

Associated Baptist Press

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SBC may denounce past role in racism

By Ferrell Foster

ATLANTA (ABP) -- When Southern Baptists meet this summer to celebrate their 150th anniversary, they may be asked to repent of the racism most agree played a central role in the founding of their denomination.

Two Southern Baptist Convention agencies and a group of Baptist leaders from metropolitan areas have submitted resolutions on racial reconciliation to the SBC Resolutions Committee. The committee will decide whether or not to make a proposal to messengers at the SBC annual meeting in Atlanta June 20-22.

All three proposals note Southern Baptists' connection to slavery in the last century and call on today's Baptists to repent of racial bigotry in their own lives.

"We acknowledge that slavery is where we began," said Jere Allen of Washington, D.C., a leader of the movement.

The SBC Christian Life Commission hosted a "Racial Reconciliation Consultation" May 22 in Nashville, Tenn. Participants, including about equal numbers of Anglo and African American Southern Baptists, produced a resolution for consideration, according to a CLC release.

Earlier in May, the SBC Historical Commission approved a "Declaration of Repentance and Rededication."

And prior to both of those efforts, a "task group" produced a resolution which spurred the adoption of similar statements in regional associations and several state conventions. That group, including two blacks and two whites, had been chosen by 15 directors of missions and ministers in "metropolitan areas with large percentages of African Americans."

These three proposals, along with other information, are being forwarded to the Resolutions Committee for consideration, said Mark Coppenger, vice president for convention relations for the SBC Executive Committee.

Committee chairman Charles Carter, pastor of Shades Mountain Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala., was out of his office Friday and unavailable for comment.

Timing of the efforts is significant. As Southern Baptists celebrate their 150th anniversary, their history reminds them of the denomination's roots in the slavery issue of the mid-1800s.

Today, there are about 1,000 black Southern Baptist churches. But some within the SBC believe the denomination's past is hurting efforts in missions and evangelism.

Southern Baptists have used resolutions to condemn racism before, but they have not spoken to the role of slavery in the denomination's founding, said Jere Allen, executive director of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and a member of the metropolitan task group.

The group's proposal notes that "one of the precipitating factors ... in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention was the desire to appoint missionaries who were slave owners. ... "

Though today's Southern Baptists did not participate in the practice of slavery, the statement adds, "we continue to reap the bitter harvest of the resulting inequality. ..."

Southern Baptists can't repent of the sins of their forebears, Allen said, "but we acknowledge that slavery is where we began."

Some people, especially in the North and Northeast, still believe the SBC is a "racist denomination," Allen said, "and it is hurting our efforts to reach out to more blacks as well as whites in these areas."

Allen said white Southern Baptists need repentance "for our own healing." He likened the situation to an adult who has refused to acknowledge abuse as a child. "We have capped this over ... and don't want to talk about it."

Coppenger recalled the "racial bigotry" he saw in Baptist churches in the past and contrasted it with the "racial cooperation" seen today in the SBC. "I'm so gratified we have come so far since the 1950s," he said. "I'm really happy with the way that we've become a melting pot denomination."

Though Southern Baptists have not spoken explicitly to the slavery issue in a resolution, Coppenger said the convention has acknowledged its past through its funding of the work of seminary history professors and the publication of brochures, books and periodicals. "It hasn't been a whispered secret," he added.

While the metropolitan task group may have provided the impetus for the current discussion. The Historical Commission and Christian Life Commission efforts move the issue to center stage in the denomination.

All three have similar wording on some points, but there also are differences.

The CLC's "Racial Reconciliation Consultation" proposal will attract attention because of those involved in the process and the way in which it was developed.

Participants included Richard Land, CLC executive director; Gary Frost, second vice president of the SBC; Emmanuel McCall, pastor of Atlanta Christian Fellowship Baptist Church; Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; and nine others, including both blacks and whites.

"We cannot go to Atlanta and not address the issue of our historic racism," said Frost, an African American.

Land was unavailable for comment Friday, but the CLC release called the meeting "historic." It included a lengthy session of corporate prayer, followed by prayer in small groups.

The consultation stretched into the night on May 22 and produced a resolution unanimously approved by the 14 participants, the release said.

The resolution notes that "our relationship to African Americans has been crippled from the beginning by the significant role that slavery played in the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention...."

Also, it says, "in later years Southern Baptists, though a dominant Christian denomination in the South, did not take bold initiatives to secure civil rights of African American people, and often tragically stood in the way of such initiatives taken by others"

The proper place of repentance has become a factor in the debate over racial reconciliation.

The CLC proposal calls for Southern Baptists to "repent both of conscious and unconscious racism ... in our lifetime." In regard to sins of Baptist forebears, the resolution says, "We lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery, from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest"

Noted Land in the CLC release: "There are many Southern Baptists, and I include myself among them, who are grieved by the role that racism has played in our denomination's past, and who are eager to apologize and ask for forgiveness from our African American brothers and sisters, but who have grave theological problems with the

concept of repenting for the sins of our forbears, since we believe that only the individuals who committed the sins can repent for those sins."

But, Land added, "We have an obligation and a responsibility to confess our own sin."

Corporate repentance regarding racism has surfaced before in an SBC resolution. In 1989, SBC messengers approved a resolution which said, "We repent of any past bigotry and pray for those who are still caught in its clutches"

An amendment was offered from the floor of the 1989 convention that would have changed the wording to "all past bigotry." But Coppenger, who was chairman of the Resolutions Committee that year, said the committee opposed the change because it would be "inappropriate" to repent of someone else's sin. The amendment failed, and the original wording was then adopted.

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Bob Terry named editor of Alabama Baptist

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Missouri editor Bob Terry has been named editor of the Alabama Baptist, news journal for the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

Directors of the paper unanimously elected the new editor May 26 in Birmingham. Terry, 52, succeeds Hudson Baggett, who died last November.

A native of Alabama, Terry has been editor of the Missouri Baptist paper, *Word & Way*, since 1975. Previously he was associate editor of *Western Recorder* in Kentucky from 1968 to 1975.

Born in Decatur, Ala., Terry is a graduate of Mississippi College, where he earned his bachelor's degree in 1965, and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky, where he received both the master of divinity and doctor of ministry degrees. He received an honorary doctorate from Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., in 1989.

"When first contacted by the committee," Terry said, "I told my wife it would be a miracle if the search committee for the Alabama Baptist were to select me. Their unanimous vote today, I believe, is a miracle from God, and I take it as confirmation of the dream the Lord planted in my heart some years ago to serve as editor of the Alabama Baptist."

Shortly after his election, Terry was introduced to more than 60 people gathered for a ceremony renaming the newspaper's Birmingham office building "The Hudson Baggett Memorial Building." The offices were built in 1976 under the leadership of Baggett, who edited the paper 28 years before suffering a fatal heart attack at 71.

During Terry's Missouri editorship, *Word & Way* won 55 awards for editorial writing, news reporting, photography, graphic design and general excellence in national and international competitions.

He is past president of the Southern Baptist Press Association and currently serves as the group's interim executive director. He chairs the postal services committee for the SBPA, as well as for Associated Church Press and Evangelical Press Association. He is one of two representatives of the religious press to sit on a Mailers Technical Advisory Committee, a position he has held since 1990.

He also has been pastor or staff member at churches in Michigan, Mississippi and Kentucky and interim pastor of several churches in Missouri and Kentucky. He is a popular preacher for revivals and pulpit supply.

Terry's wife, Eleanor, is senior associate dean of student affairs at William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo. They have two children: Brent, an attorney in Atlanta, and Jean Cullen, who, with her husband, attends Southern Seminary.

With a reported circulation of 123,000, the Alabama Baptist is the second largest of the 39 Southern Baptist state papers, behind the Baptist Standard of Texas. Established in 1835, only three state papers are older.

Word & Way ranks seventh in circulation among the state papers, with 64,000.

Mike McLemore, a Birmingham pastor and chairman of the search committee, said Terry "is widely considered to be one of the top state editors in the Southern Baptist Convention."

Troy Morrison, executive secretary of the Alabama Baptist State Convention, predicted Terry "will do an excellent job as editor."

"When Hudson Baggett passed away," Morrison continued, "I did not think he could be replaced -- and he cannot. However, Bob Terry will make his own mark. He will find his way into the hearts of Alabama Baptists."

"I have known Bob Terry for 20 years," said Gary Fenton, newly elected chairman of newspaper's board. "I've observed his work as editor of Word & Way as having great integrity and a very high degree of professionalism. He has a great love for Baptists and Baptist churches."

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-- By Bob Allen and Keith Hinson

Surgeon general nominee receives committee approval

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee has voted 9-7 to send the nomination of Henry Foster as surgeon general to the full Senate.

The May 26 vote followed months of controversy over the fact Foster performed abortions during his decades of medical practice and the Clinton administration's handling of that revelation.

Some GOP leaders have threatened to block confirmation either by filibuster or simply declining to bring the matter for a vote on the Senate floor. Even with the committee's favorable review, it remains uncertain if the nomination will come to a vote before the full chamber.

The committee split down party lines with only two Republican members -- Jim Jeffords of Vermont and Bill Frist of Tennessee -- breaking ranks to vote in favor of the Nashville, Tenn., physician.

Frist, a first-term senator and the only physician on the panel, said he is the only senator who really knows Foster. The two men once practiced medicine only four miles apart.

Frist said the issue before the committee was not politics or the way the administration handled the nomination, but rather the qualifications and commitment of the nominee.

"Having known Hank Foster as a fellow Tennessean, having heard his testimony, having had the opportunity to talk to him extensively face-to-face asking those tough questions and having considered every aspect of his nomination very carefully, I believe his nomination should be referred out of committee favorably and brought before the United States Senate," Frist said.

Committee chairwoman Sen. Nancy Kassebaum, R-Kan., opposed Foster, saying the controversy surrounding him would limit his ability to re-establish the credibility of an office tarnished by "the troubled term of Joycelyn Elders." Foster, she said, is "the wrong person to step into this badly damaged office."

Elders resigned the surgeon general post after coming under fire for her outspoken views on sex education.

Sen. Dan Coats, R-Ind., said Foster's testimony failed to satisfy his concerns about the nomination.

"I have attempted to raise some basic questions -- questions that for me are determinative," Coats said. "Has the nominee been candid? Has the nominee during his career displayed ... judgment and leadership necessary for the position of U.S. surgeon general? Would this nominee unify our nation on important matters of health concerns

or would he fragment our nation through divisive moral debates?"

Other senators, meanwhile, said they found Foster's testimony forthright and convincing.

Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Ct., said he is convinced Foster "would be a first-rate surgeon general."

Among opponents to Foster's confirmation are top Southern Baptist Convention leaders who spoke out against Foster in a press conference in February.

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Texas student ministry director resigns

DALLAS (ABP) -- The longtime leader of Baptist ministries to college and university campuses in Texas is stepping down from his post, he says, to make way for new leadership.

Jack Greever, director of the Texas Baptist Division of Student Ministry for nearly 16 years, announced his resignation May 24.

Following a study leave, Greever will be assigned to a new position, said Jerry Dawson, director of Texas Baptists' Christian Education Coordinating Board.

Greever, 62, said student ministry is in transition and that a long-term leadership commitment is needed to meet challenges in the future. Greever said he sincerely believes it is time for new leadership to assume guidance of the program.

Thomas Ruane, associate in the student ministry office, will serve as the program's acting director.

"Few leaders in any capacity, in any area of Baptist life, have had as great an influence on the entire college population of Texas," said William Pinson, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. "His service spanning nearly four decades has been an example of steadfast commitment to a task which all of us can honor."

Greever began his career in student ministry in 1957. Following 12 years as a campus minister, he was named associate director of student work in 1969.

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-- By Ken Camp

Dan Martin laid off as director of Texans Against Gambling

By Ken Camp

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- Dan Martin, one of two Baptist Press editors fired in 1990 for reporting considered too adversarial toward his conservative employers, is being laid off his current job with a Texas anti-gambling coalition.

Martin, 56, has been executive director of the Austin-based Texans Against Gambling since Jan. 1, 1993. Martin's wife, Colleen, is the office's other staff member, a part-time administrative assistant.

Both positions are being eliminated May 31 due to a lack of financial support for the coalition. It will continue as a volunteer organization, according to chairman Dick Graves of Plano.

"For the past year, the financial situation has been increasingly precarious," Martin said. "There is much work to be done in opposing gambling in Texas, but funding simply has not been there."

Graves praised Martin's leadership over the past two years, particularly in efforts to defeat a casino gambling initiative in the most recent legislative session. A Senate committee in March rejected a proposal to let Texans vote on casinos, and Lt. Gov. Bob Bullock declared the issue dead in the 74th Texas legislature.

Martin is a former pastor of churches in Texas and North Carolina and an award-winning reporter who spent 17 years working for newspapers in Texas and Colorado before entering denominational journalism in 1973.

He worked in the news and information offices of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Home Mission Board, and he served nearly 10 years as news editor of Baptist Press, news service of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Martin and his boss, Al Shackleford, were fired by the SBC Executive Committee in 1990 in a closed-door session after refusing to resign their positions. Though no reason was stated for the firings, they were widely perceived to be motivated by a desire for reporting more sympathetic to the fundamental-conservative faction which gained control of the SBC during the 1980s.

From there, Martin served briefly as interim editor of Associated Baptist Press, an independent news service formed in reaction to the firings.

The Martins said they will relocate while they look for other job opportunities.

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