

Associated Baptist Press

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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Committee proposes massive overhaul of SBC agencies
- SBC president endorses restructuring proposal

Committee proposes massive overhaul of Southern Baptist Convention agencies

By Mark Wingfield and Greg Warner

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention will reduce its agencies from 19 to 12 in the most massive restructuring of its 150-year history, if the report of a special study committee is approved.

The proposal would consolidate the SBC's Home Mission Board, Brotherhood Commission and Radio and Television Commission into a new entity called the North American Mission Board, to be based in Atlanta.

It also removes from Woman's Missionary Union the SBC assignment to develop women's ministries and raise money for the two mission boards.

The proposal would eliminate the SBC's Education Commission, Stewardship Commission, Historical Commission, the Southern Baptist Foundation and the Commission on the American Baptist Theological Seminary, assigning some of their work to other agencies.

Significant cost-savings would result from combining and eliminating some of these agencies, each of which now has its own trustee board and management staff.

The downsizing will create a more efficient structure for the 21st century and channel "more money, more personnel and more prayer into reaching the world for Christ," Mark Brister told the SBC Executive Committee Feb. 20.

Brister, pastor of Broadmoor Baptist Church in Shreveport, La., is chairman of a program and structure study committee appointed by the Executive Committee chairman two years ago. Brister's committee was charged with evaluating the entire structure of the SBC's agencies and recommending changes.

The Executive Committee is scheduled to vote on the proposed changes Tuesday night, Feb. 21. Various periods of dialogue with different leadership groups were scheduled during the day Feb. 21.

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If approved by the Executive Committee, the proposal then would go to the SBC annual meeting in Atlanta next June. The SBC's bylaws require changes of such magnitude to be approved in two consecutive annual sessions, although full implementation is projected to take five years.

Executive Committee members and officials with the SBC's 19 current agencies got their first glimpse of the committee's report at the same time Monday night. The study committee succeeded in keeping its work a secret until the formal report was made.

The report, called "A Covenant for a New Century," begins with a mission statement, which Brister said would be the first-ever such statement for the SBC.

The mission statement says: "The Southern Baptist Convention exists to facilitate, extend and enlarge the Great Commission ministries of the Southern Baptist churches, under the lordship of Jesus Christ, upon the authority of Holy Scripture and by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit."

The committee proposes changing the SBC's focus from agency program assignments to ministry assignments. This parallels a trend in many growing Baptist churches to replace committees with ministry groups.

Based on this philosophy and the new mission statement, the study committee projects five basic ministries the SBC ought to perform: world missions, church enrichment, theological education, Christian ethics and religious liberty, and facilitating ministries.

Here is a breakdown of how these five ministry objectives would be performed:

-- Mission ministries.

Mission ministries would include two agencies, the new North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board, a new name for the Foreign Mission Board.

These two boards would be linked by a Great Commission Council, a 14-member body composed of the two mission board presidents, three vice presidents and three trustees from each board. The Great Commission Council would not be a new agency, merely a means of coordination, Brister said.

The Foreign Mission Board's work would be largely unchanged by the proposal, except for the new terminology. The Home Mission Board's work, however, would be radically changed.

In addition to merging the Home Mission Board with the Radio and Television Commission and the Brotherhood Commission, the proposal would move several existing assignments away from the Home Mission Board and change the way the mission board relates to state conventions.

The North American Mission Board would focus on "direct mission strategies" of evangelism and church planting, giving state conventions "primary responsibility for developing and funding mission strategies within their state boundaries" -- fulfilling a 1959 pledge that was never implemented.

This echoes a proposal first offered by the Florida Baptist Convention last year but later withdrawn under criticism from the Home Mission Board.

Ironically, Florida may not gain the full leverage it sought, however. The study committee's report declares that state conventions with total church membership of 10 percent or more of the total population "have resources adequate to fund their evangelism and mission staff and programs."

That includes all Southern states except Florida. The Florida Baptist Convention is among the SBC's largest, its membership represents less than 10 percent of the state population.

The Home Mission Board's current work in church growth would be transferred to the Sunday School Board.

The committee's report carefully avoided any directives to Woman's Missionary Union, the SBC auxiliary that promotes missions but elects its own board. However, the WMU assignment of promoting the annual Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong mission offerings would be transferred to the respective mission boards under the plan. Those offerings raise roughly half the annual budgets of the Home and Foreign Mission boards.

Although the committee's plan does not address WMU directly, "it does change the context in which we work," said Dellanna O'Brien, WMU executive director. "We will be interested to see what it means when it becomes spelled out more clearly."

A question-and-answer sheet distributed by the committee said WMU was not given assignments because it does not have trustees elected by the SBC. WMU apparently was asked if it would accept control by the convention. But "WMU executives informed [the committee] of the desire of WMU to remain an auxiliary," the handout said.

-- Church enrichment.

The ministry of church enrichment would be assigned exclusively to the Sunday School Board, which would gain several additional areas under the proposal: men's ministries, women's ministries, stewardship education and capital fund-raising.

This portends a major change in men's and women's ministries, which traditionally have been missions oriented and directed by Woman's Missionary Union and the Brotherhood Commission.

The Brotherhood Commission has been seen as unnecessary and outdated by some critics, while Woman's Missionary Union has been soundly criticized by the SBC's new conservative leaders for not submitting to conservative control.

The Sunday School Board also will assume responsibility for stewardship education and capital fund-raising programs with the dissolution of the Stewardship Commission.

The study committee further proposes giving the Sunday School Board an entirely new responsibility for assisting churches with Christian schools and home-schooling ministries.

-- Theological education.

The SBC's six seminaries are mostly unchanged by the report.

The six seminary presidents would form a new council which will coordinate theological education. The seminaries also would take over the work of the SBC Historical Commission, which would be dissolved.

The committee recommends dissolving the Commission on the American Theological Seminary, which has related to the American Baptist Theological Seminary, a black Baptist school in Nashville.

-- Ethics and religious liberty.

The SBC Christian Life Commission would be renamed the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, but its work would remain the same.

-- Facilitating ministries.

The SBC Executive Committee and the Annuity Board would receive the remaining ministry assignments.

The Annuity Board's work would remain the same as currently defined, except the study committee proposes a new definition for whom the Annuity Board may serve. Adopting this guideline would eliminate a concern of the SBC's most conservative leaders that the Annuity Board should not serve moderate spin-off organizations such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Under the study committee's proposal, the Annuity Board would be limited to serving church employees qualified by state conventions, employees of qualified Baptist associations, employees of state conventions and their subsidiaries and employees of the entities of the SBC and their subsidiaries.

The Executive Committee would pick up the work currently done by the Southern Baptist Foundation, which would be eliminated, and the Cooperative Program promotion assignment currently done by the Stewardship Commission, which also would be eliminated.

The SBC Education Commission would be eliminated and its work not reassigned to any other agency. "The need for the Education Commission is no longer what it was in the 1950s," Brister said.

Brister later declined to answer any questions about the plan, and other leaders also were reluctant to discuss it.

SBC president Jim Henry of Orlando, who spoke to the Executive Committee and guests before Brister's presentation, called the proposal "one of the most important recommendations ever to come before this board."

Henry, who was briefed by the committee in January, told ABP the scope of the recommendation is likely to surprise some Baptists. "Once the committee began to dig into it, they realized it was going to be more comprehensive than they thought, but it needed to be done," he added.

Despite the sweeping scope of the plan, Henry predicted it would be approved by Southern Baptists "if our leaders get behind it."

"I'm hopeful. I think it's needed. Every other business in the country is doing it -- becoming leaner and more effective. If we are putting more dollars into missions, I think they will support it."

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SBC president endorses restructuring proposal

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Speaking to Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, SBC President Jim Henry endorsed the work of a committee proposing a massive

restructuring of the nation's largest Protestant religious body, calling it "one of the most important recommendations ever to come before this board."

The Program and Structure Study Committee, appointed two years ago, "did not enter this task lightly or unadvisedly," Henry said. "I can assure you as Southern Baptists they have felt the awesome weight and responsibility they have been facing."

Henry, speaking at the opening session of the three-day Executive Committee meeting Feb. 21, commended the seven-member committee, chaired by Mark Brister, pastor of Broadmoor Baptist Church in Shreveport, La.

The group represents "some of our finest thinking," Henry said. "Their grasp of our past, present and future ... is excellent."

Henry assured Southern Baptists the committee "had no agenda or axe to grind" but worked to develop a recommendation targeting "kingdom of God purposes."

The recommendation, if adopted by the SBC, would reduce the number of denominational agencies from 19 to 12 by the year 2000. The full Executive Committee was scheduled to vote Tuesday night, Feb. 21, on whether to take the recommendation to the convention, scheduled June 20-22 in Atlanta.

The recommendation "deals with change," Henry said. "Change is never easy, but change is inevitable. Whether we change or not, everything around us does."

"We must be willing to change," he said. "We need not bemoan the times, but be grateful for them. It's a time for action."

Henry related how he once asked the venerable R.G. Lee, longtime pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., what counsel he offered to a young preacher. Lee's response, Henry said, was "stay on your knees, stay in the Book and stay close to your people."

I think as Southern Baptists, pastors, denominational workers, state conventions, if we do that, God's blessing will be upon us," Henry said.

Executive Committee chairman Fred Wolfe, who appointed the committee two years ago, said when he first saw the report he "was overwhelmed at the wisdom and insight God had given these men."

Wolfe said he left the meeting "with a sense of excitement I have not felt as a Southern Baptist for many, many years."

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