

Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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In this issue:

- SBC president urges leaders to restore trust, not seek control
- Georgia group says CP support should not be criteria for leadership
- SBC controversy extends to Kentucky church split
- Virginia conservatives elect president
- Virginia pastor Neal Jones to retire in May 1995
- Clinton orders Justice Department to drop stance in tithing dispute

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SBC president urges leaders to restore trust, not seek control

By Greg Warner

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) — Southern Baptist leaders must resist the temptation to control, said Jim Henry, and instead restore trust to a denomination wracked by 15 years of turmoil.

Henry, in his first address to the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee since his election as SBC president in June, outlined his agenda for reconciliation and revitalization of the 15 million-member denomination Sept. 19.

Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, Fla., is the first person to win the presidency without the endorsement of the SBC's conservative leadership, which now controls the Executive Committee and the SBC's 20 agencies.

Introduced by committee chairman and Alabama pastor Fred Wolfe, whom Henry defeated for the presidency, Henry said he has received letters from almost 1,000 Southern Baptists since his election, many asking if the SBC has "a hope and a future."

Southern Baptists do have a hope and a future, Henry said, if they do three things: remember their heritage and polity, recommit to cooperation and civility, and refocus on their primary mission.

"We've been through the crucible many times," he said. "Individuals and groups have splintered off and left us and become tributaries or disappeared from the landscape. But the mainstream of Southern Baptists has continued steadfastly forward. History is a great teacher. Our mistakes should not be repeated. Our successes we should learn from."

Southern Baptists should learn from their history that the denomination exists to serve local churches, he said. "Centralization is not to our benefit."

"Our best posture on this committee and in our institutions is the servant mode," he said. "It's been said that

an enterprise begins to die when it is run for the insiders rather than for the benefit of the customers."

"Control must be anathema to us," he warned. While theological "parameters" are healthy and serve to ensure "diversity without divergence," he said, Southern Baptist leaders must resist the temptation to control Southern Baptist life.

"We are perceived by some as recreating a system that we sought to loose ourselves from some years ago, and it's not selling well on Main Street," he told the committee.

"The answer is not complicated," he said. "It's one word: trust."

The "deep well" of mutual trust among Southern Baptists is still intact, he said. There is still much love and loyalty in the denomination, he said, noting "only a few hundred churches of 39,000 have opted out" during 15 years of controversy.

"But hundreds stand on the brink," he warned. While sound theologically, they desire "more openness, more of an opportunity to participate and know that they're heard," he said.

To demonstrate that trust, Henry said he would use only Southern Baptists as parliamentarians at next summer's Southern Baptist Convention meeting. Barry McCarty, a professional parliamentarian and Church of Christ minister, has served as convention parliamentarian each year since 1986, after a legal battle over parliamentary procedure landed the SBC in court.

Henry said he has thanked McCarty "for the excellent work that he did at a critical time in our denomination. God used him. But now we need to move on."

Reaction to Henry's speech was mixed among Executive Committee members, who gave him a standing ovation before he spoke but applauded less enthusiastically from their seats afterward. Those favoring Henry's softer approach praised him for politely taking the committee to task on issues of control and cooperation. More hardline members, those closer to the SBC's new power structure, labeled Henry's talk of reconciliation naïve.

In addition to cooperation, Henry called Southern Baptists to recommit to three other things: the responsibility of leadership among America's evangelicals, the Cooperative Program and civility.

Henry criticized the "hypocrisy" of SBC leaders whose support for the denomination's central budget, the Cooperative Program, is minimal.

"For too long, some of us in leadership or who aspire to leadership have given lip service," said Henry. "Our people in the trenches then question if what we're about is that important."

"We've poured time, energy and resources in defending biblical integrity, and we should, but the question is: why don't we support the vehicle that is our prime delivery system for that same good truth to be disseminated in this nation and around the world? It smacks of hypocrisy and leaves the faithful in the pews uncertain and eventually persuaded to pour their resources into those projects whose leaders have shown that where their treasures are, that's where their hearts are."

Leaders of the SBC's conservative movement have been criticized for a tradition of not funding the denomination they now control.

Without renewed financial support, Henry warned, the denomination may "implode," lacking the resources to support its huge institutional structure.

Henry also urged caution for "any restructuring, renaming or re-engineering" of the Cooperative Program. Several state conventions have already altered the traditional channels of financial funding, and others are studying changes. Meanwhile, the Executive Committee is studying a realignment of the SBC's agencies.

Change is appropriate only "if it will better facilitate accomplishing God's purpose," he said, not if it decreases the SBC's effectiveness or confuses the people.

Henry called for a recommitment to dialogue and civility, "talking with and not shouting at each other."

"We have brothers and sisters in Christ who have been unfairly judged and labeled because at some point they did not dot every 'i' nor cross every 't.' This intolerance has burned bridges rather than building them. It has caused anger, hostility and anxiety. This is not in the spirit of Jesus Christ. We must recapture civility again."

Henry urged Southern Baptists to refocus on "keeping the main thing the main thing."

"We've gotten a lot of negative publicity," Henry said. But, he added, "the time has come for us to stop sitting around in our 'poor-poor-pitiful-me' mode, wringing our hands and moaning and groaning about how misunderstood and misinterpreted we are."

He urged Baptist leaders to "take a fresh initiative."

"It's time to get off our personal soapboxes that focus on concerns that are important but not primary and often result in tying the hands of our institutional agency leadership and keep them in a sense of guerilla warfare, taxing their creativity and energy, while a lost world could care less. It's time for us to seek God's face, to do our business God's way."

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Georgia group says CP support should not be criteria for leadership

ATLANTA (ABP) — A committee studying what constitutes membership in the Georgia Baptist Convention affirmed the Southern Baptist Convention's Cooperative Program as the state convention's "principle channel" of financial support but recommended that churches which defund SBC programs not be penalized in Georgia Baptist life.

The committee, which will bring recommendations to the convention's Nov. 14-16 annual meeting in Macon, presented its report as information to the state's executive committee, meeting Sept. 13 in Atlanta.

The Committee To Study Harmony and Cooperation was established by vote of last year's convention when it adopted a motion by Floyd Roebuck, pastor of First Baptist Church of Rome. Roebuck called for the study after a 1993 nominating committee announced it would consider for leadership positions only Georgia Baptists from churches that gave at least 7 percent of undesignated receipts through the Cooperative Program.

The requirement, Roebuck said, disqualified members of more than half of the churches in Georgia.

The Cooperative Program is the plan by which churches fund simultaneously budgets of both the SBC and the various Baptist state conventions, which are autonomous from the national convention.

Since it was established in 1925, the budget plan is credited with helping the 15-million-member SBC to grow into the nation's largest Protestant body and build a massive worldwide missions delivery system.

Fueled by societal changes and denominational controversy, however, the Cooperative Program concept is being revisited on several fronts. Two Baptist state conventions -- Virginia and North Carolina -- offer optional cooperative giving tracks for churches who opt out of the national program. Others allow churches to designate gifts for non-SBC ventures, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an alternative missionary sending agency supported by moderates. The largest state convention, Texas, is considering a plan this fall that would count virtually all missions gifts as cooperative, whether a portion of them ever reaches the SBC or not.

The Georgia committee proposed, and the executive committee approved, a change in the way missions gifts are reported. Replacing two giving categories -- Cooperative Program for undesignated gifts and "Restricted" for those which exclude SBC agencies -- the proposal offers four options including Cooperative Program and "Designated Cooperative Program Causes."

Supporters of the change say "designated carries a less negative connotation than "restricted."

The committee's report describes the Cooperative Program as "the principal channel of financial support of Baptist work at home and abroad."

It goes on to state: "We recognize the tremendous responsibility of the Committee on Nominations and the Georgia Baptist Convention to select for nomination the very finest leadership available from all Georgia Baptist churches to serve in the elected positions of the Convention. Further, we ask the Committee on Nominations to always

seek to reflect the diversity within the Convention in its choice of nominees, and we affirm the concept that all Georgia Baptists are worthy of consideration to serve in Georgia Baptist life."

The executive committee also adopted a record CP budget of \$34.6 million. It calls for an increase of 2.74 percent over the 1994 budget and continues the 50/50 split between national and state causes -- not counting shared responsibilities which comprise about 10 percent of the overall budget -- the highest SBC portion in any state convention.

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-- By William Neal and Bob Allen

SBC controversy extends to Kentucky church split

By Mark Wingfield

HENDERSON, Ky. (ABP) -- A new church is forming in West Kentucky, in what appears to be the state's first church split with a direct link to the Southern Baptist Convention controversy.

About 70 members of Immanuel Temple Baptist Church in Henderson, Ky., began meeting as Community Baptist Fellowship after a heated business meeting at Immanuel Temple May 25. At that business meeting, three motions were presented in an apparent attempt to link the church to the SBC's conservative swing and disallow moderate dissent.

The most controversial of the motions would have required that anyone in a leadership position at Immanuel Temple pledge complete agreement with the direction of the SBC. The motion was tabled.

The two other motions, which both passed, said the church would "remain a Southern Baptist church" and that the church no longer would allow members to designate offerings through the church to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

In the months leading up to the split, some church members had been seeking information about the Fellowship, a national group of moderate Southern Baptists who feel disenfranchised by the SBC's new conservative leaders. Some had begun designating their missions offerings to support the Fellowship.

At the same time, the church called a new pastor, Harry Hunter, who apparently wanted to move the church in a more conservative direction.

Details of both sides of the church's internal conflict are scarce, in part because leaders refused to be interviewed.

But other issues reportedly were involved in the growing rift, including a dispute over the church's day care center, concerns about the way Hunter was called as pastor after having been interim pastor and a fight over how to handle nomination of several women as deacons.

Tim Hall, a lay leader among those leaving Immanuel Temple, said the problems largely resulted from the new pastor's "authoritarian" leadership.

Hunter was "closed to any discussion" about the Fellowship and would not allow anyone to question his pronouncements and actions, Hall said. "The priesthood of the believer was an alien thought."

Greg Brooks, moderator of the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, has met with representatives of the new congregation and said he believes they are victims of the SBC conflict.

"Part of it centered, to my understanding, around the idea of giving to the Fellowship," he explained. "As

much as that is an issue at the national level, ... this was a similar vote in microcosm at the local church level.

"The gist of those two motions coming in tandem was that support of the Fellowship equated with non-support of the Southern Baptist Convention. That's an improper equation. There are a lot of churches out there supporting a lot of causes ... and no one has ever questioned their loyalty to the Southern Baptist Convention."

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Virginia conservatives elect president

By Robert Dilday

COLONIAL HEIGHTS, Va. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia elected Fredericksburg pastor Bob Melvin as president and adopted a \$105,000 budget Sept. 15.

The actions came during the second annual meeting of the organization of Virginia Baptists sympathetic with the conservative direction taken by the Southern Baptist Convention since 1979. The organization formed in 1993 to counter what its founders charged was a weakening of ties between the SBC and the more moderate Baptist General Association of Virginia.

Melvin, pastor of Spotswood Baptist Church in Fredericksburg, will preside at a time when SBCV is solidifying its structure. Last July the group's executive committee employed evangelist Howard Baldwin as interim executive director, a move leaders described as an attempt to "mobilize support and gain strength."

About 30 percent of SBCV's 1994-95 budget will help Baldwin accomplish that goal. He will receive a \$9,000 salary and \$3,000 in travel expenses.

An additional \$58,265, or 55 percent of the budget, will fund missions endeavors. That includes \$20,000 for mission projects in Virginia and \$10,000 for educational scholarships.

Finance committee chairman Jim Pope said the budget's total was based on SBCV giving during the past 18 months. The group received \$116,560 from 54 churches and 14 individuals between February 1993 and August 1994, reported SBCV treasurer Doyle Chauncey.

Melvin garnered 71 votes in a four-way contest for the SBCV presidency.

In an address, Baldwin outlined five SBCV goals:

-- To reclaim the history and biblical heritage of Baptists in Virginia, which he described as belief in an inerrant Bible;

-- To be inclusive, not exclusive. "We do not need to make this organization a little club to warm our hearts because we've been excluded by the [BGAV]", he said.

-- To support the SBC's Cooperative Program, which funds all convention boards and agencies. "I can give [to the CP] without any reservation in my heart," he said. "This is the first time in my adult life I can say that," an apparent reference to conservative misgivings about alleged liberalism in the SBC prior to 1979.

-- To disciple churches through training courses such as MasterLife and Experiencing God.

-- To promote missions and evangelism.

Baldwin dismissed speculation that SBCV will separate from the BGAV to form a new state Baptist association affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. "We have a responsibility to be salt and light in this state and we wouldn't be doing that by separating," he said.

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Virginia pastor Neal Jones to retire in May 1995

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP) -- Neal Jones, pastor of one of Virginia's largest Southern Baptist churches for 25 years, has announced plans to retire May 1, 1995.

Jones, 68, has served the 128-year-old Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, a Washington suburb, since 1969. During his tenure the church has grown to nearly 3,300 members and sponsored Arabic, Korean and Spanish congregations.

Jones also spearheaded the development of a children's development center, a seminary for Korean Baptist leaders and a partnership with Central Baptist Church in Moscow.

The Kentucky native is a former president of the Baptist General Association of Virginia and member of the Virginia Baptist General Board. While BGAV president in 1988, Jones appointed a President's Task Force on the Denominational Crisis, the first of several moderate responses by Virginia to the conservative shift in the Southern Baptist Convention.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This story updates and replaces one posted last week. New material is in paragraphs 12 and 13.

Clinton orders Justice Department to drop stance in tithing dispute

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Acting on orders from President Clinton, the Justice Department has withdrawn its argument that a Minnesota church must turn over tithes given by a couple headed for bankruptcy.

The department had argued in a federal appeals court brief that under bankruptcy laws, the \$13,450 donated by Bruce and Nancy Young to Crystal Evangelical Free Church actually belongs to their creditors and should be recovered from the church.

Particularly troubling to religious groups was the Justice Department's insistence that recovering the funds from the church would not violate a new religious freedom law designed to enhance protections for religious practice.

Signed into law in November by President Clinton, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act restored a legal standard that permits government to restrict religious practice only when it can show a compelling reason.

Senior administration officials said Clinton's "exceptional interest" in RFRA prompted the rare action of ordering the Justice Department to abandon its position in the case. The department withdrew from the case the day before it was scheduled for argument in the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Clinton's action is consistent with his record of support of RFRA, said senior administration officials, who noted that the president's remarks when he signed the bill were more than routine.

Top officials said the president's view is reflected in his statement at the signing that, "Government should be held to a very high level of proof before it interferes with someone's free exercise of religion."

Religious organizations that had challenged the department's stance quickly praised the administration's

reversal.

"President Clinton has proven that he is sincerely committed to meaningful legal protection for religious exercise," said Steve McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom. "The administration has told government lawyers nationwide that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act is not a toothless tiger."

The CLS, along with other religious groups including the Baptist Joint Committee and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, had filed a friend- of-the-court brief siding with the church. In addition, attorneys for those organizations and three prominent law school professors met with high administration officials in June to discuss application of RFRA.

BJC General Counsel Brent Walker commended the administration for "doing the right thing.

"It takes courage to admit a mistake and reverse a legal argument," Walker said. "This is further proof that President Clinton cares deeply about the free exercise of religion and spiritual values."

Michael Whitehead, general counsel for the Christian Life Commission, praised Clinton for "calling off Janet Reno's assault against RFRA" but added he had asked the president to go further.

"More than just stopping Ms. Reno's attacks, the president should have told Justice to stay in the case and actively support RFRA," Whitehead said. "DOJ is no longer fighting against RFRA, but they don't deserve the medal of honor just for being AWOL at the battle for religious freedom. RFRA is under attack and we hope the White House will actively engage the battle to rescue and revive RFRA."

In a separate dispute, the Justice Department is arguing for the free exercise and free speech rights of students seeking to meet for religious purposes during the lunch period.

The administration will pursue "vigilant enforcement" of religious freedom, senior officials said. Should the Minnesota tithing case be decided against the church, the administration will seek to change bankruptcy laws to protect tithes given in good faith, officials said.

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