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Vestal, others want to rally
grass-roots support for WMU

By Greg Warner

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Five Baptist leaders, led by Houston pastor Daniel Vestal, have launched a petition campaign calling for "an outpouring of support" from individual Baptists for Woman's Missionary Union, which the leaders say has been the target of "abusive remarks" and "alarming pressure" recently.

Woman's Missionary Union, the Southern Baptist Convention's mission-support auxiliary, has been criticized by the SBC's conservative leaders since Jan. 10, when it adopted a plan to offer non-financial support to non-SBC groups that do mission work, including the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

In its 105-year existence, WMU has supported the SBC's two mission boards almost exclusively. The powerful SBC Executive Committee in February passed a resolution asking WMU to return to its "exclusive relationship" with the SBC Home and Foreign Mission boards.

Vestal and the others are distributing copies of a one-page "tributes to WMU" and asking individual Baptists to sign the statements, which will be presented to WMU June 12 during the organization's annual meeting in Houston. That meeting precedes the annual Southern Baptist Convention, also in Houston, where the WMU's changes are expected to generate considerable debate.

Vestal, pastor of Tallwood Baptist Church, said his group's objective is not to get the SBC to take any action or to pre-empt any SBC action. But he said the organizers are concerned about the Executive Committee resolution, which also was adopted by the HMB. "We're concerned or we wouldn't be doing this," he said.

Vestal commended WMU's track record of supporting missions and added, "We don't want that to be impaired in the future."

"Our effort is to call forth Baptist people to be affirming (of WMU)," he explained. "They are looking for some kind of way to express their concern ... and what we're trying to do is give them some avenue."

Vestal and the other four leaders conducted a conference-call press conference with more than a dozen Baptist newspaper editors April 8 to unveil their tribute and plans to distribute it. The group has opened a toll-free telephone line to coordinate distribution of the petitions and expects to buy ads in Baptist newspapers.

The tribute commends WMU for 100-plus years of support for Baptist missions. "Hundreds of millions of dollars have been given because WMU has challenged, educated and inspired Southern Baptist people who seek to fulfill the Great Commission. Accordingly, the Woman's Missionary Union's integrity of commitment is unquestionable."

"It is inconceivable," the statement adds, "that any person would question the WMU's intent or ability to expand its mission support to reach the people of all nations."

The statement bemoans the fact that "abusive remarks" against WMU have appeared in secular and Baptist newspapers. Vestal declined to identify those remarks. "The statement does not finger anybody.... We're trying to be positive."

One widely publicized comment from California pastor John Jackson, chairman of the FMB trustees, said WMU's offer to work with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is tantamount to adultery. "Their attitude is, 'Why can't we have both bedfellows? We don't see anything wrong with going to bed with CBF as well as the SBC,'" Jackson said in January.

The tribute also says WMU "has been subjected to alarming pressure to alter that which has served God so wonderfully well for more than a century," an apparent reference to the suggestion from some conservative leaders, including former SBC president Adrian Rogers, that WMU permit the SBC to elect the members of its governing board. Those members now are chosen by state-level WMU participants.

Richmond pastor James Flamming, one of the five co-sponsors of the tribute project, said the issue for SBC leaders is one of control.

"What the fundamentalist leaders can't control they want to destroy," he told participants in the conference call. "All the women want to do is missions. They're not interested in politics."

Flamming, pastor of First Baptist Church in Richmond, said control also was at issue in 1888, when WMU was formed over the objections of male messengers to the SBC, which was meeting in Richmond at the time. Prohibited from participating in the SBC, the women held WMU's organizational meeting in a Methodist church in Richmond.

"For the men the issue was control," Flamming said. "... Now we're kind of back at the same place again where, for the male-dominated fundamentalist leadership, the issue is still control."

Flamming said WMU, by voting to work with all Southern Baptists regardless of political involvement, is asking SBC leaders "to leave them alone and let them do what they do so well."

Joining Vestal and Flamming in sponsoring the tribute are Dick Maples, president of Texas Baptists and pastor of First Baptist Church of Bryan, Texas; Quinn Pugh, executive director of the New York Baptist Convention; and Ellen Teague, president of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and a member of the task force that drafted the changes approved by WMU in January.

Vestal, twice an unsuccessful candidate for SBC president, disputed the suggestion that the five leaders are identified with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or the SBC's moderate faction. He said the other four participants are all respected Southern Baptist leaders whose primary objective is the "extension of God's kingdom."

"There's nothing political in this," said Dick Maples, who said he is not a member of the Fellowship but merely "a mainstream, conservative

Southern Baptist" who appreciates WMU.

Maples said he has been "rather startled by all the uproar" over the WMU changes, which he said changes little in the way Southern Baptists have been working with non-SBC groups. "We ought to join hands with all who claim Christ as Lord...."

"I shudder to think where we would be today without WMU and their emphasis on missions," he added.

New York executive Pugh said his appreciation for WMU started when, as a young pastor in the Northeast, he benefitted from the mission support of WMU, particularly money raised through the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for home missions.

Pugh said that money is especially valuable in places like New York, where Southern Baptist work is newer. "Without this generous monetary support, our 400 congregations could not be about their assignment in this needy and influential area of the country."

"It is my judgment that no structure exists among Baptists with the ability and clarity of vision to support and undergird our Home Mission Board and Foreign Mission Board ... (other) than Woman's Missionary Union," Pugh said.

Teague commended WMU for encouraging her in "the development and use of my gifts."

Vestal said he informed Dellanna O'Brien, executive director of WMU, about his group's plans. While she expressed appreciation, he said, "I want to make real clear this ... did not originate with her office."

In an interview after the conference call, Vestal declined to say who initiated the tribute project. "There are several individuals personally involved. It's unfair to single out one individual." He confirmed, however, that John Baugh, a member of his church and longtime moderate activist, is involved.

Asked if Baugh, a retired millionaire grocer, will fund the project, Vestal said several individuals are involved in funding. "It's safe to say he'll be one of them."

WMU executive O'Brien and other WMU leaders were in Houston making arrangements for the organization's annual meeting and were unavailable for comment.

David Hankins, chairman of the SBC Executive Committee, discounted the efforts of Vestal's group.

"The Executive Committee passed a strong resolution of affirmation for Woman's Missionary Union's historic witness and work among Southern Baptists," said Hankins, a pastor in Lake Charles, La. "If they are affirming the WMU, we've already done that."

The toll-free phone number for the "Tributes to the WMU" project is (800) 580-7729.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Al Mohler, president-elect of Southern Seminary, held a dialogue session with Southern students April 8. The story will be sent to CompuServe users Friday, April 9.

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Masonic dispute disrupts St. Louis congregation

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- The controversy between Southern Baptists and Masons, which has attracted attention on the national level, has now surfaced in a local church, contributing to the resignation of a St. Louis pastor.

Stony Shaw, pastor of Parkway Baptist Church for 12 years, resigned Feb. 28 in part because of a dispute over the involvement of Masons in church leadership positions.

"I am not angry at any Mason, but I am categorically opposed to Freemasonry and its deception," the former pastor said. Shaw said the Masonic issue was only one factor in his decision to leave Parkway, but he added he does not plan to seek another Southern Baptist pastorate.

Last November Parkway Baptist adopted a policy -- supported by Shaw -- that prohibited Masons from serving as deacons or members of the church staff. The vote, 148-100, forced one deacon to resign and stirred an emotional debate among church members, including Masons and their families.

"Bitterness erupted from both sides in this meeting," said church member Arthur Swope in a letter to the Home Mission Board. "... This has really put a heavy spirit on the church at Parkway."

The HMB concluded a study of Freemasonry in March, adopting a report that said some Masonic teachings are incompatible with Christianity. The HMB stopped short of condemning Freemasonry, however, and said the issue of Masonic membership should be decided by individual Baptists.

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.

Critics insist those private practices are inspired by pagan rituals and occultism and that they 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. They say criticism of Masonic teachings are intentional distortions designed to make Masons appear evil.

The Southern Baptist Convention last June instructed the Home Mission Board to conduct the study of Freemasonry and make a report. The HMB's conclusions, approved by trustees March 17, will be presented to the SBC in June for adoption.

Parkway Baptist became involved in the Masonic dispute after a Sunday school teacher brought the subject to Shaw's attention. The teacher had used literature that said Christians should avoid Freemasonry, and some members of the class protested.

Shaw took the matter to the deacons last June and they agreed to study Freemasonry.

"The more we studied it, the more we felt it was very cultic and very anti-Christian," the former pastor said. The committee reviewed materials from modern Freemasonry critics, as well as the works of the late Albert Pike, a Masonic writer.

After the vote, members made their feelings known in different ways. One deacon served the Lord's Supper while wearing a Masonic lapel pin, Shaw said. "It literally amazed me that men would defend a man-made organization over the church of the Living God."

Shaw expressed regret that the issue generated such hard feelings. He

noted that some older women in the church even became fearful that their deceased husbands had gone to hell because they were Masons.

Although the HMB study concluded Freemasonry is not a religion, Shaw said he is convinced it is. He cited Freemasonry's emphasis on oaths and its concept of an inclusive God called the "Great Architect" -- teachings Shaw said are contrary to Scripture and Christian principles.

Men who downplay the seriousness of Masonic rituals are deceived, Shaw said. "I think their intent is good, but they're connected to evil."

Shaw claimed that opponents of the church's anti-Mason policy misrepresented it. "We tried to make it a truth issue, but they made it into a personality issue," he said.

Arthur Lewis, a Mason and a former deacon at Parkway, said Freemasonry was not the real issue. "I believe Jesus is my high priest," he said. "Does a minister have a right to determine who's a Christian or who's not? That's the whole problem here."

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-- By Tim Palmer

Moral consensus needed to heal
justice system, Colson says

By Mark Wingfield

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- America's criminal justice system is in shambles because the nation has lost its moral consensus, Charles Colson said in a speech to the National Press Club March 11.

Colson, who gained notoriety for his role in the Nixon administration and Watergate scandal, is the founder of Prison Fellowship. He began the ministry organization in 1976, after becoming a Christian while in prison for his role in Watergate.

Today Prison Fellowship has a staff of 300 people working with 50,000 volunteers in 54 nations. For his work with this openly Christian program, Colson recently received the prestigious Templeton Prize for progress in religion.

Colson called America's criminal justice system the one case where he believes euthanasia is necessary. The system is terminally ill, doesn't work and needs to be killed, he said.

He cited statistics to show that the U.S. prison population has exploded in the past 20 years, making America the nation with the highest ratio of inmates to citizens in the world.

During a period when Americans have spent \$37 billion to build new prisons, violent crime has increased 75 percent, he said.

Prisoners put in the care of the criminal justice system are left to waste away both in body and spirit, Colson reported. "I've seen the failure and the bankruptcy of the American justice system in the faces of the people I lived with when I was a prisoner and in the thousands of faces of people I've seen in prison since then."

Responsibility for this failure "rests squarely with Republicans and Democrats alike," Colson said.

He charged that neither the liberals' push for "rehabilitation" nor the conservatives' push to "lock them up and throw away the key" has been correct.

"Rehabilitation has turned out to be the most costly myth ever foisted on the American public," he said.

Likewise, he added, "the deterrent theory doesn't work because fear does not stop people from doing things. If it did, there wouldn't be anybody in America who would smoke."

Both approaches have failed because they ignored moral behavior, Colson said. "They've passed over our character. They've neglected our soul. And that's where crime is rooted."

He cited several scholarly studies about the cause of crime, including one which found crime is caused by people making wrong moral decisions.

"What the crime problem boils down to is concepts that are foreign to our lips and discourse in America today, like morality, character -- terms that almost sound quaint," Colson said. "The root of the problem of crime in America today is the breakdown of character in the individual and the resulting breakdown of character in society at large."

Colson offered three suggestions for correcting the criminal justice problem:

-- Treat people as individuals. Prison Fellowship's programs, for example, focus on transforming individual lives through the power of Jesus Christ, he said.

-- Chart a new course. "We need a balanced criminal justice system," he said, "one that charts a third way between the liberals and the conservatives, one that offers real punishment but also real redemption."

For example, people convicted of non-violent crimes should be channeled into community service and work programs that allow them to do something useful for themselves and for society, he said.

He cited Minnesota as an example of a state that has had such a program since 1973. As a result, Colson said, Minnesota now has the second-lowest crime rate in the nation and spends only \$21 per citizen per year on corrections, compared to \$77 per citizen per year in California.

-- Restore a moral consensus. "If we're going to solve crime, we need a moral response that deals with our nation's crumbling moral consensus," he said. "We've got to teach the difference between right and wrong."

No society can survive without a moral consensus or common standard of truth, he suggested. "It's the agreement that a society is governed more by transcendent truths than by the sum of individual choices."

This moral consensus must come from deep within people rather than from the law, Colson said. "The goal needs to be not just reform but reformation."

Authentic religion provides the motivation and power for people to make moral choices, he explained.

Yet at the very time when the influence of religion is needed most, forces are "endeavoring to scrub our lives of any religious reference," he said. "We are jettisoning the life rafts as we are setting sail on a very stormy sea."

Speaking directly to the reporters at the National Press Club luncheon, Colson called for a truce between the "media elite" and the "religious right."

"We basically need each other for the greater good of society," he said.

Colson suggested Christians need to do a better job of explaining why religious influence is important for moral living and that the press needs to take a more serious look at the positive contributions religious life makes.

Religious aberrations, like cult leader David Koresh, should not be the only religious news told, he said.

"Do you judge all Christians by that?" he asked. "No, not any more than you judge all journalists by what NBC does to blow up a truck to make a good television show."

**Conservative group urges prayers
at graduations, but others object**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice is conducting a national campaign to encourage prayers at public-school graduation services, but church-state specialists say school officials and students should be wary of the effort.

At an April 5 news conference in Washington, D.C., Robertson's legal group urged school officials to permit students to vote on the graduation-prayer issue. The group distributed a three-page bulletin that gave its interpretation of the 1992 Supreme Court decision that ruled such prayers unconstitutional.

The center mailed the bulletin to 14,658 public-school superintendents across the country and to more than 300,000 "concerned citizens." The bulletin asserts the high court ruled that school officials could not invite clergy to pray at commencement but that students could vote to pray.

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, said: "Prayer and religious speech can be included at public high school graduation ceremonies as long as it is student-led and student-initiated. A student's First Amendment right to free speech does not end when he or she stands up to get a diploma."

The ACLJ is involved in disputes concerning graduation prayer in more than 130 school districts, with cases in more than 25 states.

In addition to the bulletin, the Robertson group is launching a national advertising campaign to encourage students to pray at ceremonies this spring.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, called the effort "a disgraceful attempt to evade the clear intent of the Supreme Court."

"Pat Robertson's legal group is trying to mislead school boards about the high court's wise and proper decision on graduation prayers. School board members should turn to their own attorneys and other objective legal experts on this matter -- not to Robertson's ideologically driven lawyers."

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, sharply criticized the campaign.

"The approach approximates medieval majoritarianism. From the Peace of Augsburg came the guideline 'Whose the rule, his the religion' as the mean measure for freedom of conscience. The Bill of Rights on the other hand is blatantly counter-majoritarian, designed to defend the religious freedom of individuals, even the minutest minority."

A BJC attorney said that the ACLJ's bulletin gives "too pinched an interpretation" of Lee vs. Weisman, the graduation-prayer ruling.

"It's true that the decision was controlled by the facts before the court, but the infirmity there is not necessarily cured by running a student in to do the praying instead of a rabbi," said Brent Walker, BJC associate general counsel. "As long as the ceremony remains a school-sponsored event, there is still a problem."

Walker also criticized the bulletin for giving too much weight to a 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision that allowed student majorities to sponsor commencement prayer. He said the circuit court decision was at odds with the high court's ruling, adding that it had been sent back by the high court for reconsideration in light of the Weisman decision.

The ACLJ's guidelines stress "non-sectarian, non-proselytizing prayer," which raises theological questions, Walker said.

"I don't know how in the world you have a serious prayer that doesn't

come out of someone's faith tradition, and if it says anything at all, how can it not proselytize to some extent."

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-- By Pam Parry

Commemorative march
on Washington planned

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Focusing on the central message of slain civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., the New Coalition of Conscience announced plans for the 30th Anniversary March on Washington, scheduled for Saturday, Aug. 28.

Coretta Scott King, president of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, said the commemorative march will help keep her husband's dream alive. In 1963, King led a march on Washington to help secure civil rights for African-Americans.

At an April 8 press conference, she said the broad-based coalition of more than 200 organizations has not ironed out many details for the effort, but that a series of organizational meetings and mobilization efforts are in process.

The event will focus on the theme "Justice and Jobs for All Americans," emphasizing a relationship between joblessness and violence.

Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and co-convener with Coretta King, said: "We will call for renewed commitment to full employment and expanded economic opportunities. The violence of joblessness is a contributing factor to the despair and desperation that often leads to violent responses.

"Violence in the suites precipitates violence in the streets," he continued. "Economic violence has exported jobs and expanded poverty."

James Dunn, Baptist Joint Committee executive director and a co-convener, said the commemoration of the original march will focus on King's legacy of non-violence and love.

Noting King's Baptist roots, Dunn pointed to an editorial by Michael Smith of the Columbia Missourian as capturing the essence of that legacy: "King was the first public figure in American history to make love the central theme of his message. In the face of beatings, attack dogs, fire hoses and imprisonment, he refused to meet hate with hate, but responded with love."

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-- By Pam Parry

CBF of Georgia adopts
bylaws, elects officers

STONE MOUNTAIN, Ga. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia gained official standing March 20 as 550-600 people adopted a set of bylaws for the group.

The meeting was held at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain.

The group has organized over the past year as the state organization affiliated with the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The Fellowship

is composed of moderate Southern Baptists who disagree with the current conservative direction of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Bylaws for the CBF of Georgia call for a slate of officers as well as a coordinating council, which will conduct business of the organization between meetings.

The group will meet three times annually -- at the group's annual general assembly; in conjunction with the CBF's national general assembly; and in conjunction with the Georgia Baptist Convention annual meeting in November.

Principal speakers during the March 20 meeting were Keith Parks, missions coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; and Dorothy Pryor, retired executive director of Baptist Woman's Missionary Union of Georgia, who gave a report and answered questions on recent changes adopted by the national WMU.

Officers, elected at a November meeting and reaffirmed as part of the adoption of bylaws, are Billy Nimmons, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dalton, moderator; Pearl DuVall, member of First Baptist Church of Cordele, vice moderator; and John Baker, pastor of Druid Hills Baptist Church, Atlanta, clerk-treasurer.

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