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North Carolina convention ousts two churches for gay endorsement

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
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Nashville, Tennessee

By Dan O'Mara

ASHEBORO, N.C. (ABP) -- The General Board of the North Carolina Baptist Convention approved a resolution May 19 that will expel two member churches that have taken controversial stands on homosexuality.

The action apparently marks the first time a state Baptist convention has expelled churches over the homosexuality issue, national leaders say. It also is believed to be the first time any church has been expelled from the 162-year-old North Carolina Baptist Convention for any reason.

Banned from the convention are Pullen Memorial Baptist Church of Raleigh and Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill. Pullen's members voted in March to bless the union of two gay men. Binkley's members voted in April to license a gay divinity student to preach.

Pullen already has been ousted from its local Baptist association over the issue.

The action by the General Board changes the convention's financial policy to prohibit the acceptance of funds "from any church which knowingly takes or has taken any official action which manifests public approval, promotion or blessing of homosexuality."

Churches that don't contribute to the convention cannot participate as voting members.

The vote by members of the General Board was 59 in favor of the resolution and 28 against, with one abstention.

Glen Holt, a pastor from Fayetteville and convention president, said the vote reflects the view of most Baptists in North Carolina.

"There were no winners tonight," Holt said after the meeting, held in Asheboro. "We all feel compassion and a sense of pain, but this was necessary."

Opponents said they fear the vote would set a dangerous precedent.

"I'm afraid this will be a snowball," said Mike Jamison, pastor of Greensboro's College Park Baptist Church. "We may have instituted a witch hunt. We have no guarantee that this easy, quick procedure won't be used again."

Jamison and others who voted against the resolution said they do not endorse the action of the two churches but believe the churches should be

able to make their own decisions.

The General Board acts on behalf of the convention between its annual meetings, which are in November. The board's actions stand as convention dictum unless the convention votes to revoke them.

Some state Baptist leaders don't like the idea of identifying one sin -- homosexuality -- for special punishment.

"What about other sins in our churches?" said Clay Warf, pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Durham. "I don't see us getting excited about racism, and there are close-door policies at some churches.

"Sin is sin, and yet here we are, making a distinction. My church is not perfect. We sin from time to time, but I don't want you to disassociate from us."

"We did not address other sins with this resolution," Greensboro pastor Jamison said. "We singled out one sin -- homosexuality -- and it's an emotional issue and that's how many people voted, with their emotions."

But Ed Vick of Raleigh, second vice president of the convention, said those arguments miss the point of the issue.

"The key to this resolution is the blessing of sin," Vick said. "These churches have chosen to endorse homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle, and it's not. This is a major sin issue. We don't have churches out there handing out gold stars for blasphemy or awarding liar-of-the-month awards."

The General Board rejected two less-severe proposals before approving the action.

Lamar King, pastor of First Baptist Church of High Point, proposed delaying the vote until September, giving a committee of the board a chance to meet with leaders of the two churches.

Warf suggested the board censure the two churches, stating its opposition to their stands but allowing them to remain as members.

But Mark Corts, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, said censure would have shown less respect for the churches than expelling them. "The board said if you want to do this, fine, you just do it alone. Censure would have been like a father slapping an adult child in public."

Steven Churchill, the homosexual member of Pullen Church whose request for the church to bless his monogamous relationship with Kevin Turner sparked the controversy, expressed disappointment with the board's decision.

"We hoped the convention would see this as a challenge to deal with the issue -- that there are gays and lesbians in the church, whether they acknowledge them or not," Churchill said.

Churchill, 23, said he and Turner, 28, are just trying to lead normal lives. "I think it's silly that someone is persecuting me for something that is just as natural as my hair color or the color of my eyes," he said.

Mahan Siler, pastor of Pullen Church, called the decision shortsighted.

"Someday the current use of the Bible to condemn homosexuality will look like the way we've used the Bible in the past to support slavery or to prohibit women to be ministers," he said.

"I think this may be as divisive and controversial an issue as slavery was," Siler said.

Opponents of expelling churches say such proposals trample on local church autonomy. But supporters say the state and national conventions must protect their own autonomy by setting standards for their members.

Pullen and Binkley churches may soon find themselves banned by the national Southern Baptist Convention as well. The SBC Executive Committee is considering a proposal to exclude churches that "affirm the homosexual lifestyle." The proposal could be approved by the Southern Baptist Convention when it meets June 9-11 in Indianapolis, Ind.

"It is as clear in God's word as anything is -- homosexuality is a physical rebellion against God's established order," said T.C. Pinckney of Alexandria, Va., the Executive Committee member who submitted the proposal.

"God has made it very clear in the Bible that he regards homosexuality as an abomination," Pinckney said.

If the convention does not move to expel churches that endorse, promote or condone homosexuality, Pinckney said, it will allow those churches to set the "parameters of acceptable behavior for Christians throughout the Southern Baptist Convention."

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-- Dan O'Mara is staff writer for the Greensboro News and Record. This story is reprinted with permission.

Will Furman become secular?
School says 'no'; others wonder

By Christopher Schwarz

GREENVILLE, S.C. (ABP) -- Now that Furman University is no longer affiliated with the South Carolina Baptist Convention, some Baptists say the school is heading down the road to becoming a secular university.

"If Furman doesn't become secular, it will probably be the first in history not to," said Tim Head, a South Carolina pastor.

But Furman President John Johns said his school can keep close ties with its Baptist heritage, even though as of May 15 the school no longer is attached to the state Baptist convention legally or financially.

"I would hope that we never become secular," Johns said. "The board of trustees...adopted a statement of purpose last Wednesday stating that we would remain Christian and that we would remain true to our Baptist heritage."

It will be business as usual, Johns said.

"I can assure that I'm not going to change any rules or regulations or any of the guidelines for the hiring of faculty," he said. "The only difference is that Furman will control its own board."

Johns said independence from the convention was necessary to ensure the university does not fall victim to a takeover by fundamentalist Baptists. Similar fears were cited last year when Baylor University in Waco, Texas, sought and won the freedom to elect its own trustees.

But Head, who was chairman of a now-defunct committee charged with taking Furman to court, said the research of his committee shows that schools that split from their religious heritage eventually become secular.

Head cited articles named "The Decline and Fall of the Christian College, I and II" by James Turnstead Burtchell, a professor of theology at Notre Dame.

Those articles review the history of Vanderbilt, Brown and Emory universities and conclude that schools that reject their Christian roots become non-religious colleges, Head said.

"Professor Burtchell concludes that no denominational institution which severs its ties with its sponsoring denomination has ever, after a sufficient period of time, remained Christian, not to mention denominational," Head said.

South Carolina Baptists voted overwhelmingly May 15 to cut financial and legal ties with the school they founded in 1826, ending an 18-month struggle for control of the school. Baptists made the split to avoid a legal battle with the school and to focus more attention on the state convention's 10-year plan for church growth.

Hal Lane, pastor at West Side Baptist Church in Greenwood, said the school has already become more secular.

"I certainly think that Furman is not only headed toward being secular, I think they're already there," said Lane, who favored taking Furman to court. "And now I think we're going to see the secularization accelerate."

But Johns said the school won't forget its marriage to the South Carolina Baptist Convention. "It's kind of like a divorce, I guess," Johns said. "You will always remember your first wife."

Now that the school is safe from a fundamentalist takeover, Johns said, he feels free to retire soon, probably in about two years.

Johns, 70, has been president since 1976 and had said that he wouldn't retire until he thought the school was safe from a fundamentalist takeover. "It's safe now," he said.

Some Baptist officials maintain there was no takeover in the works.

And Johns said he wants to work at least another two academic years at the school. "I'd like to work on some other problems," he said, laughing. "I'd like to see what it's like to get back to what I used to do as president."

Johns graduated from Furman in 1947, and received his masters and doctorate degrees from the University of North Carolina. He taught in the department of history and political science at Stetson University in DeLand, Fla., and worked his way up the ranks and became Stetson president in 1970.

During his years with Furman, the school's budget has quadrupled and the endowment has increased by five times.

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-- Christopher Schwarz is a staff writer for the Greenville (N.C.) News. This story is reprinted with permission.

Hewett, Hasteley assess
future for moderates

By Larry Chesser

VIENNA, Va. (ABP) -- What do the 1990s hold for moderate Baptists who find themselves out of step in the fundamentalist-led Southern Baptist Convention?

To a large degree, answers to that question appear closely linked to the future of two moderate Baptist organizations formed after fundamentalists gained control of the SBC -- the older, smaller Alliance of Baptists centered in the mid-Atlantic region and the younger, larger, more geographically diverse Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Will the Alliance and Fellowship merge, and if not, what will be their relationship? Will the year-old Fellowship become a new convention for Baptists ready to leave the SBC?

While it may take the rest of this decade or longer to learn full answers to those questions, Alliance and Fellowship leaders say the answers will come from local church decisions.

John Hewett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C., and outgoing moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and Stan Hasteley, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists, recently told the Virginia chapter of the Alliance that the future is determined at the local church level in Baptist life.

"We could call a so-called constitutional convention and say, 'Come and we're going to form a new convention,' and the power of that would be absolutely nothing unless local congregations voted to do it," Hewett said. "When local congregations demand it, it will happen, and I'm convinced that it ought not to happen until then if we're going to be authentically

Baptist."

Hewett told the Virginia Baptists the answer to the question of what the Fellowship will become is "whatever people like you make it become. We haven't thought in terms like that for so long in Baptist life. We've been part of institutions that nobody could change, not even God."

Hastey said that until recently he has given a qualified answer to the frequent question of whether the two organizations will merge. "That answer now is, 'No. In my view there will be no merger,'" he said.

"Yet we all recognize that my saying that doesn't make it so.... Only if those of us who have been elected to leadership roles succeed in persuading our individual members, and more importantly, our affiliated and supporting congregations, that there is yet room on this playing field for the Alliance will the Alliance continue."

Hastey reported that new Fellowship coordinator Cecil Sherman had told him unequivocally that "there is room on the playing field for both the Alliance and the Fellowship."

"Does this image suggest we will be on opposite sides of the ball on that field? If it does, the image fails," Hastey said. "And if we insist on being opponents -- you can write this down -- there will be no winners."

Discussions between Alliance and CBF representatives about the relationship between the groups are ongoing, with the next round of meetings scheduled Sept. 9 in Atlanta.

"Whatever arrangement we work out structurally, it is going to be a friendly relationship that we enjoy with the Fellowship," Hastey told Virginia Alliance members.

He predicted that the five-year-old Alliance "is not going to get very much bigger than we are right now," but said he had concluded in recent weeks "that the Alliance does and will have a continuing role to play as a self-standing organization and movement."

Hastey said his belief is based on three factors: input from Alliance members; the group's recent Charlotte, N.C., convocation which he said showcased the Alliance's relationship with other Baptist and Christian bodies; and indications that some members of the CBF's governing body, the coordinating council, prefer that organization to become a "convention in exile" and hope to regain control of the SBC rather than forming a new convention.

The Alliance's developing relationships with other religious bodies, particularly the American Baptist Churches U.S.A. and the Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc., "more than anything else, have come to represent the best we Alliance people have to offer."

Both Hastey and Hewett expressed agreement with predictions by sociologist Nancy Ammerman and Bill Leonard that any division within the SBC would resemble fragmentation more than schism.

"The fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention is underway, but it will be neither as large, nor as broad nor as deep as many of us might have thought at various points along the way," Hastey said.

"I think we are going to be small," Hewett said, calling attention to the crowd sizes at the May 16-17 Virginia Alliance gathering and also at the recent CBF meeting in Fort Worth, which attracted 4,500 registrants compared with 6,000 a year earlier in Atlanta.

"The fact is that most of the people who are wedded to the Southern Baptist Convention are going to stay right there," Hewett said, "and if you think differently, I congratulate you on your optimism. I think we're going to be small. I think the pace of this movement of Baptists in the '90s is going to be slow."

But Hewett predicted that the fragmentation "is going to be the inevitable precursor to a new kind of coming together at the end of this century as Baptists understand that independent is not a word that we ought

to necessarily celebrate. We're going to learn that there is a kind of interdependence of free and faithful Baptists that not only is necessary to our survival but is necessary to our gospel."

In a sermon based on the story of Pentecost in Act 2, Hewett both criticized and credited the role of SBC fundamentalists.

"In my journey I've come to lean more toward Pentecostalism than fundamentalism," he said. "Pentecostals do not worship the closed canon of a book; they believe with all their hearts in the presence of the Spirit making all things new."

If pushed between being a Pentecostal and fundamentalist, Hewett said he would go with the Spirit.

"It's true that some Pentecostals handle snakes, but they only do it for a while and then they put them back in the box. Fundamentalists elect them to (denominational) office and they appoint them to run seminaries and mission boards and publishing houses."

Hewett said part of what has happened in the SBC "has been the judgment of God" on what Southern Baptists had become.

"That wind (of God's judgment) has blown away the murky smog of denominational traditionalism which kept Baptists for generation upon generation from a clear vision of who we are," he said. "We went forth with grandiose claims to win the world to us. We were concerned that most of the people on the face of the earth did not know who Baptists were.

"And in that concern we lost sight of the more disturbing truth, they did not know who Jesus was."

He said the SBC fundamentalists helped "us admit that we were caught up in something that was bland and tasteless and occasionally wicked.... That mighty wind blew down our self-righteousness which afflicted and still afflicts a people who think of themselves as 'God's Last and Only Hope.'"

He predicted that some Southern Baptists soon "will wake up and discover themselves mired in the mud of a rigid totalitarian structure deemed totally irrelevant by much of the church and most of the world. And the rest will never notice because the rest just don't notice. They live their lives building more stately mansions while they discover new ways to alliterate."

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Bush remains opposed
to fetal-tissue research

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Despite appeals from leading pro-life congressmen, President George Bush remains steadfast in his opposition to federally funded research using fetal tissue from induced abortions, the administration said this week.

A four-year-old ban on that research has been supported by the Reagan and Bush administrations because officials say the research would encourage abortions. However, opponents of the ban say the moratorium has stopped promising research on the treatment of Parkinson's disease, juvenile diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and other genetic disorders.

Bush said he favors such research only if the tissue comes from spontaneous abortions or tubal pregnancies. He signed an executive order May 19 directing the Department of Health and Human Services to establish a fetal-tissue bank that obtains tissue exclusively from those two sources.

The administration said the bank will provide an ample supply of tissue for research. Louis Sullivan, HHS secretary, supported the bank, saying it will guarantee enough tissue to allow aggressive exploration of every research area.

Some medical authorities and congressional leaders disagreed, including staunch pro-life Republicans.

In a "Dear Colleague" letter, six congressional leaders said that "tissue from miscarriages and tubal pregnancies is rarely suitable for use in research."

"Over the past few weeks, there has been some confusion about the facts on the research use of fetal tissue from induced abortions," the letter continued. "Some have said that it's not needed.... Some have said tissue banks of spontaneous abortions and ectopic (tubal) pregnancies are enough to do research.

"We are writing to you to give you the facts -- according to published research from prominent medical journals, including the Journal of the American Medical Association, and the government's own Centers for Disease Control and National Center for Health Statistics."

The letter urged congressional leaders to support the conference report on H.R. 2507 that would lift the ban.

The letter signers were Sens. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C.; Alan Simpson, R-Wyo.; and Mark Hatfield, R-Ore.; and Reps. Jim McDermott, D-Wash.; Roy Rowland, D-Ga.; and Fred Upton, R-Mich.

At a May 19 press conference, Upton said that he "concluded that being for fetal-tissue transplantation was consistent with being for life."

"Most of us in Congress are not medical doctors; therefore, we rely on medical professionals to guide us," said Upton, whose grandfather died of Alzheimer's disease. "The overwhelming opinion of these professionals is that this research holds hope for millions of Americans.... Let's not hold this important research hostage to scare tactics and politics."

Both chambers have approved similar measures that would lift the ban, and a conference committee has ironed out the differences in the measures.

The U.S. House of Representatives was scheduled to consider the conference report on May 21. The Senate may consider the report in early June.

Observers say Bush may face his first veto override after having 28 vetoes sustained. A two-thirds majority in each chamber is required to override a veto.

The Senate appears to have a two-thirds majority, approving H.R. 2507 by a 87-10 vote. While the House approved the bill by a large number, it fell 12 votes shy of a needed two-thirds majority.

Some observers say the strong showing in the Senate, coupled with pro-life support, may garner more votes in the House.

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Jimmy Carter to head
BWA commission on racism

By Wendy Ryan

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Former President Jimmy Carter has agreed to serve as honorary chairman of a Special Commission of Baptists Against Racism formed by the Baptist World Alliance.

Baptist World Alliance is the worldwide body of Baptists representing 37 million believers in 156 conventions and unions in more than 200 countries of the world.

According to BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz, who named the commission on racism, the group was appointed to study the causes of racism, state clearly the biblical answer to racism, and determine what Baptists can do to confront and help defeat racism.

The commission is expected to make a report and recommendations for

worldwide Baptists when the BWA General Council meets in Harare, Zimbabwe, in August 1993.

The impetus for the commission was the recent Los Angeles riots, Lotz said, but "also continuing conflicts in the former republics of Yugoslavia and the former USSR, South Africa and the Middle East."

"It is time that Baptists around the world make a strong statement against racism by word and deed," said Lotz.

In a May 14 letter of acceptance to the BWA, Carter, a lifelong Southern Baptist, said he is "pleased to have his name listed" and sent his "warm, best wishes to fellow Baptists who are working to eliminate social discrimination."

Carter will head an international committee of Baptists leaders from the United States and other countries, many of which are currently embroiled in racial and ethnic conflicts.

Explaining the choice of Carter, Lotz said, "There is no Baptist anywhere in the world who has more visibility and courage and is known to be against racism than Jimmy Carter."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Because of the Memorial Day holiday, no ABP issue is planned for Tuesday, May 26.

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