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IN THIS ISSUE:

- * SBC slams Clinton's policies on homosexuality, abortion
- * Baptists adopt Mason report after rejecting effort to toughen it
- * Elder, Hobbs seek support for shared-power plan
- * Multi-ethnic youth choir shows harmony can take place at SBC
- * Clinton names 'consensus-builder' to replace White on Supreme Court

SBC slams Clinton's policies
on homosexuality, abortion

By Bob Allen

HOUSTON (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution June 16 to "separate" the denomination from President Bill Clinton's policies on abortion and homosexual rights and "urge him to affirm biblical morality" in public office.

The resolution also urges Southern Baptists to pray for the president and "use their influence" to encourage him to reverse his stands.

Ronnie Floyd, a member of the resolutions committee, told messengers the resolution is "not a personal attack" on Clinton but simply a repudiation of his policies. "The intent of this resolution is to separate ourselves as a body from the president's policies on the critical moral issues we believe to be in contradiction to the Word of God and what is best for America."

"If we do not give a clarion call (on these issues), we will jeopardize the future survival of our nation," said Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church of Springdale, Ark.

One messenger, Don Wilkey from Onalaska, Texas, said mentioning Clinton by name in the resolution sets "a dangerous precedent" which "smacks of partisan politics." SBC resolutions attacking segregation did not single out segregationist governors by name, Wilkey said.

"We've already made the WMU mad and the Masons mad. I don't want to go back to put out fires because we've made the Democrats mad in our county," he said.

Messengers rejected an amendment to add an admonition calling the president to "repent." James Merritt of Snellville, Ga., chairman of the Resolutions Committee, opposed the amendment, noting "the issue is not the person of the president. It is not the position of the presidency. It is

the policies he is trying to put into place."

Messengers defeated the amendment and adopted the resolution overwhelmingly. Afterward, SBC President Ed Young paused proceedings to offer a prayer, asking "godly wisdom" for President Clinton and for the nation's "revival and renewal."

A separate anti-Clinton proposal -- that the SBC "unseat" messengers from Clinton's home church, Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. -- apparently has been scuttled.

The motion, which effectively would have expelled the church from the SBC, came from Bo Hammock, pastor of Providence Village Baptist Church in Lake Butler, Fla., who criticized Immanuel's failure to take "biblical action" to discipline Clinton for his views on homosexuality. The motion was referred to the credentials committee, which voted unanimously June 16 not to recommend action.

The committee's decision could be reversed by convention action June 17, but that was viewed as unlikely.

Rex Horne, pastor of Immanuel Church, said he disagrees with Clinton on the issue of homosexuality but was "saddened and angered" that the convention would consider disfellowshipping his church.

Although SBC leaders have called for the convention to avoid controversy and focus on love, Horne said, "We are finding it so easy to preach and not to practice what we preach."

Hammock said he considers it Immanuel's duty to discipline such a public member as Clinton when his position contradicts the Bible. He said Immanuel should expel Clinton from the church.

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Southern Baptists adopt Mason report
after rejecting effort to toughen it

By Greg Warner

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Membership in the Masonic fraternity should be a matter of personal conscience, Southern Baptists said June 16, although they acknowledged many Masonic teachings "are not compatible with Christianity and Southern Baptist doctrine."

Messengers to the annual Southern Baptist Convention in Houston debated the Masonic issue for a tense half hour before overwhelmingly approving the recommendation, drafted by the SBC Home Mission Board.

The vote apparently concluded a year of debate in the 15 million-member denomination over Masonic membership. At last year's SBC meeting, messengers asked the Home Mission Board to conduct a study of the secret fraternity.

The HMB recommendation, a compromise that offered both praise and criticism for Freemasonry, drew reluctant endorsements from both Masons and critics when it was approved by the agency's trustees in March.

Messengers turned back an effort to toughen the recommendation when it was presented June 16. Dan Daniels, a messenger from Mobile, Ala., offered an amendment to declare Freemasonry to be a "mixture of paganism and Christianity" that is "condemned by God."

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, 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.

Daniels' motion would have removed language that entrusted the decision about Masonic membership to "personal conscience," citing the Baptist tenets of the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church.

"Let there be no whitewash," Daniels said. "Are we to be righteous or partly righteous?"

Brad Allen of Duncan, Okla., HMB trustee chairman, argued against Daniels' motion, which he said "is asking this convention to strike two of the dearest things to the Baptist heart -- the priesthood of the believer and autonomy of the local church."

The amendment failed by a margin greater than two-to-one.

Earlier Ron Sutherland of Tucker, Ga., argued for the HMB recommendation, although he said it was "very, very weak."

Sutherland, a former 32nd degree Mason, said he left the fraternity when he became a Christian. "I have never seen any other cult that is more destructive than this one," he said. "... I speak as one who has been there."

"Freemasonry is not, has not (been), and never will be a religion or a cult," countered Wallace Finfrock, a Mason from Dallas. He said he is a better Christian for having joined the Masons, and he urged messengers, "Don't reject, in a time of moral decline, those who believe in morality."

Several messengers expressed a desire to settle the Masonic issue and move on to more important things. Convention parliamentarian John Sullivan of Jacksonville, Fla., called for a vote on the matter, saying further debate would only "pirate the priorities" of the SBC, "negate needed energy" from other work, "fracture many fragile fellowships," and "continue to complicate" evangelistic concerns.

The motion was approved by a wide margin, estimated to be at least five-to-one.

Absent from the debate was Larry Holly, whose criticisms last year sparked the original HMB study. Holly, a Beaumont, Texas, physician and author of two anti-Mason books, told Associated Baptist Press after the vote that the HMB recommendation is acceptable. "On balance, it's not as I would have written it but it's not bad, because it does balance mercy and truth," he said.

Holly said approval by messengers would end his crusade against Freemasonry. "I'm not going to spend my life on this issue," he said.

Several Masonic leaders praised the SBC action June 16, particularly the willingness of messengers to entrust the issue of Masonic membership to individual conscience. "The conclusion is, indeed, in accordance with the traditional and highly commendable insistence in the Southern Baptist Convention that each person must decide issues of faith for him/herself," a

prepared statement said.

Speaking to reporters after the vote, HMB President Larry Lewis said he hoped the SBC action would "satisfy most our messengers." However, considering the intensity of debate, Lewis said, he would not predict that the issue will ever be totally settled.

Lewis questioned whether the yearlong HMB study, which cost the agency \$111,000, was worth the expense, considering other pressing needs facing Baptists. But the project could have an unexpected benefit, he suggested. "A lot could be accomplished if Masons would seek to change some of their practices."

Believing Masons might change is a "false concept," Holly said. "No, they won't do anything. I think we will see a solidifying of the differences between" Masons and Christians.

The yearlong HMB project produced a lengthy staff study, seven-page trustee report and the one paragraph recommendation passed by messengers.

The 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 cites some tenets of Freemasonry that "are not compatible with Christianity or Southern Baptist doctrine," 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.

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.

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Elder, Hobbs seek support
for shared-power plan

By Trennis Henderson

HOUSTON (ABP) -- A plan intended to resolve the lingering controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention by redistributing denominational power apparently won't be brought to a vote during the Southern Baptist Convention this week.

Instead the plan, offered by Southern Baptist leaders Lloyd Elder and Herschel Hobbs, will become part of a yearlong effort to build consensus among grass-roots Baptists for change in the SBC structure.

Elder and Hobbs say the exclusion of Southern Baptist moderates from denominational leadership by ruling SBC conservatives is sapping strength from the 15 million-member denomination.

The anticipated yearlong process is expected to involve a broad coalition of state convention leaders who will seek to highlight specific ways to promote hope and unity among Southern Baptists. One possible vehicle is a national "convocation of hope" involving selected state leaders.

During a three-hour meeting June 14, initial proposals to present a motion or resolution during this week's annual meeting were rejected out of concern that the proposal would be defeated without an opportunity to enlist grass-roots support.

Elder, former president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, recently issued a 16-page research report projecting that by the year 2000 missionaries would be called home from the field and some Baptist agencies would be closed "unless we stop the critical trends and build a new coalition among and by the people."

Elder acknowledged that his effort has received no encouragement from current Southern Baptist leaders. "They are saying there is no crisis." By contrast, he said he had received an affirming response from Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's coordinator, Cecil Sherman, who attended the meeting's general session.

Hobbs, an elder statesman in SBC life who issued a call in February for dialogue among the convention's conservative and moderate forces, endorsed Elder's report after his own proposal failed to gain any momentum.

Elder's report, titled "Calling the Family Back Together," included 20 proposed action plans designed to "get governing and giving back together in Southern Baptist life."

In an effort to expand ownership of his proposals, Elder invited state convention executive directors, presidents and executive board chairman to the dialogue session held on the eve of the SBC annual meeting. Approximately 100 people attended a two-hour session which featured presentations by Elder and Hobbs and dialogue by participants.

Following that session, about 30 state convention leaders accepted Elder's open invitation to form a discussion group to address specific ways to move forward in establishing a "coalition of hope."

The discussion group elected a seven-member workgroup chaired by Rodney Osborn, an Illinois anesthesiologist who is the immediate past president of the Illinois Baptist State Association and the State Convention Presidents Fellowship. Elder said the workgroup will seek "to develop a process to carry to state conventions both a concern and a message of hope to get leaders to express themselves about what is needed for a new vision of missions."

At a breakfast meeting the following morning, the workgroup adopted a statement which said: "We seek to interpret God's great call for a new day in missions advance. We seek input from those of like mind to share in the development of a process to implement this vision, to assist in 'calling the Southern Baptist family together,' to accept the challenge the future holds for our response to the Great Commission."

In an afternoon press conference, Osborn said the workgroup "would ask all Southern Baptists to join us in that prayer." He said the workgroup will meet June 24-25 in Chicago to further discuss the specific mechanism to involve state convention leadership.

While Elder's report will form the basis of discussion in Chicago, "I must tell you that the workgroup is not wedded to any part of the 20 proposals of (Elder's) research report," Osborn said. "That doesn't mean we don't support some of them; it doesn't mean we don't support all of them."

Elder agreed. "The effort now is to try to build a new network -- shared leadership is what I've called it -- so that state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention are welded together in total effort to encourage missions giving and missions support," he said. "How we move forward to accomplish that goal may not be in this plan."

During the Monday night meeting, Elder cited statistical data which show that Southern Baptists' 14-year controversy has consistently reflected a 55-45 voting split. Charging that the 45 percent minority represents 6.9 million Southern Baptists who have been excluded from full SBC participation, he emphasized, "The urgency of the hour is to find a way that we can be inclusive of the whole number."

"We're talking about the principles of getting governing and giving back together in Southern Baptist life," Elder said. "We will not call the family back together unless we create some way to have shared governance in Southern Baptist life."

Elder said he is motivated by the question, "Are we better off now in our missionary/evangelistic thrust 14 years into the controversy than we were when we started into it?" Responding that "something is happening in missions giving and Cooperative Program giving that is critical," he said giving trends indicate that "the buying power of the Cooperative Program has been decreasing since 1988."

"We're still selling but the churches are not buying," he remarked. "We can either support the controversy with half of the family or support

missions with the whole family.

"If we are not inclusive in governance, we cannot expect Southern Baptists to continue to give," Elder declared, urging Southern Baptist leaders to "change the mentality from exclusivism to inclusivism."

Hobbs, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church, Oklahoma City, is a former SBC president. He was a member of the SBC Peace Committee and chairman of the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message committee.

Calling Lloyd's efforts "the best hope I see," Hobbs said, "What we have is not working. Let's try to adjust to something that does."

Emphasizing that "I'm not mad at anybody," Hobbs added, "I'm right in the middle where most Southern Baptists are all the time.... We're all looking for a way back home. The more people we involve, the better we'll be."

Regardless of the outcome of the efforts to establish a grass-roots coalition, he added, "At least we've done one thing tonight. We've gotten together and talked it over."

In addition to Osborn and Elder, members of the coordinating group include Joe Baker, president of the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio; Dick Maples, president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas; Quinn Pugh, executive director of the Baptist Convention of New York; Cecil Sims, executive director of the Northwest Baptist Convention; and Rodney Travis, president of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

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-- Bill Webb contributed to this story.

Multi-ethnic youth choir shows
harmony can take place at SBC

HOUSTON (ABP) -- A 100-voice youth choir representing Anglo, African-American, Hispanic and Chinese congregations from Houston did its part to demonstrate that harmony can occur at an annual Southern Baptist Convention gathering.

"United Colors of Christ," a combined choir drawn from the predominantly black Brentwood Baptist Church, Houston's Chinese Baptist Church, the primarily Hispanic Trinity Baptist Church, and the predominantly Anglo Willow Meadows Baptist Church, performed a mini-concert at the Tuesday evening session of the SBC.

Musical selections were led by directors from each of the four churches and included arrangements of the Doxology in both English and Cantonese, a Spanish-language medley, a gospel song written by a local African-American music minister and a prayerful anthem to unity -- "Many Gifts, One Spirit" by Allen Pote.

The choir also has performed at a community-service program at Brentwood and they have been invited to sing at the annual meeting of Union Baptist Association in October. They have sung at each of the four churches from which membership is drawn.

In the future, leaders hope the choir can sing at citywide functions such as the lighting of the community Christmas tree, according to William

Love, minister of music at Willow Meadows Baptist Church.

"Moving beyond the walls of the church building, the choir makes an important witness," said Love. "So much of the future rests in the hands of today's youth. The choir offers a message about the possibility of living in harmony."

The SBC appearance was part of a statewide tour that included visits to the state capitol in Austin, Six Flags amusement park in Arlington and churches in Austin, Dallas, Houston and Arlington representing various ethnicities.

During a mission tour last summer, Love first dreamed of organizing a multi-ethnic youth choir that could tour together and learn from each other.

"The idea had been stirring within me for some time. On the bus last summer, I talked about it to the young lady who was to be the youth choir president this year, and she was very positive," he said.

Love contacted the music ministers and youth choir directors at four churches and asked them to attend a meeting last November to explore the possibilities of a united youth choir.

In January, United Colors of Christ began meeting each Saturday afternoon for choir practice, games and social activities. To enhance communication and build relationships, youth from the different churches were divided into small "family groups" for prayer and fellowship.

"These young people are in school together, in some cases, but there they tend to hang out with 'their own.' But along the way this year -- in a very natural way through the family groups and other activities -- some real friendships and lasting relationships developed," Love said.

Although no firm plans have been made about the future of the choir beyond the summer tour, Love said he would not be surprised if the youth demanded that the program continue.

"They have come to the realization that there is a real strength in working together in unity and harmony," Love said. "This really works."

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-- By Ken Camp

Clinton names 'consensus-builder'
to replace White on Supreme Court

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Stressing his desire to name a consensus builder to the U.S. Supreme Court, President Bill Clinton has nominated centrist federal appeals court judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg to replace retiring Justice Byron White.

Ginsburg, 60, has served on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia -- often called the nation's second highest court -- since nominated by President Jimmy Carter in 1980.

The nomination drew praise from both Republicans and Democrats, prompting speculation that Senate confirmation will not be a barrier to Ginsburg becoming the court's 107th justice and second woman member.

If confirmed, Ginsburg would be expected to help solidify the court's

center.

Clinton said he nominated Ginsburg because of her distinguished record as a judge, her pioneering work on behalf of women and what he predicted will be her ability to be a "force for consensus building" on the court.

The nominee, Clinton said, "cannot be called a liberal or a conservative. She has proved herself too thoughtful for such labels."

Clinton praised Ginsburg as a "person of immense character" and noted that "many admirers of her work say that she is to the women's movement what former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall was to the movement for the rights of African-Americans."

Ginsburg "has proven herself to be a healer, what attorneys call a moderate," Clinton said.

"If this is a time for consensus building on the court, and I believe it is, Judge Ginsburg will be an able and effective architect of that effort."

Ginsburg's First Amendment views are encouraging, a Baptist church-state attorney said after reviewing some of her writings as an appeals court judge.

"Judge Ginsburg appears to have an expansive view of the Bill of Rights and a keen interest in protecting individual liberties," said Brent Walker, associate general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee. "But she's not a knee-jerk ideologue. She is balanced and fair."

In a number of church-state cases decided during her term on the D.C. Circuit Court, Ginsburg has shown a commitment to religious liberty, Walker said.

"She has not hesitated to hold government accountable when it seeks to deny someone's free exercise of religion," he said. "Her Jewish heritage probably heightens her sensitivity in that regard."

During the 1970s, Ginsburg argued six women's rights cases before the high court and won five of them.

She said her nomination is significant "because it contributes to the end of the days when women, at least half the talent pool in our society, appear in high places only as one-at-a-time performers."

While noting that the announcement news conference was not the place for extended discussion of judicial philosophy, Ginsburg said one guide for her work was offered by Chief Justice William Rehnquist.

"A judge is bound to decide each case fairly in accord with the relevant facts and applicable law, even when the decision is not, as he (Rehnquist) put it, what the home crowd wants," she said.

Ginsburg's record on abortion, the controversial issue that loomed large in recent Supreme Court nomination debates, adds to the perception of a centrist nominee. While seen as a supporter of abortion rights, Ginsburg has on occasion criticized the Supreme Court's 1973 landmark abortion decision in *Roe vs. Wade*.

In 1989, she dissented from the appeals court's dismissal of a lawsuit challenging the Bush administration's ban on the use of foreign aid for abortion counseling.

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CORRECTION: In the June 8 ABP story "Leadership style spurs conflict," please add the following after the 10th paragraph.

Sherman maintains the division in the church is "not generational," however. About 80 percent of the baby boomers in the congregation support the pastor and the church's current direction, he told ABP.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A story about the election of Jerry Rankin to the Foreign Mission Board presidency was sent Monday, June 14. If you did not receive the story, please call the ABP office.

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