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Churches expect little effect  
from SBC refusal of CBF funds

By Greg Warner

(ABP) -- The decision by the Southern Baptist Convention to refuse contributions from the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will complicate bookkeeping procedures for many congregations but likely will have little effect on how much money the two organizations receive, according to some of those churches.

Messengers to the SBC voted June 15 to instruct the SBC's agencies and institutions to no longer receive funds channeled through the Fellowship. Those funds have added a total of \$9 million to SBC coffers since 1991. By refusing Fellowship money, according to the motion, SBC agencies will preserve the "integrity" of the Cooperative Program, the traditional channel of SBC funding.

But some people on both sides of the issue say the action's underlying intent is to force Fellowship-supporting churches to declare their allegiance to one organization or the other, and may even force a split in the denomination. "It is an effort to force you to be an either/or church rather than a both/and church," Fellowship Coordinator Cecil Sherman said in a June 21 letter to congregations that support the Fellowship.

But initial reactions from representative churches suggest the SBC vote will have little impact on where local church money ends up.

The action probably "won't make a hill of beans of difference" at Walnut Street Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., predicted Pastor Bob Long. Church members there choose between sending their global-missions money to the SBC or Fellowship. Most who pick the Fellowship still ask that a portion go to some SBC agencies.

Long predicted most church members will continue to support the Fellowship, even if none of their money finds its way back to the SBC. "Most of our people who give to the Fellowship do so to protest the Cooperative Program, and this doesn't change anything," he said.

But the SBC action does change the nature of the Fellowship, which was begun in 1990 as an alternate funding channel -- a way to support some SBC agencies while bypassing those that moderates felt were lost to conservative control.

With that role now gone, some conservative leaders hope the Fellowship will split away and form a new denomination. Fellowship leaders insist that is not their intention.

Other observers see the SBC action as mostly symbolic, since it carries no power to dictate local-church actions. Fellowship supporters who still want some of their church contributions to support SBC agencies can find other ways to steer their money to the desired location.

How?

-- Local churches can send checks directly to selected agencies. This solution presents a major bookkeeping headache for those congregations, however. Most will likely look for some less cumbersome method.

-- Churches can send SBC money formerly handled by the Fellowship to the SBC Executive Committee with instructions on how to divide it among the agencies. The Executive Committee says it will honor those "designated gifts," as they are called.

-- Some state conventions also will distribute designated gifts to the agencies.

-- Since most churches that support the CBF also support the SBC Cooperative Program, they can compensate for the CBF portion that no longer goes to SBC agencies by increasing the Cooperative Program portion of their budget.

"There are very few churches that give exclusively to the Fellowship," said David Wilkinson, CBF communications coordinator.

Money sent to the Fellowship is directed to one of three Fellowship funding plans:

-- Vision 2000 Plan. All funds go to the Fellowship's own ministries (including 70 percent to global missions) and Fellowship-supported agencies, such as the Baptist Joint Committee. Southern Baptist agencies receive nothing.

-- Ventures Plan. Forty-two percent goes to 15 SBC agencies but nothing goes to the Executive Committee, Christian Life Commission or Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. The remaining 58 percent goes to Fellowship ministries (35 percent to global missions) and Fellowship-supported agencies.

-- Transition Plan. Southern Baptist agencies receive 82.4 percent of funds, but nothing goes to the Executive Committee or Christian Life Commission. The rest is distributed to Fellowship ministries (10 percent to global missions) and Fellowship-supported agencies.

Churches or individual donors choose one of the three plans or they design their own. However, only the Visions 2000 Plan remains viable after the SBC's June 15 vote.

About 1,200 of the SBC's 39,000 churches -- and an equal number of individuals -- send some money to the Fellowship. About a third of those churches won't be affected at all by the SBC action, Wilkinson estimated, because they already have chosen the Visions 2000 Plan.

But for two thirds of Fellowship-supporting churches, the SBC vote will require a change.

Wilkinson predicted most will simply shift to the Visions 2000 Plan, which translates into more money for the Fellowship and less for the SBC.

Since the June 15 vote, Wilkinson said, the Fellowship office has been "flooded with calls" from church leaders upset with the action, which they see as an infringement on local-church autonomy. "Churches are insisting, 'We are not going to be bullied,'" he said.

Officials of the SBC insist the action on CBF funding does not interfere with local-church autonomy, since churches are still free to choose where to send their money. Refusing the CBF funds, they said, is simply an endorsement of the traditional, time-honored method of SBC funding, the Cooperative Program.

Wilkinson conceded some churches and individuals will be "intimidated" by the SBC action into cutting off ties to the Fellowship. "The vote will be used as another weapon in the arsenal of those who are trying to bully pastors and other church leaders," he said.

The most vulnerable, he said, are those churches that predominantly support the SBC but which allow a handful of members to designate funds to the Fellowship.

First Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., does not have the Fellowship in its budget but forwards members' contributions to the CBF if requested. "We are in a fairly unique position here," said church administrator Jimmy Dunn, whose church is in the shadow of the SBC Executive Committee building. "We need to handle things as carefully as we can."

The number of church members funding the Fellowship is "not substantial," Dunn said. Those who were using a Fellowship plan that included SBC causes will have to tell the church what to do with the money now, he said. Otherwise, the SBC action will have "little effect on us or on anything we do," he said.

South Main Baptist Church in Houston won't be affected either, even though about half the church members have chosen to support the Fellowship, said Phillip Martin, senior educator and administrator. The CBF-bound money goes to the Vision 2000 Plan, which does not fund SBC causes. Another 40 percent of church members have chosen an "alternate track" developed by Martin that funds some SBC causes and some Fellowship-type ministries directly. About 5 percent have chosen to support the Cooperative Program.

The vote of the SBC "is another expression of the current (SBC) leadership's attitude about the local church's freedom to make choices in funding missions," Martin said. Many Southern Baptists will be angered by the move, he predicted, producing an increase in Fellowship funding.

At Dunwoody Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta, church members are asked to choose either the SBC or CBF as the recipient of the missions portion of their contributions, which is 12 percent of the church's budget. About 18 percent have chosen the SBC and 16 percent have chosen the CBF. The rest of the money is placed in a missions escrow fund, and the missions committee will determine at the end of the fiscal year how to spend it.

The church's decisions about missions support are guided by the principle of local-church autonomy, said Pastor Jim Johnson. "The denomination exists for the service of churches and not vice versa," he said.

"We are evaluating and taking very seriously how denominational groups and services can help us accomplish our goals and mission, rather than feeling like we owe blind allegiance to any denomination or organization."

The fact most people have not stated a preference indicates "a lot of people do not yet know or care how we carry out missions beyond the boundaries of this campus," said Johnson.

"The action of the convention will not change anything about the process at this time," Johnson said. But, he said, he wonders if the SBC will eventually decide not to take money from churches like Dunwoody that also support the Fellowship.

"We will cooperate with the CBF and the SBC, and do so gladly and enthusiastically, as long as they are willing to cooperate with us," he said.

But he added: "I have a real concern for what appears to be an inconsistency in the thinking of some of the current SBC leaders. Their statements define the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as being in direct competition with the Cooperative Program, but at the same time most if not all the former presidents of the SBC have supported other seminaries and other mission organizations for years, and their own actions are not considered to be in direct competition."

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-- Marv Knox contributed to this story

Cooperative venture to yield  
Bible translation for Gypsies

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Soon, for the first time, many of the world's Gypsy population will have access to the entire New Testament in their own language.

A joint translation and Bible distribution project by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Baptist General Association of Virginia and the United Bible Society will be "a turning point" in the evangelism of the Romany -- or Gypsy -- peoples in central and eastern Europe, predicted "T" Thomas, a Fellowship missionary living near Paris, France.

The United Bible Society is completing a translation of the New Testament in Kalderash, the Romani dialect understood by the greatest number of Gypsies. Due to multiple migrations, at least a dozen distinct dialects have evolved in the Romani language, Thomas said. Until now, only portions of the New Testament have been available in Kalderash.

The Baptist General Association of Virginia will pay for a first printing of 2,000 Bibles. The Virginia Baptist general board recently approved a mission expenditure of \$11,500 for the project.

Fellowship missionaries will arrange distribution of the Bibles through Baptist unions in Europe and the Romany Pentecostal Mission, which has contacts throughout Europe.

The translation will be "invaluable" to pastors and missionaries working among the Gypsies, said Thomas, who, with his wife, Kathie, is developing a strategy for reaching the Romany people scattered across several continents.

Thomas described a friend, "one of the few -- if not the only -- Romany Baptist lay missionary in Romania" who travels at his own expense to preach and share the gospel in Gypsy house churches. Now, he translates his sermons and Bible studies from Romanian into Romani, but with the new translation "will be able to read and preach directly to his people and to introduce them to God's Word in his own language," Thomas said.

News about the translation is spreading quickly, said Thomas, who is already getting requests for copies.

Keith Parks, the Fellowship's global missions coordinator, said the availability of scriptures in their own language is "the highest priority" of the Gypsy pastors and laypeople with whom he has met.

Parks said the translation and distribution project is "a classic example" of the Fellowship's reliance on networking and cooperation in its missions programs. "This is typically the way we want to work," Parks said, "going to groups which have already developed particular expertise and helping to coordinate and channel that expertise to address unmet needs and unreached peoples."

Tom Prevost, director of Virginia Baptists' missions ministries division said the project is a "breakthrough" opportunity for which the general association is providing "seed money."

"There's no telling what the Lord will be able to do through this unique project," he said.

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Church of God (Anderson)  
heads Holly on Freemasonry

ANDERSON, Ind. (ABP) -- A campaign by a Southern Baptist layman which failed to persuade his own denomination to repudiate the fraternal order of Freemasonry has apparently influenced at least one national religious body to do so.

The general assembly of the Church of God (Anderson) adopted a resolution declaring Freemasonry "a Christless religion" at its annual meeting June 15 in Anderson, Ind.

The resolution declared oath-bound membership in secret societies "not compatible with the Christian loyalty to Christ."

The Church of God (Anderson) movement numbers 2,314 churches in the United States. Worldwide membership is estimated at 500,000.

A three-volume work, "The Southern Baptist Convention and Freemasonry," by Beaumont, Texas, physician Larry Holly, was "instrumental" in the decision to bring the resolution to the floor, said Jack Lawrence, past chairman of the church's West Virginia general assembly, who proposed the resolution.

Holly's books criticize a study by the interfaith witness department of the SBC Home Mission Board and a report adopted by the convention in 1993 which found some teachings of Freemasonry objectionable

but appealed to Baptists' tradition of local church autonomy and individual conscience in deciding whether Baptists should be Masons.

A member of the Church of God study committee cited that decision, Lawrence said, asking how in the face of "overwhelming evidence that Freemasonry is anti-Christ and heretical in much of its ritual and teaching" could the SBC conclude that "membership in a Masonic Order be a matter of personal conscience?"

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-- By Bob Allen

Treat religion differently,  
Walker tells lawmakers

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The First Amendment sometimes requires that government treat religion differently than other civil rights, a Baptist church-state attorney told 18 members of Congress attending a June 21 Constitutional Forum.

Because of the First Amendment's religion guarantees, "government should accommodate religion without advancing it," said Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee.

"In a word, government should turn religion loose -- leave it alone -- so that people of faith may practice their religion as they see fit, not as government sees fit."

Walker and Mark Tushnet, associate dean at Georgetown University Law Center, discussed the question of when the government may interfere with religion.

Organized by Reps. David Skaggs, D-Colo., and James Leach, R-Iowa, the forum meets monthly to discuss constitutional issues with specialists.

Most Americans agree that government should be neutral toward religion, Walker said, but controversies arise in church-state field over defining neutrality.

A "formal" view of neutrality, he said, requires that religion be treated the same as other areas. It cannot be singled out for special burdens or privileges.

Walker said the Supreme Court's 1990 ruling that generally applicable laws that burden religion do not have to be justified by a compelling reason exemplified a formal view of neutrality.

In contrast, Walker said, a "substantive" view of neutrality sometimes requires that religion be exempted from broadly applied laws.

"Churches that oppose the ordination of women should be exempt from the gender provisions of Title VII (of the Civil Rights Act) and Jews should be allowed to hire rabbis, not Baptist preachers, to lead their synagogues," he said.

Walker commended lawmakers for enacting the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which superseded the 1990 Supreme Court ruling by once again requiring government to demonstrate a compelling reason to restrict religious practice.

Since RFRA became law, he said, more than a dozen cases have been decided in favor of individuals pursuing religious claims. Additionally, governmental decision makers, now aware that they need a compelling reason to restrict religion, are accommodating religious practice without the need for litigation.

Tushnet, a proponent of formal neutrality, said it is "a constitutionally bad thing ... to single out a fairly narrow class of religious beliefs or believers for special treatment." That treatment can be in the form of a burden or a benefit, he said.

Under formal neutrality, broadly based and applied laws may either burden or benefit religion.

Walker was asked about a House proposal to request that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission

remove religion from its proposed comprehensive guidelines covering harassment in the workplace.

Walker acknowledged there are problems with the guidelines as originally issued, but said "there are ways to make them more specific, to better tailor them for religion harassment.

"We are very much against taking them out entirely ... because in large measure they are there, I think, properly interpreted and applied, to help religious liberty, not to cut against it or to quell it."

Noting that less than half of 1 percent of harassment complaints are based on religion, one lawmaker predicted that it would become a greater problem once federal bureaucrats began enforcing the guidelines.

"I share that concern to some extent," Walker said, "but here's the problem: If you take religion out and (issue guidelines on) every other form of discrimination listed in Title VII ... that's going to send a signal to employers that religion is not as important."

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HUD seeks partnership  
with America's congregations

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Churches, synagogues and mosques hold the key to rebuilding community within cities across America, according to the secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Henry Cisneros told religious leaders that HUD wants to work with their congregations in rebuilding the nation's cities. Cisneros addressed the group at a June 22 conference -- the first of its type hosted by HUD.

The federal agency has little chance of making a difference in America's cities unless it can engage community leaders, including those who provide moral and spiritual leadership, he said. Many of the city's problems -- such as drugs, violence and the breakup of the family -- involve matters of the spirit, he added.

"There is no force that is sufficiently powerful to overcome the overwhelming chains of drug addiction but a spiritual force," Cisneros said.

Cisneros, former mayor of San Antonio, Texas, said a partnership is natural for HUD and the religious community, because they have "a common stake in communities."

"The values that we observe spiritually and the values we celebrate about our country come from the same place in the human heart," he said.

HUD and congregations worked together in the 1970s to build homes, he said, but in the 1980s that relationship was relaxed.

"We are open for business again," he said.

Cisneros asked houses of worship to work with HUD in five priority areas:

- reducing homelessness;
- turning around distressed public housing;
- providing more affordable housing;
- ensuring fair housing; and
- empowering communities.

On any given night there are 600,000 homeless persons in America, Cisneros said, and HUD is doubling its financial commitment to reduce the number. Congregations are by far the greatest providers for homeless persons, he said, pledging to solidify the department's relationship with them in those efforts.

As part of HUD's strategy, Cisneros established an office to relate to congregations and has hired a staff person as religious liaison.

After Cisneros' address, the religious leaders dispersed for small conferences that focused on "concrete initiatives" for solving urban problems.

Panel keeps abortion  
services in health care

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The House Ways and Means Committee rejected an attempt to remove abortion coverage from a health-care bill June 22 , but lawmakers expect the issue to resurface later in the House chamber.

Abortion coverage has been controversial from the start of the health-care debate. Its opponents argue taxpayers who find abortions morally objectionable should not be forced to pay for them. Supporters counter that women should receive the full range of medical services offered by private insurance companies, including abortion.

The committee defeated the amendment offered by Rep. Jim Bunning, R-Ky., 23-15.

-- By Pam Parry

Richmond seminary approved  
as associate member of ATS

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond has moved one step closer to accreditation, gaining associate membership in the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada.

The accrediting agency approved the Richmond seminary for membership at its biennial meeting, June 12-14, in Atlanta.

The seminary, which opened in 1991, graduated its first class to have completed requirements for its entire master of divinity degree in May, qualifying the school for associate member status in ATS. The seminary will apply to become a candidate for full accreditation during the coming year.

-- By Bob Allen

Truett's first full-time professor  
sees herself as an unlikely pick

By Mark Wingfield

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP)--Ruth Ann Foster considers herself about the last person likely to be the first person hired to teach at a new theological seminary.

But the Kentucky native has become just that -- the first full-time faculty member hired for the new George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University in Waco, Texas. "If God had told me in 1973 that I would have a doctorate degree and teach in a seminary, I would have laughed out loud like Sarah," she explained.

Foster, 46, grew up in Central Baptist Church in Ashland, Ky., where she was taught women could not

hold certain positions in the church, specifically positions of authority over men. Women were not even allowed to give reports during business meetings.

To this day in Greenup Baptist Association, to which her home church belongs, women may not bring a motion or even speak during associational meetings -- except to bring the Woman's Missionary Union report.

Along with her entire family, Foster was active in church from a young age. She professed her faith in Jesus Christ at Central Baptist just before her 11th birthday. Because she was a female, she went to business school rather than college and eventually became a secretary. At 25, she sensed, but dismissed, a call to ministry. "I didn't want to do missions or children's work, and I didn't know I could do anything else," she said.

After moving to Middlesboro, Ky., to work as a secretary, she signed up for three classes at Clear Creek Baptist Bible College in Pineville, Ky. "I ended the year with 24 quarter-hours and found out at that point they didn't accept women students," she explained. But the school changed its policy, and Foster became Clear Creek's first female graduate in 1978, with the highest grade point average in her class.

Earl Clark, distinguished professor of New Testament at Clear Creek, remembers Foster as one of his best students ever. "She made straight A's in advanced Greek," he said. "I could grade her paper, then place it down on my desk and grade the others from it." During her last year at Clear Creek, Foster served as Clark's teaching assistant. And it was there, she said, she discovered her calling in life was to teach.

So she went on to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, where she earned the master of divinity degree and doctor of philosophy degree.

But her hopes for teaching were dashed in 1984, she said, when the Southern Baptist Convention passed a strongly worded resolution against women working in ministry roles. "At that point, just as it had seemed doors were opening up to women, they were being closed," she said.

She taught part time -- at Texas Christian University for seven years and at Southwestern Seminary for three years -- but a full-time teaching position was not to be found.

About three years ago, she accepted a position as minister of education at Manor Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas. She felt called to that particular church, she said, but not to church staff ministry on a permanent basis.

But now a door has opened at Truett, and Foster is preparing to fulfill her longtime dream. Many Baptists don't yet know what to make of Truett. Some see it as a seminary formed by Baptist moderates in reaction to the conservative swing of the SBC. Others see its formation as part of a larger trend that has new seminaries popping up all over the United States.

"I don't think anybody needs to be afraid of Truett," Foster said. "I think we're going to be a very balanced approach to Baptist life. We're definitely going to be a free Baptist institution."

Her decision to help launch the seminary was a spiritual one, she said.

"I feel like God is in this. It's much more a movement of God than a political situation," Foster added. "Truett doesn't plan to have a political agenda. Basically, the agenda is the lordship of Christ."

Although some might view Foster's appointment as Truett's first professor as an open endorsement of women in the pulpit, that is not the intent, she asserted.

"We believe that all people are gifted for ministry," Foster said. This applies equally to groups such as Hispanics, blacks and women, she said.

"We're not promoting women pastors. We're going to affirm giftedness, and local churches and individuals will decide how that works out."

While Truett will not promote women as pastors, neither will the seminary discourage them, she said. However, the practical reality is that "most of the women out there in Baptist life are not pastors."

Those who have known Foster through the years affirm her ability to lead in this new enterprise and her sincere devotion to the Bible. They also predict her ministry will be well-received.

"She is very much committed to the Scriptures and is conservative in her theology," said Bill Whittaker, president of Clear Creek College. "She is definitely not a radical feminist." Foster quickly won the respect of male students at Clear Creek, he said. "She got along well here. She wasn't trying to prove anything."

"She has a sensible view of things," added John Weaver, Foster's pastor at Central Baptist Church in

Ashland while she was a child and teen-ager. "She's tolerant. You can talk with Ruth Ann.

"I'm a bit on the conservative side, and we're great friends and have gotten along fine. I've encouraged her along the way."

Being hired as Truett's first faculty member isn't the first time God has caught Foster by surprise, she said. But it is typical of the kind of life experiences she will bring to the classroom.

One of those foundational life-changing experiences happened in 1973, when Foster had a "tremendous experience with God."

At age 19, she had become disillusioned with her childhood church and dropped out. "I was raised to think in such black-and-white terms," she recalled. "And in the late '60s, some things happened. ... I had a real sense that 'None of this is true.'

"I knew (Foreign Mission Board President) Baker James Cauthen's address, but I didn't know how to handle doubts."

She stayed out of church for about five years before finally calling out to the Lord for help. "And before I got the sentence out, I had a greater peace than I had ever had. At that moment, I understood what grace was," she said.

"I was stupefied -- really, really stupefied -- that love could just pour into you when you didn't deserve it."

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