

CBF Ponders What it Means to be a 'Partner'

What it means to be a “partner” ministry with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship—and how much financial dependence that title implies—have become front-burner issues for the moderate group.

The CBF currently devotes 28 percent of its budget to fund partners—which include 13 theology schools, the Baptist Joint Committee, Associated Baptist Press, Baptist Center for Ethics, *Baptists Today* and the Baptist World Alliance.

Amid financial challenges facing many non-profits in the current economy, however, a CBF task force on budget priorities has recommended reducing partner funding to no more than 20 percent in future budgets.

For partners, that would translate into a 30 percent reduction in CBF funding, and that on the heels of a mid-year budget cut in 2002-2003.

Founded in 1991 as an offshoot of controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention, the CBF has traditionally shied away from building institutions, instead providing partial support for autonomous partner ministries for tasks like theological education and publishing and emphasizes like religious liberty and ethics.

The main component of the CBF’s internal operations is its global missions program, which supports 130 missionaries and receives about 56 percent of undesignated budget funds and an even larger budget share when designated funds are added. Over the years, however, the CBF has also developed and staffed a variety of other support ministries at its offices in Atlanta.

The recent report of the budget priorities task force could guide future decisions about how money is allocated between the Atlanta staff and the various partners.

In addition to proposing the cap on partner funding, the task force document—which was not voted upon by the General Assembly or the Coordinating Council—identifies six areas for highest-priority funding. They are most-neglected and unevangelized people, church starting, developing partnership missions with local churches, supporting theological education, nurturing congregational health and fostering congregational leadership. Except for theological education, all the top priority areas relate to the CBF's own Atlanta-based programs.

The task force also identified four areas least important and, presumably, the most likely to be targeted for budget cuts. They are collegiate ministries, marriage and family, chaplaincy and Baptist identity.

In its new budget for 2003-04, Baptist identity includes funding for ethnic and regional networks, interim pastor support and allocations to the Baptist Joint Committee, ABP, BCE, *Baptists Today* and the BWA.

In an address to the CBF General Assembly in Charlotte, N.C., June 27, Coordinator Daniel Vestal hinted at a coming struggle over partner funding: "Who exactly is a partner, and how should they be funded? What are the reasonable expectations from partners, and what are the different kinds of partners? This next year, our Coordinating Council will be working hard to clarify and strengthen our institutional partnerships."

Those words, combined with the sagging gifts to the CBF budget and the report of the task force, generated concern among leaders of the CBF partner ministries.

"*Baptists Today* is grateful for a voluntary, mutually beneficial partnership with CBF," said John Pierce, editor of the monthly newspaper based in Macon, Ga. "However, I am concerned about the continual decline in financial support."

Pierce said "there seems to be a disconnect between CBF's stated priorities and an appreciation for the role we play in fulfilling those priorities." Pierce noted that in a report to the Coordinating Council, Vestal identified the CBF's primary

focus as serving churches, developing leaders and supporting missions, while ranking partnerships as a lower priority.

But *Baptists Today*, Pierce said, helps the CBF to achieve its top priorities. “Key church leaders routinely tell us that the information provided through *Baptists Today* enables them to make wise choices about supporting mission causes that are consistent with their values,” he said.

Rebecca Wiggs, immediate past chairwoman of the board of directors for Associated Baptist Press, echoed Pierce’s concern that CBF partner ministries might be undervalued.

“In a perfect world, we would get no money from CBF,” she said, citing the Jacksonville, Fla.-based news service’s desire to report objectively on all Baptist entities, including the CBF. However, she added, “I think CBF must see ABP as a vital part of its overall ministry by keeping Baptists informed.”

Robert Parham, executive director of Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., said the partner organizations “are the most visible and tangible evidence of the investment that churches and individuals make in CBF with their financial gifts.”

While grateful for those gifts, he said, BCE in turn “provides an excellent return on their investment by building constituency and providing resources to local churches. Imagine what we could do with more funding.”

Brent Walker, executive director of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee, also expressed appreciation for CBF financial support as one of the “primary avenues through which churches and individuals have supported the BJC’s ministry.”

Those comments contrasted, however, with frustration expressed at a CBF Coordinating Council meeting just prior to the General Assembly over the impact of partner funding on the CBF’s own budget woes.

“We are paying partners at our detriment,” said Philip Wise, chairman of the

budget committee and pastor of Second Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas.

Tim Brendle, a member of the budget priorities task force, said partners need to be more proactive in raising money for CBF. Partners ought to be “promoting together our budget, rather than this being a cash cow,” Brendle said.

But ABP board leader Wiggs said the CBF shouldn’t increase its own budget at the expense of partners.

Wiggs, an attorney from Jackson, Miss., said she hopes CBF leadership “understand that the whole CBF constituency does desire for a partner like us to be funded. ... I hope (CBF) continues to be an organization that exists to support its partners instead of the other way around.”

Ideally, CBF should be “more of a flow-through organization rather than one that starts needing more money to support its own infrastructure,” she said. “I don’t like the trend toward supporting more internal CBF organizations as opposed to where the people want [the money] to go.”

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