
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

CONTACT: Greg Warner (904) 396-0396 Fax: (904) 396-4441

Southern Baptist
Historical Library & Archives
Nashville, TN

July 29, 1991

Moderates form
ethics agency

By Greg Warner

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A new ethics agency is being formed by Southern Baptist moderate-conservatives to fill a void created by changes at the denomination's Christian Life Commission.

The Baptist Center for Ethics will provide Southern Baptists with "careful moral reflection and practical solutions to real problems," according to Robert Parham, who acknowledged he will resign as associate director of the Christian Life Commission Sept. 1 to take the reins of the new agency.

Although those involved in the Baptist Center for Ethics include four former CLC staff members, organizers are being careful not to portray the center in opposition to the CLC, the only official Southern Baptist agency charged with speaking specifically to ethical concerns.

"With the broad spectrum of issues that exists, there is an opportunity for a number of groups if need be," said Joel Snider, chairman of the board of directors for the new center and pastor of Crieewood Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn.

Snider, Parham and other organizers are scheduled to hold a press conference July 30 in Nashville to announce the center, which will be based in Nashville.

Organizers say the BCE will offer a more comprehensive approach to Christian ethics than espoused in recent years by the CLC, which came under control of Southern Baptist fundamental-conservatives in 1987.

Under current director Richard Land, the CLC has focused most of its attention on abortion, pornography and homosexuality. And, since opening an office in the nation's capital, the CLC has taken a more visible political role on those issues.

Land told Baptist Press he has been "very encouraged" by the response of Southern Baptists to the CLC's direction in recent years. But, he added, "If other Baptists feel the need to do something in the area of ethics with their time and money, that of course is their right and their business."

In an interview with Associated Baptist Press, Parham was careful not to criticize the CLC, but he noted, "Our focus is quite different."

The BCE will address "the broad spectrum" of ethical issues, with less attention on political action and lobbying, said Parham, the CLC's only remaining staff member with a doctorate in ethics and the last of the pre-Land professional staff to leave.

"We intend not to tell Baptists what to think and what to do," he continued. "We will take concrete positions, but my hope is we will help Baptists think about ethical issues, be involved in ethical issues and be ethical."

According to Parham, there will be three components to the Baptist Center for Ethics.

A 21-member board of directors will stake out the center's positions on issues and set policies. But the directors do not intend to be "the end-all voice" on every issue, said chairman Snider. "Our approach will not be to pontificate on issues but to help people work through issues," Snider said.

A group of unpaid associates -- including several Southern Baptist seminary professors -- will provide the professional expertise, writing resource materials and articles for publication, teaching seminars and serving as resource persons for the media and others seeking information.

Meanwhile, an advisory council that includes at least two former SBC agency executives will raise the money.

The center will be funded by donations from individuals, churches and groups, Parham said.

One group organizers hope to attract is the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the newly formed organization of Southern Baptist moderate-conservatives.

The Fellowship will be invited to fill three positions on the 21-member board of directors, which already includes John Hewett, moderator of the Fellowship and pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C.

Although no formal ties have been established with the Fellowship, Snider said, "We have a fairly common identity with those people."

But both Parham and Snider insist the BCE is not part of a movement to give structure to a breakaway Baptist denomination. Instead, they say, the center will operate within the larger framework of Southern Baptist life.

"This will be a free-standing center for the time being," Parham explained. "If the Fellowship doesn't make it, Southern Baptists are still going to need help with ethics and public policy."

One way the Baptist Center for Ethics will differ from the CLC will be "the methodology," Snider said. Rather than having staff members who are "experts on everything," he said, the BCE will draw from its roster of up to 21 associates around the country who are specialists in various areas of Christian ethics.

So far, 13 people have agreed to serve as associates, all of whom have doctoral degrees in ethics or related fields. The list includes three pastors and 10 college or seminary professors -- among them three ethics professors from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and two from Southern Seminary.

"We have the two large seminaries and their ethics faculties with us," Parham said. The inclusion of the three pastors, he added, "gives us the practical, pastoral dimension to make sure we stay close to the pew."

Parham described the BCE associates as "a new generation of ethicists" who, because of shifting priorities at the CLC and among SBC leaders, "no longer have an avenue" for expressing their perspectives.

Parham listed three challenges the BCE will try to address. The first, he said, concerns personal morality.

America emerged from the 1980s, Parham said, with "a crisis in personal ethics," illustrated by scandals in the pulpit, politics and Wall Street.

"Some people are predicting that ethics will be to the 1990s what the consumer movement was to the 1970s," he said. For Southern Baptists concerned about personal ethics, he added, "that vacuum has not been filled anywhere."

Secondly, he said, the BCE will concentrate on "consensus issues," such as racial reconciliation, substance abuse, integrity in the marketplace and the family.

The third task he listed is "to challenge Baptists to face complex and cutting-edge issues with intelligence and compassion." Those issues, he said, include health care, medical ethics and "endangerment of the earth."

Concerning abortion, which has been the hot topic among Southern Baptists in recent years, Parham said the BCE would not avoid the issue but would avoid preoccupation with it.

"Too many people are talking about, and too few people are listening to, the national discussion on abortion," he said. "Why become another clanging gong on that issue?"

"My own position is that to talk about abortion at the crisis stage is unhelpful to the people in crisis," he continued. "We need to talk about it before it becomes a crisis issue."

Snider said the BCE's approach to abortion would be "pro-active" and recognize the complexity of the issue. "Instead of being anti-abortion, we're going to be pro-life, with all the ramifications that brings to it," he said.

Neither Snider nor Parham would rule out lobbying as a possible activity for the BCE, but both said it would not be a priority at the start.

The board of directors has not yet set a date for its first meeting, Snider said, but its first seminar has tentatively been scheduled for February, probably in Nashville.

Snider said the seminar, which will fall during next year's national election campaigns, will address "national priorities" and the ethical dimension of public-policy issues.

In addition to Snider and Hewett, the center's directors include Nancy Ammerman, professor of sociology at Emory University in Atlanta; Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler of Cincinnati, Ohio, retired executive director of the SBC Woman's Missionary Union; Jim Denison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Midland, Texas; Carolyn Dipboye, Oak Ridge, Tenn.; Gene Garrison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, Okla.; Vickie Hollon of Kansas City, Mo.; David Hull, pastor of First Baptist Church, Laurens, S.C.; Gene Lovelace, minister of education at Immanuel Baptist Church, Nashville; Raymond Lloyd, pastor of First Baptist Church, Starkville, Miss.; Emmanuel McCall, pastor of Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in Atlanta; William Nelson, pastor of Riverchase Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala.; and Bill Sherman, pastor of Woodmont Baptist Church, Nashville. Seven vacancies remain to be filled, including the three reserved for the Fellowship.

The 13 associates named to date include three ethics professors from Southwestern Seminary -- Raymond Higgins, Ebbie Smith, and Bill Tillman; two from Southern Seminary -- Glen Stassen and Paul Simmons; five professors from other schools -- Carolyn Blevins, assistant professor of religion at Carson-Newman College; Penny Marler, Hartford Seminary; Andrew Marius, assistant professor of religion at Averett College; Dan McGee, professor of Christian ethics at Baylor University; and Ira Peak, assistant professor of ethics and policy studies at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas; and three pastors -- Jim Johnson, First Baptist Church, Sarasota, Fla.; Craig Sherouse, Lakeside Baptist Church, Lakeland, Fla.; and Ron Sisk, Tiburon Baptist Church, Tiburon, Calif.

Higgins, Tillman and Sisk each served on the CLC staff.

The advisory council will be chaired by Wilmer C. Fields, retired vice president for public relations at the SBC Executive Committee. Others on the council are Jack Causey, pastor of First

Baptist Church, Statesville, N.C.; Bruce Heilman, former president of Richmond (Va.) University; Randall Lolley, pastor of First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C., and former president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; June McEwen, Chattanooga, Tenn.; and Bill White, pastor of Second Baptist Church, Little Rock, Ark.

-30-

***** END *****