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Phone: (904) 262-6626 Fax: (904) 262-7745 CServe: 70420,73

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FMB criticizes expanded role
of women's mission group

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Trustees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board unleashed two hours of critical questions and comments Feb. 8 to leaders of the denomination's Woman's Missionary Union, which has agreed to aid the missions efforts of non-SBC groups.

The trustees, in an emotional meeting at the FMB's headquarters in Richmond, Va., asked officers of the WMU, the SBC's mission-support auxiliary, to explain why the organization is supporting the mission efforts of groups not sanctioned by the SBC, including the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

WMU leaders voted Jan. 10 to expand the scope of the auxiliary's work by supporting the missions programs of other groups of Southern Baptists and forging relationships with evangelical missions organizations outside the SBC. Leaders said the action will allow WMU to continue to serve all Southern Baptist churches, including those disenchanted with the SBC's official mission-sending agencies -- the FMB and Home Mission Board.

The 1.2 million-member WMU, based in Birmingham, Ala., has church-based organizations in about two thirds of the SBC's 37,000 congregations. Each year, WMU raises about \$120 million for the FMB and HMB. The FMB gets about \$80 million in WMU-generated funds -- more than half of its annual budget -- through the annual Lottie Moon Christmas Offering.

The WMU action has angered many Southern Baptists, including the fundamental-conservatives who now control the FMB and most other SBC agencies. As a result, the SBC may form a competing women's organization or the FMB may begin promoting its own missions offering.

In the tense session with WMU leaders, FMB trustee Bill Blanchard of Soddy Daisy, Tenn., accused the WMU of changing its focus without consulting with the grass roots.

But Dellanna O'Brien, the WMU's executive director, pointed out that the new approach was accepted by representatives from each state convention after a lengthy period that included a call for local suggestions.

Trustee Mike Goodwin said he sensed "almost a disdain" among WMU leaders toward the SBC's current fundamental-conservative leadership.

The FMB and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship "can't walk together"

because of differences, Goodwin said, and therefore neither can WMU walk in harmony with both the Fellowship and FMB.

A moment of high drama came after a comment by Phyllis Randall, a trustee from Blacksburg, Va., who quoted Alma Hunt, a retired executive director of WMU, as saying the organization has no role except to support the SBC's two official mission-sending agencies. "Our program is that of the Home Mission Board and Foreign Mission Board," Randall quoted Hunt as writing in a history of WMU.

Hunt, who drove to Richmond from her home in Roanoke, Va., rose from her seat near the back of the auditorium and asked to speak. "When I wrote that, I believed it with all my heart," she said. "Today is a different day. But I do not believe God intends for us not to be able to walk together."

"I pray the day will never come that we as Southern Baptists will say we cannot walk with another Baptist or another person who believes in Jesus Christ," Hunt said.

The dispute over WMU has intensified since November, when former FMB President Keith Parks, who retired three years earlier than planned in a dispute with fundamental-conservative trustees over the agency's direction, accepted a similar position with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The Fellowship has 20 missionaries, while the FMB supports 3,900.

Donald Purvis Sr., a Hartsville, S.C., pastor, said he feared the WMU action was part of a plot by moderates to pull the organization out of the Southern Baptist Convention.

But O'Brien said WMU is not abandoning its traditional support of SBC causes. "We're looking at this as a business venture," she said. "We're not going to produce any materials (for other groups) unless we get paid."

While the WMU raises millions of dollars each year, it receives little financial support from the SBC. Most of its income comes from sale of its missions education materials to churches.

The primary commitment of WMU, O'Brien said, is to its initial call to support mission work. "We are less concerned about the dollars than the prayers," she said.

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-- This story by Ed Briggs of the Richmond Times-Dispatch includes information from Erich Bridges of the Foreign Mission Board.

SBC officials want to discuss
WMU plan with group's leaders

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Leaders of Woman's Missionary Union have been asked to meet with top Southern Baptist Convention officials Feb. 21 to explain why the organization is supporting the mission efforts of groups not sanctioned by the SBC.

In a letter to Dellanna O'Brien, WMU executive director, SBC chief executive Morris Chapman asked O'Brien and national WMU president Carolyn Miller to meet with the officers of the SBC Executive Committee.

At issue is the Jan. 10 vote by WMU leaders to expand the scope of the women's auxiliary. WMU will now support the missions programs of other Southern Baptist groups -- including the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- and forge relationships with evangelical missions organizations outside the SBC.

Last year, SBC leaders warned that if WMU endorsed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Executive Committee might form its own women's agency controlled by SBC-appointed trustees. The 105-year-old WMU is governed by an independent board elected from the 30-plus state and regional Baptist conventions.

Trustees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board held their own meeting with O'Brien Feb. 8 in which they registered their complaints about the new plan.

Chapman, who attended the Feb. 8 session, told FMB trustees a similar meeting had been scheduled with leaders of the Executive Committee, which Chapman serves as president.

The meeting will be held in Nashville, Tenn., Sunday night, Feb. 21, one day before the Executive Committee begins its three-day winter meeting. It is unclear if the session will be open to the press and public. Most meetings of SBC officers are not.

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-- By Greg Warner

Draper paints gloomy picture of Sunday School Board finances

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Sunday School Board is "in the process of dying" and will fade away unless drastic steps are taken to revive it, board President Jimmy Draper told trustees Feb. 8.

In an unusually frank report, Draper painted a gloomy picture of the financial future facing the Southern Baptist publishing house:

-- Flat or declining sales in the last 10 years, with real growth in only four of them.

-- An 8 percent decline in Sunday school literature sales, the board's top revenue source. "This is a source of great concern," Draper said.

-- Only four of the publisher's 17 programs made a profit last year. The Baptist Book Store -- the nations' second largest religious retailer -- lost more than \$5.5 million in sales last year.

-- The decline is only partially a factor of the economy, Draper said. Many of the board's customers see the group as "an agency behind the times," that has "lost its edge" and "will have less and less of an influence in the future if it does not change," Draper warned.

"Already we are taking steps to address these and other concerns," said Draper, adding he is "extremely optimistic about where we're headed."

Since Draper became president, the Sunday School Board has instituted changes to streamline and modernize the agency. After granting early retirement to 159 longterm employees, the board has achieved a net reduction of 84 in its workforce -- from 1,767 in 1991 to 1,683.

Its net sales last year were more than \$202 million, more than a fifth of the national religious publication sales that year. But board officials saw no safety in those numbers.

"Our first priority must be to fix a very sick business," said Charles Wilson, vice president in charge of retail operations and trade publishing.

Draper told the trustees he has several strategies to rebuild financial strength for the publishing house.

He said the board has already halved the amount of red tape it requires of its employees. It will take more advice from customers and devote more

attention to changing church congregations.

It also intends to plow more money into new ventures, such as electronic media, and will redesign its largest magazine, Home Life.

The future of the Sunday School Board is one of "a vital, ministering, serving institution," Draper said.

"We must believe in faith that this is the future before us," he continued. "We must understand that the challenges are great, but the opportunities are even greater."

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-- This story by Timothy Cornell of the Tennessean in Nashville includes information from Charles Willis of the Sunday School Board.

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