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More talk, less stridency needed, Clinton tells religious leaders

By Greg Warner and Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Frustrated by the strident tones he senses in the nation, President Bill Clinton challenged about 60 religious leaders Sept. 8 to encourage dialogue among people who disagree on the issues.

Clinton's appeal to the religious leaders came at a White House breakfast -- the second large group of religious representatives he has hosted. Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship were among those attending.

Seated at the head table with Clinton was Jim Henry, Southern Baptist Convention president and pastor of First Baptist Church, Orlando, Fla. Other Baptists present included Rex Horne, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church, Little Rock, Ark., Clinton's home church; Henry Blackaby, director of prayer and spiritual awakening at the Home Mission Board; Patrick Anderson, criminology professor at Florida Southern College, Lakeland, and moderator-elect of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; and Harold Phillips, minister of education at Second Baptist Church, Liberty, Mo., and moderator of the Baptist Fellowship of Missouri.

After the breakfast gathering, Clinton and Vice President Al Gore -- both Southern Baptists -- met with Henry, Horne and Blackaby in what Henry described as a "pastoral meeting."

"I was impressed with the president personally, his intelligence, his grasp of a whole lot of different things," Henry told Associated Baptist Press.

Henry described Clinton as "very knowledgeable" about Southern Baptists, "quoting things I've said" and resolutions passed by the SBC. "It got my attention," he said. "He not only knows about who we are but keeps up with who we are."

Henry said he and the other Southern Baptists who met privately with Clinton and Gore sought to assure them of their prayers, despite public differences between the administration and Southern Baptist leaders on such issues as abortion and homosexual rights.

Clinton and Gore are "part of our family and we wanted them to know that we cared, and that Southern Baptists believe we have a biblical responsibility to pray for them," Henry said. "I assured them that they would be at the heart of our prayers."

At the breakfast, Clinton called on religious leaders to help him overcome the gridlock and intransigence that

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blocks progress on substantive issues.

"Pray for me," he told the religious leaders.

Clinton said he is deeply disappointed that in two years he has made no headway in changing the partisan, pessimistic political climate in Washington, participants said. While significant progress could be made on consensus issues, he said, Washington focuses on "minor" issues.

"We must find concrete areas of agreement and then do them," he reportedly told participants.

White House officials declined to give details of the meeting, saying publicity was not their objective for inviting the leaders to Washington. However, several participants spoke freely about the meeting.

Clinton told the religious leaders that "the values we share are greater than the culture war that divides us," Phillips said.

Participants reported that Clinton said Americans need to find a way to be in the political process "without screaming at each other. We shouldn't demonize our adversaries."

Clinton expressed frustration with how his administration is perceived.

"I believe I am doing what the American people want, but somehow it seems we are not in the proper rhythm," he reportedly said. Citing the Mideast peace agreements, unification of Europe and other signs of progress, Clinton said, "I believe we are doing more right than wrong, but people believe the opposite."

Clinton said Americans are locked in "a screaming match" over such controversial issues as homosexuality and abortion, according to participants. Although there is wide consensus among most Americans on those two issues, he said, little constructive dialogue takes place because of polarization.

"Why can't people who disagree sit down together and say, 'What does the Bible say about this really?' ... Why can't we find some areas of agreement?" Clinton reportedly asked.

As a positive example, Clinton later told about an evangelical pastor from Michigan who, although an opponent of homosexuality, started a ministry in his church for people with AIDS.

Clinton said he is misrepresented as believing homosexuality is equally desirable as heterosexuality, Pat Anderson said. "I don't believe that," Clinton reportedly said. However, as long as homosexuals are law-abiding, tax-paying citizens, Clinton said, his job as president is to treat them equally and see that others do the same.

The vast majority of Americans want fewer abortions, Clinton reportedly said, but they are not certain the best way to accomplish that is to criminalize abortion. Clinton urged relaxation of adoption laws and streamlining of the adoption process as a partial response to abortion, Anderson said.

"He was asking for help," Anderson said afterward. "He was asking for all of us to figure out how to engage in dialogue with those who disagree with us."

"Unless I'm snowed, here's a guy who genuinely wants to make a difference," said Anderson. "He's going to do as much as he can as long as he's there. ... It sort of makes me want to do better."

"He sees the world as a cafeteria of opportunity, whereas another guy sees it as a nightmare of problems."

Anderson met Clinton after the breakfast and promised to pray for the president. "I said I wanted him to know I was appalled at the vicious personal attacks he was receiving from so-called Christian leaders. I told him I know it takes a heavy toll on him and his family."

Home said he hopes such meetings will promote "better and greater dialogue" between the president and those who disagree with him.

Rex Home, Clinton's Arkansas pastor, credited the president for being "open to hearing from those who are opposed to him," adding that he knew of no other administration that met more frequently with opponents of its policies.

Carolyn Crumpler of Cincinnati, Ohio, moderator of the Fellowship, was invited but unable to attend. On her way to the airport in Atlanta, a kidnapping, police chase and resulting traffic jam on a freeway kept her from making her flight to Washington.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following story updates and replaces the Sept. 8 ABP story, "SBC study committee seeks delay in Florida home missions proposal."

Florida board delays plan to alter HMB relationship

By Bob Allen

LEESBURG, Fla. (ABP) -- A proposal that would take responsibility for missions work in Florida -- and about \$1.3 million annually to pay for it -- away from the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board will be delayed, at least until it is reviewed by a committee that is already studying ways in which the various SBC entities relate.

The Florida Baptist Convention's State Board of Missions agreed Sept. 9 to postpone action on the plan at the request of Mark Brister, who chairs a seven-member committee studying the structure and programs of the SBC.

The Florida board authorized Executive Director John Sullivan to accept invitations to meet both with the Brister committee Oct. 28 and with Home Mission Board administrators as soon as possible. Sullivan will report on those meetings to the State Board of Missions no later than January 1995.

Sullivan said questions of who is responsible for mission work in Florida and how it will be financed "must be addressed." However, rather than push the proposal forward to be "tested as a paradigm shift in mission giving and cooperative relationships," he added, "it is my heart to cooperate" with requests for the meetings with national leaders.

"This is neither compromise nor capitulation, but a desire to cooperate with brothers and sisters in seeking solutions to sensitive problems and to ensure the aggressive ongoing mission of winning this diverse and dynamic state to Christ," Sullivan said.

The proposal, approved Aug. 18 by the state budget and allocation committee, would, beginning in 1996, transfer administration of all mission work in Florida to the state convention's offices in Jacksonville. Currently the work is administered by the Home Mission Board from offices in Atlanta through joint funding of missionary positions under terms of a "cooperative agreement" outlining responsibilities and limitations of the HMB and Florida convention.

To fund the change, the state convention would skim about \$1.3 million -- the amount of money that currently comes from the HMB to fund projects in Florida -- before it forwards home mission gifts to Atlanta. In 1993, Florida gave \$1.9 million to the Home Mission Board through the Cooperative Program unified budget of both the state and national conventions.

Sullivan says the change is necessary to keep missions viable in Florida. Two recent events precipitated the proposal, he said: a "unilateral" 6 percent reduction in HMB dollars to the states in 1995 and the formation of an HMB committee to "investigate" state conventions which accept church contributions designated for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate alternative organization whose money SBC agencies are forbidden to accept.

HMB President Larry Lewis objects to the Florida proposal, warning it could harm missions giving. He denied the board acted unilaterally when it cut funds to the states, an action he said was dictated by declining denomination support. And, he said the HMB study committee was prompted by various state convention actions, like the Florida proposal, which are "radically redefining the Cooperative Program," the denomination's unified method of budget support.

In discussion, Sullivan and members of the budget and allocations committee expressed surprise at negative

reactions to the proposal. Sullivan said it has been described as "defunding" home missions work. He said the change would not reduce the amount of dollars spent for home missions but would allow people in Jacksonville, rather than Atlanta, to determine how money collected and used in Florida is spent.

Wayne Earnest, a pastor from Dunedin, said there had been "real misunderstanding" about how the proposal has been characterized. "We need to get the word out that nothing is being done in anger," he said.

Contacted in California, Lewis released a statement welcoming Florida's decision to delay the proposal.

"I am trusting that our disagreements can be resolved, the Cooperative Program can be strengthened and together we can go forward toward the Bold Mission Thrust goal of reaching our nation for Christ," Lewis said.

Brister, pastor of Broadmoor Baptist Church in Shreveport, La., said he asked Sullivan to "hold off" on bringing the proposal and invited both Sullivan and Lewis to meet with the SBC program and structure committee in October.

Brister said the committee wants to learn more about the "background, reasons and objectives that prompted" the proposal, which is of interest to the committee because it "considers relating in a new way to one of our agencies and represents a paradigm shift in missions giving."

"We are listening to Southern Baptists," Brister said. "We are studying the entire structure. That's why we want to hear from Dr. Sullivan. We will also hear from Dr. Larry Lewis."

"Our committee is looking at the entire structure of the Southern Baptist Convention and all the program statements, which are in essence the job descriptions of the agencies," Brister said. "We are looking forward in great hopefulness toward the future of the SBC, to keep our mandate for missions solid."

The committee is "working as fast and as carefully as we can," Brister said. While he does not anticipate the committee will be ready to bring a recommendation at the Sept. 19-21 meeting of the SBC Executive Committee, "we hope to have something for the SBC in Atlanta," Brister said.

"It's a formidable but not impossible task. There is a lot of material," Brister said.

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-- Barbara Denman contributed to this story.

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