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Elder, Hobbs ask state leaders  
to support 'shared power' plan

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Lloyd Elder and Herschel Hobbs have called a conference of state convention leaders on the eve of the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting for what they say is a last-ditch effort to save the SBC from splitting or dwindling away.

In a telephone conference call with Baptist news media June 3, the two men indicated they believe constitutional amendments will be proposed at this year's SBC annual meeting June 15-17 to put control of the denomination in the hands of "grass-roots" Baptists.

These motions likely will arise out of response to a 16-page research report on SBC trends Elder released in May. Elder, former president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, contends in a cover letter to the report that the SBC must be energized by a "modern-day missionary movement" to survive.

Hobbs, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City and a former SBC president, issued a public plea in February for reconciliation in the SBC. He called for shared governance between conservatives, who have captured control of the 15 million-member SBC, and disenfranchised moderates, who have formed their own missions-sending organization in response.

Hobbs and Elder met together in Oklahoma City May 31, they said, and decided they were pursuing the same agenda. So they mailed invitations June 2 to all state convention presidents, state convention board chairmen and state convention executive directors to a dialogue session June 14 in Houston.

The meeting will be held at the Four Seasons Hotel from 8-10 p.m., just hours before the SBC convenes its annual meeting Tuesday morning, June 15.

Elder's research highlights "critical" statistical trends in SBC membership and contributions that will force the SBC to layoff missionaries and close down agencies and institutions, possibly by the year 2000, unless

cooperation is restored.

As a result of Elder's extensive research on SBC trends, he and Hobbs are suggesting amending the SBC constitution and bylaws to create shared governance between state convention leaders and nationally elected SBC leaders.

Their proposals would:

-- Involve state conventions in the nomination of half the people to serve on SBC boards, commissions and committees.

-- Change how messengers qualify for the SBC annual meeting.

-- Increase the maximum number of messengers from a church from 10 to 20.

-- Have the SBC's president and first vice president be elected for two years and alternate between laypeople and ordained ministers.

-- Have the convention be held every two years and include simultaneous regional conventions through television hookups.

In the conference call, Elder and Hobbs said they do not intend to propose these changes as motions, but they believe such motions will be made by other messengers -- perhaps the state leaders.

Both men said they would be glad to speak to the proposals once they are introduced.

Hobbs, who is 86 years old and esteemed as an elder statesman by many Baptists, said this is his final attempt to be a peacemaker in the SBC.

"I want it at least to be in the record that I tried," he explained.

"I see no end to this, except if it keeps on like it is we're either going to drain ourselves dry of power or we're going to have a division," Hobbs said. "I'm convinced we cannot get a quick fix. We tried that and it has failed."

Both Hobbs and Elder admitted they would be surprised if the conservative powerbrokers who have assumed leadership in the SBC would relinquish that control, as their plan would require.

However, change is sometimes necessary for survival, Hobbs said. "The seven last words of the dying church are 'We never did it that way before.' The same applies to a convention as well."

A precedent already exists for involving state conventions in national nominations. For two years following World War II, members of the Committee on Nominations (then called the Committee on Boards, Commissions and Standing Committees) were chosen from a list of three persons nominated by state convention caucuses held during the annual SBC meeting.

If the Elder-Hobbs proposals fail, the SBC and its dissident group known as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship ought to go ahead and part company, Hobbs said.

"I hope there's not going to be a division," he said, "but if it's going to come, the sooner the better."

Elder said he has received overwhelmingly positive response to his report and recommendations, with only two or three negative letters. State convention leaders and other "grass-roots" Baptists are tired of the SBC's internal squabbling and affirm the call for a new missionary movement, he said.

But for this plan to succeed, it must be embraced by thousands of average Baptists, Elder and Hobbs said.

"The two groups who are at odds with one another ... have refused to get together and work this out," Hobbs said. "So I think it's time for some of us who aren't on either side to get together and work this out."

"If there's not a will on the part of Southern Baptist people to stop the controversy, then it will not be done," Elder added.

Elder said he had received a cordial phone call from the Fellowship's leader, Cecil Sherman, after his report went out. He has not heard from SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman, he said.

Hobbs said he received a phone call from Chapman moments before the conference call with reporters was to begin. Chapman told Hobbs what he and Elder were doing was "divisive," Hobbs said.

Chapman is a former SBC president elected as part of the so-called "conservative resurgence" who rose to his institutional post as part of that same process. He declined to comment on Elder's proposals when they were first released.

However, after the June 3 conference call, Chapman issued a statement calling Elder's plan "unworkable" and "a total departure from time-honored, historic Southern Baptist practice."

Chapman said giving state conventions power to elect national leaders is connectionalism, a practice that has been "strongly rejected from the beginning of the Southern Baptist Convention." Further, he said, it "would drive the controversy deeper into the state conventions."

While Elder's research pinpoints "some unhappy trends" among Baptists, Chapman said, it ignores other signs of progress, such as growth in membership, church starts, overseas baptisms and contributions to home missions. "... Our sky is not falling. Southern Baptists are on the mend."

Hobbs said he has not taken sides in the controversy in the past and will die a Southern Baptist. However, he accused Chapman and other conservative leaders of violating the SBC constitution and the directives of SBC messengers by making one-sided appointments to trustee boards.

In the most recent round of appointments, supporters of the Fellowship were excluded from any leadership positions. According to Hobbs, Chapman defended those appointments, saying the SBC presidents have responded to God's leadership in making their appointments.

"That's papacy, one man saying 'I think I know what's best for Southern Baptists,'" Hobbs said.

Chapman said he was shocked that Hobbs would liken the actions of SBC presidents to those of a pope. "... I simply meant that every SBC president does his best to do, under the leadership of God's Spirit, what he believes to be best for the convention."

The Fellowship's Sherman, meanwhile, said he sees some merit in the Elder-Hobbs proposal but is skeptical the SBC's current leaders would surrender the power necessary to make it work.

"If Lloyd Elder's plans were taken literally, and if they were written into the constitution of the SBC, fundamentalism would negotiate away the advantage they have gained in political contests," Sherman explained.

"There probably is more wishful thinking in this, and there is more nostalgia, than there is prospect," he said.

However, it's not wise to say never, Sherman added. "God has ways of working that are beyond our understanding." But while Fellowship members want to be open to God's leading, they "ought not be gullible," given their experience in the SBC since 1979, he said.

**Baptist Center for Ethics elects  
second professional staff member**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Gene Lovelace has been unanimously elected by the board of directors of the Baptist Center for Ethics to become the associate director of the Nashville-based ethics organization.

Lovelace, minister of Christian education and church administration at Bayshore Baptist Church in Tampa, Fla., becomes the second professional staff member of the 21-month-old network of moderate Baptist ethicists.

The other staffer, center director Robert Parham, said Lovelace will help the organization provide "positive, practical and high-quality ethics resources and services to Baptist congregations."

Lovelace also will try to develop a network of Baptist educators interested in "a pro-active, Bible-centered approach to teaching and modeling local church ethics," Parham said. He begins work Aug. 1.

Lovelace said BCE has succeeded in establishing both credibility and national visibility. "Now the center must move quickly into its next level of growth by meeting the needs and demands of Baptist congregations....," he said.

"Gene provides our young organization with the experience, contacts and skills necessary for BCE to become a primary provider of ethics material for use in local churches," said David Hull, chair of BCE's board of directors and pastor of First Baptist Church in Laurens, S.C.

Lovelace, 38, was a founding member and on the board of directors of the center. He served as minister of Christian education at Peachtree Baptist Church in Atlanta from 1979 to 1983 and Immanuel Baptist Church in Nashville from 1983 to 1991.

A graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Carson-Newman College, Lovelace serves on the board of advising editors of Smyth & Helwys Publishing Co. and has written for its Formations curriculum series.

He is married to Carolyn Cain, and they have two children.

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**Richmond Seminary  
awards first degrees**

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Two years after opening its doors, the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (Va.) produced its first graduates. Nine students received master of divinity degrees May 28.

The graduates, all transfers from other seminaries -- including six from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary -- received a standing ovation from the audience of about 400 at Ginter Park Baptist Church in Richmond.

"We come not only to celebrate your graduation, but also to recognize your courage in coming to a young school as its first students," President Tom Graves told the graduates.

Graduation speaker Hardy Clemons, pastor of First Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., called on students to be the "right kind of rebels..., those who have the imagination and courage to color outside the lines in these days of creedal conformity, who are willing to honor the rich and radical heritage of Baptist Christians and march to the beat of a different drummer."

The seminary presented a plaque to the Greenville church recognizing it

as the site where the Alliance of Baptists voted in March 1989 to begin the new school. The church also was the birthplace of Southern Baptists' first seminary 130 years earlier, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which opened in 1859.

"To see the emergings of fruition in this first graduating class, when I stood in our sanctuary in Greenville four short years ago and, with fear and trembling, voted to launch our vessel on this voyage ... reaffirms my faith in the God who is not only God of structure and order, but also God of wonderful surprises and serendipities," Clemons added.

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-- By Beth McMahan

America at 'defining moment'  
on morals, Bauer says

LEXINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- America stands at a "defining moment" over moral values, a moment as significant as the American Revolution or the Civil War, a key spokesman for the "family values" movement said in Kentucky May 27.

Gary Bauer, a Kentucky native who served in the Reagan administration, heads the Washington-based Family Research Council, the national public-policy arm of James Dobson's Focus on the Family ministries. Bauer is a frequent guest on Dobson's nationally syndicated radio program.

"In the history of any nation, there come defining moments, times when people are forced to decide which direction they will go," Bauer said in his address at Southland Christian Church in Lexington, Ky.

He cited the American Revolution and the Civil War as examples of such times.

"We in 1993 are in one of those defining moments," he continued. "We must now decide, are we going to continue down the path of the last 30 years of unbridled individualism ... or get back to the idea of order ... and of God's principles?"

An example of this struggle, he explained, is deciding how Americans will define what constitutes a family. He said the pro-homosexual lobby is on the verge of destroying America by defining family "to mean anything."

Bauer drew sustained applause when he drove this point home. "Somebody needs to tell the president he was elected to deal with the economy, not to force the radical agenda of the gay rights people on us and on our children," he said.

Before heading the Family Research Council, Bauer was director of policy development and an undersecretary in the U.S. Department of Education during the Reagan administration.

During a question-and-answer period, one woman wanted to know if Bauer had been able to talk face to face with the president.

"You mean this president?" he asked in astonishment, explaining that the Clinton administration views him and the Family Research Council as "political enemies."

However, Bauer assured the audience he believes the "family values" movement is growing strong enough that a president who supports its agenda will be elected to the White House soon.

He stopped just short of criticizing the Reagan and Bush administrations for not delivering on campaign promises to the Religious Right. The next time conservative Christians support a candidate, Bauer said, "we need to ask for

a price."

"That individual cannot expect us to work our hearts out for him, give our money and talk to our neighbors, only to get the back of his hand," he asserted.

Bauer said his experience during the Reagan years taught him that while the president may support "family values," others around him may not.

"My experience at the White House was bittersweet," he said. "Any time I could get an idea directly to the president, I won. If I had to go through the layers between me and the president, I would not win."

He said his agenda with the president often was derailed by White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan.

During his Lexington address, Bauer touched on a number of issues, including abortion, school prayer, sex education and how to influence elected officials.

Bauer urged Christians to stand up for biblical values in government and to vote for candidates who support those values. He said the gay-rights and abortion-rights groups have done a better job of making their voices heard than have conservative Christians.

"There are more of us than there are of the other side," he declared. "If we do these things, we will win."

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-- By Mark Wingfield

High court declines to hear  
Pledge of Allegiance case

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court declined June 1 to review a lower-court ruling that Illinois may require public school teachers to lead the Pledge of Allegiance as long as students are not forced to participate.

The 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that a 1979 Illinois statute authorizing public elementary schools to have students recite the pledge daily did not violate the religion clauses of the First Amendment. The pledge has included the words "under God" since 1954.

Robert Sherman filed suit in 1988 on behalf of his son, Richard, who was then a first grader in Wheeling Township, Ill. Sherman, president of an atheist group called the Society of Separationists Inc., contended that the Illinois law violated the free-exercise clause because it required public school students to participate in the pledge. He further argued that the teacher-led recital tended to establish religion -- also a First Amendment violation.

Coerced readings of the pledge would pose free-speech and free-exercise problems, the three-judge panel said, but the court concluded the Illinois law was not coercive. The law says that the pledge "shall by recited each school day by pupils" but does not stipulate all students, the court said. With no penalty written in the law, such as expulsion from school, the court said students were free to remain silent but not to prevent others from reciting the pledge. Any peer pressure students may feel to participate does not justify silencing others, the court added.

Brent Walker, associate general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, said: "Statements about God in our public discourse -- as opposed to state-sponsored prayers to God -- are not constitutionally offensive. A reference

to God in the pledge does not amount to an endorsement of religion by the state."

The appeals court did not apply the three-part "Lemon test" the Supreme Court has used to determine establishment-clause cases because it said that last year's graduation prayer ruling in Lee vs. Weisman left the two-decades-old test in doubt. Instead, the appeals court examined the intent of the authors of the constitution and statements in previous Supreme Court cases. The lower court held that neither the constitution's authors nor the court intended ceremonial invocations of God to be viewed as establishment.

"A very troubling aspect of the decision," Walker said, "is the 7th Circuit's blithe assertion that Lemon can now be ignored by the inferior federal courts. Lee vs. Weisman did not overrule Lemon. But even under Lemon, the case would have come out the same way."

Under Lemon, government policies must have a secular purpose, neither advance nor inhibit religion and avoid excessive entanglement with religion.

The case is Robert Sherman vs. Community Consolidated School District 21 of Wheeling Township.

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-- By Pam Parry

Non-profit community  
affected by tax bill

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Although the budget battle between Congress and the White House has focused on taxes, the recently approved budget package contains several items that affect charitable giving.

By just six votes, the U.S. House of Representatives approved the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (H.R. 2264) for fiscal year 1994. The U.S. Senate is expected to consider the measure after it returns from recess June 7.

The tax package would make it more attractive for Americans to donate gifts of appreciated property to charitable institutions. Appreciated property includes real estate, stocks and tangible items such as art and collectibles whose value rose after being acquired. The bill would repeal a 1986 provision that subjected the appreciated portion of such gifts to a special tax.

Representatives of charitable groups, including Baptist organizations, say the 1986 tax provision has caused a decline in large gifts to universities, hospitals and other institutions. The new provision is expected to increase those gifts because the tax deduction would equal the full fair market value of the donated property.

Another provision permanently extends present law that limits itemized deductions, including charitable contributions, for higher income individuals. Itemized deductions for high-income taxpayers are reduced by an amount equaling 3 percent of their adjusted gross income in excess of \$100,000. Under current law the 3 percent floor is scheduled to expire at the end of 1995.

The bill also includes a provision for reporting and substantiation of charitable gifts. Taxpayers would need written receipts for any charitable gift of \$750 or more. The bill also requires a charitable organization to

tell the donor, when a contribution is made partly in exchange for goods or services, the amount that is and is not deductible.

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-- By Pam Parry

Baptist congressman introduces  
'choice' bill for DC schools

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Texas Baptist congressman introduced May 26 a bill that would provide students in the District of Columbia vouchers to attend the public, private or religious school of their choice.

The bill, introduced by Rep. Thomas DeLay, R-Texas, notes that D.C. schools had a high school graduation rate of less than 62 percent in 1990, ranking 48th among the 50 states and one district.

The measure stipulates that a parent or legal guardian of an elementary or secondary student who lives in the district is eligible for a voucher that equals the cost of the average per-student expenditure. The bill also says that the child must attend an accredited school.

In the past, similar bills that would channel public tax money to private and religious schools have been found objectionable and were defeated by Congress.

"This is another ill-advised attempt to do good while flouting the First Amendment's prohibition on the establishment of religion," said Brent Walker, Baptist Joint Committee associate general counsel. "Given the president's opposition to these schemes and past congressional rejection of them, we don't expect the bill to move."

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-- By Pam Parry

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