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In this issue:

- Texas conservatives file charter, but deny plans, for new convention
- Young Texan ministers embrace proposed change in missions giving
- Sherman answers critics with 10-point statement of beliefs
- CBF is 'here to stay,' Parks tells Arkansans
- BJC recovered from defunding by SBC, Dunn tells board
- High court declines to review pair of church-state disputes
- Christian schools growing in SBC, under Executive Committee study
- Correction

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Texas conservatives file charter, but deny plans, for new convention

By Toby Druin

HOUSTON (ABP) – A Houston attorney has filed a charter for a new Texas convention of conservative Baptists but says there are no immediate plans to form such an organization.

The attorney, Walter Carpenter, told the Baptist Standard of Texas he filed a charter for a "Texas Baptist Convention, Inc.," in case the need arises for conservative Southern Baptists in the state to separate from the moderate-dominated Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Carpenter, who is a trustee of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and editor of the Texas Baptist, a fundamental-conservative publication, said he has "no intention to use" the charter, "but it is there to use if things go from bad to worse and conservative leadership in Texas wants it. It is merely an enabling thing in the event it is needed."

Carpenter said he does not know if the approval of a proposal from a Cooperative Missions Giving Study Committee might trigger a new convention. Conservatives have criticized the proposal, which would broaden the state convention's definition of cooperative giving beyond the traditional unified budget of the state and the Southern Baptist Convention to also encompass Texas-only contributions and non-SBC missions ventures, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate organization promoting alternatives to conservative-dominated SBC programs.

"I am not in the loop of the leadership decisions," Carpenter said. "I merely do what I am asked to do."

However, Carpenter said, the decision to file the non-profit charter for the new convention was his own. "I just did it and then informed them (conservative leadership) that it is available. I have heard from none of them.

Asked if by establishing another convention, conservatives would not be following the example of the

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which they criticize as schismatic, Carpenter said: "You are free to draw your own parallels. I am taking no leadership role; I am merely creating an entity."

William Pinson, executive director of the Texas convention, acknowledged that in Baptist church-governance "each church is autonomous and free to cooperate or not cooperate with any association of churches, state or national convention."

But, Pinson added, "I would hope that no church in cooperation with the Baptist General Convention of Texas would cease that cooperation. Each church is important to our cooperative effort in missions, evangelism, education and benevolence."

-30-

Young Texan ministers embrace proposed change in missions giving

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) – A group of younger Texas Baptist ministers has endorsed a committee's recommendation to broaden the definition of Cooperative Program giving, saying the proposal represents a "higher ground" than the "denominational mudslinging" which has dominated too much of the debate in Southern Baptist life.

The 27 self-described "younger ministers" released their statement of support for recommendations of the Cooperative Missions Giving Study Committee at an Oct. 5 news conference in Dallas.

The study committee, authorized last year by vote of the state convention, will recommend to messengers at this year's annual meeting, scheduled Oct. 31-Nov. 1 in Amarillo, that the Baptist General Convention of Texas expand its definition of the Cooperative Program, the unified budgeting plan which raises money simultaneously for Baptist state conventions and the national Southern Baptist Convention, the denomination's main funding channel since 1925.

The committee will recommend that all contributions be counted as Cooperative Program funds, whether they support the national portion of the Cooperative Program, other worldwide mission causes – such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship – or the BGCT alone.

"Texas Baptists are inclusive," said one signer, David Becker, second vice president of the state convention and pastor of University Heights Baptist Church in Huntsville. "The Cooperative Missions Giving report does not change us. It keeps us right where we have been."

Other signers ranged from pastors of First Baptist churches in small Texas towns such as Muleshoe, McGregor, Rosebud and Happy to Allen Walworth, pastor of the 8,800-member Park Cities Baptist Church of Dallas.

The statement of support was mailed to more than 100 Texas Baptist ministers for their consideration, according to Ed Hogan, pastor of First Baptist Church of Crockett, an organizer of the initiative.

Signers, identified as generally 45 years old and under, "represent the broad spectrum of who Texas Baptists are," Hogan said.

"We have been recipients of a great heritage of cooperation in Texas Baptist life," the statement of support said. "We want to see a renewal of cooperative trust in our state."

Younger ministers "have grown up in the quagmire of power politics, and we are weary of denominational mudslinging," it continued. "We believe this giving plan will move us to higher ground."

The plan "is equally fair to every Texas Baptist church," it "honors the autonomy of each and blesses the involvement of all" and will greatly enhance the viability of the state convention as "a mission force in the 21st century," the statement said.

The committee's recommendations offer Texas Baptists an opportunity to move beyond the division that has characterized the SBC for 15 years, said Dennis Wiles, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church of Garland.

"I'm 35 years old, and my entire ministry has been conducted in the shadow of the controversy," Wiles said. "I'm ready to move to higher ground."

Not everyone views the Texas proposal as a step forward. A minority report issued by five of the 22 members of the Cooperative Missions Giving Study Committee maintains that the full committee's recommendations "set up unnecessary confrontation" and "drive a wedge" in the BGCT between SBC supporters and those who oppose the national convention's current direction.

Those claims ignore reality, said Ken Massey, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, who drafted the statement of support.

"The wedge" was driven by those who have controlled the national Southern Baptist Convention since 1979, and the "smoking hammer" belongs to those "who have driven a stake through the heart of Southwestern Seminary and who continue to drive the tent stakes narrower," Massey said.

John Hatch, pastor of First Baptist Church of Lake Jackson and spokesman for the five members of the study committee who drafted the minority report, said he had no comment regarding the news conference or statement of support.

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Sherman answers critics with 10-point statement of beliefs

ATLANTA (ABP) – In answer to critics who say leaders of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship are liberal, CBF chief executive Cecil Sherman has issued a 10-point statement of his own beliefs which embraces orthodox Christian tenets.

Among the doctrines endorsed in Sherman's statement are the Virgin Birth, the Trinity, Adam and Eve, final judgment, heaven and hell. The statement appears in Sherman's regular column in the Sept. 22 issue of *Baptists Today*, a moderate Baptist newspaper.

Sherman and the Fellowship have been under attack from leaders of the conservative-controlled Southern Baptist Convention, who say the Fellowship, a rival organization of Southern Baptist moderates, departs from traditional Baptist doctrine. The latest attack came from the SBC Executive Committee in September.

Despite the criticism, the Fellowship has resisted adopting a statement of faith for fear it would be viewed or used as a creed. Traditional Southern Baptist confessions, such as the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, have been misused by conservatives during the 15-year SBC controversy, Sherman, Fellowship coordinator, said in his column.

"I don't want CBF to write a confession of faith," Sherman wrote. "But here is a brief statement of what I believe."

Concerning Jesus, Sherman says: "I believe God came in a unique way in Jesus. He is the Messiah and our Savior. By his virgin birth, sinless life, sacrificial death and bodily resurrection, Jesus became our best way to see God. So, I preach Christ, the way to 'see the Father.' ..."

Sherman's statement uses language that is more casual than theological. He does not talk of Jesus' death as "substitutionary atonement" but says salvation is based on the "borrowed goodness" of Jesus.

Sherman likewise avoids common terms, like inerrancy, used to defend the Bible's authority. He says simply: "I believe the Bible. And that should settle it." He adds the Bible is "a guide for the churches in faith and practice"

and "a true sample of all God has ever spoken to us humanly and a measure for any future revelation."

Sherman's statement affirms the Bible's authority but does not deal with the historical accuracy of the biblical miracles and narratives, one bone of contention between conservatives and moderates.

That omission is telling, according to one critic, Mark Coppenger, vice president for convention relations for the SBC Executive Committee. "It leaves some very important things unsaid," namely the historical reliability of the Bible, he said.

While what Sherman says may be true, Coppenger said, "I think Southern Baptists would like to know Cecil Sherman does not think God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac" (Gen. 22).

Sherman was traveling and unavailable for comment.

Coppenger quoted a 1981 presentation by Sherman in which he said Abraham's perception of God as cruel led him to misinterpret God's instruction to sacrifice Isaac. The quotation was included in a document, prepared by Coppenger and presented to the Executive Committee in September, that purports to demonstrate Fellowship "departures" from traditional Southern Baptist doctrine. The committee later passed a resolution urging Southern Baptists to examine such "variances of theology and doctrine."

Coppenger's material quotes people who have appeared on Fellowship programs, not official Fellowship documents. "When the group will not come out with a representative doctrinal statement, then it's fair to say, 'Let's look at what the people on the platform say,'" he explained.

The Fellowship's administrative committee is considering a statement, in the form of a question-and-answer brochure, that affirms basic Christian doctrine, including the Trinity, the Resurrection, salvation in Christ alone and biblical authority.

The document commends several historic confessions of faith, including the "Baptist Faith and Message," but says doctrinal authority properly rests with local congregations and individuals, not national organizations.

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-- By Greg Warner

CBF is 'here to stay,' Parks tells Arkansans

By Trennis Henderson

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) — The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is "here to stay," Keith Parks told several Baptist churches during a recent swing through Arkansas.

The CBF, organized by Baptists dissatisfied with the current direction and philosophy of Southern Baptist Convention leadership, has established its own global missions program and supports other moderate Baptist causes. SBC messengers responded in June by instructing convention agencies to cease accepting any funds channeled through CBF.

Parks, who served 13 years as president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, retired in 1992, citing philosophical differences with trustees. He later accepted the position of CBF global missions coordinator where he has helped build a missions program which currently includes 52 missionaries.

Parks, a former Arkansan, spoke recently at Lakeshore Drive Baptist Church in Little Rock, First Baptist Church in Batesville, First Baptist Church in El Dorado and Second Baptist Church in Russellville.

Speaking to a luncheon crowd at Lakeshore Drive that included more than a dozen former or retired missionaries, Parks noted that the CBF missions program is "focusing on peoples rather than nations." He said their strategy involves "going where there are not missionaries, taking the gospel to that fourth of the world that has not

had a chance to hear in our lifetime."

Describing the CBF as "a movement within Southern Baptist life" rather than a separate denomination, Parks said SBC leaders "are determined to identify us as a denomination. They want to do that because they feel that would hinder our growth. We don't accept that tag.

"The sharp distinction between denominations and what we're about is we do not control one thing about any of those agencies we support. We don't control a thing except our missions program.

"We're still in the Southern Baptist family," he said, "but we are not comfortable with the controlling mechanisms in the institutions. We're providing alternatives just as Mid-America Seminary was created for the same reason. It's not a new turn except it is broader based," with more than 1,200 churches providing financial support to CBF causes.

Voicing hope that the SBC and CBF "can co-exist," Parks said he believes SBC leaders "are going to try to destroy us, but I don't think they can. Hopefully in the future there will be sort of at least a truce, if not a peace, and we can co-exist as Baptists and churches will choose, individuals will choose how they express their Baptist convictions beyond their own church."

-30-

BJC recovered from defunding by SBC, Dunn tells board

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) — The Baptist Joint Committee is back on its feet financially after losing the support of its largest member-denomination three years ago, James Dunn told the agency's board of directors in their annual meeting, held Oct. 3-4 at Riverside Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

The Southern Baptist Convention, a founder of the BJC and member for more than 50 years, withdrew its \$400,000 in annual support for the BJC in the early 1990s and refused to turn over \$300,000 in endowment funds on which the BJC had drawn interest income for many years. Later, however, attorneys reached a settlement in a dispute over the endowment funds in which the SBC agreed to pay the BJC \$100,000 in payments over four years.

The rapid defunding brought hard times to the BJC, said Dunn, executive director of the Washington-based religious-liberty watchdog organization, but now things are turning around. Cash reserve funds dropped to about \$30,000 last year but have rebounded to \$118,800, said Dunn.

"There have been a couple of times the last few years when we were scraping bottom," said Dunn. He said his goal is to set aside cash reserves of \$200,000, enough to operate the BJC for three months.

The SBC defunding changed forever the picture of BJC support, Dunn said. A few years ago, funding came almost exclusively from member denominations. Today, the BJC's largest supporters are not denominations, but Baptist state conventions, congregations, individuals and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a national moderate organization which its leaders insist cannot properly be termed a denomination.

The BJC board approved a 1995 budget of \$815,700, 3 percent larger than this year's budget. It projects \$291,000 from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship — up from \$190,000 in the 1994 budget — along with \$165,000 from Baptist state conventions, \$114,000 from churches and \$108,000 from individuals.

Other supporters in the budget include the American Baptist Churches, USA, \$57,000; Baptist General Conference, \$9,400; the North American Baptist Conference, \$6,600; Progressive National Baptist Convention, \$6,000; National Baptist Convention of America, \$4,000; National Baptist Convention, USA, \$2,000; National Missionary Baptist-Convention, \$2,000; and Seventh-Day Baptist General Conference, \$1,000.

Dunn predicted the BJC will continue to draw on diverse sources for support. "We must not think we can turn the clock back to the day when denominations out of their budgets can support the Baptist Joint Committee," Dunn said.

Dunn said individual and church contributions are now "an essential component," in the BJC's budget. "We have to broaden our base of individual involvement," said Dunn, asking board members to share their mailing lists with the BJC for "a substantial and significant" one-shot mailing to promote the BJC.

While the Fellowship is the BJC's largest supporter, it has so far declined to accept representation on the BJC's board, Dunn said. "They are sending us the largest hunk of our support without demanding any control. We are happy to live with that until the Fellowship wants it to change," he said.

However, the Religious Liberty Council, a group of Southern Baptists representing the various entities to fund the BJC after the SBC defunding, is represented on the BJC board.

The Religious Liberty Council has "deliberately and intentionally" nominated people for slots on the board that are also active in CBF, Dunn said.

The amount of money channeled through the Religious Liberty Council is declining as supporters who formerly used the council are moving to the Fellowship's giving plans, Dunn said. In the 1995 budget, \$16,870 is projected from the Religious Liberty Council, down from \$60,000 in the current budget. "The people who have helped us bridge the gap are now giving to the CBF," Dunn said.

Under a new alignment of the BJC, which reduces the board's membership from 50 to 46, the Religious Liberty Council will be entitled to 13 representatives. The next largest delegation is the American Baptist Churches of the USA, with eight. Three other bodies get five representatives, two get three, one gets two and two get one.

The membership formula is designed to maintain the "joint-ness" of the BJC, Dunn said, by ensuring that the smallest group least able to contribute to the organization is still represented, and to keep the board small enough so that meetings are affordable.

The new formula dictates that no more than one-third of the board members come from any single faith group. "We don't want the BJC to ever again be dominated by one denomination," Dunn said.

In other business, a Kentucky Baptist foundation formed last December to support the BJC has received \$90,000 in pledges and \$23,000 in gifts, reported Bill Crosby, pastor of First Baptist Church in Erlanger, Ky. The goal is to raise a corpus of \$200,000, which would raise about \$20,000 a year for BJC support, by 1996, said Crosby, a BJC member.

The board also adopted two resolutions. One urges defeat of legislative action to exempt prison inmates from protection under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. "Prisoners should be entitled to exercise their religion freely, consistent with the state's compelling interest of maintaining order and safety within the prison system," the resolution stated.

The other resolution endorses the statement, "A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century," published by the BJC staff and 80 other organizations and individuals this summer.

The document "reaffirms both the proper role of religion in public discourse and civic affairs and the need for the separation of church and state," the resolution says.

Circulation of Report from the Capital, the BJC's periodical, has increased 38 percent in two years, to 8,500, reported Larry Chessner, director of information services. The publication recently changed its format from a magazine to a newsletter and increased frequency from 10 times a year to twice monthly. It is sent to subscribers, denominational leaders and to every member of Congress and the Supreme Court.

High court declines to review pair of church-state disputes

WASHINGTON (ABP) – Religious liberty disputes over a Florida city's efforts to regulate charitable solicitation and Puerto Rico's requirement that religious schools be licensed were among more than 800 cases rejected Oct. 3 by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The high court issued the orders as it opened its 1994-95 term.

The court left standing a federal appeals court decision that struck down a Clearwater, Fla., ordinance which imposed substantial record-keeping and disclosure requirements on charities and religious organizations that solicit funds in the city.

The appeals court said the ordinance violates both the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment. Clearwater officials singled out the Church of Scientology for regulation, the appeals court said, excessively entangling church and state.

Clearwater officials argued that the ordinance was a neutral, broadly applied statute designed to prevent fraud.

The appeals court acknowledged that Clearwater had a compelling interest to protect its citizens from fraudulent solicitation but concluded that the law's broad disclosure requirement did not precisely further that interest.

The Supreme Court also left standing a ruling by the Puerto Rico Supreme Court upholding a law that requires all preschools, elementary and secondary schools to be licensed by the Puerto Rico Education Department.

The Association of Christian Academies and Colleges of Puerto Rico argued that the licensing law – which requires schools to make certain disclosures and affirmations about their resources and operations – interferes with the free exercise of religion.

Puerto Rico's top court disagreed, saying the requirements are strictly secular and designed to assure educational quality.

In asking the high court to review the case, the association tried to invoke the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a law enacted last year that permits government to restrict the free exercise of religion only when it uses the least restrictive means of furthering a compelling state interest.

The religious liberty legislation has been cited in other cases the court has been asked to review.

Among them is a dispute involving an Alaska landlord who for religious reasons refuses to rent properties to unmarried couples. The landlord is asking justices to review an Alaska Supreme Court decision that neither the First Amendment nor RFRA excuse him from compliance with state anti-discrimination laws.

Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Brent Walker said the refusal by justices to review the Puerto Rico case is not "a signal that the Supreme Court won't review other pending RFRA cases, but it clearly indicates that the court isn't interested in taking all comers."

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– By Larry Chesser

Christian schools growing in SBC, under Executive Committee study

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE (ABP) – School bells and church bells are ringing together in an increasing number of Southern Baptist congregations, but denominational officials aren't quite sure what to do about it.

This fall, an estimated 541 Southern Baptist churches opened their doors to 132,000 students in church-sponsored schools nationwide, according to projections of the Southern Baptist Association of Christian Schools. These Southern Baptist Christian schools are projected to take in \$300 million this year and spend \$15 million purchasing curriculum.

In the past 18 years, the number of Southern Baptist churches sponsoring schools is believed to have increased 57 percent, although precise data is not available.

This mirrors a national trend among Protestant churches, particularly among theologically and politically conservative congregations. The number of Christian schools nationwide is increasing at a rate of about 5 percent per year, according to Joel Belz, publisher of God's World Publications, a provider of periodical and curriculum materials for Protestant-related schools.

The increase has been fueled by conservative Christians' concern about problems in public schools and the absence of religious teaching there. A Gallup poll taken earlier this year found that the number of Americans who believe their local schools have gotten worse has doubled in the last eight years. This year, 37 percent of Americans said they believe their public schools have declined.

Texas Baptists lead the SBC in number of churches sponsoring schools, with an estimated 184 schools. Florida has the second-largest number of SBC church-sponsored schools, an estimated 78.

Other leading states are Alabama, 32; Tennessee, 25; Georgia, 25; North Carolina, 17; Virginia, 16; Oklahoma, 13; Arkansas, 11; and Kentucky, 11.

This grass-roots movement burst onto the Southern Baptist Convention agenda last summer, when David Baker of Belton, Mo., made a motion at the SBC annual meeting to establish a standing committee of the SBC to relate to Christian schools and home schoolers.

Baker is pastor of Heartland Baptist Tabernacle in Belton, a Southern Baptist church which operates a Christian school.

Baker's motion was referred to the SBC Executive Committee, which took up the issue during its Sept. 19-20 meeting in Nashville, Tenn.. The motion was discussed at length in the Executive Committee's administrative subcommittee, which first wanted to decline to act on it, but later agreed to defer action and solicit more input.

Out of eight motions referred from the SBC annual meeting, this was the only one the subcommittee did not quickly reject.

Although many members of the administrative subcommittee are sympathetic to the Christian school movement – and some are pastors of churches with Christian schools – they expressed frustration at how to get a handle on the situation.

Executive Committee subcommittees operate under rules limiting press reporting, so individual comments may not be quoted. But a recurring theme in the meeting was reluctance to establish a standing committee – as Baker's motion requests – combined with a desire to do something to unify the very loose-knit association between SBC churches with schools.

Baker addressed the group at length and provided several handouts. In a cover letter to the committee, he said: "If we fail to develop a comprehensive response to church-sponsored schools in our convention, we can be assured that Southern Baptists will play only a minor role in a major movement of God. A revolution of the way we do developmental education in this country is taking place right now."

Baker's supporting documents drew largely upon a 1993 report from the SBC's Inter-Agency Council, composed of the heads of all SBC agencies and institutions. That report did not call for establishing a standing committee of the SBC, but did call for various SBC agencies to do more to support church-sponsored schools.

The complexity of the situation is illustrated by the fact the Inter-Agency Council report suggested assigning church-school tasks to 10 SBC agencies and commissions.

The scope of what Christian schools are about does not fit neatly into any one existing SBC agency.

The Sunday School Board currently has the program assignment of weekday education, which could include

everything from day cares to high schools. Despite that, board officials have said it would take a multi-million dollar financial commitment and significant restructuring for the board to be all that church-school supporters desire. The board's primary focus is on publishing Sunday school curriculum, not Christian school curriculum.

But Christian school advocates counter they want to be loyal Southern Baptists and they would rather give their \$15 million for annual curriculum purchases to an SBC agency than to the independent organizations now use.

The quandary of how the SBC will address this issue likely will not be resolved soon. The Executive Committee has asked for more information from the Sunday School Board and won't take up the issue again until February.

If Baker's motion ultimately were approved, it would create only the third standing committee of the SBC. The other two are the committee on order of business, which guides the proceedings of the annual meeting, and the denominational calendar committee.

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CORRECTION: In the 20th paragraph of the Sept. 29 ABP story, "Joel Gregory philosophical about rise, fall of ministry," please correct the spelling of the name in the last sentence to Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

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