. McDaniel, pastor of First Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., and president of the 1925 Convention, did not miss the meaning of what had been done. Speaking to his people on the Sunday following the Convention, he urged, "Join heartily in the cooperative program for missions You, through your messengers, helped to make that program. It represents the combined thought and judgment of Southern Baptists - not my thought, not your thought, not that of any one man - but the combined thought of many. The hope of every Board and institution is the success of the cooperative program. Churches and pastors should get behind that program with all their might. Nothing should be allowed to interfere with this main objective. In this Church nothing shall Here is where I take my stand. Appeals for special objects I cannot heed, for I am going my limit for the program" (*Religious Herald*, May 28, 1925).

What is the Cooperative Program? Southern Baptists have defined the Cooperative Program as: "... a financial channel of cooperation between the state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention which makes it possible for all persons making undesignated gifts through their church to support the missionary, education, and benevolent work in their state convention, and also the work of the Southern Baptist Convention." (*SBC Annual*, 1979, recommendation #6 of the Executive Committee, p. 30)

Thomas E. Halsell of West Virginia once said, "The Cooperative Program is the glue which holds

Southern Baptists together and enables them to stick to the Great Commission." (Cecil Ray and Susan Ray, *Cooperation: The Baptist Way to a Lost World*, Nashville: Stewardship Commission, 1985, p. 26)

N. F. Greer of Alabama has said, "The Cooperative Program allows me to go where I cannot go, and do what I cannot do." (Cecil Ray and Susan Ray, *Cooperation: The Baptist Way to a Lost World*, Nashville: Stewardship Commission, 1985, p. 23)

In looking ahead to the dangers of the renewal of society-style appeals, James L. Sullivan, president of the Sunday School Board from 1953 to 1975, counseled: "There will come a time when they (society-style appeals) will create real problems for Southern Baptists. The churches need to recognize that present-day efforts to re-establish the old society system, whose known weaknesses were long-since abandoned by our forefathers, could be unwise." (James L. Sullivan, *Baptists Polity as I See It*, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983, p. 91)

In 1962, Mrs. W. C. James, at the age of 90, was living in a nursing home in Richmond, Virginia. In a few months she would go home to meet the Lord. She was asked this question: "You were president of our Woman's Missionary Union, and a member of that small group which recommended the establishment of the Cooperative Program. Why did you do it, Mrs. James?"

She answered, "It belonged in our Southern Baptist Convention. We just had to cooperate. We had tried everything else. There was no other way."

Then she was asked, "How do you feel about it now?" She responded, "I believe in it more than ever. I'm proud to have had a share in its beginning. We would never have grown as we have without it. God led us to start this program. I don't recall all the reasons; but I'll be on the other side before long, and everything will be clear. I pray every morning for the Cooperative Program. My part in it was the most important thing I ever did. Tell Baptists to keep it going." (W. E. Grindstaff, *Our Cooperative Program*, Nashville: Convention Press, 1965. p. 17)

Commenting last Saturday to the heads of SBC entities during a meeting of the Great Commission Council, Jerry Rankin, president of our International Mission Board, said, "Recently I met with a group of mission leaders from evangelical denominations and parachurch groups. Every one of them testified

that the number of missionaries was declining because they were unable to raise sufficient financial support. None of them has a unified plan of giving like the Cooperative Program. They were amazed at our success and dismayed at their increasing decline. It was as if their testimony was, "Tell Baptists to keep it going."

The Cooperative Program is an alliance and partnership with state Baptist conventions. It is a matter of "all for one and one for all." Tell Baptists to keep it going!

The Cooperative Program has no inherently geographical, economical, or racial prejudice. It is money given for state missions, North American missions, world missions, for all peoples throughout the earth who need a Savior. Tell Baptists to keep it going!

The Cooperative Program is doing together what we cannot do separately. Tell Baptists to keep it going!

The Cooperative Program is, without dispute, the greatest voluntary funding program in the history of Christendom. Tell Baptists to keep it going!

The Cooperative Program supports more than 9,000 foreign and domestic missionaries. Tell Baptists to keep it going!

The Cooperative Program assists financially in the theological education of more than 10,000 students through six Southern Baptist seminaries. Tell Baptists to keep it going!

The Cooperative Program provides ethical challenge and moral leadership to this nation through the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Tell Baptists to keep it going!

The Cooperative Program provides relief funds to pastors and their wives whose retirement income is so meager it just won't stretch far enough for an existence with dignity. Tell Baptists to keep it going!

Our Lord said, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest*" (Matthew 9:37-38 NIV).

As we move into the year 2000 and celebrate the 75th Anniversary of the Cooperative Program, my prayer is that Southern Baptists, standing upon the shoulders of our forefathers, will be ***Partners in the***

Harvest , telling Baptists to keep it going!

This article reprinted by permission from [SBCLife](#)

[[Go to SBCLife](#)] [[B2B Home](#)]