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SBC not dead despite
warnings, Hobbs says

By Mark Wingfield

COLUMBIA, Ky. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention is not dead, despite the warnings issued by some Southern Baptists opposed to the denomination's current direction, said Herschel Hobbs.

Hobbs, widely regarded as the SBC's elder statesman, advised disgruntled moderate-conservatives, who have lost control of the SBC to fundamental-conservatives in the last 13 years, not to leave the denomination.

The retired Oklahoma pastor said he was reminded of a letter he received years ago from W. A. Criswell, longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and a well-known fundamental-conservative leader. Writing long before the current controversy erupted, Criswell told Hobbs he was concerned that the SBC was dying, that "this old ship is going down."

Hobbs said he replied then that the SBC's ship wasn't sinking but just going through some troubled waters.

And the advice he gave Criswell then still applies to modern-day moderate-conservatives who think the SBC is dying, he said: "If this ship does go down, I'm still going to be on board, bailing water until the last gurgle."

Hobbs' advice to Southern Baptist churches is to ignore the controversy between Baptist factions that has preoccupied the SBC since 1979.

"I tell churches wherever I go, 'This is a struggle up at the top. Go on and do the Lord's work and pay no attention to that.'"

"Southern Baptists are not up to their necks in this, but to their heads, and they're drowning in it. The average layperson is disgusted.

Hobbs, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, Okla., is the oldest living former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. He preached on the SBC's "Baptist Hour" radio program 18 years, chaired the committee which developed the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, held numerous denominational posts, served on the SBC Peace

Committee and has written 141 books.

He offered his assessment of the SBC during an interview at First Baptist Church in Columbia, Ky., where he was preaching a revival July 19-22.

As evidence the SBC is not dying, Hobbs cited the \$81 million received last year for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for foreign missions. "That doesn't sound to me like the Southern Baptist Convention is dead," he said, recalling when the annual offering goal was just \$7 million.

Instead of dying, the convention is going through a periodic "course correction," Hobbs asserted. "This time, because of the politics, we're going to come back a little to the right of center, but it won't last long," he said.

Southern Baptists "turned the corner" on the controversy this year, Hobbs suggested. "I think we turned the corner in Indianapolis," he said, referring to the June annual SBC meeting in that Indiana city.

Hobbs said he voted for Ed Young for SBC president in Indianapolis and thinks brighter days lie ahead. "I think Ed Young meant what he said when he said he wanted to turn this thing around," Hobbs explained.

In a three-way race for president, Young was the candidate favored by fundamental-conservatives.

Further, Hobbs cited division among conservatives over Houston Judge Paul Pressler's nomination as a Foreign Mission Board trustee as evidence of change. The fact that some leading fundamental-conservative pastors opposed Pressler's nomination indicates the group is not as "monolithic" as some thought, he said.

Tensions linger in the convention because of politics, he suggested.

The Peace Committee did what it was asked to do and offered a good report, which was adopted by the SBC in 1987, he explained. That report cited reasons for the conflict and called on both sides to stop their political efforts.

"All the agencies are living by that report that was adopted in St. Louis," Hobbs said. "But the two little warring parties are more or less ignoring it."

Also, the committee's recommendation that SBC leaders make balanced appointments to boards and agencies has not been heeded, he said.

Hobbs, who will turn 85 in October, said he has the advantage of a long view in making his optimistic assessment for the future. "I've lived long enough to see us go through several controversies, and I've always seen us come out stronger than we went in."

Hobbs has had a front-row seat to several other Southern Baptist fights, most notably the Elliott controversy.

When Hobbs was SBC president in 1962, conflict came to a head over the book, *The Message of Genesis*, written by Ralph Elliott. Critics accused Elliott, a professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, of espousing a liberal slant on the first book of the Bible.

That conflict resulted in Elliott's firing from the seminary faculty and led to the 1963 adoption of the "Baptist Faith and Message" under Hobbs' leadership.

Some historians see the Elliott controversy as the first tremor in the larger quake to rock the SBC in the 1980s. But Hobbs said he is confident the convention will survive its current "course correction" just as it did in the 1960s.

"There's some right and some wrong on both sides," he said of the current fight. "There are no white hats or black hats, but gray hats."

"The irony is that both groups have something the other needs," he said. Fundamental-conservatives need to learn about discipleship from moderate-conservatives, who need to learn about evangelism from fundamental-conservatives, he said.

Amazingly, Hobbs has come through years of high-profile involvement in SBC conflicts with few serious critics and claims to have friends "in all strains of beliefs."

That has been possible, he said, because his beliefs are in the middle, "where old-time Southern Baptists have been and where they are now if they only knew the terms going around."

Hobbs said he doesn't like the labels that get put on people with different viewpoints. He explained that he doesn't want to be remembered either as a conservative or a moderate but as an "old-time Baptist."

"I want to be known as someone who believes the Bible and has done my best to understand it," he said.

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Resolution offered on abortion-drug case

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The latest battle over the French abortion pill RU-486 once again may pit the U.S. Congress against the nation's high court and the Bush administration.

The conflict emerged when Leona Benten tried to import the drug into the United States. She wanted to use the drug to induce an abortion, but federal authorities confiscated it at the airport because RU-486 has not been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

She filed suit in the District Court for the Eastern District of New York seeking immediate return of the drug. The District Court granted a temporary injunction providing for the drug's return. However, the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals stayed the injunction, and the Supreme Court denied her application to vacate the appeals court's decision.

Although losing in the court system, Benten has found some support in Congress.

Rep. Pat Schroeder, D-Colo., introduced July 21 a resolution (H. Con. Res. 350) expressing the "sense" of Congress that the U.S. Customs Service return the dosage of RU-486 seized from Benten on July 1. Even if passed, however, the resolution does not carry the force of law and is not expected to convince the Supreme Court to reverse its ruling.

Schroeder said her resolution complements a bill introduced in February 1991 by Rep. Ron Wyden, D-Ore. Wyden's bill (H.R. 875) is designed to lift the import ban on RU-486. No hearings have been held on the bill.

Schroeder noted RU-486 is on the FDA list of 58 imported drugs banned from the United States even though it does not meet any of the established criteria for the list.

"The import ban on RU-486 is unfair and discriminatory," Schroeder said. "It is evident that this drug is on the list not because of any dangers, but because it has been decreed 'politically incorrect' by the Bush administration."

Benten has said that if the drug is not returned she will have a surgical abortion.

"For Ms. Benten to use the RU-486 in the manner that she and her doctors would like, we have to pass this bill within 10 days," Schroeder said. The drug is safe and effective if used within the first nine weeks of pregnancy.

"However, this battle does not end with her pregnancy," Schroeder continued. "The principle here -- that the FDA should be deciding policy based on science and not politics -- is worth the fight."

But Ben Mitchell, director of biomedical and life issues for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said the U.S. government should not allow use of RU-486.

"This is just another mode of killing unborn babies," Mitchell told Associated Baptist Press.

"Whether it is approved by the FDA or not doesn't change the fact that morally it would be wrong to use the drug," he said.

Although the drug produces a non-surgical abortion, Mitchell said, "it doesn't mean there are not going to be psychological and emotional traumas attached to use of any abortion procedure."

Mitchell labeled Benton's attempt to import the drug "a contrived incident" which pro-abortionists are using to push for legislation legalizing RU-486. "This is hardly a case where there is a great public demand" for the drug, he said.

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-- By Pam Parry

New school-choice bill
introduced in Senate

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A new bill that would channel tax dollars to private and religious schools was introduced July 22 in both houses of Congress.

The GI Bill for Children, a new plan unveiled by the Bush administration June 25 as part of its 1993 budget proposal, was introduced as legislation by Sen. John Danforth, R-Mo., and Rep. Bill Gradison, R-Ohio.

The bill (S. 3010, H.R. 5664) would provide \$500 million in fiscal year 1993 for \$1,000 scholarships to help low- and middle- income families send their children to public, private and religious schools. The program would extend beyond 1993, with appropriation levels set during the budgeting process.

In June the Bush administration unveiled the new version of its school-choice proposal, drawing criticism that the administration was giving a souped-up name to a proposal that already had been rejected by Congress.

Earlier the Senate rejected private-school choice when it approved a major education bill (S. 2). A House committee also approved an education bill that contains no choice language, but a choice battle is expected when the House bill comes to the floor.

At a July 22 press conference, Education Secretary Lamar Alexander joined Danforth and Gradison in support of their legislation.

Danforth said: "The concept of school choice is an exciting idea for reform and improvement in education, particularly for America's most

disadvantaged young people. It is my hope that our legislation will focus attention on the need for new thinking, for a measure of boldness and for expanded horizons with respect to education.

Danforth likened the proposal to programs that funnel federal money to private college-level education. Such programs have not been used for private schools below the college level.

"The widely supported Pell grant program for college and university aid is a model for our approach," Danforth explained. "We would rely on students and families to select the education that is best for them, and then provide help with finances. I believe that all schools -- public and non-public alike -- will benefit from this infusion of new funds and, of equal importance, from the same diversity nourished by federal assistance in higher education."

Gradison said he believed the bill will have a dramatic and positive effect on elementary and secondary education by putting powerful competitive forces in play.

"For the first time, it will enable middle- and low-income families to make choices about the education they wish to provide for their children," Gradison said. "It will make schools more responsive. It will actively engage more parents in the education of their children."

"Most importantly, it will motivate schools to succeed because, for the first time, they will know that if they do not, they will suffer the consequences."

Opponents disagree with those assessments, however. They say choice programs will siphon badly needed money from public schools and, in the case of religious schools, entangle the government in the affairs of the church through federal regulations.

Because of opposition to the original choice proposals, administration officials concede Congress probably will not approve the measure this year. However, those officials said educational choice would be a top priority in a second Bush term.

A Baptist church-state specialist agreed the measure had little hope for passage and called the new program an "election-year stunt."

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the latest choice proposal is "pitiful political posturing without a prayer for passage. Such a cynical use of the political process has a cruel dimension. Its introduction raises false hopes and impossible expectations."

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-- By Pam Parry

Racism threatens peace,
Baptist ethicists say

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- From Eastern Europe to South Central Los Angeles, racial and ethnic tensions threaten world peace at both interpersonal and international levels, Baptist ethicists note.

In a post-Cold War world of improved relations between global superpowers, some people no longer see peacemaking as a priority. But Christians should seize the opportunity to turn their focus inward toward

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root causes of conflict -- causes such as racism, said Joe Haag, associate with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Southern Baptists will pause Aug. 2 to observe their annual Day of Prayer for World Peace -- the first since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Haag said they might best use the time individually and corporately to confess racist attitudes.

"Racism is sin because it ignores the reconciliation Christ has brought us, rebuilding the dividing walls he has broken down," he said. "And it is sin because it mocks the power of Pentecost that made one people out of many nations."

Before Christians can become reconciled to persons of other ethnic groups, they must recognize their own ethnocentricity as a form of idolatry, said Dan McGee, professor of religion at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

"Racism elevates ethnic identity to a kind of divine status and makes a kind of 'little religion' out of loyalty to one's ethnic group," said McGee, an associate with the Baptist Center for Ethics. "The clear teaching of the gospel is that only God is Lord. Our ethnicity is not."

Racism is linked not only to self-centered, ethnic pride, but also to sloth, said Robert Parham, director of the Baptist Center for Ethics. Moral sloth can take the form of a "don't care" attitude about forces contributing to conflict or of retreat to a privatized, escapist religion that emphasizes personal salvation alone, neglecting issues of social justice.

"We think that witnessing replaces those things that the Bible says make for peace, such as feeding the hungry, doing justice, advocating human rights, walking the second mile, and seeking the welfare of the enemy," he said. "Baptist peacemakers are those who care enough to act and trust enough to obey the Bible."

Economic and social injustice often are both outgrowths of racism and direct causes of conflict, Haag noted.

"Unless there is a realization of justice between people, there will be no real, lasting peace," he said.

Ken Sehested of Memphis, Tenn., executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, underscored the linkage between economics, racism and peacemaking.

"Racism is fundamentally a spiritual issue. All issues of peace and justice are fundamentally spiritual. What one does with one's 'stuff' is a spiritual issue," he said. "It is an issue of security. What do we do with our material reality? Do we hoard it for ourselves or do we share it with the entire human community?"

Though improved relations between nations with nuclear capabilities lessen the likelihood of world war, ethnic tensions continue to be manifested in armed conflict from Bosnia to Belfast.

"It is not just a U.S. issue," Sehested said. "It is not just a black and white issue. In fact, racism is not even just an issue related to skin color."

Recognizing the international dimension of racial and ethnic turmoil, the Baptist World Alliance recently appointed a special commission on Baptists Against Racism and named former U.S. President Jimmy Carter as its honorary chairman.

Representatives from 35 countries attending the July 14-18 International Baptist Peace Conference in Nicaragua approved an open letter commending the BWA for its action and pledging support for the special

commission.

However, attention devoted to national and international expressions of racism should not detract from the individual responsibility of each Christian to practice self-examination and to deal with conflicts close to home, Haag emphasized.

"Pick any major Texas city and you will see a place where ethnic barriers divide Anglo-, African-, Hispanic- and Asian-Americans," the Texas leader said. "Those tensions were played out most graphically three months ago in Los Angeles. But they exist everywhere."

In addition to prayers of confession and repentance, the Baptist ethicists suggested strategies for peacemaking between races centering on local congregations. Without demeaning the once-a-year pulpit and choir exchanges practiced by some churches, the ethicists suggested moving beyond that point to ongoing partnerships between churches of differing ethnicities.

The key, according to McGee, is contact and communication between children of God who come from varying racial and ethnic backgrounds.

"As different parts of the body of Christ, our differences complement each other," he said. "When we come to understand that because of our differences we need each other and can learn from each other -- that's what creates community."

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