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May 16, 1991

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Bush Invited to speak at SBC

ATLANTA (ABP) — President George Bush has been invited to address the closing session of the Southern Baptist Convention June 6 in Atlanta.

The White House won't confirm the invitation and routinely doesn't commit to such engagements more than a week or two in advance. But a member of the SBC Committee on Order of Business said there is "a good possibility" the president will speak.

"It's all on the shoulders of the president," said Chris Tecmire, pastor of Ridgecrest Baptist Church in suburban Oklahoma City, Okla., and vice chairman of the committee that invited Bush.

"It would be an honor for the president of the United States to speak," Tecmire added. "It's something we would like to happen."

Tecmire said he did not know when Bush might respond to the invitation. "It's a day-by-day thing," he said.

Last year Bush was invited to speak to the 1990 convention at the suggestion of the White House. The invitation was issued, but Bush declined after some SBC leaders expressed disapproval about gay and lesbian participation in a White House ceremony.

Danny Watters, pastor of Beulah Baptist Church in Douglasville, Ga., and chairman of the Committee on Order of Business, could not be reached for comment.

Southern Baptist Convention president Morris Chapman, an ex officio member the committee, declined to comment on the Bush invitation but noted, "He is presiding over our country at a time when there is a great swell of patriotism, and Southern Baptists would receive his coming with excitement."

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—By Greg Warner and Toby Druin

ABP ANALYSIS

"Enlarging the tent": Did Chapman succeed?

By Trennis Henderson

(ABP) — "Enlarging the tent" of Southern Baptist leadership became a campaign slogan for Morris Chapman prior to his election last June as president of the Southern Baptist Convention. In practical terms, what does it mean and has it been accomplished?

An analysis of Chapman's recent appointments to SBC committees suggests the denominational "tent" has been enlarged for pastors previously uninvolved in the convention, but not for women and laypeople.

Prior to his election, Chapman made the commitment "to enlarge the tent of our beloved convention to encompass all cooperating Southern Baptists who are dedicated to perpetuating our allegiance to the Bible as the perfect Word from a perfect God."

In a news conference following his election, Chapman said he believes 90 percent of Southern Baptists adhere to inerrancy, his standard for judging allegiance to the Bible. If 90 percent of all Southern Baptists are theologically acceptable, then Chapman had tremendous latitude in "enlarging the tent" to include a broader scope of Southern Baptists in leadership roles. But did he succeed?

Chapman recently announced the appointment of 130 people to four SBC committees. Among that total, 115 are male, or 88.5 percent. And 95 are ministers, or 73 percent. Only 11.5 percent are women and only 27 percent of the appointees are laypeople.

How do these statistics compare with Chapman's presidential predecessors?

When Jerry Vines was president, he made 234 appointments during his two years as president — 41.9 percent laypeople and 17.5 percent women. Adrian Rogers' 258 appointments included 42.2 percent laypeople and 17.4 percent women.

Charles Stanley's appointments were made in 1985 and 1986, prior to the adoption of the Peace Committee recommendation that all future appointments and nominations be "drawn in balanced fashion" from SBC membership. Stanley's 214 appointments included 36.4 percent laypeople and 11.7 percent women.

Chapman's ratio of lay appointments is 9.4 percent below Stanley's pre-Peace Committee appointments and 0.2 percent below his appointments of women. Among presidential appointments since the Peace Committee report, Chapman's percentage of lay appointments is 15 percent below his predecessors; his percentage of female appointments lags behind by 6 percent.

Chapman's percentage of lay appointments suffered partially because of the way he approached his appointments to the powerful Committee on Committees, which represents the president's influence over the selection of new trustees for Southern Baptist agencies and institutions.

The 68-member committee includes two people from each qualified state or regional convention. Traditionally, each state's appointees have included one minister and one layperson, although SBC bylaws do not require such a balance.

During the past two years, Vines' Committee on Committees appointments achieved the 50-50 balance between ministers and laity. Rogers' appointments included four states each year in which two ministers and no laypersons were appointed. Stanley had one such state each year.

For 1991, Chapman's Committee on Committees appointments included 10 states with two ministers and no laypeople appointed.

In a single year, his exceptions to the traditional 50-50 balance equaled the previous six years' exceptions combined.

Chapman defended his appointments as balanced.

"I did reach deep into the heart of Southern Baptist life to make all the appointments I have made," Chapman said. "I have certainly chosen many who had never served on an SBC board or committee."

Responding to questions about his appointment percentages, Chapman said: "I approached the selection of these committees as diligently as I know how. I followed no specific formula other than abiding by those things I said I would adhere to.

"I had many more ministers recommended than laypeople," he explained. "I just followed through with the recommendations before me. There was no intention to be exclusive in any way."

Chapman said he has been true to his promise to enlarge the SBC tent because "many of my appointees have never before served on committees or boards of the Southern Baptist Convention." Many have not been involved in the SBC controversy, either, he added.

He said his appointees are "loyal to our convention" and, in the cases of Committee on Committees and Resolutions Committee, come from churches that contribute an average of 11.5 percent of their budgets to the Cooperative Program.

Regardless of individual appointment percentages, is there a fair and realistic way to reach "deep into the heart of Southern Baptist life" and obtain a statistical balance for appointments?

Among other commitments prior to last year's election, Chapman said, "My heart's desire is to be used of God to reach beyond perceived political parameters to bring us together again."

Some have proposed balancing appointments according to voting percentages in the annual presidential election. Chapman won the presidency last year with 58 percent of the vote, defeating Daniel Vestal of Atlanta.

Yet Vestal sees Chapman's appointments as almost exclusively one-sided in favor of fundamental-conservatives.

Vestal, pastor of Dunwoody Baptist Church, told Associated Baptist Press: "The appointments by Morris Chapman represent the continuation of the same philosophy of the past 12 years and demonstrate the continued commitment of those who lead the convention to a narrow and restrictive involvement. I am grieved by it, but not surprised."

Of course, analysis of most Southern Baptists' theological/political persuasion is subjective at best. But Chapman's appointments of laypeople and women fall far below Southern Baptist membership.

Southern Baptists' 15 million members include 99.4 percent laypeople. Chapman's lay appointments totaled 27 percent. Females comprise 58 percent of Southern Baptist membership; Chapman's female appointees totaled 11.5 percent.

Even laity and female involvement in the annual SBC meeting is far more balanced than Chapman's appointments. Based on the annual messenger survey conducted during last year's SBC, 54 percent of the respondents were laypeople and 45 percent were female.

Before his election, Chapman called for a "spirit of broadened togetherness and shared leadership." As he approaches next month's annual convention with no challenge expected to his presidential re-election, Chapman likely will have one more opportunity to broaden SBC leadership when he makes his second-year appointments in 1992.

It appears the enlarged SBC tent, at least for many, will have to wait until next year.

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Noriega denied baptism by prison officials

By Greg Warner

MIAMI (ABP) — Manuel Noriega won't be baptized until he is either convicted or acquitted of drug charges, if his prison guardians have their way.

The deposed Panamanian leader, who says he became a Christian a year ago in his Miami prison cell under the influence of two Texas evangelists, is now requesting baptism.

But Warden Stephen Pontesso of the Metropolitan Correctional Center has informed Noriega and the evangelists that the baptism won't be allowed while Noriega is in custody at the federal facility in Miami.

Noriega is awaiting trial June 24 on federal drug trafficking charges. Accused of being a key link in illegal drug traffic between South America and the United States, Noriega could be sentenced to 165 years in prison if convicted.

In a March 26 letter to evangelist Clift Brannon of Longview, Texas, Warden Pontesso said MCC chaplains have neither performed nor approved any baptisms at the detention facility, which he said is "a temporary place of residence" for those awaiting trial. It is "imperative," Pontesso wrote, that the prison "not single out Mr. Noriega for special treatment."

According to Pontesso, MCC's chaplains consider baptism "a very personal and long-term commitment (that) should be done either in the context of the outside community upon release or at an institution to which the inmate will be designated following sentencing."

"This practice in no way seeks to minimize this sacrament," Pontesso wrote, "but seeks to highlight its importance by placing it in the proper context of a faith community."

Baptism by immersion typically follows conversion in many Christian denominations.

Brannon and fellow evangelist Rudy Hernandez of San Antonio, Texas, visited Noriega in prison May 15, on the one-year anniversary of his profession of faith.

The evangelists had hoped to baptize Noriega during their visit and had arranged for him to become a member of a Baptist church in Miami.

The evangelists were accompanied in their visit by Miami Baptist layman Tony Ponceti, who, at the request of the evangelists, has led Noriega through eight months of intensive weekly Bible studies.

It was Ponceti's first visit with Noriega since April. After news of Noriega's reported conversion made national news in March, prison officials told Ponceti he could no longer visit Noriega unless he was trained and approved as a volunteer chaplain.

Ponceti said he took the training but refused to sign a standard agreement that was required for approval as a volunteer. The agreement would have required Ponceti to observe strict confidentiality about his visits with Noriega, required him to tell prison officials if Noriega confessed to any crimes, and prohibited Ponceti from developing a personal relationship with his prisoner-student or the prisoner's family.

Prison officials lifted that restriction this week and Ponceti plans to resume his weekly visits with Noriega.

Richard Noah, acting public information officer for MCC, said Ponceti likely was required to qualify as a volunteer chaplain because of heightened security around Noriega. In such cases, he said, prison officials often deny requests for "social visitors," he said. "We're going to deny it unless we can see there are certain needs that need to be met, including spiritual needs," he said.

Concerning Noriega's request for baptism, Noah said any reversal of the prison's refusal would have to come from the federal prison system's central office in Washington, D.C.

Brannon said they will appeal the baptism decision through the federal prison system. "We believe that is going to come about," he said.

Brannon said he found Noriega "in good health and on the upbeat" during their visit. Brannon, Hernandez and Ponceti were allowed to visit Noriega for three hours May 15 and again May 16, during which they reviewed Noriega's spiritual growth, Brannon said.

"When we left him we told him he should prepare his heart because he will receive persecution," Brannon said. "It's not going to be rosy."

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Supreme Court declines appeal in Texas abortion clinic case

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) — The U.S. Supreme Court has declined to review the convictions of three men charged with misdemeanor obstruction of a passageway at a Houston abortion clinic.

Without comment, the nation's high court let stand May 13 a Texas appeals court ruling that upheld the convictions and sentences of Charles Dale Reed, James Clifford Horan and Michael Scott Amerson. Reed was fined \$1,000 and sentenced to 90 days in jail and the other defendants received \$1,000 fines and 180-day jail terms.

According to court records, the three were found guilty of disobeying a police order to quit blocking the driveway at Houston Women's Clinic. Protesters had blocked access to the clinic by securing themselves to barrels.

Writing for a three-judge panel of the Texas 14th Court of Appeals, Justice Paul Pressler rejected arguments by defense attorneys that the Texas penal code under which the defendants were convicted is vague or overbroad.

Pressler also rejected other defense claims that were based on the alleged invalidity of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that recognized women's right of privacy in abortion decisions.

"Roe is still the law and has not, as yet, been overruled or modified to support the appellants' position," Pressler wrote. The appeals court also upheld the punishments assessed by the trial court, noting that all three were within the range prescribed by Texas law.

Pressler, a leader in the fundamental-conservative effort to take control of the Southern Baptist Convention during the past decade, noted that the defendants were "motivated by the highest principles."

"The question before us, however, is not their motivation or the correctness of their convictions," Pressler wrote. "This court must determine solely the question of whether these individuals, however well intentioned, have actually broken the law of the state of Texas."

In another May 13 action, the Supreme Court approved a motion by U.S. Solicitor General Kenneth Starr to participate in oral arguments in an Alexandria, Va., abortion-clinic case that justices earlier accepted for review.

In that case, the federal Justice Department has sided with Operation Rescue in challenging a federal court injunction barring demonstrations at Alexandria Women's Health Clinic.

A permanent injunction was issued by U.S. District Judge T. S. Ellis III of Alexandria, who held that the abortion clinic blockades violated the rights of interstate travel spelled out in an 1871 civil rights law. The 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld Ellis' decision, holding that "blocking access to medical services provided by abortion clinics violates the constitutional right to travel."

The solicitor general has joined Operation Rescue attorneys in asking the high court to reverse the lower rulings.

The Texas case is Amerson v. Texas and the Virginia case is Bray v. Alexandria Women's Health Clinic.

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