

Associated Baptist Press

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In this issue:

- Florida plan would eliminate HMB involvement in state
- Church cancels morning worship for Sunday of community service
- Judge temporarily strikes down Mississippi school prayer law
- J. Leo Green, Bible scholar, seminary professor, dies
- Baptist group kicks out churches which license women preachers

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Florida plan would eliminate HMB involvement in state

By Greg Warner

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- In yet another demonstration of the independent mood of state Baptist conventions, a Florida Baptist committee voted Aug. 18 to keep most of the money the state convention sends to the Home Mission Board through the Southern Baptist Convention budget.

The proposal, which awaits approval by another committee and the full convention this fall, represents a major change in the way Florida Baptists relate to the Home Mission Board, effectively taking the HMB out of missions work in Florida, one of its most fertile fields.

The Florida Baptist Convention, the sixth largest in the SBC, sent \$1.9 million to the Home Mission Board in 1993 through the Cooperative Program, the SBC's central budget. In turn, the HMB sent \$1.3 million back to the state to support jointly funded missions personnel and projects.

The Florida proposal, in effect, gives the state convention sole control of home missions work in the state, which traditionally has been done in cooperation with the Home Mission Board.

John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention, cited two events that prompted the action -- the "unilateral" decision of the HMB to cut funding of state conventions by 6 percent next year and the recent decision of the HMB trustees to study the agency's relationship to state conventions that handle contributions from the rival Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

"They have no right to investigate us, just as we have no right to investigate them," said Sullivan. The Florida convention allows churches to designate money to the CBF.

Members of the convention's budget and allocations committee, which unanimously approved the proposal, said the HMB funding cut poses a threat to missions work in the state and violates the cooperative agreement, the document that defines how the HMB and Florida convention will relate.

That agreement, which governs Southern Baptist missions work in all states, prohibits "unilateral actions in

areas of cooperation" by either the HMB or the state convention. It also encourages state conventions "to assume administrative and financial responsibility for direct mission work now conducted by the HMB as rapidly as possible."

"All we are doing," said budget committee chairman Jerald Hicks of Orlando, "is what their guidelines permit us to do."

"And encourage us to do," added Sullivan. "There was a time when we needed funding for home missions. We don't need that any more. ... All we're asking is to follow this document, becoming self-sustaining, self-supporting. The only way we can do that is by retaining the funds."

The proposal came from a special budget study committee, which considered several ways to recoup the anticipated 6 percent cut in HMB funds. Rejected were cuts in Florida personnel, reductions in the Florida budget, and reductions in the amount of money Florida sends to the national Cooperative Program, which would have made all SBC agencies pay for the loss of HMB funding.

Instead, the committee chose to retain the amount of Cooperative Program money that normally would return to Florida via the HMB. Since Florida receives less money that it sends to the HMB, the difference -- about \$600,000 -- would be sent through the SBC as a designation to the HMB to support missions work in other states.

Likewise, all other Cooperative Program gifts from Florida churches -- about \$8.3 million a year -- will be sent through the SBC as designated funds for distribution to all other agencies according to standard percentages.

Although that practice would place the Florida convention outside traditional Cooperative Program channels, Sullivan said he is hopeful the SBC will still count the convention's gifts as Cooperative Program funds.

Untouched by the committee's recommendation is the \$2 million Florida Baptists contribute annually to the HMB's Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for home missions.

Committee members who spoke in favor of the proposal said it was preferred because it would mean no net loss in HMB mission work and eliminate "mounds of paperwork" required by the HMB.

No committee members spoke against the plan. However, member Ferrell Mills of Green Cove Springs said the convention "would have been branded as uncooperative" for the action a few years ago.

Mills said he supports the action but warned it could hurt mission giving. "The perception of the man in the pew of the Cooperative Program is worldwide missions, not state convention," he said. "When you chip away at that, some people will be willing to chip away on what they give."

Home Mission Board administrators were not available for comment. At a recent meeting, HMB President Larry Lewis told trustees that 25 jobs are being cut or suspended at the agency's Atlanta headquarters, reducing home-office expenditures by about 6 percent to compensate for a reduction in funding from the SBC.

Florida is home to 32 missionaries paid jointly by the HMB and state convention -- 17 field missionaries and 15 state convention staffers. Under terms of the cooperative agreement with Florida, the HMB pays 65 percent of those salaries. The HMB claims another 76 missionaries in Florida, including 38 long-term volunteers, but does not pay their salaries.

To take effect, the new procedure must be approved by the State Board of Missions Sept. 9 and the Florida Baptist State Convention, which meets Nov. 14-16. The change won't take effect until 1996 and will be reconsidered after three years.

To compensate for the 6 percent HMB cut in 1995, Florida Baptists will draw \$76,620 out of reserves, according to a recommendation approved by the budget and allocations committee Aug. 18.

The Florida proposal is the latest in a series of state-level actions that are redefining the relationships between the SBC and state conventions, which are autonomous bodies.

-- In Texas, Baptists will vote this fall on a plan that would allow churches to designate all their Cooperative Program gifts for use in Texas, rather than sending a required portion to the SBC. The plan also would count contributions to virtually any Baptist cause, including the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, as Cooperative Program.

-- In Virginia, churches are allowed to support any of three budgets -- one which follows traditional CP

patterns, one that funds CBF but not SBC, and one that is a hybrid of the other two.

– In North Carolina, churches can choose an alternate Cooperative Program budget that steers money away from some SBC agencies to moderate alternatives.

– Georgia Baptists last fall authorized a study of whether churches must cooperate with the SBC to be in good standing with the state convention.

Critics say such changes will cause an erosion in historic Baptist cooperation and undermine the Baptist cause. Others say the changes reflect a social trend of decentralization and a loss of confidence in the conservative leadership of SBC agencies.

Under the traditional Cooperative Program system, state conventions send a portion of their receipts -- in Florida's case 42 percent -- to the Southern Baptist Convention for distribution to its agencies, including the Home Mission Board. The HMB uses the money to appoint and support missionaries, mission pastors, some state convention personnel and projects in the states.

In states like Florida where Baptist work is well-established, the convention usually contributes more money to the HMB than it receives in grants from the agency. In states where Southern Baptists are less numerous, like Pennsylvania and Nevada, the state conventions receive more money from the HMB than they contribute, making them much more dependent on the agency's help.

Another change approved by Florida's budget and allocations committee would cut the amount of money the state gives to the Cooperative Program further by reducing the SBC's share of Florida's budget from 42 percent to 40 percent by 1996. In the 1980s, Florida was the first state convention to send 50 percent of receipts to the Cooperative Program but like all other states has backed away from that level in recent years.

"We were sending too much out too fast, but churches stopped while we kept going," explained Sullivan. If and when CP giving by Florida churches increases, the state convention will raise the percentage, he said. Florida remains among the top three states in CP percentage, Sullivan said.

Another proposal from the budget committee asks the state convention to endorse the concept of two annual special offerings in place of the current four. One spring offering would fund the Annie Armstrong offering and state missions. A fall offering would support the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for foreign missions and world hunger.

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Church cancels morning worship for Sunday of community service

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) – Believing there is more than one way to praise God, Park Road Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., canceled its Aug. 21 Sunday morning service, encouraging members to use the worship hour to engage in acts of kindness across their community.

The experimental break from tradition is being tried for the first time by the 44-year-old congregation of 650 members, but one of the event's planners hopes it will be done annually.

"Part of our worship is to witness to the community," church member Marinn Bengel told the Charlotte Observer. "This is a part of what we should do as a church, using our Sunday as a Sunday of service rather than just passing the plate."

Church members planned to fan out to more than a dozen sites to feed the poor, sing for the elderly and clean off concrete blocks destined for Habitat for Humanity homes. Senior adults and children planned to stay behind at the church to make tote bags and knit blankets for the homeless.

Twenty to 25 members were scheduled to paint and landscape around a chapel for the homeless, 10-15 were

to wallpaper and paint an emergency shelter for youth and seven to 10 planned to lead devotionals at a nursing home. The day closed with a 7 p.m. service "to celebrate the fact we can help others," said Bengel.

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-- By Bob Allen

Judge temporarily strikes down Mississippi school prayer law

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) – A federal judge temporarily struck down a Mississippi school prayer law until he can decide if it is constitutional.

The law, which took effect July 1, permits student-initiated prayers in public schools and voluntary "non-sectarian and non-proselytizing" benedictions and invocations.

U.S. District Judge Henry Wingate wrote in a ruling Aug. 11 that the law is vague.

"As it reads now, any person, including school administrators, teachers or members of the clergy, seemingly would be permitted under the statute to deliver invocations and benedictions at a wide range of school-related functions," he wrote.

The law was introduced after a Jackson school principal was suspended for allowing students to read prayers over the school intercom.

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J. Leo Green, Bible scholar, seminary professor, dies

DUNN, N.C. (ABP) – J. Leo Green, an Old Testament scholar and founding faculty member of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, died Aug. 16 after a long illness. He was 81.

One of six original faculty members at the seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., Green served as head of the Old Testament Department 27 years before retiring in 1978.

"He combined the qualities of a careful scholar with those of an enthusiastic teacher and a very good preacher," said Thomas Bland, who had known Green since 1956.

A native of Mississippi, Green earned a doctorate and became a full professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., at age 24. "Many of his students were his own age," his son Richard Green told the Raleigh News & Observer. Green remained on the faculty 11 years.

From the seminary, he went to two Florida pastorates -- First Baptist Church in Pensacola and then First Baptist Church of Gainesville -- before joining Southeastern's faculty in 1951.

Green also studied and conducted research in Europe in the London Museum, at Oxford and Cambridge universities and the University of Zurich.

Among his publications are a volume of the Broadman Commentary, on the Book of Jeremiah, published in 1971, and a book on the prophet Isaiah titled "God Reigns."

Green was preceded in death by his wife, Ruth, in 1987, and suffered a long bout with Parkinson's disease. Services were scheduled Aug. 19 at Binkley Chapel on the Southeastern Seminary campus with burial in

Southeastern Seminary Cemetery.

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Baptist group kicks out churches which license women preachers

LEXINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- The General Association of Baptist Churches in Kentucky, a 126-year-old association of black Baptist churches in the state, voted Aug. 17 to disfellowship several congregations because they had licensed women preachers in violation of the organization's rules.

Forest Tabernacle Baptist Church in Newburg and First Gethsemane Baptist Church in Louisville were removed from the association's membership roll at the association's annual meeting in Lexington. Other churches either have been or will be removed, the Louisville Courier-Journal reported.

T. Vaughn Walker, pastor at First Gethsemane, is a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

The removals enforced a February 1993 decision that churches which have licensed women preachers are ineligible to register for membership in the association. A notice to churches warned that vote "was the voice of the body that churches who have licensed women preachers cannot register in this body for membership."

That decision was made entirely by men. The association does not allow women to vote at its meetings.

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