

Associated Baptist Press

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Restructuring committee turns down WMU request to amend proposal

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- A committee proposing a massive restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention has reportedly turned down a request to amend its report to recognize Woman's Missionary Union.

Dellanna O'Brien, WMU executive director, said she asked the blue-ribbon Program and Structure Study Committee to add WMU's missions and ministries statements to the restructure plan.

The request came in a letter to committee chairman Mark Brister, pastor of Broadmoor Baptist Church in Shreveport, La. Brister responded, she said, notifying her the committee decided unanimously to decline the request.

In her April 11 letter, O'Brien told Brister that adding WMU's mission statement to the committee's recommendations would "calm the fears expressed by many that there is an attempt to alienate Woman's Missionary Union from the cooperative efforts of the SBC."

The restructure plan has received widespread praise for its proposals to streamline the denomination's bureaucracy and sharpen the convention's focus on missions and church starting. Critics, meanwhile, say they fear the new structure concentrates power in the SBC Executive Committee and diminish important services currently offered by the SBC and its agencies.

The largest outcry to date has focused on the report's omission of any mention of WMU, the convention's 107-year-old auxiliary, and the reassignment of tasks historically performed by WMU to other agencies.

Members of the structure committee say they did not include an assignment for WMU out of respect for the organization's desire to remain an auxiliary free of the convention's control. Some observers, however, have suggested the omission reflects an attempt to distance the SBC from the auxiliary, which has not embraced the inerrancy movement that gained control of the convention during the 1980s.

The reorganization plan gives responsibility for missions education and promotion of the convention's two missions offerings -- tasks traditionally headed up by WMU -- to other agencies.

Under the plan, two renamed mission boards would promote their own offerings. What is now the Brotherhood Commission, but in the proposal would be absorbed into the new North American Mission Board, would assume responsibility for missions education. Also, an assignment for "women's ministries" is proposed for the Baptist Sunday School Board, the SBC's publishing arm.

Brister has said the committee's report does not change the convention's relationship to WMU. And the current presidents of both SBC mission boards have said they plan to continue to work closely with WMU. Still, O'Brien wrote, "Despite the assurances that nothing has changed, it's quite clear that things have changed."

"People say we haven't been deprived of anything, but we have. Otherwise, there would be some statement in the report at least acknowledging WMU's contribution," O'Brien said.

O'Brien said she has personally received hundreds of letters and resolutions in support of WMU since the restructure plan was unveiled in February. Statements of support for WMU have also been printed as letters to the editor in several Baptist state newspapers.

"Clearly, as the state newspapers indicate, there is something wrong when everything we do has been taken away from us and assigned to someone else," O'Brien said. "People can say all they want to about things staying the same, but unless there is some designation in the report about the WMU, we become simply a group left to the decisions of the directors of other agencies."

WMU leaders, however, have opted not to actively oppose the restructure but instead urged WMU members and supporters to "get the facts and vote your conscience," she said.

"We've had every opportunity to organize resistance," she said. "Our approach has been to encourage our members to be informed and to make good choices."

O'Brien said WMU supports many of the restructuring proposals and simply wants to add its program statement, which was revised in 1993 in consultation with WMU's Executive Committee.

O'Brien said there is historical precedent for the WMU's request: In 1967, WMU presented its program statement to the SBC -- although not required to do so -- and the statement was approved by the SBC.

In her letter to Brister, she also reacted to several suggestions about how WMU ought to respond to the Brister report.

"To those who want us to respond by saying we recommit ourselves to missions, I don't know how many times or in how many languages we have to say it before people believe it," she said.

Others have suggested the WMU ought to restate its commitment to the SBC. When the WMU revised its own purpose statement in 1993, "We felt it was our responsibility to communicate to the churches," O'Brien said. For the program and structure committee now to "say it is incumbent on us to communicate our new role in the SBC is unfair," she said.

She also responded to a statement by Foreign Mission Board President Jerry Rankin urging WMU not to act "victimized" by the report. "We haven't asked anybody to speak on our behalf," she said. "We have felt simply that justice will be done."

"If the report passes in June, we're confused about what it means," O'Brien said. "Because other agencies have been involved in the promotion of the offerings and in the missions education, clearly some changes will have to be made."

O'Brien said, however, that WMU will continue its ongoing work of promotion and missions education. Changes in WMU organizations and structure proposed in the 1993 update of its purpose statement will go into effect in October, and O'Brien said those prospects are "exciting."

The reorganization report is titled "Covenant for a New Century." It has been approved by the SBC Executive Committee, which appointed the committee and commissioned its two-year study. It is scheduled for a vote at this year's SBC annual meeting, June 20-22 in Atlanta. If adopted at two consecutive convention meetings, the new structure would be fully implemented in the year 2000, according to a timeline included in the report.

In addition to Brister, other members of the committee are: Ronnie Floyd, an Arkansas pastor; Bill Hall, a financial strategist from California; Gregory Horton, a businessman from South Carolina; Albert Mohler, president of Southern Seminary in Kentucky; Bob Sorrell, an associate pastor in Tennessee; and Rex Terry, an Arkansas attorney.

Brister did not return a reporter's phone call before this story's deadline.

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-- By Mark Baggett

EDITOR'S NOTE: ABP will update this story when and if a statement is available from Brister.

Religious conservatives caricatured, Robertson aide tells Jewish group

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Politically active religious conservatives have been falsely characterized, the head of Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition told a Jewish group gathered in Washington May 5.

Christian Coalition President Ralph Reed said religious conservatives "have been caricatured and stereotyped as a danger to tolerance, a threat to the separation of church and state and that they desire to break down the values of a pluralistic society."

The coalition's real aim, Reed told the American Jewish Committee, is "a mainstream agenda of limited government, of lower taxes, of safe neighborhoods, of schools that work and of traditional values."

To achieve those goals, Reed said the organization seeks "to legislate not our theology" but "our public-policy views."

In formal responses at the breakfast meeting, Baptist and Jewish leaders welcomed Reed's affirmation of pluralism and church-state separation but questioned the Christian Coalition's record in these areas.

"Frankly, I'm underwhelmed by a lot of the talk of religious liberty and mainstreaming and good words for pluralism with an organization that has the track record of the Christian Coalition," said James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty watchdog group in Washington.

"I'm troubled by the moral credibility, the political tactics, the interfaith relationships and the religious understanding of the Christian Coalition," Dunn said.

Rabbi James Rudin, interreligious affairs director of the AJC, said the United States "is increasingly a multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-ethnic nation, but groups like the Christian Coalition appear to be advocating an exclusivist America."

"It would be an America that in the critical arenas of governance and politics would bestow special preference upon a particular brand of Christianity," Rudin said.

Reed appealed the largely Jewish audience to "form a genuine friendship ... based on our mutual opposition to religious bigotry and intolerance in all its ugly forms."

He acknowledged that evangelicals would never know the suffering experienced by Jews during the Holocaust but lamented that politically active evangelicals have been greeted by "hostility and intolerance."

"When religious bigotry and anti-Semitism are directed at you, then we in the Christian community have a moral obligation to defend you, because we might be next," Reed said. "And when Roman Catholics and evangelicals are being victims of rhetorical religious bigotry, I believe you have an obligation to defend us, because you might be next."

Bigotry has an impact, Reed said, citing a Gallup survey showing that while 5 percent of Americans said they would not want a Catholic or a Jew as a neighbor, 33 percent said they did not want to live next door to a fundamentalist evangelical.

"Now imagine that," Reed said. "One out of every three Americans doesn't want to live next door to somebody who reads their Bible, who prays daily, who obeys the law and who tries to raise their children to be successful and productive adults."

Dunn said the Christian Coalition's credibility is damaged both by its tactics and the behavior of its founder, Robertson.

Robertson, he said, "built a vast television empire with tax-deductible contributions for a 'ministry' under the cover of tax exemption and then sold it off for great profit."

Dunn also noted that while Reed has rejected the notion that the United States is a Christian nation and affirmed church-state separation, Robertson has used his television program to sound a contradictory message.

"Sounds to me like a 'good cop, bad cop' routine that you and Pat have worked out," Dunn told Reed.

It is appropriate that the public policies advocated by the Christian Coalition be debated in the public arena, Dunn said.

"But it's inappropriate that we start that debate with the misguided assumption that those policies warrant the label 'Christian,'" he said.

Dunn also disagreed with the charge that opponents of policies advocated by Reed's group are "Christian bashers."

"Some may be," he said, "but many are sincere committed Christians whose life and faith experiences lead them to different political choices than those espoused by the so-called Christian Coalition, which has become a de facto part of the GOP, God's Own Party."

"But God is not a Republican or Democrat," Dunn said.

In rebuttal remarks, Reed noted that one-third of the organization's 1.5 million members are either Democrats or independents.

"We have never equated our movement with either party," he said.

Saying he was "honored and privileged" to work for Robertson, Reed also defended his boss's acquisition of stock in the Family Channel. U.S. Tax law required Robertson's non-profit organization to sell the for-profit subsidiary, Reed said. When he was unable to find a buyer, Robertson sold the Family Channel to a partnership. According to Reed, Robertson holds stock originally valued at \$183,000 that is now worth "about \$80 million."

"That stock is in an irrevocable trust that he does not have access to and upon his death every cent of it goes to CBN," Reed said.

Robertson's desire is to reach people, not personal profit, Reed said.

During a question-and-answer period, Reed acknowledged that religious groups can cross the line of acceptability in political involvement.

He cited one organization's 1992 full-page ad that said a vote for Clinton is a "sin against God."

Reed said the organization, a New York congregation, had a constitutional right to place the ad, but added, "I think that went way over the line in the appropriate role religion should play in our civic discourse." Reed noted that he sent out a press release at the time denouncing it.

"I think to vote for Clinton was a lot of things, not the least of which was a mistake, but I don't believe it was a sin."

Robertson's legal organization, the American Center for Law and Justice, has filed suit defending the organization's right to place the anti-Clinton ad and challenging the IRS' enforcement of a statutory ban against partisan campaigning by churches and other non-profit organizations.

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Baptist camp, hospital, hit hard by Texas storms

By Laura Horne and Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- A series of killer storms that swept across Texas May 5-7 claimed 20 lives, devastated a Baptist encampment and flooded the emergency room at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas.

A tornado hit High Plains Baptist Assembly in Canyon, Texas, destroying the camp manager's home and the encampment dining hall, leveling at least one cabin and ripping the roofs off several other buildings.

Encampment manager George Hamontree and his family sought shelter before the high winds hit, and there were no injuries reported at the assembly grounds, according to Roy Kornegay, director of missions in Amarillo Baptist Association.

"One day before, we had a big GA group out here and the place was full of girls, but there were no groups here when the tornado came through," Kornegay said. "We're just thankful. These buildings can be replaced. People can't."

About 400 miles to the southeast, local authorities contacted two Texas Baptist disaster relief volunteers to join in searching the area around swollen creeks in south Dallas for flood victims.

More than two dozen patients being treated in the emergency room at Baylor University Medical Center had to be moved when rising water began to fill the basement facility just before 10 p.m. on May 5. The emergency room remained closed throughout the weekend and was expected to be closed for another three or four days.

A few blocks away, the Texas Baptist River Ministry warehouse filled with nearly two feet of water, causing about \$15,000 in damage to supplies, according to Elmin Howell, director.

High winds blew out one large window at North Richland Hills Baptist Church in Fort Worth, and several small trees on the church property were knocked down, but the church building did not appear to have any roof damage, according to executive associate pastor Jack Schoeppey.

Many church members did not fare as well, however. A significant number of homes sustained water damage, either from leaks or rising floodwaters, Schoeppey said. He noted that the carpet in his house would have to be replaced. One family from the church, Mark and Martha Carr, lost their home to a storm-related fire.

Hail broke more than three dozen stained glass window panes in the sanctuary of Richland Hills Baptist Church in Fort Worth, according to George Steere, minister of administration. Windows in the fellowship hall and another church building also were broken, and the hoods and tops of two church vans were dented by hail.

In one of Fort Worth's hardest-hit neighborhoods, members of Sagamore Hill Baptist Church quickly came to the rescue. Strong winds, torrential rains and damaging hail hit the Sagamore Hill area just after dark on May 5. Church members went to work almost immediately, securing the church's buildings and patching the first floor. As they worked, they recognized the needs of the surrounding community.

The next day, work teams met at 8 a.m. to take stock of the church's damage. Then about 75 workers

were sent door-to-door to find out what needs existed in the area and how they could be met.

On Sunday morning, adults met for a rally-type Sunday school assembly since the church's educational space was unable to be used. In a brief Sunday morning service, pastor Gary Miller challenged members to "love thy neighbor." Then he sent them home to change into work clothes.

On Sunday afternoon, a job board was set up at the church, created from requests collected in Sunday school and the morning worship service. Volunteers were assigned to teams, given job assignments from the message board, and sent out to work. The most pressing needs were addressed first. Evening services were canceled since much of the clean-up work lasted until about 7 p.m.

Workers nailed plywood over broken windows and covered roofs with plastic sheeting. A lot of yard work was needed also, clearing broken limbs and debris.

"Raking leaves may seem insignificant, but for a 94-year-old woman, it is an important job for us to help with," Miller said.

Since damaging hail and winds left windows broken in many homes, several women from Sagamore Hill worked in the neighborhood sweeping up broken glass and mopping up water.

Miller estimated that the church would continue to be involved in relief, recovery and repairs in the area throughout May.

"We are trying to use the church as a catalyst," said Miller, noting that the church wants to help the neighborhood in any way possible. "A lot of the people in the community are elderly, and there are a lot of rental properties. We've made a commitment to help rebuild the neighborhood in some way."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Laura Horne is a student at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas. She is working as Texas Baptist Communications Association intern with the Baptist General Convention of Texas news and information service.

Bill Sherman considering run for Nashville mayor

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A prominent Baptist pastor in Nashville who is campaigning against allowing beer sales in the city's new arena may now run for mayor.

"Some people have asked me if I would think about it, and I told them I would," Bill Sherman, pastor of Woodmont Baptist Church, told the Nashville Business Journal.

Sherman, whose weekly sermons have been broadcast on local television for 24 years, has been an outspoken opponent of the plan to sell beer in the arena under construction. Incumbent Mayor Phil Bredesen hopes to attract a professional hockey team to the city but says a ban on beer sales could nix the effort.

"I would like to see us have a city in which character values would be more important than a big 20,000-seat building and a pro team," countered Sherman, 63.

A city ordinance prevents beer sales within 100 feet of a church building. The new downtown arena is 85 away from First Baptist Church of Nashville. City leaders are trying to exempt the arena from the law.

While other names have been mentioned, no candidate has emerged to challenge Bredesen. Sherman,

whose brother, Cecil, is coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, is well known in Nashville. In the 1980s, he led a successful campaign against parimutuel gambling.

The deadline for candidates to file for the post is May 18.

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-- ABP staff

Ethicist, SBC president join effort to squelch perennial false rumors

By Ken Camp

(ABP) -- They're back, like ragweed in the summer.

Perennial rumors linking Procter & Gamble to Satanism and alleging that Madalyn Murray O'Hair has petitioned the Federal Communications Committee to take religious programming off the airwaves are false. Always have been. Still are.

Perpetuators of these kinds of rumors provide "perfect nourishment for those who live by fear instead of faith," according to Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"There are too many people feeding at the trough of rumor and conspiracy fantasies," Strickland said. "And feeding on conspiracy fantasies can have horrible consequences, as we have witnessed in Oklahoma City."

Procter & Gamble recently issued an informational packet noting the return of a "completely ridiculous and false story" that the company's president appeared on a talk show to discuss his organization's ties to Satanism.

The informational packet from Procter & Gamble includes letters from Southern Baptist Convention President Jim Henry, evangelist Jerry Falwell, a representative of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and other religious leaders noting that the rumor is untrue and urging everyone to ignore those who spread the lies.

"If there are those in the Christian community who continue to bring this matter up, they should be given a deaf ear," Henry stated.

The rumor originally surfaced in 1981-82, came back in 1984-85, and sprung to life once again in 1990. Now, Procter & Gamble reports, it is back.

"None of this is true. The president of P&G has never appeared on any talk show to discuss Satanism," according to the cover letter by Elaine Matthews, resource manager for Procter & Gamble.

"We have successfully filed lawsuits over the years against a number of people who were intentionally spreading this lie, and will do so again if necessary," she continued.

Procter & Gamble has obtained judgments of up to \$75,000 against individuals who have spread false rumors tying the company to Satanism.

Another recurring falsehood that takes on new life periodically concerns RM 2493. It originated when two California broadcast producers petitioned the FCC to stop accepting applications from religious institutions for television and FM channels that had been reserved for educational use.

Their request was rejected by the FCC in 1975. But the case number somehow became linked to atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair in a series of bogus petitions that have circulated for the last 20 years.

Christians who continue to spread rumors without checking their veracity are "irresponsible," Strickland said.

"We have a distinct ethical responsibility as Christians to seek the truth," he said.
"We need to do our homework. There are too many people trying to sell us too many ideas. We must not be irresponsible carriers of that which is not true."

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APOLOGY: In the April 13 story "Foreign Mission Board pulls out of joint Albanian partnership," FMB associate area director Roger Briggs was quoted. Because of a misunderstanding between Briggs and the reporter, Robert Dilday, Briggs was not aware his comments would be published. ABP apologizes for that misunderstanding.

END