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In this issue:

- SBC history marked by wary centralization
- Sidebar: Working together becomes ever more complex for Baptists
- Nashville pastor says no to run for mayor's office
- Baptist volunteers make Memorial Day memorable for victims of storm
- Merger of Foundation draws protests from major investors
- Correction

EDITOR'S NOTE: Following is the first in a three-part series on the sesquicentennial meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention June 20-22. The other two stories will be issued tomorrow.

PART ONE:

SBC history marked by wary centralization

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention will meet in June not only to celebrate its 150-year history but perhaps to repeat part of it.

While historically Southern Baptists have been leery of centralized denominational structures, their 150-year journey has been a steady, incremental trek toward consolidation of authority, according to Baptist historians.

And when Southern Baptists gather for their annual meeting June 20-22 in Atlanta -- 150 miles from their first meeting in Augusta, Ga., in 1845 -- the main item on their agenda will be a plan that will carry the SBC one step further down the road toward a centralization.

Messengers will vote on a massive restructuring of the SBC that would reduce the number of agencies from 19 to 12 while broadening the powers of some agencies and the Executive Committee.

Meanwhile, some Southern Baptists have reacted to the trend toward consolidation by reverting to patterns of cooperation that were more common among Baptists about 200 years ago, the historians claim.

Baptist moderates, who previously were the advocates of strong convention allegiance, have watched as the SBC's conservative party has risen to dominance in the denominational structure. They have responded by launching an array of new ventures, reminiscent of various ministries operated by Baptist "societies" early in the 19th century.

Both trends -- consolidation and decentralization -- have their place in Baptists' past, historians say.

Baptists historically have had a "highly decentralized nature" and originally were "highly suspicious of organizations other than the local church," writes Jesse Fletcher, author of *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History*.

Nevertheless, Baptists' pragmatism and passion for missions eventually propelled them to cooperate for common causes, Fletcher said in an interview. For example, 19th-century Baptists joined forces for the sole purpose of sending missionaries around the world.

The trend developed down through the years, enabling Baptists to cooperate in order to perform increasing numbers of tasks under a denominational structure, said Fletcher, chancellor of Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas. And it continues today, when the reorganization proposal "looks more like a centralized structure" than previous developments, he added.

In the years immediately following its founding in 1845, the SBC functioned like a hybrid between a modern convention and a society, Fletcher said. Conventions perform multiple ministries channeled through a centralized organization. A society performs a single ministry, and members band together for that purpose alone.

"We began with just two boards," the Home Mission Board and the Foreign Mission Board, Fletcher noted. "Initially, the convention did a lot of the work of the boards during its annual meetings.

"But gradually, the scope of the activity of the boards and their intensive work put the individual boards and their executives on their own, reporting to and getting instructions from the convention."

The formation of the Sunday School Board in 1891 caused the convention to take another step toward "resembling what we've known since then," Fletcher said. By providing Sunday school literature and other materials for church programs, the Sunday School Board gave the SBC and its churches a national identity and a common way of doing and organizing church, he said.

Despite its growth in numbers of adherents and types of ministries, the convention still functioned somewhat like a cluster of societies, he added.

Agents hired by the agencies and institutions traveled the country, appealing for money, but the SBC lacked a unified method of financing its common ministry and integrating its work.

"By the turn of the century, we found ourselves in a different world," said Albert McClellan, longtime associate executive secretary of the SBC Executive Committee, who retired in 1980 and who has spent much of the intervening years teaching and writing about SBC history and development.

From 1845 until the turn of the century, SBC annual meetings were small, and messengers spent several days developing and debating recommendations for the convention's few agencies, McClellan said. "It was possible to bring together consensus recognizing two ideas -- diversity and missions."

But as the annual meetings got larger and the work of the agencies grew more complex, Southern Baptists began to complain that the convention's organization was in fact disorganized, McClellan said.

About that time, the trend toward centralization eclipsed societal tendencies and provided impetus for a more organized way of doing business, Fletcher says in his book.

The Executive Committee, which acts on behalf of the convention between annual sessions, referees relationships between agencies and sets the convention budget, was created in 1917 and came into its own in 1927. The Cooperative Program, the SBC's unified budget, was launched in 1925. And the rules for seating messengers to the annual meetings, which originally allowed representatives from individual donors and societies, gave churches the exclusive right to send messengers in 1931.

In the mid-1950s, as the SBC and its churches enjoyed a post-war boom, the convention looked to the corporate world for guidance in effectively handling rapid expansion. In 1954, the Sunday School Board hired an outside consulting firm to help reorganize its structure and work. Two years later, the SBC created the Committee to Study Total Program.

In the ensuing years, the convention patterned itself after big business, claimed Bill Leonard, an American church historian and head of the religion department at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

"The denominational model in America has tended to follow the corporate business model," Leonard said. "This particularly has been true in the 20th century, with a trend toward national centralization.

"A national body was seen as the best provider of overall services, such as literature, education and missions. Smaller churches that could not afford to send their own missionaries could combine with larger congregations to do more organizationally."

This business-efficient structure jelled in the 1970s, with the Executive Committee and an Inter-Agency Council gaining strength to coordinate the work of the agencies. In the mid-'70s, Southern Baptists dreamed up Bold Mission Thrust, the campaign to present the gospel to every person on the planet by the year 2000.

The impetus of denominational development worked well until controversy wracked the convention, beginning in the late '70s, historians and other observers say.

"We worked together on the basis of confidence and mutuality," McClellan said of the earlier years. "There was generally an atmosphere of respect from Southern Baptists for each other. We could go to the convention and say with confidence and integrity, 'Blessed be the tie that binds.'"

But conflict dominated Southern Baptists in the '80s, historians agree. And although the overt political battles for control of the convention ended with the conservatives' victory in 1990, the fallout continues, they note.

In the summer of 1990, moderates met on short notice to begin developing what would become the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Based in Atlanta, it provides disaffected Southern Baptists with opportunities to plug into a Baptist missions/ministry system now that the SBC is closed to them.

SBC and Fellowship leaders argue over whether the Fellowship is a new convention or not, with SBC officials saying it is and Fellowship advocates saying it isn't.

Whatever the ultimate answer, it currently functions like a hybrid, historians note. In one respect, it's a society for doing missions. In another, it's a convention-type distributor of funds for an expanding array of other Baptist societies.

The presence of the Fellowship, along with a host of other vibrant para-church groups -- from Habitat for Humanity, to InterVarsity Fellowship and World Vision -- indicates "regionalism and localism have prevailed over a national bureaucracy," Leonard insisted.

"That is true, whether you're talking about IBM, the Department of Housing and Urban Development or the SBC. It's not that churches aren't doing Baptist things, but that they're doing some para-church and some denominational things. The lines are blurred."

This "blurring" began before the SBC started to fragment, with the rise of evangelical para-church groups like Campus Crusade for Christ in the early '70s.

Meanwhile, the SBC's reorganization plan seems to be steering the convention in another direction, Fletcher said.

"When other organizations are getting flatter from top to bottom, we're seeing more of a pyramid structure in the SBC," he explained. Despite reducing the number of SBC agencies, the reorganization plan adds at least one level of denominational strata, with a new Great Commission Council placed over the two mission boards. And one of those boards, the North American Mission Board, will combine three current SBC agencies into one mammoth organization.

In addition, while current business models emphasize strengthening grass-roots participation in decision-making, the SBC is consolidating the power of its chief decision-making body, the Executive Committee, he said. That puts the "top" and "bottom" of the SBC pyramid even further apart.

That's because the streamlined '90s-look of the SBC "still has its feet in the '50s," Leonard said. "The question is this: Is the SBC bureaucracy so tied to the '50s that it cannot downsize quickly enough?"

The answer will be played out over time, Fletcher said. Regardless of whether recent moves will have positive or negative results, "these changes are the stuff of history," he asserted. "They just happen."

SIDEBAR:

Working together becomes ever more complex for Baptists

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (ABP) -- From humble beginnings, Baptists have developed increasingly large and sophisticated organizational structures. Here's an overview of the journey:

-- A single church.

Most historians date the modern Baptist movement to 1609, when a group of English Separatists fled to Holland. Led by John Smyth and his protege, Thomas Helwys, they practiced believer's baptism -- the concept of baptizing a Christian after the individual professes faith in Jesus Christ.

True to Baptist tradition that would follow, this tiny congregation split, reports the late American Baptist historian Robert Torbet. Since somebody had to get the believer's baptism chain started, Smyth had baptized himself. Later, he doubted the validity of his baptism and joined the Mennonites. Helwys vigorously disagreed, and by 1611 or 1612, he and a remnant of the church returned to England.

-- Associations of churches.

As Baptists grew, they started new congregations. Eventually, churches within close proximity joined together in associations, Torbet reports.

During the period from 1624 to 1630, five or six General Baptist congregations grouped together. They shared a belief in "general atonement," the notion that "whosoever will" may come to faith in Christ.

In 1644, seven Particular Baptist churches convened to draft what came to be the First London Confession, a statement of common beliefs. They derived their name from their belief in "particular atonement," the notion that salvation is only for those whom God has elected to save.

In America, the first associational grouping occurred in 1707, when five small Baptist churches formed the Philadelphia Baptist Association.

Associations were "loose in structure and without power or authority to bind the churches," Torbet says. Member churches used the association "as both an advisory council in matters of local concern and an expression of the larger church through which the mind of Christ might become known." Associations helped churches settle disputes, ordain ministers, examine the credentials of itinerant ministers and discipline ministers, he notes.

-- Societies.

Although associations linked churches by geography and doctrine, Baptist churches also eventually felt compelled to work on a larger scale to do what they could not do alone. Consequently, they formed societies to accomplish specific ministries and tasks.

The largest, and most widely known, was the General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions, formed in 1814. Since it met every third year, it was called the Triennial Convention. And although it had "convention" in its name, it actually was a society, banded together exclusively to support foreign missions.

Numerous societies formed for an array of ministries, note Torbet and Jesse Fletcher, author of "The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History." They included the American Education Society (1815), the American Bible Society (1816), the Sunday School Union (1824) and the American Baptist Home Missionary Society (1826). Individuals, churches and other groups could be members of as many or as few societies as they wished, selecting their ministry participation in smorgasbord fashion.

Cooperation in societies reflected a willingness to set aside concerns about centralized authority in order to do ministry, Fletcher writes.

-- State conventions.

"Missions-motivated connectionalism" encouraged Baptists in the South to form state conventions, Fletcher says. Their structure resembled that of large associations, not societies, he adds. Yet they combined the roles of associations and societies. Members shared geographical proximity like associations, yet they also teamed to do ministry like societies.

South Carolina was the first to organize, in 1821. Others were Georgia (1822), Virginia and Alabama (1823), North Carolina (1830), Missouri (1834), Maryland and Mississippi (1836) and Kentucky (1837).

-- A national convention.

Three primary factors prompted Baptists in the South to organize the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, Fletcher writes. The factors were "a growing Baptist confessional and connectional consciousness, a passionate missionary conviction, and a visceral sectional spirit."

Although less high-minded, the last reason may have been most important, Baptist historians have reported. Like most other Americans, Baptists were products of their culture, and that culture was increasingly divided. The SBC's organization specifically was prompted by the American Baptist Home Missionary Society's decision not to appoint slaveowners as missionaries. Baptists in the South met and created the SBC, establishing both the Home Mission Board and the Foreign Mission Board.

A third entity, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was founded in 1859. Woman's Missionary Union, an auxiliary to the SBC, was formed in 1888. And the Sunday School Board was formed in 1891.

Since 1900, the SBC has created an additional 19 national agencies, institutions and commissions.

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Nashville pastor says no to run for mayor's office

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A prominent Baptist pastor in Nashville who told newspapers he was considering running for mayor has decided not to enter the race.

Pastor Bill Sherman told the congregation of Woodmont Baptist Church May 17 he had decided against running for mayor. The deadline for filing for the office was May 18.

Sherman, 63, earlier told the Nashville Business Journal he had been asked to think about a mayoral run and that he was considering it.

Sherman is spearheading a campaign against allowing beer sales at Nashville's new 20,000-seat arena. A city ordinance prevents beer sales within 100 feet of a church building. The new city arena stands 85 feet from First Baptist Church in Nashville. City leaders are trying to exempt the arena from the law.

Incumbent Mayor Phil Bredesen hopes to attract a professional hockey team but says a ban on beer sales could kill the effort.

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Baptist volunteers make Memorial Day memorable for victims of Texas storm

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- About 100 Texas Baptist volunteers spent much of Memorial Day weekend repairing the roofs of a dozen storm-damaged houses in Fort Worth.

Meanwhile, another 50 workers hauled away trash, prepared meals and carried cold water to the roofers. Others knocked on doors, helping to assess needs in the area.

Sagamore Hill Baptist Church in Fort Worth, spearheaded the holiday labor of love in cooperation with Texas Baptist Men, Tarrant Baptist Association, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and a number of other churches.

"This is a blessing from God," said Marvin Garrett, an east Fort Worth homeowner whose roof was destroyed by softball-sized hail several weeks earlier. "There's no way I'd have been able to put a roof on this house. I know this is God's doing."

American Red Cross discovered more than 200 uninsured, poverty-level households with storm damage in an 18-square-mile area in east Fort Worth and granted Sagamore Hill Baptist Church responsibility for coordinating the rebuilding of homes in the area.

Ken Hemphill, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and his wife, Paula, worked with fellow members of Travis Avenue Baptist Church on one roof.

Southwestern provided two large trucks for the roofing and rebuilding project, and Hemphill said at least a dozen seminary students worked on volunteer crews related to local churches.

"As summer school gets underway, it will give more of our students the opportunity to be involved," Hemphill said.

Originally, directors of Sagamore Hill's disaster relief ministry had hoped that 1,200 volunteers could be enlisted Memorial Day weekend to rebuild 200 homes damaged by hail and high water May 5-7. But taking a second look at the situation, church leaders decided instead to seek 100 volunteers each weekend until the job is completed.

"The plan is to have 10 teams working each weekend throughout the summer," said Gary Miller, pastor of Sagamore Hill Baptist Church. "We'd feel like we hit a home run if we could do that."

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-- By Ken Camp

EDITOR'S NOTE: Following is the fifth and last story in a series on the proposed restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention. The other four stories ran May 25.

Merger of Foundation draws protests from major investors

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Should the Executive Committee, which already oversees the Southern Baptist Convention's \$137 million annual budget, be allowed to manage another \$167 million in investments that benefit Baptist work?

That is what's at stake in the plan to dissolve the Southern Baptist Foundation, the SBC's investment service, and give its assets and assignment to the powerful Executive Committee. It's all part of the massive restructuring of the denomination proposed by a blue-ribbon panel appointed by the Executive Committee.

Although the Foundation produces about \$10 million a year in income for SBC agencies and other Baptist causes, its work goes on largely unheralded. Talk of its elimination has ignited no firestorms of protest among Southern Baptists, who are more concerned with how the proposed restructuring affects the Woman's Missionary Union and Baptist mission work.

But the proposal has caught the attention of the Foundation's best customers -- the 32 state Baptist foundations, who account for almost half of the money invested through the national agency.

"We do not believe that combining the board of directors of the Southern Baptist Foundation with that of the Executive Committee will serve the best interests of Southern Baptists," wrote Robert Ross, president of the Association of Baptist Foundations, in a letter to SBC leaders April 5.

The state foundations were set up to help Baptists and others invest their money, such as through wills and trusts, and distribute the income, usually to Baptist causes. Some of those state foundations -- at least the larger ones -- manage their own assets. But most invest at least some money in investment programs operated by the SBC Foundation. Some of the smaller state foundations are administered almost completely by the SBC Foundation.

Southern Baptist agencies likewise invest their reserve and endowment funds through the SBC Foundation, although the Foundation won't say which agencies or how many. And the Foundation's 35 trustees include representatives of each of the SBC agencies.

Those same SBC agencies, which often are the beneficiaries of the trusts and wills managed by the Foundation, receive most of their funding through the Executive Committee. Assigning the SBC's investment service to the Executive Committee would create at least the appearance of impropriety, say several state foundation directors.

A conflict of interest could result when the Foundation becomes "answerable to the beneficiary," namely the Executive Committee and its related agencies, said George Borders, president of the Florida Baptist Foundation.

"We are concerned with a healthy distance that should exist between the boards of the Southern Baptist Foundation and the Executive Committee due to the fiduciary responsibilities inherent in managing trust and endowment funds," wrote Ross, president of the Baptist Foundation of Oklahoma. Ross asked for a meeting with SBC leaders to air the group's concerns.

There are other concerns as well:

-- That the Executive Committee will be tempted to use Foundation investment decisions to pursue its own moral or political agenda. Last year the committee tried to withhold funds from the SBC Annuity Board until that agency could guarantee it was not investing in any companies that endorse abortion.

-- That replacing the Foundation's current trustees with Executive Committee members will deprive the institution of experienced money managers and financial experts -- one key to its past success.

-- That transferring the Foundation's assets -- including complex endowments and trusts -- to the Executive Committee will create a web of legal complications.

-- That by leading the Foundation to do more estate planning for potential benefactors -- a task previously left to the state foundations -- the Executive Committee could spark competition between the state and national levels. Benefactors could be led to endow the Cooperative Program, which the Executive Committee controls, at the expense of colleges, children's homes and other traditional beneficiaries.

The state foundation directors cited some of those issues in Ross' letter. But the group's primary concern is with the Foundation's autonomy.

"The independence issue is THE issue," added the SBC Foundation's president, Hollis Johnson. "People want independent folks managing their money." That's no ill reflection on the members of the Executive Committee, Johnson told Associated Baptist Press. It's just the nature of the business.

Borders and others are concerned that the individuals and organizations that have trusted the Foundation to manage their investments will lose confidence in the institution if it loses its independence. That's more than 1,200 accounts -- all of which benefit Baptist causes -- that could be moved somewhere else.

Concern over the Foundation's independence is part of a larger debate over the Executive Committee's place in a revamped SBC.

Under the plan, which eliminates seven of the SBC's current 19 agencies, the 80-member Executive Committee would take over the roles of the Foundation as well as the Stewardship Commission, which promotes financial support of the Cooperative Program, the denominational budget.

As a result, the Executive Committee, which already decides how to spend Cooperative Program money, will also determine how it is raised and how some of it is invested.

Proponents say those changes are necessary to streamline an unwieldy denominational structure. But critics fear the expanded role of the Executive Committee represents a dangerous consolidation of power in a committee that has proven itself susceptible to denominational politicking.

"It was never intended to become a super committee with hierarchal authority, but that is what it has become," Slayden Yarbrough, a professor at Oklahoma Baptist University, wrote recently in the college's newspaper. Yarbrough is chairman of trustees of the SBC Historical Commission, another of the SBC agencies marked for elimination.

"Using its power of allocation and appropriation of funds, it has placed great pressure upon agencies to conform to its political agenda," Yarbrough wrote. "In so doing, it has violated the bylaws of the SBC constitution...that 'The Executive Committee shall not have authority to control or direct the several boards, agencies and institutions of the convention. That is the responsibility of trustees elected by the convention and accountable directly to the convention.'"

Morris Chapman, president of the Executive Committee, said such fears are unfounded. "Southern Baptists have always been careful not to empower any one entity with authority over other entities," said Chapman, the SBC's chief executive. "The Executive Committee understands that it exists to serve our churches across the country and to be a facilitator among the SBC entities. Nothing in the report gives any added power or leverage."

Executive Committee chairman Fred Wolfe conceded that the authority to recommend an agency's budget does represent tremendous power and influence, but the Executive Committee has had that all along, he said. The restructuring grants "no less power or no more power" to the Executive Committee, said Wolfe, pastor of Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala.

In a response to Ross' letter, Wolfe assured the state foundations that, according to the SBC's attorney, a merger of the Foundation with the Executive Committee is "legally doable." And he added: "I am certain we can depend upon Southern Baptists to send to the Executive Committee qualified trustees who have financial expertise," he said.

Wolfe declined to meet with the state foundation directors until after the restructuring plan is approved at the June Southern Baptist Convention meeting. "It seems premature to begin now discussing implementation plans prior to the vote in June," he wrote May 5.

Wolfe noted the Executive Committee does not plan to amend the restructuring proposal before it is presented to the SBC in June. And the committee reportedly will ask SBC messengers to adopt the entire report of the Program and Structure Committee, which will discourage amendments from the floor of the convention.

Approval is necessary by two consecutive conventions. Some critics, convinced approval this year is almost certain, fear changes will be virtually impossible to make once the plan gains momentum.

But Lee Black, president of the New Mexico Baptist Foundation, is more optimistic. Once implementation of the plan begins, he said, the need for an independent Foundation board will become apparent. "I'm optimistic that it will be addressed," he said.

Right now the Executive Committee is considering two other options, neither of which makes the Foundation independent of the committee.

-- Merger. The Foundation could be merged with the Executive Committee, with the "surviving" corporation, the Executive Committee, assuming all the assets and liabilities of the Foundation. The Foundation would no longer exist. The Executive Committee would run the SBC's investment service.

But eliminating the Foundation not only ignores the issue of independence, some say it presents legal problems because many trusts and endowments are held in the Foundation's name. "If those contractual arrangements are not honored, [the trustors] could withdraw the funds or file lawsuits," warned Borders of Florida, president elect of the Association of State Foundations.

That's no problem, said James Guenther, the SBC's attorney, because the Executive Committee would rightfully take on those contractual obligations in a merger. "Every right and duty the Foundation has will become a right and duty the Executive Committee has," he said.

Nonetheless, a second option now is getting more attention.

-- Subsidiary. The Foundation could continue to exist as a subsidiary, operated under the corporate umbrella of the Executive Committee. "The Executive Committee members would elect, presumedly from among themselves, those who would constitute the board of the Foundation," explained Guenther.

But that option would not solve the issue of independence, said Black of New Mexico. Historically, to disperse power, Southern Baptists have not assigned one individual to two or more boards, he said. "The Foundation needs to have a board that is comprised of individuals who have experience in the marketplace and [for whom] that board is their primary duty," Black insisted.

Neither would a subsidiary accomplish the primary goal of the restructuring -- to save money -- noted Hollis Johnson, the Foundation's chief executive.

Trustees would still have to meet. And a staff would still be necessary to manage the Foundation's investments, Johnson said.

Mark Brister, chairman of the restructuring committee, concedes the Executive Committee would have to have help. "The Executive Committee will not be managing funds," he said. "The Foundation would become a sub-corporation or the work could be out-serviced. It will continue to be handled by professionals."

The Foundation manages assets of \$167 million on an annual budget of \$557,000, earning a return of 5.9 percent last year. That kind of efficiency can't be matched by an outside money manager, Johnson said. It would cost the SBC three times as much to hire outside managers to handle the Foundation's investments, he said.

The Foundation's 35 trustees have yet to take a position on the restructuring plan, in part because the Foundation's new role is still unclear. "There is nothing out there of any tangible nature that says what's going to happen," said Johnson. He is convinced on one issue, however: "We don't think it's going to save any money at all."

He said he is optimistic about the outcome. "Our attitude is we will be able to deal with it."

CORRECTION: In the May 26 ABP story "Bob Terry named editor of Alabama Baptist," please replace the 8th paragraph with the following:

He is executive director of the Southern Baptist Press Association and a past president of the group. 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.

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