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March 18, 1993

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HMB finds many Masonic teachings
incompatible with Christianity

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Many teachings of the Masonic Lodge "are not compatible with Christianity and Southern Baptist doctrine," according to a report approved by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board March 17.

But the report, commissioned by the Southern Baptist Convention last June, stops short of denouncing Freemasonry as a religion and concludes that individual Baptists should be left to decide about participating in the secret fraternity.

With that middle-ground position, Southern Baptists may avert a fight between Masons and their critics, both of whom were gearing up for a showdown at the Southern Baptist Convention this summer.

The report, which now goes to the SBC in June for approval, mixes criticism of some Masonic teachings with praise for the benevolent work of the Masons, an ancient order that boasts 3.5 million members nationwide, including an estimated 1.3 million Southern Baptists.

But the report's central finding -- that many Masonic teachings contradict Christianity -- apparently will be enough to satisfy Southern Baptists' most outspoken critic of Freemasonry, Texas physician Larry Holly.

"In the environment we're in, that's the best we're going to get," Holly said of the report.

Holly and other critics wanted the Home Mission Board to define Freemasonry as a religious system, and therefore a contradiction to Christianity.

Holly, a Beaumont layman who has authored two books against the dangers of Freemasonry, convinced messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention last June to conduct the study. He told Associated Baptist Press March 18 he won't push for further action at the convention this year.

"I plan to do nothing but support the (HMB) motion," he said.

Ron Phillips, chairman of HMB trustees, said Southern Baptists have a good chance of putting the Masonic dispute behind them.

"I think the cautions we expressed (about Freemasonry) are real," said Phillips, a pastor from Hixson, Tenn. "I'm grateful that Dr. Holly feels good about it. I feel good about the prospects of the report being received (by the SBC)."

Freemasonry, which is organized into 51 independent Grand Lodges nationwide, is a secretive organization known publicly for its benevolent activities but whose private pursuits involve elaborate rituals and oaths and devotion to an eclectic quest for higher knowledge.

Holly and other critics insist those private practices, inspired by pagan rituals and occultism, comprise a religion that competes with Christianity by convincing well-intentioned men that good deeds -- not faith in Jesus -- can get them to heaven.

The Masons insist their organization is a fraternity, not a religion, and that its principles both reflect and enhance the Christian faith of members. Masons recently mounted an elaborate and rare public defense against Holly's attacks, which they say take Masonic materials out of context to make them appear evil.

Response to the HMB report from various Masonic leaders was generally favorable, despite the criticism the report contains.

Max Tatum, grand master of Masons in Oklahoma, issued a statement congratulating the Home Mission Board "on upholding the intellectual integrity of the SBC." Tatum, a Baptist layman from Piedmont, Okla., said many critics of the Masons misunderstand or misinterpret the terminology and customs of Freemasonry, much of which developed during 18th-century England. Some Masonic practices with pagan overtones predate Christianity, he said.

Fred McPeake, a Masonic leader and Baptist layman who opposed Holly on the floor of the Southern Baptist Convention last June, said some of the concerns cited in the HMB report are unfounded.

McPeake, executive director of the Scottish Rite of Masons in a 24-county region of Tennessee, told ABP the Masons' emphasis on secrecy and oaths developed as a necessary defense against religious oppression centuries ago.

"The commitments made in those days had to be very, very secretive," he said. "Of course, these days they are simply symbolic."

The HMB's seven-page report praises Masons for their "charitable endeavors," which include operation of 44 hospitals or burn centers and efforts to help the elderly and to prevent drug abuse. The report acknowledges that many legendary Southern Baptists, including George Truett and W.T. Connor, were Masons.

And, the report adds, many teachings of Masonry are "supportive of Christian faith and practice," such as the belief in God and emphases on honesty, integrity and industry, and some Masonic lodges incorporate explicit Christian beliefs into their rituals.

However, the report continues, "many tenets of Freemasonry are not compatible with Christianity or Southern Baptist doctrine."

Several examples were cited, including:

-- The use of "sacrilegious" titles and concepts, such as reference to the leader of a lodge as "Worshipful Master."

-- The use of pagan "bloody oaths" which are part of Masonic initiation ceremonies. Such oaths, sworn with a hand on the Bible, are "inappropriate" for Christians, even though many Masons do not take them seriously, the HMB report says.

-- The "undeniably pagan and/or occultic writings" of Masonic leaders,

some of which teach philosophies that contradict or claim to supersede Christianity.

-- The implication in some Masonic writings that salvation may be attained by good works instead of faith in Jesus, such as the frequent admonition in Masonic writings of "that purity of life and conduct which is necessary to obtain admittance into the Celestial Lodge above where the Supreme Architect of the Universe presides." The report notes, "Even though many Masons understand that the 'purity of life and conduct' can only be achieved through faith in Jesus Christ, others may be led to believe they can earn salvation by living a pure life with good conduct."

-- The "heresy" of universalism, prevalent in some Masonic writings.

-- The racial discrimination practiced by most Masonic lodges.

Despite the sharp criticism, trustees stopped short of condemning Freemasonry and bowed to individual conscience about Masonic membership. The report closed with a one-paragraph summary:

"In light of the fact that many tenets and teachings of Freemasonry are not compatible with Christianity and Southern Baptist doctrine, while others are compatible with Christianity and Southern Baptist doctrine, we therefore recommend that consistent with our denomination's deep convictions regarding the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church, membership in a Masonic Order be a matter of personal conscience. Therefore, we exhort Southern Baptists to prayerfully and carefully evaluate Freemasonry in light of the Lordship of Christ, the teachings of the Scripture, and the findings of this report, as led by the Holy Spirit of God."

Wording of that final paragraph was toughened after a one-hour closed-door meeting of HMB trustees March 16. The original paragraph did not include the finding, contained earlier in the report, that many Masonic teachings are incompatible with Christianity.

After debating the report in private the night before, trustees wasted little time in approving it in open session March 18. Only one negative vote was noted.

Holly said the toughened document is acceptable.

"There is enough information in there that a person who is committed to Jesus Christ will know to get out of the Lodge," said Holly, who did not attend the trustees' meeting in Atlanta.

In a prepared statement issued within minutes of the meeting, Holly said, "While this statement is not as I would have made it, it offers little succor for the Southern Baptist pastors, deacons and laymen who are Masons."

In a telephone interview the next day with ABP, Holly described the report as "the weakest response of any Christian group" to Freemasonry. In his recent book attacking Masonry, Holly noted that no Christian denomination that has investigated the organization has failed to condemn it.

Still, he said, the evidence is there. "If you read between the lines, this report is a rejection of the Lodge."

Assuming the report is adopted by the SBC in June, Holly said his career as an anti-Mason crusader is over. He noted he may publish one more book about Masonry next year -- his third -- to bring the SBC-Masonry debate up to date, but that it would not lead to another request for SBC action.

But McPeake seemed unconvinced that SBC adoption of the report will end the debate, or that he has seen the last of Holly. "I really doubt that it will end the issue, and frankly, well, I really don't know what he will do."

Meanwhile, the HMB employee who did the background work for the Freemasonry report was reassigned to a lower-level job because of his controversial role in the Masonry dispute. Trustees were told Gary Leazer, director of the HMB's interfaith witness department, had requested reassignment as a field staffer in the department.

Leazer drafted the 110-page study on which the shorter HMB report was based. Holly and other critics called for Leazer's dismissal in February after Leazer wrote a letter to a Masonic leader encouraging Masons to attend the June SBC to counter Holly's criticism.

Larry Lewis, HMB president, reprimanded Holly in February and removed him from the Mason study. Lewis said he later granted Leazer's request to be relieved of duties as department director because Leazer's actions had discredited his leadership.

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HMB endorses resolution
targeting WMU changes

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Trustees of the Home Mission Board joined the chorus of Southern Baptist leaders calling for the Woman's Missionary Union to restrict its work to helping the denomination's official agencies.

In January WMU's executive board voted to offer educational materials and prayer support -- but not money -- to missionary-sending groups other than the Foreign and Home Mission boards, the Southern Baptist Convention's two official missionary-sending agencies.

The Home Mission Board receives about \$40 million a year -- roughly half its budget -- from an annual offering promoted by WMU in Southern Baptist churches.

Critics, including the powerful SBC Executive Committee, complained the changes voted by WMU would allow the organization to lend support to the rival Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization of moderate Southern Baptists which also sends missionaries.

In February the Executive Committee passed a resolution urging WMU to restore its "exclusive relationship" with the SBC mission boards. Trustees of the Home Mission Board voted March 17 to affirm that resolution.

The action came during the trustees' March 16-17 meeting and after trustees heard WMU Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien explain the organization's changes. Only seven HMB trustees -- all women -- voted against affirming the resolution.

The politely worded resolution begins with seven paragraphs of affirmation for WMU's historic role in supporting SBC missions. However, it also notes that WMU "was established originally for the express purpose of supporting the two mission boards of the Southern Baptist Convention."

WMU needs to affirm its "singular cooperation," "undivided commitment" and "exclusive relationship" with the SBC and its mission boards, the resolution said.

The Executive Committee resolution pledged to continue supporting the WMU's auxiliary relationship to the SBC "so long as the Woman's Missionary Union pledges its faithful and solitary support of the mission offerings and mission programs of the Southern Baptist Convention and its mission boards."

Critics of WMU have complained that the organization has too much freedom, since it was founded in 1888 with an autonomous board elected by state WMU members, not the SBC.

Some critics have suggested the SBC should start a new women's organization under SBC control. During O'Brien's dialogue with HMB trustees, chairman Ron Phillips, a pastor from Hixson, Tenn., reported he has "heard that kind of talk."

"Our conservative leadership is showing tremendous restraint," he said, noting most are taking a "watch and wait" attitude. But he added, "WMU

might find itself in competition with another women's organization."

Phillips' comment concluded a question-and-answer session between O'Brien and trustees. The dialogue was friendlier than recent similar sessions O'Brien had with Executive Committee leaders and trustees of the Foreign Mission Board.

During the HMB dialogue, some trustees said WMU's changes indicates the organization is deserting its heritage. O'Brien said WMU is not abandoning any commitments or activities but merely expanding to address the different ways Southern Baptists do missions.

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-- By Greg Warner

HMB trustee resigns,
says moderates excluded

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Asserting that the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board "has not knowingly appointed a missionary of the 'moderate' persuasion for at least six years," a Washington, D.C., pastor has resigned from that agency's board of directors.

Orris Bullock, pastor of Fountain Memorial Baptist Church, mailed a letter of resignation to HMB chairman Ron Phillips March 9. Bullock's term would have expired in June 1994.

"During my tenure I have observed with pain certain (HMB) personnel committee members who consistently acted as watchdogs for the conservative inerrancy clique, in their intolerance toward moderate candidates," Bullock wrote. "The fact is that the HMB has not knowingly appointed a missionary of the 'moderate' persuasion for at least six years."

But HMB chairman Phillips disputed Bullock's claims.

"That's a lie," said Phillips, a pastor in Hixson, Tenn. "If that's true, he needs to prove that."

Phillips said convention politics are "not even a consideration" in election of HMB missionaries and staff. "I don't know of any case where that has been a litmus test for missionaries."

In his letter, Bullock said there has been a dramatic change in the makeup of the HMB missionary force in recent years from one that included both moderates and conservatives to one increasingly made up of inerrantist conservatives.

"Under recently enacted policies, even the apostle Paul would not qualify for appointment as a Southern Baptist home missionary," Bullock wrote.

An HMB trustee since 1985, Bullock told Phillips he had been waiting in vain for the Southern Baptist Convention and the Home Mission Board to honor the 1987 Peace Committee report's call for "balanced committees and boards."

Bullock said he does not share the hopes of some who think current SBC leaders will someday obey the Peace Committee's call for balance.

"I see only leaders who are driven by a need to dominate," he said. "Continuing to sacrifice my time and energies on the (Home Mission) Board now seems like casting pearls to swine."

During the three years he served on the HMB personnel committee, Bullock told Associated Baptist Press, missionary candidates' beliefs about the Bible were the "litmus test" for appointment.

"Candidates had to be sure and use the term 'inerrancy' in regard to their belief about the Bible in a way that the committee members believed

they were sincere," Bullock said. Some candidates who expressed full and complete confidence in the Bible as the Word of God but did not use the word "inerrancy" were held up, he said.

Phillips acknowledged prospective missionaries are screened about their views of the Bible, but he denied that has kept moderates from being appointed.

"The only people I know who haven't been appointed are those ... involved in speaking in tongues and those with multiple marriages," he said. The HMB has policies against appointing missionaries who are divorced and remarried and who practice glossolalia.

Phillips also denied a conservative clique controls the trustee board. "Anytime you have 80-some trustees, you're going to have some zealots ... but they generally don't win."

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-- By Larry Chesser and Greg Warner

Baptists criticize appointment of ambassador to the Vatican

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bill Clinton's decision to name Boston Mayor Raymond Flynn as the next U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican has drawn sharp criticism from Baptist and civil-liberties organizations.

Flynn, an active Roman Catholic and a Democrat who opposes abortion, announced at a March 17 news conference in Boston that he had accepted Clinton's offer to fill the post that has been held by two other Catholics -- William Wilson and Thomas Melady. Former president Ronald Reagan established formal diplomatic ties with the Vatican in 1984.

"Such an appointment is a clear violation of the principle of church-state separation, a dangerous and divisive precedent of government meddling in church affairs, and the occasion for practical problems for all those engaged in the far-flung missionary venture in developing countries," said James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee.

Dunn said he directed the same words at President Reagan's decision nearly a decade ago to establish full diplomatic ties with the Vatican.

"The constitutional principle abandoned then continues to be ignored by Mr. Clinton's decision to maintain diplomatic ties with a church. I am deeply disappointed by this."

Dunn noted that the BJC, a Washington-based religious-liberty agency, has opposed "such flagrant entanglement between church and state" for more than half a century and will oppose Flynn's confirmation by the U.S. Senate.

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said the CLC is "saddened and chagrined" by Clinton's decision -- a decision made worse by Clinton's Baptist background.

"Such a decision by any president is bad, but coming from a Baptist president, it is even worse."

Land vowed to continue efforts to reverse the policy.

"Although history may demonstrate that Bill Clinton had the unique and perhaps last opportunity to reverse this terribly wrong policy, we will continue to call on this president and future presidents to restore a proper understanding of the First Amendment by breaking diplomatic relations with the Vatican."

Criticism of Clinton's decision also was leveled by Barry Lynn,

executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

"We are deeply disappointed that President Clinton has chosen to continue the official relationship between the United States government and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church," Lynn said. "The First Amendment of the Constitution forbids just such entanglement between the institutions of religion and the government."

Perhaps as predictable as Baptist opposition to the appointment was Catholic support for it.

Archbishop William Keeler of Baltimore, president of the United States Catholic Conference, lauded the appointment, describing Flynn as "a champion of justice and an eloquent spokesman for the poor and the marginalized in our land."

Keeler said it is gratifying that the United States and more than 100 other nations "recognize the value to our people of diplomatic relations with the Holy See, whose moral leadership on behalf of peace, justice, human development and human rights, has been so universally praised."

When Congress and President Reagan moved during 1983 and 1984 to establish diplomatic ties with the Vatican, some Catholic leaders expressed doubts about how much support the move enjoyed among U.S. Catholic bishops.

Today, with U.S.-Vatican ties in place, the situation is different, according to Jim Castelli, a veteran journalist and close watcher of Catholic affairs.

An attempt now to downgrade the diplomatic status between the United States and the Vatican would be perceived by the hierarchy and most U.S. Catholics "as a slight and a slap in the face," Castelli said.

Castelli described Flynn as "the most visible, best-connected person" to be named to the post.

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-- By Larry Chesser

House committee approves religious-freedom measure

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Less than a week after its reintroduction in Congress, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act has cleared its first legislative hurdle.

A House Judiciary panel voted unanimously March 17 to recommend passage of RFRA (H.R. 1308), a bill that would restore the stringent requirements government must meet to restrict the religious practice of U.S. citizens.

For three decades prior to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1990 ruling in *Employment Division vs. Smith*, the high court permitted government to interfere with religious practice only when it used the least restrictive means available to achieve a compelling governmental interest, such as the health and safety of citizens.

In the *Smith* decision, the court reversed itself by holding that generally applicable laws that infringed on religious practice no longer had to meet the strict requirements of the "compelling interest" test.

Without amendment or opposition, the House Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights voted to send RFRA to the full Judiciary Committee for consideration.

Before the panel approved the measure, chairman Don Edwards, D-Calif., emphasized that the measure would simply restore the protection for the free exercise of religion lost in the *Smith* ruling.

The swift, uncontested approval by the House panel provided a marked contrast to the more heated hearings and debate over RFRA in the previous session of Congress.

Despite solid support from an impressive coalition of U.S. religious and civil-liberties groups, the measure languished for months in the face of stiff opposition from the U.S. Catholic Conference and the National Right to Life Committee.

After sponsors added language clarifying that RFRA could not be used to attack churches' tax exemption or participation in government programs, the Catholic Conference recently endorsed the bill, giving it an unprecedented range of support from religious bodies.

Supporters include the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Baptist Joint Committee. President Bill Clinton has endorsed the measure.

Oliver Thomas, BJC general counsel and chairman of the coalition of religious and civil-liberties groups supporting RFRA, said committee action on the Senate version of the bill (S. 578) is expected as early as the week of March 21.

"The sponsors and the coalition are trying their best to get this bill to the president by April 13, the 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birthday," Thomas said. "What better way to celebrate this significant event."

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-- By Larry Chesser

Subcommittee approves
Freedom of Choice Act

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Suspending most debate, a House subcommittee approved March 18 an amended Freedom of Choice Act that would codify a woman's right to privacy in abortion decisions.

The House Civil and Constitutional Rights Subcommittee approved the bill on a 5-3 party-line vote after making one amendment. Most subcommittee members declined to make extensive remarks or to offer other anticipated amendments, stating that they will do so when the bill comes before the full Judiciary Committee.

The bill (H.R. 25) would codify the Supreme Court's 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision. Supporters of the bill say recent decisions by the high court have eroded the protections of Roe. Opponents counter that the bill goes beyond Roe and would allow abortion on demand throughout pregnancy.

The bill would bar states from restricting the right of a woman to choose to terminate a pregnancy before fetal viability (the point at which the fetus can live outside the womb) or at any time to protect the life or health of the woman. The bill provides an exemption for medical personnel who are conscientiously opposed to performing abortions.

The subcommittee eliminated one provision that would have allowed for the involvement of a "parent, guardian, or other responsible adult" before a minor could get an abortion. The amendment to remove this language was offered by Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y.

Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., offered and then withdrew an amendment to Nadler's that would have provided for parental consent/notification, rather than just "involvement."

Nadler's amendment prevailed 5-2, with one abstention.

Hyde offered another amendment to allow states to require that abortions be performed "only by licensed medical doctors and osteopaths." That measure

was defeated 5-3.

"This is a sad day for me," Hyde said. "We are legislating injustice here today, because the taking of somebody else's life is the ultimate injustice."

Rep. Patricia Schroeder, D-Colo., said she supports the effort to "solidify Roe" and to "stop the erosion" of a woman's right to choose by recent court decisions.

A similar measure (S. 25) has been introduced in the U.S. Senate. If Congress approves the bill, President Bill Clinton has said he will sign it.

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-- By Pam Parry

American denominations
face uncertain future

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP)--The American church has entered a "post-denominational" age, but what that era will look like remains to be seen, speakers said during a conference on "The American Denominational Future."

A variety of speakers at the March 12-13 conference in Louisville, Ky., described American religious denominations as being in transition between old and new forms.

"The signs are very clear ... denominations seem to be losing their direction," said Russell Richey, associate dean for academic programs at Duke Divinity School.

However, declaring denominationalism dead might be premature, Richey said, because the concept of denominations has nearly died four times before but lived on in new forms.

Richey and other speakers described a variety of changes facing American denominations. Prominent among the changes is decreasing denominational loyalty.

"There was a day when, if a denominational publishing house offered a program, we just took it and did it," noted D. L. Lowrie, pastor of First Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas, and former executive director of the Tennessee Baptist Convention. "There was no competition."

"But today, every agency of our Southern Baptist Convention has a competitor," he added, noting the options available to local churches are increasing rapidly.

Further, many denominations have lost the common purpose around which diverse people united in the first place, Richey said. "Denominations are losing their adhesive factor."

Other reasons speakers cited to explain the decline in American denominationalism included:

-- An erosion of regional cultural uniformity, such as what the South exerted on the Southern Baptist Convention for 100 years after the Civil War.

-- The influence of parachurch groups.

-- Campaigns of conservative forces within denominations against bureaucratic functions.

-- The rise of megachurches, which function as denominations unto themselves.

-- The denominational shift toward "regulatory agencies" which focus on rule-making, indicting and forcing adherence.

-- The change in America from a rural-based society to an urban-based

society.

-- Greater abilities to communicate among churches, nations and people.

-- The desire of modern churchgoers to support local missions causes them to do themselves rather than sending money for someone else to do missions somewhere else.

-- The fact that in modern society denominations and their churches must struggle to achieve the statistical successes that came so easily in the 1950s and '60s.

A likely alternative to denominationalism is an entrepreneurial model, where congregations shop for options, said Jim Brown, executive director of the General Assembly Council of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

Or churches might affiliate through "functional associations" rather than geographic associations, said William O'Brien, director of the Global Center at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School.

Churches of like mind and interests, whether located near each other or not, might cooperate on the specific areas they share in common, he explained. Although unthinkable a few years ago, such affiliations are possible today due to better communications and travel options, he said.

Post-denominational forms will be fashioned around niches rather than around the masses, said Nancy Ammerman, associate professor of sociology of religion at Emory University in Atlanta.

For example, rather than a denomination sponsoring "six mass-production seminaries," there might be demand for 20 or 30 smaller seminaries that focus on certain emphases, she said.

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Fellowship might become model
for future structures, speakers say

By Marv Knox and Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Can a new religious movement, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, survive in a post-denominational world?

Only if it remains flexible and sensitive to needs, participants in a conference on "The American Denominational Future" were told.

The closing decades of the 20th century have been hard on denominations, speaker after speaker said during the conference, sponsored by the Louisville Institute for the Study of Protestantism and American Culture.

The speakers cited examples -- from Southern Baptists to Presbyterians, Lutherans and Methodists -- to illustrate how denominational loyalty and cohesiveness have eroded during the past 30 years.

But the Fellowship -- created two years ago by Southern Baptist moderates disenfranchised by their convention's rightward shift -- is a model of what denominations might look like in the future, said Nancy Ammerman, a professor of sociology of religion at Emory University in Atlanta.

How the Fellowship defines itself in the coming months will determine its viability as a model, she said.

Two conservative forces are vying to keep the Fellowship from becoming a new model, Ammerman explained.

The first force comes from people who want the Fellowship to retain its identity as a caucus within the Southern Baptist Convention, she noted. However, this course is "neither viable nor likely," she said, predicting that the SBC's leadership might force the Fellowship to break away.

The second force is from people who want the Fellowship to recreate the "good ol' days" of the SBC, a model she called "SBC Jr."

But during those days, the SBC built upon trust, said William O'Brien. Days of trust are gone, he said, and he suggested new religious organizations build upon "functional associationalism."

That means working together through societies to do missions and ministry, provide theological education, and develop training materials, said O'Brien, director of the Global Center at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala.

"People are finding an affinity clustering," he said, and if it's not a permanent model for denominational structure, it's at least an interim model.

Bill Leonard, a church historian and director of the religion department at Samford University in Birmingham, agreed.

"If the Fellowship holds to the society method, it can succeed," he said. "But if it denominationalizes too quickly, I don't give it much of a chance."

The key will be providing potential members with choices -- a wide range of options for voluntary participation, he stressed.

That sentiment was echoed by Ammerman, who noted the whole spectrum of American organizational development is moving toward options. She suggested the Fellowship would do well to:

-- Offer specialized, flexible services to churches. "It should have a 'do it yourself' flavor about it," she said.

-- Use computer technology to match specific needs with specific services.

-- Assume laypeople have the skills to develop church programs to meet their needs, rather than imposing pre-packaged programs on them.

-- Work in coalitions and networks with other religious bodies rather than trying to do everything itself.

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Speakers search for 'center'
of Southern Baptist Convention

By Marv Knox

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Scholars searched for the magnetic "center" of the Southern Baptist Convention during a conference on American denominationalism in Louisville, Ky., March 12-13.

And while professors and pastors offered ideas about what has held and can hold Baptists together, a conservative SBC leader said the original center -- a pious pursuit of missions -- still holds.

A largely Baptist crowd converged on Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary for the meeting. Its theme was "The American Denominational Future: The Southern Baptist Case," and it was sponsored by the Louisville Institute for the Study of Protestantism and American Culture.

"The denominational center of the SBC was forged in the cultural ethos of the American South and the defeat in the Civil War, as well as through participation in the 'religion of the Lost Cause' and the prevailing racism of the region," said church historian Bill Leonard, who noted the SBC formed out of a split with northern Baptists in 1845 over the issue of slavery.

Along the way, that center was shaped by the denomination's successful programs, such as missions, Sunday school and centralized fund-raising, added Leonard, chairman of the religion department at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

But "the centrist coalition was so obsessed with avoiding schism and retaining numerical growth that it sowed the seeds of its own demise," he

asserted. "By retaining incompatible subgroups, the ultimate destruction of the old center was ensured.

"The once-impregnable center collapsed in the latter quarter of the 20th century. While something called the 'Southern Baptist Convention' continues to exist, it is merely a shell for an ever-fragmenting assortment of subgroups each as yet incapable of re-establishing a new center for the denomination or for itself."

The fragmentation that has marked the SBC in recent years came about because members of the convention's right wing "were willing to be divisive if necessary in order to create a theological rather than a programmatic center for the SBC," Leonard said.

His assertion of a new theological center received support from David Dockery, dean of the school of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

Dockery recounted the history of theological development within the convention, but ultimately concluded that Southern Baptists of the '90s "believe inerrancy cannot be ignored. ... It's part of the developing new center of the SBC."

An emerging leader of SBC conservatives insisted, however, that this trend is nothing new. Recent upheaval in the convention is the result of Baptists reclaiming their traditional heritage, said Jerry Sutton, pastor of Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn.

"Conservatives are the pietists" who have refocused the SBC on its early purposes -- baptisms and revivals, Sutton stressed. "'Priests rising up' explains the conservative resurgence in the SBC, representing the actual center of the convention."

Asked about a force that could hold today's Baptists together, Sutton responded, "It would have to be that which we can only do together and not separately -- missions."

But a longtime missions strategist for the SBC disagreed.

"Five years ago, I would have said missions is the glue that has held Southern Baptists together," said William O'Brien, former executive vice president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board and now director of the Global Center at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School. He cited a recent survey in which Southern Baptists ranked missions seventh out of a possible seven church priorities.

Now, O'Brien said, he realizes the denominational glue was trust rather than missions.

And in the SBC, trust is in short supply, speakers agreed.

Although made worse by its own particular political infighting, the breakdown of a denominational center in the SBC reflects a larger trend, said Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist of religion and professor at Emory University in Atlanta.

"The SBC has a crisis in confidence in an organization that has functioned since the 1920s," when its primary business and fund-raising functions were set, said Ammerman, whose recent research focuses on American organizational theory.

But that confidence breakdown is part of a pervasive "crisis of confidence in American denominations," she said. "It's no longer clear what organizations ought to be doing and how they should be doing it."

That doesn't really matter to most new Southern Baptists, said John Hewett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C., and immediate past moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Non-Baptists who join his church "never think about joining the SBC," Hewett said. "They're 'little-b' baptists" who belong to the Baptist denomination only because their current church is affiliated.

The pain of fractured identity and torn fellowship will continue to be intense for awhile but will get better later, a veteran pastor and denominational worker said.

"I'm pessimistic short-range and optimistic long-range," said D. L. Lowrie, pastor of First Baptist Church of Lubbock, Texas, and former executive director of the Tennessee Baptist Convention.

For awhile, Southern Baptists will continue to suffer from divisions, but eventually the bonds that historically drew them together will pull them back toward harmony, Lowrie predicted.

That may take more work than Southern Baptists realize, said Jim Brown, an executive with the Presbyterian Church (USA), which in 1983 reunited three groups that had been separated since the Civil War.

"The compromises required for reunion in denominations are so great," he said, "that the institutions created usually won't work."

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Gallup poll finds some nations
more 'Christian' than U.S.

By Mark Wingfield

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP)--While Christianity remains the primary religion of choice in the United States, residents of at least nine other nations claim a higher level of identification with Christianity.

However, Protestantism has its third-highest following in the U.S. among 19 countries surveyed by Gallup International last year.

The survey, reported in the latest newsletter of the Princeton Religion Research Center, measured religious preferences in the Americas, Western Europe and parts of Asia and Africa.

Countries studied include India, Nigeria, the Philippines, South Korea, Turkey, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Mexico, the United States, Uruguay, Denmark, Finland, West Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Netherlands and Portugal.

In the U.S., 82 percent of the population identify Christianity as their religious preference, the survey found. A detailed breakdown shows 56 percent of the population Protestants, 25 percent Roman Catholics, 1 percent Orthodox, 2 percent Jews, 5 percent other faiths, 2 percent agnostics, 2 percent atheists and 7 percent with no preference.

Countries with a higher proportion of residents identifying with Christianity are the Philippines (97 percent), Bolivia (84 percent), Chile (89 percent), Mexico (93 percent), Denmark (88 percent), Finland (86 percent), West Germany (85 percent), Ireland (96 percent) and Portugal (87 percent).

Many of these countries are culturally Roman Catholic strongholds, such as Mexico where 86 percent of the population call themselves Catholics.

Among the countries studied, India, Turkey and South Korea stand out as having few Christians. India's population is 90 percent Hindu and 4 percent Muslim. Turkey's population is 97 percent Muslim. South Korea's population largely has no preference, although 28 percent are Hindu and 27 percent Christian.

The number of atheists and agnostics identified in all countries studied was relatively small. Uruguay registered by far the highest proportion of atheists and agnostics, with 3 percent of the population claiming to be agnostic and 7 percent claiming to be atheists.

However, the survey did not include any of the former Communist block. The number of people with no religious preference was highest in South Korea (41 percent), the Netherlands (35 percent), Great Britain (21 percent), Canada (15 percent), Uruguay (14 percent) and West Germany (12 percent).

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EDITOR'S NOTE: There was no ABP issue for March 16.

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