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

EDITOR'S NOTE: ABP plans an issue for Friday, June 2. Trustees at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary are expected to vote on Mark Coppenger as seminary president.

Lewis asks for delay in vote on SBC restructuring plan

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board is opposing a reorganization plan for the denomination, scheduled for a vote when the convention meets June 20-22 in Atlanta.

Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis says the vote on the restructuring proposal should be delayed until after detailed studies on the impact, cost, savings and possible revisions in the far-reaching plan.

In a letter dated May 25, Lewis recommended that the restructuring proposal be referred back to the Executive Committee. "Concerns raised by the trustees and leaders of the various agencies need to be addressed," he wrote.

The letter was sent to Home Mission Board directors, SBC officers, members of the Program and Structure Study Committee that drafted the plan, and members of the denomination's Executive Committee, which approved it.

The reorganization, proposed after an 18-month study, would reduce the number of denominational agencies from 19 to 12. Among the committee's recommendations are that the Atlanta-based Home Mission Board be

combined with two other SBC agencies -- the Brotherhood Commission in Memphis, Tenn., and the Radio and Television Commission in Fort Worth, Texas -- to form a new North American Mission Board, located in Atlanta.

Lewis said he had intended to voice his concerns about that proposal at a meeting of Home Mission Board directors in April, but a spontaneous "time of revival" broke out, shortening time allotted for business. The directors planned to hold a special meeting to discuss the report, but called it off because no one from the study committee agreed to participate and fewer board members than a quorum said they could attend.

In a cover letter to his 12-page, 10-point "response" to the restructuring committee's report, Lewis noted that many HMB directors "have asked my opinions about the report and recommendations."

Among concerns noted by Lewis were:

-- Costs, impact and projected savings of the merger of three agencies into one North American Mission Board. "I think I favor this consolidation, but I'm not sure," Lewis wrote. "It appears to me that a recommendation of this magnitude should be supported with adequate data and cost projections. Doesn't the Bible decry the foolishness of setting out to build a tower without having carefully counted the cost?"

-- A mission statement for the proposed new agency that "seems to minimize the important relationships we have with associations, state conventions and ... churches" as partners in missions strategy. The report also transfers responsibilities for church growth away from the Home Mission Board to the Baptist Sunday School Board, a move Lewis said he does not oppose. However, he warned, "It is simply impossible to separate church growth from evangelism, if both are what they ought to be."

-- The formation of a new Great Commission Council to coordinate work of the SBC's two mission boards. While the two boards currently communicate through a "transnational desk," it is merely an interagency council with no authority. The restructuring proposal, however, seems to place the Great Commission Council in an authoritative role over the two mission boards with reporting responsibilities to the convention and Executive Committee. Such a move could usurp the role of the mission boards and bring the mission boards "more tightly under the control of the Executive Committee," Lewis said.

-- Giving the North American Mission Board primary responsibility for promoting the annual Annie Armstrong home missions offering. Lewis said the Home Mission Board already works to promote the offering, in cooperation with other agencies, but he wishes the report "had contained a strong affirmation" for Woman's Missionary Union, the SBC's auxiliary, "and a word of appreciation for their illustrious history of mission support."

-- Giving the North American Board responsibility for Canada. Currently the Home and Foreign Mission boards cooperate in Canada. Since Canadian Baptists choose to function as an autonomous national body rather than a subsidiary of the SBC, "it appears to me it would be more appropriate for them to be serviced by the International Mission Board," successor of the FMB, he said. He also asked if the Foreign Mission Board were to leave Canada, how would the reported \$1 million a year it invests there be replaced?

-- A recommendation that larger Baptist state conventions assume greater responsibility for their own mission work while the North American Board focuses energies in new work areas. This element of the plan "has the potential for the most serious repercussions," Lewis said.

The change would hinder Southern Baptists' national strategy by effectively reducing the board to a regional entity, he said. Also, he noted, Baptists are losing ground in the South, making it an area of greater, not diminished, missions need. A denominational strategy needs to focus on large cities, Lewis said, including many in the South.

The move would also mean that home missionaries in larger states would be transferred to the employ of state conventions. Not all missionaries would welcome the transfer, and the national mission board would lose its ability to maintain quality control in personnel, he noted.

"Here again is the obvious need for a very thorough impact study with supporting data," Lewis said. "We simply aren't ready to make that kind of decision without a great deal of forethought."

Lewis also questioned new terms used in the report to describe areas of the board's work, limiting its personnel assignment to "career" missionaries (most HMB appointees now are mission pastors funded only part-time by the board) and giving the North American Board responsibility for "direct" mission strategies, presumably in place of cooperative, joint-funding arrangements with state conventions and local churches.

Should the recommendation not be referred back to the Executive Committee, it is "imperative" that amendments be allowed at the convention, Lewis said, citing speculation that any attempt to amend the report from the floor might be ruled out of order.

A member of the Program and Structure Study Committee, Albert Mohler, said he "regrets" Lewis' letter. "In my judgment he has misread portions of the report and misrepresented others," said Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Mohler said members of the committee "are firmly convinced that the establishment of the North American Mission Board represents the heart of this new structure for the denomination and a tremendous opportunity for missions advance in North America."

Mohler said it was understood from the beginning of the study committee's work that issues of finance and feasibility analysis come during the implementation phase of the report.

"Given the size and complexity of the Southern Baptist Convention, the implementation phase of this report will involve thousands of questions and issues to be resolved with the best organizational, fiscal and legal minds involved in the process," he said.

Mohler said the committee members "stand by our report" and are convinced "it will increase and expand Southern Baptists in North America and throughout the world."

Mohler said he urges concerned Baptists "to read the report carefully" and understand its "purpose" and "goal" of organizing the SBC in a way that facilitates the establishment of missions and ministries.

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PREVIEW:

SBC to look back, look ahead, during 150th annual meeting

ATLANTA (ABP) -- When Southern Baptists gather June 20-22 for their 150th annual meeting, they will look back at their history, including their ties to racism, and look ahead to their future, voting on a massive plan to downsize their denominational structure.

Throughout the three-day meeting in Atlanta's Georgia Dome, a projected crowd of 25,000 messengers will celebrate the SBC's founding in nearby Augusta in 1845 and hear a variety of reports and inspirational messages. Evangelist Billy Graham will deliver the convention's closing message.

But the messengers are expected to take a sober look at the role racism played in their convention's past as well. A resolution renouncing racism past and present is expected to come to a vote.

Little debate is expected over the election of the convention's president, however. Current president Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, Fla., is eligible for re-election and is the only announced candidate for the post this year.

Observers predict debate on the SBC's reorganization proposal will garner much of the convention spotlight. The plan was drafted by a seven-member Program and Structure Study Committee appointed by Fred Wolfe, chairman of the SBC Executive Committee.

The reorganization proposal already has been approved by the Executive Committee but must be approved by SBC messengers this year and again next year. It would reduce the number of SBC agencies from 19 to 12.

While most parts of the reorganization proposal have been praised, a few parts have generated intense questions and some outright opposition. The most controversial elements are:

-- Virtually ignoring Woman's Missionary Union and assigning some of its current responsibilities to other SBC agencies.

-- Merging the Home Mission Board, Radio and Television Commission and Brotherhood Commission into

a new North American Mission Board.

-- Eliminating the Historical Commission and assigning its work to the six SBC seminaries and the Sunday School Board.

SBC leaders have said the proposal will be presented as a single package. However, a number of critics of the proposal have called for it to be divided for separate votes on each component.

Supporters of resolution on racism have tied their cause to this year's sesquicentennial celebration, noting the convention was formed largely out of a dispute over whether slaveholders could serve as missionaries.

While SBC resolutions opposing racism are not new, this apparently would be the first to confront the role Southern Baptists played in fostering racism. Similar resolutions have been adopted by a number of local associations and state conventions in the past two years.

Proponents say the resolution would put down a marker of repudiation for "racist" actions and attitudes of the convention in the past and send a clear signal to African Americans that the SBC today is open to all races.

Opponents of the resolution say it is unnecessary because one generation cannot repent of the sins of a previous generation.

For the resolution to be considered by messengers, it must be reported out of the SBC resolutions committee. Resolutions chairman Charles Carter of Birmingham, Ala., said the SBC would be "derelict" not to speak to the issue of racial reconciliation this year.

The theme of this year's annual meeting is "Empowered for the Unfinished Task," based on Matthew 28:19-20.

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--By Mark Wingfield

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Following is part two and part three of the three-part series on the upcoming Southern Baptist Convention meeting. Part one was issued May 31.
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**PART TWO:
Southern Baptists at crossroads
of past success, future challenges**

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Will the remarkable growth of the Southern Baptist Convention during its first century and a half carry over to its future?

When Southern Baptists gather June 20-22 to celebrate their history and consider a plan to retool their organization for the next century, they will begin to answer that question.

No one has a crystal ball. But historians cite Baptists' ability to adapt to changing times as a key to the denomination's past successes. However, they also warn of unprecedented challenges, both internal and external, that could diminish the convention's potential.

Mark Brister, chairman of a blue-ribbon committee proposing the reorganization of the SBC, said the denomination is at "an exciting transition moment in history." The SBC "has great strengths and a bright future," he said.

Alluding to the convention's embrace of a more-conservative theology during the 1980s, Brister contrasted

the SBC to declining liberal denominations "which have veered from biblical Christianity."

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said the SBC in 1995 is "poised for growth after a sustained period of conflict and transition."

The "conservative resurgence" beginning in 1979 was the "equivalent of organizational surgery," involving pain but "opening the way for a much healthier convention in the years to come," Mohler said. "Put bluntly, the theological issues which formed the center of the conservative resurgence are absolutely vital to the integrity of the convention," he said.

Not everyone, however, views the changes in the convention as progress. Along the way, says historian Walter Shurden, the denomination has sacrificed bedrock Baptist distinctives related to freedom of conscience. "I think there's a sense where the SBC has been de-Baptistified in the last 15 years," said Shurden, chair of the Christianity department at Mercer University in Macon, Ga.

Morris Chapman, president and chief executive officer of the SBC Executive Committee, credits the theological "course correction" for the denomination's health. Without it, he said, "we would find ourselves adrift as we head into the next century. Now the sails are set."

"We are strong but we're not perfect," Chapman said. "Our health depends on our willingness to abandon self for the sake of Christ." Chapman said the denomination "has great promise" but must "overcome the temptation to become lethargic," must "continue to personalize missions," and must reach out beyond the Bible Belt.

Mohler said the SBC is "well on the way to healing" after its protracted controversy but cannot expect "a period of institutional stability" like that enjoyed after World War II. "The world has changed. No corporation or national institution expects stability at the end of the 20th century," he said.

Mohler, who served on the committee that drafted the SBC's restructuring plan, described four challenges facing the SBC: To maintain theological integrity, uphold biblical morality, focus on the denomination's mission, and accept the need for structural change.

"Those who would measure the SBC solely in terms of statistical issues (such as growth and giving) may miss the whole by focusing on the parts," Mohler said. Still, he added, "very encouraging reports" on denominational giving and numerical growth indicate the convention "has not suffered but is indeed in much better shape to move into the 21st century."

Countered Shurden: "I think the SBC is going to be all right institutionally in terms of statistics, but statistics don't tell us anything about vitality."

The SBC is one of the success stories of American religion, said Jesse Fletcher, author of a new sesquicentennial history of the Southern Baptist Convention published by Broadman & Holman.

"There's no way that the founders who gathered in Augusta in May of 1845 could have imagined the scope of operations that exist in 1995," said Fletcher, chancellor of Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas.

The denomination boasts "the largest mission enterprise of its kind," is established in every state and sponsors colleges and seminaries that form an "education matrix ... that's almost unrivaled," he said. "You've just got an overwhelming story, even given 150 years, and especially when you consider how hard the first 50 years were."

One key to the SBC's success has been the convention's form of governance -- centered on local church autonomy with multiple layers of affiliation -- which "seemed to fit hand in glove with the American spirit," Fletcher said. Coupled with that is a strong entrepreneurial spirit that led the convention's leaders to branch out into new areas -- such as communications and publishing -- to bolster existing programs.

Fletcher said the SBC's 150th anniversary should prompt not only celebration but introspection. "When you get over celebrating; you've got to address the challenges," Fletcher said.

Among those challenges, according to experts interviewed by Associated Baptist Press, are:

-- Women. Many Baptists employ a literal reading of the Bible that prohibits women from serving in some leadership roles in churches. This pits them against the larger movement in society in which doors are opening to all persons, regardless of gender.

The convention seems unable to resolve the women's issue "in a healthy way, at least to date," Fletcher said.

Fletcher cited two recent episodes involving conflict over the roles of women in church life. One is a decision by President Albert Mohler to make opposition to women pastors a condition of employment at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. The other is suspicion by SBC leaders of the fact that its auxiliary, Woman's Missionary Union, remains autonomous.

Both issues have to be resolved for the convention to move forward in a healthy way, Fletcher said.

Shurden noted: "One of the big challenges for the SBC in the future is to devise some attraction for women who feel God has called them into ministry." He predicted the SBC will eventually be forced to accept women in religious roles.

"That is a moral and ethical issue that has to do with the inclusion of human beings into the full community of faith," he said. "I just can't help but believe in time that truth will triumph." However, he confessed, "I don't see it any time in the immediate future."

-- Exclusivism. The convention's long battle between conservatives and moderates has discouraged dissent and resulted in a leadership more monolithic than in the past.

"The big question is: Is the convention becoming exclusive when the gospel by definition is inclusive?" Fletcher said. In most religious bodies, dissent "usually represents an awful lot of the vitality," he observed.

"I think that one of the biggest dangers is we're going to exclude too many of the people we need to address many of the challenges of the new age," Fletcher said.

In the closing chapter of his book, Fletcher assesses three "foundations for the future" for the SBC: confessionalism or theological consensus; connectionalism, the way churches relate to each other through associational and convention structures; and cooperation, common values and goals. "We need to appreciate that's what we've built on," he said.

Fletcher then identifies nine "fault lines" in that foundation: Calvinism vs. Arminianism, society methodology vs. convention methodology; local church vs. larger body; scholarship vs. populism; gender roles vs. gender equality; the perspectives represented by the SBC's two dominant seminaries, Southern and Southwestern; orthodox vs. progressive thinking; fundamentalism vs. evangelicalism; and pastoral authority vs. democratic church leadership.

The fault lines indicate polarities that have divided Baptists in the past and represent challenges for the future, Fletcher wrote.

Those fault lines may "expand and contract" as in the past without rupture, he wrote. Or perhaps "events will emerge" to reduce tensions dividing Southern Baptists.

But he added: "Another more potent possibility, however, is that the present polarities in Southern Baptist life will find themselves on opposite sides of enough of these fault lines for the aggregate to constitute a basis for a bill of divorcement." Together those divisions could force a "separation" Southern Baptists have resisted so far, he noted.

-- Identity. Baptist historian Bill Leonard said one of the major challenges facing the SBC is passing on a Baptist identity to future generations.

Many of the "mechanisms and resources" that traditionally have identified Southern Baptists are breaking down, Leonard said. He noted, for instance, that Baptists on the left now minimize the "Southern" in the Southern Baptist label, while some on the right prefer a "community church" identity to the term "Baptist."

Leonard teaches undergraduate students at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., 65 percent of whom are Baptists. When those students leave home and pick a new church, "they are choosing churches before they are choosing brand names," Leonard said.

Students today value "a highly subjective religious experience that is very privatized, very personalized, and that tends to minimize the role of Christian community," Leonard said. "It's what I sometimes call a kind of Me-and-Jesus spirituality," he said.

That kind of faith is not only less concerned with denominational labels but also minimizes the relevance of ordinances like baptism and the Lord's Supper, Leonard said. Students commonly feel the ordinances are "only symbols that don't really mean much as long as you have Jesus in your heart."

Those ordinances, however, were "extremely important to early Baptists into this century," Leonard said. "Those are communal symbols. They link us to the body of Christ. ... I'm talking about the importance of baptism as an identifying experience. If not baptism, what?"

Fletcher said Baptist ideals may seem irrelevant to young people because "we have not done a good job of making the case for what it is Baptists have contributed to the larger church." Also, he added, "these college students are confronted with the complexities of the developing world they are going to live in, and they don't always see the churches addressing those things."

"De-Baptistification" is Walter Shurden's word for the loss of Baptist identity. The challenge for Southern Baptists, he said, is to recover the hallmark Baptist doctrines of anti-creedalism, the priesthood of believers, and the centrality of laity in Baptist life.

"The Baptist identity has really been crowded out by the fundamentalist identity of the SBC leadership," Shurden said. "I think that right now the leadership of the SBC gets their identify not from Baptist life but from fundamentalist life."

Despite the success of the inerrancy movement in gaining control of the convention, Shurden said, "I'm not yet convinced the masses of people care about some of the things the fundamentalist leadership have brought to pass. ... The masses in SBC life will act on a broader theology than the SBC leaders will act on."

"One of the challenges of the next generation is to move away from a fundamentalist identity and restore a Baptist identity," Shurden said.

-- Post-denominationalism. Baby boomers are less loyal to institutions -- including religious institutions -- than their parents, sociologists say. Much of the denominational loyalty Southern Baptists counted on -- to fill the offering plates and the pulpits, for instance -- is lost.

"I think every generation has to develop new ways to relate to its constituency," Fletcher said. "I don't think loyalties just carry over any more."

"Yuppies don't tithe," Leonard noted. Will the SBC be able to attract adequate financial support as the baby boomer generation moves into the "tithing generation" -- the 55-and-older age group that traditionally gives most generously to churches?

Declining seminary enrollments and a proliferation of new theology schools is already complicating the task of hiring church ministers, Leonard said. "The day is coming when churches have to look in all kinds of places ... for ministers."

The pool of prospective ministers coming out of theological schools looks much different today, Leonard said. "There are fewer of them and they are much less committed to lifelong service as a Southern Baptist," he said.

Today's seminarians include "women, second-career, older, divorced, people who didn't grow up Southern Baptist," Leonard said. And rather than the SBC's traditional rural and working class stock, they are increasingly urban and affluent, he said. As a result, many prospective ministers lack "the frame of reference" to minister to the smaller rural or small-town churches that numerically predominate the SBC.

-- Race. While the SBC boasts of being one of the most racially inclusive American denominations, it has a long way to go toward assimilating minorities, leaders say.

Much of the convention's numerical growth is among African American and language churches, but those churches are more reluctant to identify exclusively with a single, predominantly white, denomination.

While Southern Baptists have been able "embrace a large ethnic range of churches," Fletcher said, most SBC churches are "largely homogeneous." Assimilation of minorities remains a problem in the denomination, he said, particularly in leadership.

That is not intentional, Fletcher said. Convention leaders complain it is difficult to recruit minorities for denominational service. "Usually the demands on educated and able black and ethnic Baptist leaders are overwhelming," he said.

But Leonard, who is a member of a predominantly black church in Birmingham, noted "a growing restlessness among some African American and Hispanic Baptists" over what they perceive as a lack of a voice in the SBC.

Fletcher noted the SBC "started off hobbled" in its approach to race relations by having supported slavery in its inception and segregation for much of its history. "In one sense, only in the last 40 or 50 years have we been able to break free of that."

Meanwhile, the challenge of evangelizing the cities is made more difficult by the "white flight" phenomenon of recent decades, when many Southern Baptist churches abandoned the cities. "Many churches respond to the changes in their community by moving," Fletcher said.

-- Localism. "We are returning to a much more local and regional orientation toward being Baptist and organizing Baptists," Leonard said.

"And people are more apt to participate in a variety of entities, the SBC being one." Churches will continue the trend of purchasing educational materials from multiple sources rather than exclusively from the denominational publishing house, he noted.

Another facet of localism is the rise of volunteer missions projects in local churches, which Leonard said is changing the face of Southern Baptist missions. While he does not foresee the demise of traditional missionaries, Leonard predicts that "career missions is going to be less normative and only one of multiple options" in the SBC of the future.

-- Resiliency. SBC President Jim Henry, who recently endorsed a proposed overhaul of the SBC's structure, encouraged Southern Baptists to move forward, lest "we fossilize and become a denominational dinosaur in the sands of time."

The proposed restructuring poises the convention "for a positive paradigm shift -- the gospel method unchanged, our methods ever changing," explained Mark Brister, chair of the committee that drafted the proposal.

Fletcher said the restructure proposal is being presented as an effort to "retool and resize for the new period." But the recommendation is flawed, he said, because Brister's committee sought only minimal input and did not explore important legal and cost factors.

A deeper question, Fletcher said, is: "To what degree is the restructure simply a challenge of looking toward the 21st century and to what degree is it a reaction to our recent conflicts?"

-- Courage. Leonard said he recently reviewed the early history of the SBC for a book he is writing and was struck by the courage and "willingness to take a chance" the convention's founders possessed. "Once they realized [their old denomination] was coming apart, they went ahead with it."

Even if their motivation, in part to defend slavery, was questionable, "they had some courage," Leonard said. He noted that early missionaries often struck out with little concern about health, safety or if any support would follow. "I'm flabbergasted by it."

"That is in sharp contrast to what I would see today as the hesitancy to look for new paradigms, to look for new models and explore new possibilities," Leonard said.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following story updates one issued under the same headline May 26.

PART THREE:
SBC expected to
confront racist past

By Ferrell Foster

ATLANTA (ABP) -- When Southern Baptists meet this summer to celebrate their 150th anniversary, they probably will be asked to confront the racism associated with their denomination since its founding.

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, which will decide whether or not to propose a statement to messengers at the SBC annual meeting in Atlanta June 20-22.

The chairman of the committee predicted the group will call for action. "We are spiritually and morally committed to responding ... to what is of concern to the people," said Charles Carter, pastor of Shades Mountain Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. The committee "would be derelict in our sensitivity" not to speak on racial reconciliation this year, he said, adding he was speaking for himself and not the committee.

Carter cited "grass-roots interest" in the issue, including the work of the two SBC agencies and recent actions by several state conventions.

All three proposals sent to the committee note Southern Baptists' support for slavery in the 19th 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 news 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.

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

The SBC broke off from a national Baptist organization in 1845 after the old Triennial Convention refused to appoint slaveholders as missionaries.

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 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, 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.

Oklahoma exec Bill Tanner announces 1996 retirement

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- William Tanner, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma since 1986 and former head of Southern Baptist home missions, announced plans to retire a year from now.

Saying it has been "an exciting and wonderful journey," Tanner, 65, made the announcement May 31 to the convention's board of directors.

A native of Oklahoma and former president of Oklahoma Baptist University (1971-76), Tanner returned to his home state in 1986 after a 10-year stint as president of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta. By the time he retires June 30, 1996, he will have spent 10 years in the Oklahoma position as well.

"I do not wish to be a leader who finds himself slowly becoming counterproductive by repetition, lack of interest or not caring to be creative," he explained.

Tanner is a graduate of Baylor University, the University of Houston and Southwestern Seminary, where he received doctorates in 1958 and 1966. The Tanners have four married children and five grandchildren. A sixth grandchild died in 1988.

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Oklahoma directors cut SBC's share of CP funds

OKLAHOMA CITY, Okla. (ABP) -- Directors of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma voted unanimously May 30-31 to cut the portion of Cooperative Program gifts forwarded to the Southern Baptist Convention.

A proposed 1996 budget for the state convention anticipates income of \$17.9 million. If the unified budget is approved by Oklahoma Baptists in their state convention this fall, 60 percent of those funds will remain in the state while 40 percent is forwarded to the SBC.

Last year, the SBC received \$7.3 million from Oklahoma, or a 42 percent share of the state budget of \$17.4 million. With the cut, the national body would stand to receive \$7.16 million from Oklahoma in 1996.

"Missions do not just occur 'over there.' They occur in Oklahoma," said Allen McHam, chairman of the budget subcommittee and pastor of First Baptist Church of Perry.

Citing an eight-to-10 year budget deficit, McHam noted, "Our committee felt it was outrageous to have the best convention staff in the SBC and tie their hands by not giving them some funding."

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Number of graduates continues to grow at Richmond seminary

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Thirty-one students received degrees from Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (Va.) May 27 -- the largest graduating class in the school's brief history.

The graduates -- 16 men and 15 women from six states and one European country -- all earned the master of divinity degree. It is the third graduating class for the seminary, which was founded in 1991 by Baptist moderates.

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Baptists serve meals, assess damage following West Texas storm

DALLAS (ABP) -- Baptists provided meals in four storm-damaged churches for San Angelo, Texas, residents who were forced from their homes by high winds, torrential rain and baseball-sized hail May 28.

Hailstones that pummeled San Angelo's west side shattered windows, battered roofs and soaked interiors at Belmore Baptist Church, its Korean Mission, Park Heights Baptist Church, Harris Avenue Baptist Church, Hillcrest Baptist Church, Primera Iglesia Bautista, Segunda Iglesia Bautista, and Oriente Iglesia Bautista.

The storm damaged houses, knocked down trees and power lines, and injured at least 60 people in the West Texas city. At one point, 20,000 homes were without electricity.

The Texas Baptist disaster-relief mobile unit arrived in San Angelo about 11 p.m. on May 29 and its emergency meal service was set up at Belmore Baptist Church.

In their first 24 hours working in San Angelo, disaster-relief volunteers prepared about 2,000 meals for storm victims in the 18-wheel tractor-trailer rig's field kitchen. Members of Belmore Baptist Church served the meals to their displaced neighbors who were gathered at the church.

The disaster-relief team also cooked and delivered meals to Oriente, Park Heights and Harris Avenue churches, and members of those churches served them to area residents. Texas Baptist volunteers also prepared meals that were delivered to remote locations by American Red Cross Emergency response vehicles.

Earl Dunn, pastor of Harris Avenue Baptist Church, said at least a half-dozen families in his church sustained major damage to their homes. He estimated damage to his own house at about \$15,000.

"One of our members had his arm broken in the storm," Dunn said. "A hailstone that was tennis ball size or larger came through his window and drapes and struck his left arm."

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-- By Ken Camp

END