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WMU asks FMB to open
dialogue with Fellowship

By Susan Doyle

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Leaders of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union met July 27 to discuss, among other things, WMU's relationship with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which has asked WMU for help with its new missions program.

The three-hour frank discussion ended with FMB trustee chairman John Jackson agreeing to initiate a dialogue with leaders of the Fellowship, an organization of Southern Baptists formed in protest of the Southern Baptist Convention's current leadership and direction.

Trustees of the FMB fear the Fellowship's missions program, launched in January, will drain support from the FMB's worldwide missions effort.

Woman's Missionary Union supports Southern Baptist missions through fund-raising, education and mission action. The annual Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, sponsored primarily by WMU, provides about half the funds for FMB missions.

In May leaders of the Fellowship asked WMU to promote its missions effort as well, which was founded in January. Those WMU-CBF discussions prompted Foreign Mission Board trustees in June to ask for a meeting with WMU leaders to discuss WMU's relationship with the Fellowship.

But the July 27 meeting also included questions from WMU leaders about recent actions taken by the FMB trustees and how they affect Southern Baptist missions.

A WMU reporter was allowed to observe the meeting under background rules, which prohibit directly quoting the participants. The dialogue involved four WMU leaders and four FMB leaders. The two groups agreed to continue their dialogue.

The Fellowship launched its missions program earlier this year after FMB trustees angered European Baptists by defunding a Swiss seminary they accused of being liberal. The FMB's top administrators for Europe resigned in protest of the defunding and what they call the trustees' attempt to impose their brand of theological orthodoxy on Baptists overseas.

The Fellowship has asked WMU to consider providing some missions education materials tailored for the Fellowship, FMB leaders were told. However, the decision to produce those materials for the Fellowship has not been made, WMU leaders said.

WMU has not been asked to initiate or promote a missions offering for the Fellowship, contrary to rumor, the WMU leaders said.

WMU leaders expressed their own concerns about the FMB's relationship with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Jackson was asked by the WMU leaders to initiate a dialogue with Fellowship leaders. Specifically, they asked Jackson to underscore the FMB's willingness to appoint people as career missionaries who have been involved with the Fellowship.

Cecil Sherman, coordinator of the Fellowship, said he would be "startled" by a request from the FMB for dialogue but not opposed to it. "Sure, we'll talk," Sherman told Associated Baptist Press. "We've got lots to talk about. We have things in common."

During their dialogue with the FMB, WMU leaders also asked pointed questions about the replacement of FMB President Keith Parks, who will take early retirement Oct. 30 after a 38-year career in foreign missions. Parks cited philosophical differences with trustees in his retirement decision.

The WMU leaders urged that the appointment not be politically motivated. Instead, they asked that FMB trustees seek someone with a history of career missionary service.

Representing the FMB in the dialogue were Parks, Jackson and trustees Karen Gilbert and Phyllis Randall. Gilbert is the board's recording secretary. Randall chairs the trustee human resources committee.

Representing WMU were national WMU Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien, national president Carolyn Miller and board members Virginia Caughman of South Carolina and Gerry Dunkin of Texas.

The group agreed to continue the dialogue by sending representatives to each other's board meetings beginning with the WMU Executive Board meeting in January 1993 and the FMB trustee meeting in February 1993. They each agreed to send seven representatives -- five trustees and two staff members.

Both WMU and FMB leaders agreed that healing within the controversy-torn Southern Baptist Convention will only be possible if discussions such as this one continue.

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ACTS, VISN officials
finalize agreement

By Bob Terry

DENVER, Colo. (ABP) -- The agreement between ACTS, the Southern Baptist cable television network, and VISN, an interfaith cable TV network, was finalized July 28 in Denver.

The former competitors will begin sharing a common television channel Oct. 1. The move will save both networks money and may turn ACTS into a money-making venture for the first time since its launch in 1984, network officials said.

ACTS, based in Fort Worth, Texas, currently has a potential audience of about 8 million households.

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VISN, based in New York, was launched in 1988 and now claims 12 million households. The 28 faith groups participating in VISN include Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Methodists and other mainline Protestant denominations, as well as Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish groups.

ACTS will provide eight hours of programming per day for the shared channel. VISN will furnish 16 hours per day. Both networks will continue to prohibit fund-raising, proselytizing and maligning of other faiths.

The agreement is "a move that needed to happen," said Richard McCartney, executive vice president of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission, which owns and operates ACTS for Southern Baptists.

McCartney said the joint operating agreement will send ACTS programming into areas of the country where Southern Baptists are not strong. He cited the West Coast, the northern tier of states, and the Northeast as places where VISN's market penetration will make Baptist programming widely viewable for the first time.

The cable systems that carry ACTS are concentrated in the South and Southwest, areas where VISN is weak.

"This shared channel will bring together the...faith groups related to VISN with the largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptists, to offer the widest scope of religious programming on a single channel," said Daniel Matthews, chairman of National Interfaith Cable Coalition, which owns and operates VISN.

By combining their current cable TV outlets, the two networks will have access to more than 20 million U.S. homes. The deal could eventually make the ACTS-VISN channel the largest religious cable network in the country. Only Eternal Word Television Network, a Roman Catholic cable network reaching 23-to-27 million homes, claims a wider reach.

The ACTS-VISN partnership "will be the largest cable religious faith and values channel in very short order," Nelson Price, president of VISN, predicted July 16.

Although rumored for months, the agreement did not come together until July 24. The next evening the Radio and Television Commission's executive committee met at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport to approve the agreement. The RTVC trustees also serve as trustees for ACTS.

"I didn't think this would ever happen," said Richard Wakefield, pastor of First Baptist Church of Camdenton, Mo., and a member of the RTVC executive committee. "I didn't think they would come to our terms."

Problem areas between the two networks included scheduling, programming concerns, and the right of local ACTS boards to produce local programming and to pre-empt network programming.

Both Wakefield and McCartney said the final agreement protects the local ACTS boards, which often produce local programming and provide a key link with local cable system operators.

"That was a point at which we were unwilling to compromise," McCartney said. "We wanted to protect our ACTS boards across the country."

McCartney emphasized ACTS and VISN are not merging. They will share one channel while maintaining separate corporate identities.

"We had no interest in merging with anyone or losing our identity as the ACTS Television Network," McCartney said.

He explained that both ACTS and VISN signed operating agreements with VISN Group Inc., an operating company which provides sales, marketing, master control and uplink to satellites. Previously, the company serviced only VISN.

In addition to the expanded reach for ACTS programming, the financial condition of the Southern Baptist network was a major concern in the negotiations. For the first time in its history, ACTS will be able to shoulder its own debt, McCartney said.

Wakefield added that the RTVC was looking at a \$400,000 to \$500,000 deficit for the coming year without the new arrangement because of increased costs for satellite transmission.

"You do that for a year or two and then you are out of the broadcasting business," he said. The new agreement not only solves the cash-flow crisis, it provides money for new programming, the leaders said.

"In my eight years as a trustee, all we have done is struggle to keep our heads above water, and sometimes it was real close," Wakefield continued. He said the board had not produced any new programming except for a live call-in show called "Cope" which has minimal production costs.

The new arrangement will provide money for new programming as well as renewed attention to other ministries of the RTVC, he explained.

The two networks expect their combined audience of 20 million households will attract more paid advertising as well.

McCartney acknowledged the agreement will relieve a financial crunch for the RTVC. He said a significant difference will be omitting \$135,000 per month in rental fees for a satellite channel. Without the agreement, the ACTS channel would have had to move to another satellite channel by year's end with an additional monthly charge of \$30,000 to \$35,000.

The new agreement also allows ACTS to retain the income from the program time it sells and to share advertising revenue on a predetermined formula. This means ACTS is now expected to be a money-making venture rather than one with only a negative cash flow.

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Ethical preaching demands
ministers speak truthfully

By Kathy Palen

(ABP) -- Preaching is storytelling and truth-telling, say two Southern Baptists. And, they add, preaching poses ethical challenges for ministers.

"We're storytellers, but we're telling the gospel story," said William Tillman, associate professor of ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. "One of the challenges is maintaining a freshness about that from our perspective. The story is always fresh, but the temptation is to let it become stale. We try to retell it out of dry reservoirs."

Telling the gospel story in fresh ways becomes a matter of the preacher's own reservoir of integrity and character formation, said Tillman, an associate with the Baptist Center for Ethics.

The challenge, he said, is to find one's own sense of character and communication rather than adding to the story in an effort to entertain or even to manipulate.

Preaching also is truth-telling, said Stephen Shoemaker, pastor of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky. "You are honest with the truth -- as honest as you can be as a fallible human being -- so that you do not say things that may or may not be true in the pulpit," he said.

Being honest includes treating resources fairly so that "you don't

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quote people out of context" or "represent someone unfairly for your own advantage," Shoemaker said.

He said that whenever he quotes or tells a story about someone in a sermon, he tries to imagine that the person is sitting in the congregation. "That helps keep me honest so that, to the best of my ability, I don't misrepresent them," he explained.

Another ethical rule that Shoemaker said he employs is never to use a story about a church member without that person's permission. "I never ambush anybody with the use of their words in a sermon without permission being given," he said. The rule also applies to his family members, he said, explaining that a preacher's family often can feel used or exposed in a sermon.

In addition, Tillman stressed the importance of not betraying confidences from the pulpit.

"In the fervor of the moment or for the sake of evoking a particular sentiment from the congregation, sometimes preachers will pull out conversations that had best been left private," Tillman said.

"Some preachers think they're rather skillful at hiding the details," he added, "but actually they end up betraying confidences and damaging the person who may be sitting there in the congregation. Ultimately, it will result in the preacher's not being trusted."

When preachers tell stories that are not their own, Shoemaker said, they should say so. Although in the past some preaching traditions have allowed sermonic license in the use of stories, Shoemaker said he thinks preachers need to be strict about never telling a story "as if it happened to you when it has not happened to you."

Preachers also need to give proper credit to the sources they use in their preaching, Tillman and Shoemaker agreed.

Ministers constantly face the dilemma of finding time for sermon preparation, Tillman said. Because of the press of pastoral care and administrative demands, he explained, there is a temptation to "short cut" preparation time.

Some ministers, he said, give in to a "mail-order approach" and use material they receive from other people. "I think it's one thing to use outlines," he said, "but another to lift out a whole sermon."

Shoemaker said if another person's sermon has dominated his approach to a Scripture text and the way he preaches a sermon, he will mention that fact and give the person credit at the beginning of his sermon.

He said he also generally names the person who spoke any important idea he uses in a sermon if that name contributes to the authority of the saying. At other times, he said, he omits the name and simply says, "poet" or "scholar," if the "naming of the name would feel pedantic and unnecessary in the public preaching of it."

Tillman said that while most congregations don't want to hear an academic treatise complete with endnotes, preachers at least should credit material that is not theirs in a general way. He offered an illustration: "You could say, 'A book I was reading this week struck me. The author said'"

Preachers also face ethical challenges in their use of the Bible, both men said.

Despite the fact that preachers may proclaim their devotion to the Bible, Tillman said, sometimes the Bible becomes a mere prop in the sermonic presentation of personal opinion. In preaching, he said, it is important to avoid the misuse and abuse of the Bible by not taking

Scripture out of context. It is also important, he added, to avoid building a whole system of theological perspective out of one phrase or verse from the Bible.

In interpreting a Scripture text for a sermon, Tillman said, one first should let the passage say what it said to the original hearers and readers and then find truths, principles and guidelines that can speak just as vividly to people today.

"That's tough work," he said, "because what you can slide into pretty easily is making the Scripture say what you want it to say rather than just speaking from it."

Shoemaker suggested several ways to work on being honest with a text. First, he said, it is helpful to spend time alone with the text apart from any kind of commentaries. Then, he added, it is helpful to consult multiple commentaries that are of different theological persuasions and from different times in history.

"What we should be doing in exegesis is round-table conversation with people who have gone before us, as well as with people who are around us now," Shoemaker said. "I think it's important to read people who have been working with these texts for the 2,000 years of Christian history. It helps keep you honest to read how other people have interacted with the text.

"I also find it helpful to read commentaries written by women and people from the Third World so that I'm not always working with a white male, Eurocentric kind of study of Scripture," he added.

Shoemaker also suggested that preachers be honest with their congregations about their emotions. He said he usually does not preach on an issue if he is mad about it because "people can tell when you're mad and can feel bullied by the pulpit."

But, he added, "If you're having strong emotions -- whether it's sadness or anger or whatever -- it's important at times to tell people, 'This is the way I'm feeling.' That way, they're not getting the emotion indirectly."

Shoemaker and Tillman agreed that it is important for preachers to be sensitive also to the emotions of members of their congregations.

"Preachers need to stay in touch with people and to listen honestly to them," Tillman said. "There needs to be a sense of openness -- even to criticism."

"I often tell my students, 'Listen to your enemies. In the long haul, they may be your best friends because they have pointed out something that perhaps has not been taken seriously and needs to be addressed.'"

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-- This is the third in a series of articles on ministerial ethics commissioned by the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. Kathy Palen is a free-lance writer in New Haven, Conn.

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