

Associated Baptist Press

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SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Historical Commission, SBC
Nashville, Tennessee

Exec Committee asks states to avoid funding Fellowship

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Meeting for the first time since Southern Baptists instructed their agencies to end most financial dealings with the rival Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Southern Baptist Executive Committee adopted a resolution asking Baptist state conventions to consider doing the same.

In June the Southern Baptist Convention took strong action against the Fellowship, a moderate organization dissatisfied with official SBC programs now under conservative control, over fear of competition for scarce missions funds.

Several state conventions, meanwhile, are considering their own responses to the Fellowship, by deciding whether to grant full membership privileges to churches that opt to fund the Fellowship's alternatives to traditional SBC giving channels.

The resolution, adopted by the Executive Committee at a Sept. 19-20 meeting in Nashville, Tenn., reminds state conventions considering alternate giving plans that "at no time" has Cooperative Program money been used to fund organizations "having no accountability" to state conventions or the SBC.

The statement, which does not name the Fellowship, goes on to "humbly, respectfully and prayerfully" ask states considering broadening the Cooperative Program definition to "inform their constituents of the variances of theology and doctrine being embraced and espoused by some groups identifying themselves as Southern Baptists."

It specifically calls for those states to ask messengers to their annual meetings if they want Cooperative Program monies diverted to organizations "with elected leaders that embrace and/or espouse theology and doctrines that depart from the 'definite doctrines Baptists believe, cherish and with which they have been and are now closely identified,' " a quotation from the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement.

Attached to the resolution were three documents given to Executive Committee members, produced by the SBC's convention relations office. One, titled "A Question of Heritage," contains excerpts from historical Southern Baptist figures suggesting they held the Bible to be inerrant and infallible, a position shared by current SBC leaders and publicly challenged by the Fellowship.

Another, "Departures: CBF Leadership," questions doctrinal commitments of the Fellowship by quoting statements dating from 1962 to 1994 by people who have appeared on the program of Fellowship meetings. The various quotations reject inerrancy, question literal readings of selected biblical passages and argue that Christian salvation is unconditional.

David Wilkinson, communications coordinator for the Fellowship, dismissed the committee's charges as "the same old stuff that I think Southern Baptists are sick and tired of hearing about -- false accusations, innuendos, exaggerated statements and unsubstantiated claims."

"You can try to bully your support or you can try to earn it," Wilkinson said. "The Fellowship would rather earn it."

Jerold McBride, president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, one state considering changes in the way it cooperates with the SBC, called the Executive Committee resolution "coercive" and a violation of Baptist polity.

"There are other denominations whose polity calls for power to flow down from the national level, to the state level, to the district or association and to the local churches, but such polity has no place in Baptist life," McBride said. "There are no levels in Baptist organized life and no group has any business 'reminding' or 'urging' any group."

"Such language reflects a continuing effort to make the Cooperative Program the 'Coercive Program,' " he added.

Leaders of other state conventions that either allow funding of the Fellowship or are considering it were unavailable for comment.

In other business, the Executive Committee "respectfully request(ed)" the SBC Annuity Board to revise its guidelines to prohibit investment in companies with connections to the "abortion industry."

Current investment guidelines forbid the Dallas-based Annuity Board from investing in "any company that is publicly recognized ... as being in the liquor, tobacco, gambling and pornography industries" or "whose products, services or activities are publicly recognized as being incompatible with the moral and ethical posture" of the Annuity Board.

The Executive Committee action requests the Annuity Board to add abortion to the list of banned industries in the first clause and that "contributions" be substituted for "activities" in the latter.

In past meetings, Executive Committee members have voiced concern to Annuity Board leaders about companies which contribute to Planned Parenthood, which they consider an abortion provider. Annuity Board representatives respond it is hard to implement such a ban, because almost every company participates in locally run United Way and similar programs, which may in some cases include funding for abortion-related services but are not controlled by contributors.

The Annuity Board's chairman, Richard Scott of Waco, Texas, told the Executive Committee "we feel the same way about abortion as you do," but reiterated the "operational difficulty" of implementing the policy.

Paul Powell, Annuity Board president, added his agency's trustees will carry out the Executive Committee's request to consider changing the policy but reminded members "this will not be the investment policy of the Annuity Board unless the trustees say that."

In a separate motion, the Executive Committee later asked the Annuity Board to provide "a written report of all involvement with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship," including contracts, by the committee's next meeting in February 1995.

The Annuity Board manages the retirement plan for the Atlanta-based Fellowship, as well as other non-SBC agencies including Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary in Memphis, Tenn.

"This is just requesting information," said Executive Committee chairman Fred Wolfe, before calling for a vote that appeared to be unanimous. Annuity Board spokesman Tom Miller told ABP the agency has no comment about the request.

The Executive Committee, which functions on behalf of the SBC between annual conventions, also:

— Voted not to proceed with plans to produce a weekly televised news program because, leaders said, money is not available to produce it. Executive Committee members saw a pilot of "News Matrix," a good-news program with a news magazine format, in February, produced at a cost of about \$20,000. The budget for producing the show weekly would be more than \$1 million a year, said Richard Cagle of Alabama, chairman of the convention relations

work group.

– Voted not to recommend an official study and review of the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, saying the statement of consensus doctrines adopted by the SBC in 1963 has been recently affirmed in convention votes. A request to consider writing a new doctrinal statement came in the form of a motion made at last summer's SBC meeting in Orlando, Fla., which was referred to the Executive Committee.

The committee dealt with other motions referred by the SBC by deferring action on a request that a committee be formed to serve as a liaison to Southern Baptist Christian schools, declining to change the convention's process for nominating new leaders, and declining to change the SBC constitution to forbid the convention's missions boards from asking missionary applicants questions about inerrancy.

– Declined "at this time" to recommend that a registration fee be charged at the SBC annual meeting. In recent years, the per-messenger cost of SBC meetings has ranged from \$27 this year in Orlando to a high of \$45 in Houston in 1993. While recent cost-cutting steps make requiring messengers to pay to attend the SBC unnecessary for now, a registration fee may be considered in the future, Executive Committee leaders say. Most denominations charge a registration fee at their conventions, said Lee Porter, SBC registration secretary.

– Adopted a resolution affirming Albert Mohler for leadership as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Mohler, who has undergone intense criticism since requesting the resignation of a popular theology professor this summer, has exhibited "unwavering courage" and "uncontaminated integrity," said James Merritt of Snellville, Ga, who offered the motion from the floor during a plenary session.

– Heard comments by SBC President Jim Henry. In his first remarks before an SBC entity since his election in June, Henry urged Executive Committee members to put behind them the political infighting that has characterized much of SBC life over the past 15 years and to increase their support of the Cooperative Program, the SBC's central budget.

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-- Greg Warner contributed to this story.

CORRECTION: Please replace the lead in the Sept. 20 ABP story, "SBC president urges leaders to restore trust, not seek control," with the following. The original inadvertently omitted the date.

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.

EEOC withdraws guidelines on harassment in the workplace

WASHINGTON (ABP) – Following months of controversy, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission voted Sept. 19 to withdraw guidelines designed to help interpret what constitutes workplace harassment based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

An EEOC spokesperson said the agency has no plans to redraft a new set of guidelines.

Virtually every religious and civil liberties group, including the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Baptist Joint Committee, criticized the guidelines as open to misinterpretation. Some, fearing the guidelines would lead to "religion-free" workplaces, asked the EEOC to drop religion from the guidelines; others urged EEOC to keep religion in the guidelines but clarify them to ensure legitimate religious expression is not stifled.

The EEOC withdrew the guidelines entirely because it became apparent that the objective for drafting them had not been accomplished, the EEOC spokesperson said. The objective, she continued, was to clarify what the Civil Rights Act of 1964 said about workplace harassment.

Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, said, "It's probably good that the guidelines were withdrawn in their entirety. The worst thing would have been to withdraw only religion and move forward with the rest of the guidelines. Religion would have been left at the station as the train departed.

"If we are going to have new guidelines, religion should be there too, but with improvements that will protect religion, not impede it."

Michael Whitehead, general counsel for the Christian Life Commission, could not be reached for comment.

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--By Pam Parry

Church wins legal right to feed the hungry in D.C.

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A federal court ruled Sept. 9 that a Washington, D.C., church has the right to feed the homeless.

Western Presbyterian Church filed suit to retain the right to run a feeding program after the District of Columbia zoning board voted in April to ban the ministry when the congregation moves to a new location. The court earlier temporarily suspended the zoning board decision until final judgment could be made.

The 139-year-old church is scheduled to move a few blocks from its current location three blocks from the White House. Residents at the new location have complained that the feeding program will attract undesirable people to their upscale neighborhood. The congregation has run its feeding program for 11 years, serving breakfast to about 150 to 200 homeless people every weekday.

The district judge said that "the city must refrain, absent extraordinary circumstances, from in any way regulating what religious functions the church may conduct. ... Unquestionably, the church's feeding program in every respect is religious activity and a form of worship."

The judge said that feeding the homeless is a "form of worship akin to prayer" and that to regulate religious conduct through zoning laws is a "substantial burden on the free exercise of religion."

Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, who worked with the church's attorney, was delighted that a federal district judge in Washington applied the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to keep government from telling the church how to do its ministry.

Walker said he is "encouraged that a federal court has rejected the false dichotomy between piety and practice. Feeding the homeless is a mainstay of Christian discipleship and for the government to try to prevent it substantially burdens the churches' religious liberty."

RFRA, which was signed into law in November, restored a high level of protection for religious practice previously abandoned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1990. Under RFRA government must have a compelling state interest before it can burden religious practice, and then, it must use the least restrictive means to safeguard that interest.

-- By Pam Parry

Melissa Rogers named to BJC legal position

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Melissa Rogers, a former associate in a District of Columbia law firm, has been named associate general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee.

Rogers, who is pursuing a master of arts degree in history at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., has been volunteering services to the Washington-based religious liberty agency since March.

She will fill the associate general counsel's position on a part-time basis beginning Oct. 1.

The position previously was held full-time by Brent Walker, who was promoted to general counsel at the BJC in October 1993.

Rogers is a 1991 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Law and a cum laude graduate of Baylor University in 1988.

She was an associate in the D.C. firm of Dow, Lohnes & Albertson from 1991-93, where she specialized in telecommunications law.

More recently she taught government and economics in the Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, Md. She is a member of the Maryland and D.C. bars.

Walker said Rogers "is a first-rate lawyer" whose presence "will expand the BJC's ability to meet effectively challenges to religious liberty and church-state separation."

Rogers is married to Stan Fendley, tax counsel to the Senate Small Business Committee. Her father, Bill Rogers, is professor of Christian education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

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-- By Larry Chesser

Churches go on-line via computer technology

By Lilla Ross

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- On the morning of Jan. 28, 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded after takeoff. That evening, there was a memorial service for the crew with prayers, eulogies, scripture readings, expressions of grief.

It was all done by a loose-knit community of friends, who had never met face to face, but joined the service from all over the country via their computer keyboards. They were members of an on-line computer service that included PresbyNet, the network of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

"It was very moving," said the Rev. Merrill Cook, Presbyterian administrator for computer communications. "No one expected it to work out as well as it did. That was our first sense that not only were we communicating with each other but there was a sense of community. We're not the electronic church, but we are building relationships and working together."

Religion has gone on-line. There's preaching, teaching, praying and lots of debating in cyberspace.

News and views of the major denominations are available on their own computer networks -- PresbyNet, SBCNet, EpiscoNet, EcuNet. And bulletin boards addressing every religious topic you can think of (and a bunch you haven't) are available on commercial computer services such as America OnLine, CompuServe and GENie. And, of course, on the Internet.

Christianity Today, the leading evangelical magazine, will be available this fall on America OnLine. And Zondervan publishers has an on-line press syndicate that supplies newspaper and magazine editors with cartoons, puzzles, items on books and biographical sketches.

"We decided to go on-line because it's how people are communicating," said Polly House, editorial assistant with Baptist Press in Nashville, Tenn.

And communicating on-line is faster than the mail and cheaper than faxes and long distance, she said. "Before, it might be a week before they got our news. Now, they can get it in a matter of hours."

The Southern Baptist Sunday School Board's 3-year-old SBCNet has grown from about 500 subscribers 18 months ago to more than 2,700, said David Haywood, a computer specialist at the Nashville, Tenn.,-based publishing house. The board projects subscriptions will reach 10,000 in 1997, he said.

PresbyNet has nearly 2,300 subscribers and more than 4,100 public "meetings," though only 600 of them are active, notes Cook.

News releases from the Presbyterian News Service are published daily and on the spot accounts of the 1994 General Assembly in Wichita were also available to subscribers.

Fifteen or 16 denominations use EcuNet, including the Presbyterians, Lutherans, the Methodists and the United Church of Christ.

Notices can be posted about news from the mission field within hours of an event or crisis that in the past would not have been available for days or weeks.

Church World Service issues alerts as soon as there is a disaster, estimating what kinds of relief will be necessary. "It makes the world smaller," Cook said.

One of the latest additions to EcuNet is BaptistNet, launched Sept. 1 by Smyth & Helwys publishers in Macon, Ga. The service offers various discussion groups and services including on-line versions of Associated Baptist Press, Baptists Today and support for Formations curriculum, said Jerry Cappell, on-line editor.

CompuServe has its own religion bulletin boards, featuring such topics as "Is God a vegetarian?" and "Are Jews saved?" In addition, there are weekly prayer services and Bible and Torah studies.

America OnLine carries eight religious journals, including "Israel News Digest" and "Electronic Mason."

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