

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Questions remain, but agency heads impressed with SBC restructure plan**

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The heads of agencies potentially affected by a massive restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention generally applauded its basic outline but said they will need more time to assess its full impact on the work of the 15 million-member denomination.

The restructuring, if adopted by the SBC in consecutive annual meetings, would reduce the number of denominational agencies from the current 19 to 12 and focus more resources on church planting efforts of domestic and international mission boards. The plan was approved Feb. 21 by the SBC Executive Committee.

Jimmy Draper, president of the Baptist Sunday School Board, applauded the efforts of a blue-ribbon program and structure study committee, appointed two ago earlier by the Executive Committee's chairman, for its "attempt to structure the Southern Baptist Convention for the 21st century."

"I favor the report and support the committee," said Draper, whose agency is largely unaffected by the plan.

Foreign Mission Board President Jerry Rankin commended the report for focusing denominational resources on missions and evangelism.

"I appreciate the affirmation not just for the Foreign Mission Board and for our staff but for the desire to bring Southern Baptists and our resources and all our agencies back together with that original mandate that brought us together 150 years ago," Rankin told reporters at a press conference.

Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis said it "appears" the recommendation "would address the areas of work now assigned to the Home Mission Board and certainly has the potential for improved efficiency and effectiveness."

Lewis admitted, however, that he has "a number of questions" about the proposal and will "look forward to understanding better the details and ramifications of the recommendation."

Jack Johnson, president of the Radio and Television Commission, said the proposal to eliminate his Fort Worth-based agency and transfer its resources to a new mission board with responsibility for the United States and Canada poses "a problem with morale" for his staff.

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

"At the same time, I am excited about what I see as a potential for ministry to North America and the world," Johnson said. "For me not to tell you I am excited about the opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with millions of people would be foolish."

Brotherhood Commission President James Williams said he was "completely surprised" by the recommendation to dissolve his Memphis-based agency, with the assignment for men's missions going to the new North American Mission Board. But Williams said he was "gratified that significant emphasis was placed on the cutting edge of our work, like volunteerism and missions education."

Williams said he also has questions about the study, but he assured reporters that "when the final vote is taken on this recommendation we will come down on the side of what is best for helping Southern Baptists carry out the Great Commission."

Stephen Carleton, executive director of the Education Commission called it "an impressive and far-reaching plan for reorganization." He predicted that even though his agency is on the chopping block, Baptist colleges and universities will continue to work with state conventions and "provide for the churches of this denomination thousands of new lay and clerical leaders each year."

Only one agency executive, Lynn May of the Historical Commission, registered outright disagreement with the study committee. May did not attend a press conference with other agency heads but asked a staff member to read his statement.

"I cannot and will not support a recommendation for dismantling the Historical Commission and reassigning of some of its program assignments and functions to other agencies," May said.

May said under the proposal to transfer responsibility for the SBC's historical library and archives to the presidents of the six SBC seminaries, "the concerns of history will not have the priority they should have and must have in order to preserve the total history and heritage of Baptists in general and Southern Baptists in particular."

"An even greater concern is the proposal's lack of adequate priority being given to the area of communicating the heritage of Southern Baptists," May said. The task of providing teaching materials on Baptist history was assigned to the Sunday School Board.

"If this becomes the sole responsibility of a large agency which has an even larger number of program assignments by the convention," May said, "I fear that the Sunday School Board will not be able to give this new assignment adequate priority to preparing study material and promoting Baptist history through its church curricula."

May also criticized the report for the "negative effect it will have on the commission staff" and worried that eliminating the agency "will ultimately result in the loss of what has been accomplished throughout the work of the Historical Commission in the past 44 years."

Historical Commission chairman Slayden Yarbrough of Shawnee, Okla., said "the biggest oversight on the part of the committee" was not seeking input from the various agencies' boards of trustees.

Mark Brister, chairman of the seven-member, all-white, all-male study committee, said agency executives were interviewed, but "simply the logistics" of getting seven busy committee members together prevented them from broadening the circle.

Woman's Missionary Union Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien criticized the "absence of a clear statement about WMU's proposed involvement" in SBC missions. "We are assuming that WMU's role will not change," she said.

Committee members said they did not include any ministry assignments for WMU out of respect for the organization's status as a self-governing auxiliary. Instead, the report made the convention's two mission boards responsible for their own promotion of annual missions offerings, while leaving the door open for them to continue to enlist WMU for help in fund-raising and missions education tasks.

The plan also assigned women's enrichment ministries to the Sunday School Board, while tacitly leaving

missions education for girls and women up to WMU.

State convention executive directors who met with the study committee Feb. 21 emphasized the importance of cooperation between state leaders and the North American Mission Board. They also described flaws in the current system of cooperative agreements between the states and the Home Mission Board.

"I would hope this would do nothing but strengthen the partnership agreements with state conventions," said Executive Committee chairman Fred Wolfe, pastor of Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala.

Don Wideman, executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention, warned that by encouraging established state conventions to assume greater responsibility for mission work in their states, while focusing national efforts in newer-work areas, the restructure could force larger states to reduce the amount of money they send to the North American Mission Board.

"That would be a tragedy if it would happen," said committee member Bob Sorrell, a staff minister at Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, Tenn.

Greg Horton, a layman and founder of the Quincy's and Ryan's Steak House chains, advised executive directors "all this talk we're having today is just a bunch of rhetoric" if all Southern Baptist leaders "can't buy into our mission statement, ... if we don't believe in the Great Commission, if we are not willing to be under the lordship of Jesus Christ ... "

"Sir, that is not the concern," Wideman interrupted. "It is implementation."

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## **Supreme Court to examine Colorado's gay-rights measure**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court agreed Feb. 21 to decide whether states can bar local governments from protecting the civil rights of homosexuals.

At issue is a state constitutional amendment in Colorado that would bar the state or local governments from assigning protected status to persons of "homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual orientation."

Colorado voters approved the constitutional amendment in 1992. But the Colorado Supreme Court struck down the measure after homosexuals and the cities of Denver, Boulder and Aspen challenged it.

So far those legal challenges have prevented implementation of the amendment, which would repeal anti-discrimination ordinances in Denver, Boulder, Aspen, Telluride and Crested Butte and prevent enactment of similar ordinances in the future.

The Supreme Court is expected to hear the case during its next term, which begins in October.

Colorado's high court said in 1993 that the ban violated the U.S. Constitution by infringing on the right to participate equally in the political process. To survive, the Colorado court said, the measure would have to be narrowly tailored to advance a compelling state interest.

The state then asserted five "compelling interests," including its claim that the measure advanced its interests in protecting religious, familial and personal privacy.

In October 1994, the Colorado Supreme Court rejected the state's assertions.

The court said the amendment was not narrowly tailored to serve Colorado's asserted interest in protecting the religious freedom of landlords and employers who hold deep religious objections to homosexuality. An equally effective but less restrictive solution, the court said, would be to permit religious exemptions to anti-discrimination

laws.

The court also rejected the state's argument that allowing cities to protect the civil rights of homosexuals would interfere with the right of parents to teach their children "traditional values."

The court emphasized that while parents have a constitutional right to teach their own values to their children, there is no corresponding guarantee that the government endorse those values. With or without the amendment, the court said, parents retain the right to express their views about homosexuality to their children.

The state's other asserted interests -- in preserving resources for enforcing the civil rights of other groups, in allowing citizens to establish social and moral norms, in avoiding endorsement of the political objectives of a "special-interest group," and in seeking to deter factionalism -- are not "compelling," the court said.

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## **Henry, Land oppose surgeon general nominee**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Top Southern Baptist leaders announced Feb. 22 they will oppose the nomination of Henry Foster as U.S. surgeon general because of Foster's record on abortion.

Jim Henry, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and Richard Land, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission, addressed a news conference at the SBC headquarters building in Nashville, Tenn., Foster's hometown.

Even before the news conference, word of the leaders' opposition attracted the attention of the national media, including NBC News and USA Today.

Land pledged "vigorous opposition" to the nomination of Foster, who was selected by President Bill Clinton to replace the controversial Joycelyn Elders, who resigned the post under pressure. Foster's embattled nomination must be approved by the U.S. Senate.

Foster is an obstetrician and dean of the Meharry Medical College in Nashville. He attracted national attention for his efforts to combat teen pregnancy through his "I Have a Future" campaign, which advocates sexual abstinence and contraception.

But critics, including Land, say Foster should be disqualified as surgeon general because he has performed at least 39 abortions and supervised abortion research. Land also criticized Foster's leadership in Planned Parenthood Federation, which he called "one of the leading abortion providers in America."

"We have come to the inescapable conclusion that any doctor who is willing to deny the Hippocratic oath and extinguish human life, rather than protect it, is an individual whose moral vision for America is fatally flawed," Land said in a statement.

Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, Fla., said Foster "deserves to be heard" by the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, which will hear his nomination. But he added, "I also believe that close scrutiny by that committee should lead it and the full Senate to reject his nomination."

Henry, citing Southern Baptists' long-standing opposition to abortion, urged Clinton to find a nominee "who will unite the nation and be a force for good in our government and society."

Both Clinton and Foster are Baptists. Clinton belongs to Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., a Southern Baptist congregation. Foster is a member of First Baptist Church of Capitol Hill in Nashville, Tenn., an American Baptist church known for its advocacy of civil rights.

Land said his opposition to Foster is not based on race, and he praised the accomplished African-

American physician as "a man of obvious talent and personal fortitude."

"However, his prescription for addressing the problems which face our nation is very much in dispute," Land added.

Land said he will seek to testify against Foster during Senate hearings.

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-- By ABP staff

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