
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

Phone: (904) 396-0396 Fax: (904) 396-4441 CServe: 70420,73

March 26, 1992

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Gallup survey:

Despite lack of 'moral absolutes,' Americans still want to follow God

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PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- Most Americans say they want to follow God's teachings, but few believe in moral absolutes, a Gallup Poll reports.

The Gallup Organization also found more Americans are concerned about the influence of "religious fundamentalism" (50 percent) than the influence of "secular humanism" (36 percent).

To determine Americans' opinions on moral absolutes, the poll asked people whether they agree or disagree with this statement: "There are few moral absolutes; what is right or wrong usually varies from situation to situation."

Nearly 70 percent of Americans agreed with the statement. Only 27 percent disagreed.

Those opinions were held consistently across lines of gender, age and education. However, people under 30, those with less than a college education, and those who consider themselves politically liberal were most likely to agree with the statement.

Despite this lack of confidence in moral absolutes, 70 percent of the population considers it very important to do what God or Scripture tells them is right when choosing between right and wrong.

Those who say religion is very important in their lives are most likely (91 percent) to be concerned with the counsel of God or Scripture when making moral decisions. However, 63 percent of this group also rejects the concept of moral absolutes.

To determine attitudes about religious fundamentalism and secular humanism, the Gallup Organization asked Americans to rate their concern about several social and political issues.

There is some room for confusion on this question, the pollsters point out, because people could include non-Christian groups such as the Shiite Muslims of Iran with fundamentalism.

Still, half of all Americans express concern about religious fundamentalism, while about one-third show concern about secular humanism,

something often preached against by religious fundamentalists.

People who classify religious beliefs as very important are most likely to be concerned about secular humanism (44 percent), while those who consider religious beliefs not important are least concerned about humanism (22 percent).

Yet even those who consider religious beliefs very important are concerned about religious fundamentalism (60 percent) -- more so than those who consider religious beliefs not important (26 percent).

Likewise, political conservatives are more likely than political liberals to be concerned about religious fundamentalism or secular humanism.

This data was collected by the Gallup Organization on behalf of Americans United for Life through telephone interviews with a representative national sample of 2,104 adults.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

Partnership with FMB on hold till
Parks replaced, European leader says

By Greg Warner

SWANWICK, England (ABP) -- European Baptists will wait to see who replaces Keith Parks as president of the Foreign Mission Board before deciding if they can work together with the FMB on mission projects in Europe.

"As far as the partnership with the Foreign Mission Board, everything is on hold," Karl-Heinz Walter, general secretary of the European Baptist Federation, told Associated Baptist Press March 26.

"We will wait," Walter said in a telephone interview from England, where he is participating in meetings sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance. "There is no hurry. We will see who will be the next people in leadership (at the FMB)."

Parks told trustees he will retire when he turns 65 in October -- three years earlier than planned -- because of "philosophical differences" with trustees over how to do missions. He said in February there had been a "drastic shift" in the trustees' mission philosophy, with fundamental-conservative trustees now "expecting theological conformity from those who receive Southern Baptist money."

Some of those same philosophical differences have led Europeans Baptists to question their long-standing partnership with the Foreign Mission Board. The relationship between Baptists on the two continents was put in jeopardy late last year when FMB trustees cancelled their agreement to fund European Baptists' seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland.

The Europeans responded by adopting a statement of five principles they said are essential for any "real partnership" in missions and asking the FMB for response. The statement was drafted by leaders of 22 national Baptist unions in Europe who met in Dorfweil, Germany, in January.

Instead of responding to the Dorfweil statement, FMB trustees appointed a six-person committee in February to try to patch relations with European Baptists. The executive committee of the European Baptist Federation postponed the talks, however, when Parks' own future with the board came into question in February.

Since March 20, when Parks announced his plans to retire, Walter said he has talked with several members of the EBF executive committee who all are committed to waiting a while longer before pursuing partnership talks with the FMB.

Walter said EBF leaders also want to know who will replace Isam Ballenger and Keith Parker, the FMB's top two administrators for Europe, who also quit over FMB policy in Europe. "It is only meaningful if we wait until the time when it is clear who will be in those positions," Walter said.

In addition to changes in the FMB's staff, European Baptists will be watching the signals sent by FMB trustees, Walter suggested, since "partnership is not only with staff but with trustees."

Walter expressed concern for the effect Parks' retirement will have on FMB missionaries in Europe, who work closely with European Baptists.

"I feel there is a real uncertainty among the missionaries," he said, "because they feel their mission work was not only closely related to the (FMB's) missions strategy, but it was represented in the person of Keith Parks," he said. "They feel very uncertain about the future."

"I personally must say I deeply regret this development," Walter said of Parks' retirement. But he added, "I can understand...that he doesn't see a way to go on with his ministry."

Walter noted Parks's lifelong commitment to missions. "This is where his heart is beating," Walter said, adding he expects Parks to remain involved in missions after retirement.

Walter acknowledged he had heard the speculation that Parks may get involved in the European missions initiative of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. But the addition of Parks to the Fellowship effort, Walter said, would neither hurt nor especially enhance "our willingness to work with the Fellowship."

"We have clearly said we are not bound only to the Foreign Mission Board," he explained. "We have not been in the past. And we are open to cooperation with all who understand our situation and who support our five (mission) principles."

He said the Dorfweil statement had been well received by Baptist groups around the world, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which endorsed it in March, and groups within the Baptist World Alliance.

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Ed Young agrees to be
nominee for SBC president

By Toby Druin

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Ed Young, pastor of Second Church, Houston, announced last week that he will permit his nomination for president of the Southern Baptist Convention June 9 in Indianapolis, Ind.

In February Young indicated he had been asked by Dallas pastor Joel Gregory to allow his nomination. At the time, Young said he was "going to seek the mind of God" about it.

"It's not been an easy thing for me to do," he said March 25. "But...as best I know the leadership of the Lord, maybe this is the time."

Young is the third Southern Baptist pastor to indicate he will be nominated for the presidency. Others already in the race are Jess Moody, pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Church in Chatsworth, Calif., and Nelson Price, pastor of Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga.

Moody announced last September he had been asked to permit his nomination by a group of persons not aligned in the denominational controversy.

Both Price and Young have long been identified with the fundamental-conservative group in the SBC. Price is the current first vice president of the convention, and both men have served as president of the SBC Pastor's Conference, which is often a prelude to presidential election.

The fundamental-conservatives for several years have put up only a single nominee for the presidency, which they have captured each year since 1979 as part of a strategy to turn the SBC in a more conservative direction.

Although both Price and Young voiced their commitment to the "conservative resurgence" in the SBC, only Young's bid for president is expected to attract the endorsement of the SBC's top fundamental-conservative leaders.

Gregory, whose support of current president Morris Chapman was considered crucial to Chapman's election in 1990, said in February he had consulted with "some of the fellows" about nominating Young. Price, on the other hand, said his nomination is the result of "grass-roots requests" and not the product of a strategy session among fundamental-conservatives.

Young, when asked if the apparently competing nominations signal any rift in fundamental-conservative ranks, said his nomination is not linked to anyone else's actions. He said he has long been an admirer of Price, and added, "I love Jess (Moody). He's a good friend."

Asked if he feels the SBC is irreparably split, Young said, "I am for any group that will go and win people to Jesus Christ, but I have real problems with those who would fight against the Cooperative Program or the things we do cooperatively."

As in 1991, SBC moderate-conservatives are not expected to offer a nominee this year.

All three declared candidates have said they want to bring healing to the denomination.

Like current president Chapman, who will complete his allowable two terms in June, Young expressed his commitment to be more inclusive.

There is room in the SBC for "all those who call themselves Southern Baptists and who believe in the 'Baptist Faith and Message' statement as our confessional statement, and I believe 99 percent of Southern Baptists do. There are a whole bunch of people who fly under all kinds of labels who need to be included."

"I would say there is a preponderance of Southern Baptists who are evangelical, believe the Bible is truth, are evangelistic and have a heart for God. From this broad preponderance is where we should look for our committees and leadership. A lot of them have never been called forward. I would seek to reach out to all of them. I desire with all my heart to be very inclusive."

As president, he said, he would hope to lead Southern Baptists to set and achieve some new goals in evangelism and missions support -- "kingdom goals" -- that might help achieve healing in the denomination.

Baptisms, he noted, have increased in the SBC for four straight years -- with 396,668 in 1991. "That's a good trend," he said, "but by 1995 we should be capable of baptizing a half million, and by the turn of the century a million in one year. That would be a worthy goal that would rally all of our churches, boards and agencies."

"We also need to get more serious about our missions opportunities at home and abroad," he said, "not that we haven't been serious, but we have been too serious much of the time about political things. I experienced that in my time on the Peace Committee. I felt it deeply."

He said he thinks the Cooperative Program and the Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong missions offerings can be greatly expanded if properly marketed. He would encourage giving churches or groups of churches specific items to support in addition to their Cooperative Program gifts, he said.

Young said he feels the SBC is poised on the edge of tremendous growth. "On our campuses there is a tremendous interest in moving on," he said. "In the next five years, we will have thousands going into ministry. The doors are opening. It's time to quit fighting and go fishing."

Hewett says Fellowship open
to all who don't exclude

By Trennis Henderson

COLUMBIA, Mo. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is open to "every free and faithful Baptist who calls Jesus Lord," John Hewett, Fellowship moderator, told members of the group's Missouri chapter.

"Is anybody unwelcome in the Fellowship?" Hewett asked. "Only those folk who aren't willing for anybody else to be welcome in the Fellowship.

"Are inerrantists welcome? Yes. Are women welcome in the Fellowship? Absolutely. Are you welcome? You know you are," Hewett told the Missouri audience.

Hewett, pastor of First Baptist Church in Asheville, N.C., was the keynote speaker during the inaugural general assembly of the Baptist Fellowship of Missouri.

The moderate-conservative gathering, held March 21 at First Baptist Church in Columbia, attracted 342 registered participants. Host pastor Dan Day estimated total attendance at approximately 400.

In addition to Hewett's message, features of the six-hour meeting included a message by John Tyler, moderator of the statewide organization, testimonies from three Missouri Baptists, greetings from the executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, a business session, four workshops and an informal dialogue session.

"A great deal of what the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is about," Hewett said, "is to say to folk who have been excluded because of their color, or their gender, or their church membership, or the theology they have worked out in faith, in fear and trembling, or the style of their worship, or the translation of the Scripture they read, you are welcome here."

"We know God is up to something mighty good in this world and we believe that God has called us to participate," he said. "The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is about redreaming the dream."

The national Fellowship was formed last year by Southern Baptist moderate-conservatives dissatisfied with the current fundamental-conservative direction of the Southern Baptist Convention but tired of unsuccessful attempts to regain control of the denomination.

"The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is not about politics, it's not about power and it's certainly not about control," Hewett declared.

"We came to this room not with clinched fists but with open hands, not to use the Bible as a weapon or as a club but as fertile soil and as living seed," he said. "We're smiling because we believe what we're about is good and right and godly. It is God's purpose."

The state organization adopted a seven-page set of bylaws, which describes the group as "a fellowship of autonomous Missouri Baptist churches and individuals who are committed to historic Baptist distinctives and who cooperate with one another and with other Baptists to provide a progressive vision of missions, ministry, evangelism and Christian education."

Participants approved a nominating committee report re-electing Tyler as moderator. Greg Hunt, pastor of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, was named moderator-elect and Betty Heifner, a member of First Baptist Church of Bolivar, was chosen recorder.

During the meeting's closing message, Tyler compared the pilgrimage of Southern Baptist moderate-conservatives to the Israelites' Babylonian captivity.

Tyler, a member of Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis, said the prophet Jeremiah advised the captives to "build houses and live in them.... Get about the business to which you have been called."

Tyler's advise to displaced Southern Baptists was similar.

"We pray for our neighbors," he said, "even as we refuse to follow the path some of them have chosen.... We keep the dream alive. This is what the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is all about. This is what the Baptist Fellowship of Missouri is all about."

Heifner, one of three Missouri Baptists who shared testimonies during the meeting, described her grief over the "death of something I treasured," the Southern Baptist Convention.

"I began to see that the spirit of the Fellowship could become the kind of spirit that could warm our hearts again," she said.

"I hope that whatever is developed in this Fellowship that we can be positive and forward-looking," she said.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, expressed appreciation to Missouri moderate-conservatives who pledged \$16,000 to the BJCPA last fall after Missouri Baptist messengers deleted a proposed \$15,000 allocation to the BJCPA.

Affirming the historic Baptist principles of the priesthood of believers, local church autonomy and non-creedalism, Dunn added: "The Baptist Fellowship stands for free Baptists being what a Baptist is. Thank God for you who stand tall."

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Toleration of religion
not enough, says Dunn

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Freedom, not mere toleration, must be the standard treatment of religion in America, according to a religious-liberty specialist.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, told Missouri Baptist students that toleration too often is the measure of the majority religion's relationship with dissenters.

"Toleration is a human concession. Liberty is a gift of God," said Dunn, who spoke March 23-24 at the Messer Lectures, sponsored by the Baptist Student Center at Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau.

The recent bicentennial of the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, was met with "a yawn," Dunn said, "because the magnitude of the accomplishment is not fully appreciated. The culture and personalities from which it came are utterly lost."

Dunn reminded students of Roger Williams' contributions to religious liberty. Williams warned against thinking of America as a "Christian nation." "No civil state or country can truly be called Christian, although Christians be in it," Dunn quoted Williams.

Religious liberty is under assault, not necessarily by those who want to impede it, but by those who want to give religion a hand, Dunn said. Those who offer a "revised standard version of the First Amendment" would rule out favoritism among religious groups and prohibit an official state church, while endorsing God generally and allowing impartial government aid for churches, he said.

However, the U.S. Supreme Court traditionally has held much broader restraints on government, requiring neutrality toward religion, Dunn said.

"Religious liberty is not a gift of the state," Dunn said. "Government has the touch of mud in matters religious. Strict neutrality, not benignity, is the proper role for government in regard to religion."

"Government is neutral, not supportive, of religion so citizens are not forced to support religious practices and opinions they oppose, so government is not evaluating or supervising religious institutions, so the state is not engendering divisiveness and religious warfare."

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-- By Pam Parry

High court hears arguments
in airport solicitation case

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to decide later this year to what extent free-speech rights can be restricted in airport terminals.

In a March 25 session, the high court heard a lawyer for New York's three regional airports and an attorney for the International Society for Krishna Consciousness take opposite sides on the question of whether in-person solicitation of funds and distribution of literature can be banned from airport terminals.

Arthur Berg, attorney for the New York agency that operates the airports, argued that airports are not public forums but facilities whose sole purpose is to facilitate air travel.

Barry Fisher, attorney for the Hare Krishnas, told justices that airports are public forums where solicitation and distribution of literature should not be banned.

The case reached the high court after the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reversed a lower court by holding that the airports may ban solicitation. The appeals court, however, held that literature distribution, viewed as a less-disruptive activity, must be permitted.

The 2nd Circuit's holding that airports are not public forums is at odds with rulings by five other appeals courts.

During oral arguments, Supreme Court justices gave few hints about how they may rule in the case.

At one point Justice David Souter asked whether the determination that an airport is a public forum would be different for an airport whose physical characteristics and functions are compatible with a town square than it would be for a no-frills airport with narrow corridors designed only to move passengers.

The New York airports feature a variety of restaurants, shops and stores.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor asked whether free-speech restrictions at airports not considered public forums still would be required to be reasonable. Berg responded that such restrictions could not discriminate on the basis of viewpoint.

Asked by O'Connor whether it is reasonable to restrict literature distribution, Berg said he agreed that the activity is less disruptive than solicitation of funds but that it nonetheless is disruptive.

When Justice Antonin Scalia questioned whether every restriction has to be reasonable, Justice O'Connor interjected that the Supreme Court has required that in decisions to this point.

At another point, Scalia asked why it isn't enough that the airports permit distribution and solicitation on the sidewalks outside the terminals.

If the high court holds that airports are public forums, like sidewalks and public parks, free-speech activities could be limited only by time, place and manner restrictions, according to Oliver Thomas, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee. If the court determines airports are not public forums, airport operators will have more power to restrict speech activities, he said.

"The modern air terminal is like the ancient city gate where commerce, speech and culture intermingle freely," Thomas said. "If there is a place where religious speech should be protected, it is in these places."

Airports have legitimate concerns about the free flow of passengers, he said, but those concerns can be met by reasonable restrictions on the time,

place and manner of solicitations, such as designating a booth inside terminals where literature distribution and solicitation is permitted.

The BJC earlier joined nine other religious and educational groups in asking the high court to reverse the ban on airport solicitation.

"This is not just a free-speech case," said Brent Walker, associate general counsel at the BJC. "It's about religious speech. Unfortunately, the free-exercise clause was completely ignored in oral argument.

"Since the restrictions were designed to limit expression motivated by ISKCON's religious beliefs, the court should apply the compelling interest test -- even if it doesn't think the airport is a traditional public forum."

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Women in ministry
set annual meeting

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Women in Ministry will hold their annual meeting Thursday, April 30, in Fort Worth, Texas.

The business session to elect new board members will begin at 11 a.m. at Broadway Baptist Church, followed by a luncheon.

The meeting will adjourn in time for group members to participate in the training sessions that precede the general assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which opens April 30 at the Tarrant County Convention Center in Fort Worth.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Registration forms for the meeting can be obtained by writing Southern Baptist Women in Ministry, 2800 Frankfort Avenue, Louisville, Ky 40206 or calling the SBWIM office at (502) 896-4425. Cost for the luncheon, if registered by April 10, is \$8. After April 10, cost for the luncheon is \$10.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Another story on the retreat between Keith Parks and FMB trustees will be sent separately ASAP.

***** END *****