

The Cooperative Program: A brief history

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The Pathway

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. – Southern Baptists have been missionary minded since their first day and their first action. When 293 delegates gathered in 1845 in Augusta, Georgia, for the inaugural meeting of the convention, their first resolution expressed the desire to “organize a convention for the propagation of the gospel.” Before leaving Augusta, they had formed foreign and domestic mission boards, and appointed presidents to lead these efforts. These entities were the new Southern Baptist Convention’s priority, and they remain so to this day.

Messengers to the 2024 Southern Baptist Convention meeting approved a \$190.3 million allocation budget that designates 50.4 percent to the International Mission Board and 22.8 percent to the North American Mission Board (the modern counterpart to the Domestic Mission Board of 1845). But a lot of history lies between Southern Baptist beginnings and today.

An era of challenges

Even a casual reading of history reveals major obstacles that affected the early growth of Southern Baptists’ missionary enterprise. A devastating civil war left the American South in ruins, and the years following that war were lean for the churches in that region. By the end of World War I, the entities of the Convention were more numerous, in debt and unable to make realistic plans for growth. Funding had become the major obstacle in the Convention’s primary mission.

Although the denomination’s entities were not independent of the Convention, they were funded as if they were unrelated

institutions. In what was called a “societal” method, the Convention’s entities – including our mission boards – competed with one another as they solicited designated offerings from the churches in the same way independent efforts might petition for financial support. The results were unpredictable, inconsistent and the furthest thing from strategic.

The 75 million campaign

The financial situation had become desperate by 1919. That year, the convention in Atlanta approved a plan to expand the state and national work of the denomination and to settle its debts. A goal of \$75 million was set and George Truett was appointed to lead the campaign.

When the effort got underway in 1920 – the 75th anniversary of the SBC – pledges had far outstripped the goal and receipts were far below it. Churches pledged \$92.6 million but were only able to give \$58.5 million. It was a good news-bad news report. The receipts were greater than any influx of funds the Convention had experienced in its 75 years, but some of the Convention’s entities had spent, built and borrowed in expectation of the pledges being more fully subscribed. Some institutions were therefore more indebted than at the beginning of the campaign.

Though the 75 million campaign provided a significant amount for Southern Baptist ministries, it highlighted the weakness of such campaigns in sustaining a thorough – denominational – missions strategy. But it also provided the first gleam of an idea whereby all the things Southern Baptists had determined to do could be funded according to a workable plan.

The Southern Baptist CP

By the time the SBC met in Memphis in 1925, it was obvious that the churches need to speak with a more unified voice both doctrinally and organizationally. The doctrinal voice was

expressed by the adoption of a confession of faith, *The Baptist Faith and Message* (1925). Organizationally, messengers adopted a truly denominational funding plan for their missionary work, the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program.

The plan was to strategically limit the number of designated offerings upon which the Convention's work depended in favor of a common fund, given by the churches and evenly divided by the state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention. Both the state and national bodies would then allocate the money according to their own adopted budgets.

It was a challenging time around the world. The 1920s were especially difficult for rural people – the mainstay of Southern Baptist church membership – and this was followed by a depression beginning in 1929. In one year, household income was halved, and the Cooperative Program was diminished in the same measure. Two years later, in 1931, the Foreign Mission Board appointed three missionaries. The next year it appointed only one and held 30 in the U.S. until adequate funding was available. This hard time coincided with embezzlement scandals at both mission boards.

The Home Mission Board was \$2.5 million in debt by 1933. A grassroots effort called the 100,000 Club raised \$2.6 million in 10 years, helping the Convention, in 1944, to declare itself debt free. Freedom from the debt that had plagued the Convention for decades allowed the cooperative work of the churches to take off, and the Cooperative Program to show its strength.

Bold expansion at last

The next 20 years saw the Cooperative Program bear fruit as the Convention added seminaries and various commissions to undergird the work of the churches in reaching the world. The mission boards were sending thousands of workers across the country and around the world. Between 1941 and 1961,

Cooperative Program giving to the SBC grew from \$7.8 million to \$84.4 million.

During this time, the Southern Baptist Convention became more than “Southern,” as state and regional conventions covered the U.S. This enabled church-planting efforts within the least-reached places in North America. The partnership between state conventions and the SBC was always between autonomous bodies, but it has been very much a partnership between conventions that shared the same goal.

The 21st century has seen increased giving from state conventions for worldwide missions. Additionally, the Southern Baptist Convention has increased the percentage of its budget allocated to the International Mission Board. This real and crucial partnership has built a network of state, national and international Southern Baptist entities interconnected for Great Commission ministry.

Southern Baptists were, from the beginning, a missionary people. By God’s grace, the Convention survived the most challenging days of its history to surpass even the imagination of our founders in 1845 and 1925. The Cooperative Program has been an essential tool for making this possible.

Learn more

The Mississippi Baptist Convention Board has developed a Cooperative Program Training Kit that is designed as a four-session series for your church to learn how the Cooperative Program works within Mississippi Baptist life. By utilizing the Cooperative Program Training Kit, your church can play a pivotal role in educating the next generation about the Cooperative Program’s significance. By giving generously, your congregation can be assured that their contributions are instrumental in advancing God’s work. For more information about the Cooperative Program Training Kit, [click here](#).