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Committee approves massive overhaul of Southern Baptist Convention agencies (revised)

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 over the next two years.

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 would remove 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 approved the study committee's report Feb. 21 on a 64-4 vote. Most opposition expressed about the report was due not to its content so much as the short time Executive Committee members had to study it.

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 Feb. 20. The heads of agencies impacted by the proposed changes received notification from the committee as little as three hours prior to the public meeting.

About 24 hours after the first public presentation of the sweeping report, Executive Committee members were asked to vote on the document. A motion to postpone the vote until September was soundly defeated.

The proposal now moves 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.

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 stronger state conventions "primary responsibility for developing and funding mission strategies within their state boundaries."

This echoes a proposal first offered by the Florida Baptist Convention last year but later withdrawn under criticism from the Home Mission Board.

The Home Mission Board's current work in church growth would be transferred to the Sunday School Board, although the Sunday School Board would not become a missions agency and would receive no Cooperative Program funding for the additional effort, the committee said.

The committee's report carefully avoids 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."

Members of the study committee said WMU was not given assignments because it does not have trustees elected by the SBC. WMU reportedly chose to remain an auxiliary rather than accept trustee control by the SBC. This has been an issue of major contention in recent years as the SBC's new conservative leaders have appeared frustrated by their inability to bring WMU in line with their philosophy.

-- 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 Sunday School Board also would 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.

The Sunday School Board would be responsible for generating revenue to fund these additional ministries, committee members said.

-- 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 Baptist Theological Seminary, a black Baptist school in Nashville. Support for that school would be handed over to the National Baptist Convention.

-- 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 emphasized a strict 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 1915," Brister said.

Initial reaction to the plan was mixed but limited, as agency heads sought to assess the future of their agencies.

The harshest reaction came from Lynn May, executive director of the SBC Historical Commission. May said he "cannot and will not support" a recommendation to dismantle the Historical Commission.

"I fear that the discontinuation of an agency with the single assignment and focus of meeting the history needs of Southern Baptists will ultimately result in the loss of what has been accomplished ... in the past 44 years," he said.

Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis took a more cautious tone, saying he sees "the potential for improved efficiency and effectiveness" in the proposal.

Jack Johnson, president of the Radio and Television Commission, put on one of the happiest faces, even though he said he had many unanswered questions about his agency's proposed move to Atlanta.

"If Southern Baptists approve this, we're going to do it," he said. "And we're going to do it with a smile on our face."

In addition to Brister, other members of the study committee were Ronnie Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church in Springdale, Ark.; Bill Hall, a financial strategist from California; Greg Horton, founding partner of Quincy's and Ryan's steakhouses; Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Bob Sorrell, associate pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis; and Rex Terry, an attorney from Fort Smith, Ark.

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WMU will continue traditional role despite changes, leader says

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The proposed restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention apparently strips Woman's Missionary Union of its primary assignments, warned the organization's top executive.

But Woman's Missionary Union will plan to continue that work anyway -- offering missions education for women and girls and promoting annual offerings for the SBC's two mission boards -- Dellanna O'Brien said.

Women in the SBC's 107-year-old missions auxiliary "have considered ourselves full partners in the missions team" of the 15-million-member convention "and anticipate that cooperative relationship in the future," said Dellanna O'Brien, WMU executive director.

In recent years, WMU's role has been a point of major contention as the SBC's new conservative leaders have appeared frustrated by their inability to bring WMU in line with their philosophy.

A proposed streamlining of the 150-year-old SBC, which calls for consolidation or elimination of several denominational entities, includes no recommendation related to WMU. It does, however, assign responsibilities for tasks traditionally performed by the WMU to other agencies.

Members of the seven-member program and structure study committee recommending the changes say the WMU's desire to retain its auxiliary status -- free from direct control by the convention -- excluded the woman's organization from their study.

"We chose not to give any ministry assignment to the WMU, because WMU is an auxiliary," said the committee's chairman, Mark Brister, pastor of Broadmoor Baptist Church in Shreveport, La.

But the committee's assignment required "specific delineation of responsibility," Brister added. To accomplish that, the committee proposes giving responsibility for promoting the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering to a renamed Foreign Mission Board -- the International Mission Board -- and for promoting the springtime Annie Armstrong Easter Offering to the North American Mission Board, successor to the 150-year-old Home Mission Board and two other agencies.

The committee also proposes that an assignment for ministries to women be given to the Sunday School Board, the convention's 104-year-old publishing arm.

"It is the appearance of the report that you have stripped us of all of our work," O'Brien observed in a Feb. 21 discussion between current SBC agency heads and the restructure committee.

Committee members responded that their recommendation would not preclude the restructured mission boards from continuing to seek the WMU's help to increase missions awareness.

"The mission boards are free to partner with whomever they wish in terms of missions education," said Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Executive Committee Chairman Fred Wolfe, pastor of Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala., said the recommendation offers "no reason to believe" the WMU's status as an SBC auxiliary would not continue.

The current heads of the two mission boards said the changes would not affect how they would relate to the WMU.

"Home missions has had no greater friend through the years than Woman's Missionary Union," said Larry Lewis, president of the Atlanta-based Home Mission Board. "They have been the feet and legs of much of what we have done in fund-raising."

"We would hope and pray they would continue in that role," Lewis said. "Frankly, I don't see major relationship changes with WMU in the future."

Foreign Mission Board President Jerry Rankin said it would be hard to improve on the WMU's record of voluntary support for Southern Baptist missions.

"We've got to have the support to carry out our missions mandate," Rankin said. "This is really no significant change," he said, adding the FMB staff already augments WMU promotion of the annual Lottie Moon Offering and Week of Prayer for Foreign Missions.

O'Brien said "I have no concern immediately about what might happen" to the WMU's role in missions education and promotion but that "as time goes by" that relationship might be weakened.

"If WMU didn't have two good friends in the Home Mission Board and the Foreign Mission Board, I would feel very concerned," O'Brien said.

No assignment for missions education for women and girls was included in the study committee's recommendation, leaving the inference that WMU would be expected to continue that emphasis, Wolfe said.

But committee members also identified "a women's ministry movement that is a different movement" from WMU, and gave responsibility for providing women's resources to local churches to the Sunday School Board.

O'Brien told the committee it is "incumbent on your group to communicate" that the recommendation is not intended to undermine the work of WMU.

Brister responded, "I think it is incumbent also on WMU to communicate positively to members of their group" the details of the proposed reorganization.

The study committee, appointed two years ago by Wolfe, is calling for reducing the number of SBC agencies from 19 to 12. A time-line for their reorganization plan calls for its completion in the year 2000.

The Executive Committee endorsed the plan by a vote of 64-3 on Feb. 21. The plan now goes before the 1995 SBC annual meeting, scheduled June 20-22 in Atlanta. Bylaw changes necessary to implement the restructure must be approved at consecutive annual meetings.

The proposal calls for rolling resources of the current Home Mission Board, the Texas-based Radio-TV Commission and the Tennessee-based Brotherhood Commission into one agency for missions work in North America.

It would eliminate the SBC Historical, Stewardship, Education and American Baptist Theological Seminary commissions and transfer programs of the Southern Baptist Foundation to the Executive Committee.

It would establish a joint "Great Commission Council" to coordinate work of the International and North American Mission boards.

The six SBC seminaries and the Sunday School Board would be affected only by receiving additional assignments transferred from other agencies.

The Christian Life Commission, based in Nashville, would be renamed the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

The Dallas-based Annuity Board is unaffected.

Fellowship council endorses mission statement, budget

By Greg Warner

WESTLAKE, Texas (ABP) -- Leaders of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship approved a mission statement for their four-year-old organization, a reorganization plan, a \$10 million budget and 12 new missionaries during meetings Feb. 16-18.

The Fellowship's 79-member Coordinating Council met near Fort Worth, Texas, which will host the organization's annual meeting in July. The Fellowship is an Atlanta-based organization of Baptist moderates displeased with the current conservative direction of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The mission statement, which has been in development for several months, embraces global missions, Baptist principles, diversity and non-traditional ways of working together. The four-page document now goes to the Fellowship's annual general assembly July 20-22 for final approval.

The council and its committees spent the largest portion of their time discussing a "transitional" reorganization plan proposed by CBF Coordinator Cecil Sherman and an ad hoc committee. The plan, adopted without opposition, divides the Fellowship's work into four ministry areas -- global missions, Baptist principles, church resources and administration.

Each ministry area, except missions, takes in the work of several previous committees and ministry groups. The reorganization was necessary to keep the organization flexible and minimize the growth of the Fellowship staff, council members were told.

Under the plan, a staff coordinator will lead each of the four ministry areas. The council later authorized the hiring of six staff members -- the coordinator for Baptist principles and five support positions in various areas.

Leaders noted the new structure is "transitional" and is expected to change again in a few years as needs and personnel change. A strategic-planning committee was authorized to continue the evaluation process.

The \$10 million budget for 1995-96 is a 12 percent increase over 1994 revenue. (Beginning in 1995, the Fellowship shifts to a July 1-to-June 30 fiscal year.)

The 1995-96 budget is built around the proposed reorganization, grouping expenses according to the four new ministry areas.

-- Global missions, \$5,936,140 (58.99 percent).

Global missions is untouched in the reorganization plan. Missions remains the Fellowship's primary task. However, that percentage of the budget is reduced from 62.4 percent, despite an effort to amend it.

James Lacy of Midland, Texas, protested the reduction, warning that a "continued eroding" of missions funding will hurt the Fellowship's effort to elicit support from churches. "Without a missions-sending organization, it is my opinion this group would be no more than a support group," he said.

Lacy, a member of the global missions ministry group, offered an amendment that would fix the missions percentage at 60 percent. He noted missions accounts for about 70 percent of the Southern Baptist Convention's central budget. "Those people are our competition, whether we want to recognize it or not," said Lacy.

Other council members noted the dollar amount spent on missions has increased dramatically in the past year and that missions accounts for about 68 percent of all CBF revenue when the annual global missions offering is included.

Several others insisted the 60 percent figure should be maintained in the basic budget in order to highlight the priority of missions. But Ed Beddingfield of Sylva, N.C., said the Fellowship needs to see everything it does as missions in a broad sense. "This motion (to amend) is about perpetuating ... the border between church missions and foreign missions," he said.

Lacy's motion failed 19-29 in the closest vote of the meeting.

The global missions budget also includes \$21,875 for Baptist World Alliance. A motion to move that line item to the Baptist principles ministry area was defeated.

-- Baptist principles, \$2,376,801 (23.62 percent).

The assignment for Baptist principles expands the current duties of the theological education ministry group, which accounts for the largest portion of funding in the 1995-96 budget -- \$1.7 million. That funding is divided among Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond; Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University; Central Baptist Theological Seminary, an American Baptist school in Kansas City, Kan.; a proposed theology school at Mercer University; and Baptist studies programs at Duke and Emory universities.

Also included in the Baptist principles assignment are the Baptist Joint Committee (\$279,400), Associated Baptist Press (\$140,000), Baptist Today newspaper (\$55,000), and personnel costs (\$195,401).

-- Church resources, \$442,920 (4.40 percent).

The smallest of the four ministry areas combines the Fellowship's work in ethics and public policy (\$173,500), Christian education (\$86,620), ministry to ministers (\$35,000), equipping the laity (\$6,200), and personnel costs (\$141,600).

-- Administration, \$1,306,391 (12.98 percent).

Included in the administrative area are the new CBF Foundation, communications, the annual general assembly, networking, personnel and administration, and other responsibilities.

Several bylaw changes were proposed to implement the new structure, but council members postponed action on the changes until some revisions can be made.

Sherman reported the Fellowship received \$11,163,511 in total revenue in 1994, \$56,240 less than the previous year. But those figures do not reflect the true growth of the organization, he said.

The mid-year decision by the Southern Baptist Convention not to allow SBC agencies to receive contributions from the Fellowship prompted some churches and individuals to divert their SBC-bound gifts from CBF channels to traditional SBC channels, reducing total CBF income. But more of the money received by the Fellowship was available for its own programs, Sherman said -- a 27.1 percent increase.

"I don't see how we can count this anything but grace, a gift of God," Sherman said.

Contributions came from 1,377 churches, Sherman said, compared to 1,210 in 1993. The 1994 total includes about 800 churches that "almost certainly" have voted to make the CBF a line item in their budgets, while the others allow members to pass contributions through. Another 2,308 individuals contributed directly to Fellowship coffers, accounting for about 15 percent of the total income.

"The first purpose of this house is not to get more churches giving us more money" but to help churches "do what Scripture would have them to do," Sherman said.

Sherman gave council members a list of the number of churches in each state that are sending contributions. He said the number increased in 16 states, decreased in eight and remained unchanged in 13. North Carolina, Virginia and Texas account for 53 percent of the total.

The proposed mission statement begins with these words: "We are a fellowship of Baptist Christians and churches who share a passion for the Great Commission of Jesus Christ and a commitment to Baptist principles of faith and practice. Our mission is to network, empower and mobilize Baptist Christians and churches for effective missions and ministry in the name of Christ."

The mission statement was adopted unanimously after one amendment was made. To a list of six principles was added a seventh affirming racial, ethnic and gender diversity. The priorities focus on the Fellowship's preference for funding alternative ministries rather than building institutions and programs.

The priorities are:

-- Doing missions in a world without borders.

-- Championing Baptist principles of faith and practice.

-- Affirming our racial, ethnic and gender diversity as a gift of God.

-- Networking Baptist churches and individuals for cooperation, encouragement and exchange of information and ideas.

-- Empowering churches through resources rather than programs.

-- Emphasizing strategic partnerships more than owning institutions.

-- Cooperating through new ventures that encourage innovative and creative approaches to missions and ministry for the 21st century.

The document commits the Fellowship to promote the Baptist distinctives of soul freedom, Bible freedom, church freedom and religious freedom. Other commitments are listed, as well as six "initiatives."

In reports from committees, council members learned:

-- The 12 missionary appointments bring to 64 the total number of CBF missionaries worldwide. The new appointees -- five couples and two single women -- will serve in Albania, Belgium, the Czech Republic, Russia, among the Kurds of northern Iraq, as Wycliffe Bible Translators in Asia, and among Arab immigrants in Dearborn, Mich.

-- The global missions ministry group will work with a new organization of Baptist moderates committed to starting new churches in the United States -- Friends of New Churches. The organization is expected to seek CBF funding.

-- While 574 people were involved in volunteer missions with CBF in 1994, that number is expected to double in 1995.

-- 1,100 young people are registered for Passport, the Fellowship-sponsored youth camp, this summer. The five-week camp will be held at Shorter College in Georgia and Stetson University in Florida. Additionally, an abbreviated camp will be held during the general assembly in Fort Worth.

-- Missionary cards, similar to baseball trading cards, are available to churches, featuring photos and biographical data on 52 of the Fellowship's missionaries. Woman's Missionary Union is handling distribution.

-- A committee will investigate the requirements for endorsing chaplains and pastoral counselors.

-- Funding for two Christian education positions -- at Truett Seminary and Mercer 's school of theology -- were approved, with each school eligible for \$90,000 in 1995.

-- Capital funds were approved for three schools -- Mercer (\$25,000) , Central (\$50,000) and the Richmond seminary(\$40,000).

-- A contingency fund of \$200,000 was established "for emergency or other extraordinary opportunities" when regular funds are not available.

END
