

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **SBC renounces racist past before celebrating history**

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Convention messengers overwhelmingly adopted a resolution renouncing the convention's racist roots June 20.

The convention altered its planned order of business in order to deal with the statement of repudiation and repentance on the convention's opening day, prior to a celebration of the SBC's 150th anniversary that evening.

The resolution said messengers "unwaveringly denounce racism, in all its forms, as deplorable sin" and "lament and repudiate historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest."

It offered an apology to all African Americans for "condoning and/or perpetuating individual and systemic racism in our lifetime" and repentance for "racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously."

The statement sought forgiveness "from our African American brothers and sisters" and pledged to "eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry."

The SBC was founded in 1845 in Augusta, Ga., by Baptists in the South seceding from the national Triennial Convention after that body decreed it would not appoint slaveholders as missionaries.

The resolution acknowledges that because of the SBC's links to slavery, "our relationship to African Americans has been hindered from the beginning."

In more recent history, it adds, Southern Baptists "failed in many cases to support and in some cases opposed legitimate initiatives to secure the civil rights of African Americans." Many Southern Baptist congregations have "intentionally and/or unintentionally excluded" blacks from worship, the resolution added.

Messengers debated the resolution only briefly before voting overwhelmingly to adopt the statement.

"Nothing that I know of that has occurred in the sessions of this convention has been bathed in more prayer and more deliberation and more caution and more sincere spiritual effort than what we share with you at this time," Charles Carter, resolutions committee chairman, told messengers.

Gary Frost, SBC first vice president, urged messengers to adopt the resolution. "Our nation is being ripped apart by hatred," Frost said. "I believe it's up to the church of Jesus Christ to begin the process of true reconciliation," said Frost, the first African American to serve as an SBC officer.

Three messengers spoke against the resolution. Two said it was inappropriate to apologize only to African Americans for acts of racism. The third, Cary Kimbrell of Baton Rouge, La., said the resolution imposed too broad a condemnation on the "great men who founded this convention." He proposed the resolution be referred to the SBC

Historical Commission for more study.

Carter opposed the referral, acknowledging that the SBC's founders were "godly, Bible-believing persons but they were not infallible."

"We are not judging; we are simply acknowledging our wrong," said Carter, pastor of Shades Mountain Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.

Convention messengers defeated the motion to refer and then voted to approve the resolution.

After the vote, SBC President Jim Henry remarked, "The body has spoken clearly and definitively on this very important issue." Henry then embraced Frost.

"On behalf of my black brothers and sisters, we accept your apology and we extend to you our forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ," Frost responded. "We pray that the genuineness of your repentance will be demonstrated in your attitude and your action."

Before the vote, Richard Land, executive director of the SBC's Christian Life Commission, told reporters the resolution represents "one of the most historic things that has happened in the Southern Baptist Convention in my adult lifetime."

The statement on reconciliation "clears the deck for us to work for a more multi-racial future," Land said.

"This is not a social salve," Frost told reporters. "We are dealing with the disease. We believe sin is the core."

He said the resolution "represents a sincere effort on the part of our white brethren to heal some wounds."

Land said he represents many Baptists in his generation who as a teenager regarded it "very important" that the Christian Life Commission took a prophetic stand on civil rights. "I doubt I would be a Southern Baptist today if I could not have clung to the idea that the CLC was right on this issue," he said.

Though some Baptists oppose the resolution, Land said, it "walks down the broad middle of the Southern Baptist Convention." He said that in the days preceding the convention, phone calls affirming the action outnumbered complaints about 25 to one.

Land said he hopes the resolution will encourage local congregations and Baptist families to reach out across racial lines. He also called for the inclusion of greater numbers of minorities in leadership of the SBC. "Our ultimate goal would be boards of trust and a convention that represents the multi-ethnic makeup of our society," he said.

The resolution emerged from a grass-roots movement begun last year. A group of urban directors of missions tried to get a resolution before last year's convention but failed. A number of Baptist state conventions passed statements of repentance last fall.

In May, the SBC Historical Commission adopted a "Declaration of Repentance and Rededication," acknowledging the sin of racism.

Also in May, Land and Frost organized a "Racial Reconciliation Consultation" comprised of an equal number of black and white leaders to draft a statement.

All three statements were sent to the resolutions committee.

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## **SBC OKs restructure plan with WMU, HMB amendments**

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Southern Baptists approved the most massive overhaul ever of their 150-year-old denomination June 20, intended to "streamline the structure and to maximize the ministry" of the nation's largest Protestant body.

The reorganization plan was approved 9,950-to-5,357 in a ballot vote after messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention accepted two amendments -- one to clarify the role of the SBC's women's auxiliary and another to fine-tune the work of the new North American Mission Board.

The restructuring plan does not change the SBC's overall mission or message but updates the methods used to spread the gospel, said Mark Brister of Shreveport, La., chairman of the seven-man committee that developed the restructuring report, called "Covenant for a New Century."

"What this committee has heard clearly is that Mr. and Mrs. Southern Baptist want less funding of bureaucracy and more fueling of ministry," said Brister, pastor of Broadmoor Baptist Church in Shreveport.

The plan was the product of an 18-month study commissioned by the SBC Executive Committee, which approved the results in February.

The report dominated business during the opening session of the three-day SBC annual meeting in Atlanta's Georgia Dome. About 18,000 messengers were present -- about 7,000 fewer than expected.

Several challenges to the report failed during the hour-long debate.

A motion to postpone the vote until a feasibility study could be done was ruled out of order. And a motion to retain the Historical Commission, one of several SBC agencies eliminated in the plan, failed on a show-of-hands vote.

The reorganization -- the first since 1959 -- commits the SBC to reduce the number of denominational agencies from 19 to 12. It includes a first-ever overarching mission statement for the denomination and arranges the convention's work under five broad ministry groupings -- missions, church enrichment, facilitating ministries, theological education, and Christian ethics/religious liberty.

It combines the resources of three existing entities -- the Home Mission Board, the Brotherhood Commission and the Radio and Television Commission -- into the North American Mission Board, a new agency to be based in the HMB's new facility in suburban Atlanta.

The new board will emphasize evangelism nationwide, with particular emphasis on starting churches in areas where Southern Baptists are new or numerically weak.

The work of the SBC's other mission agency, the Foreign Mission Board, will continue basically unchanged. It will be renamed the International Mission Board. Southern Baptist work in Canada, now done jointly by the home and foreign mission boards, will become the sole responsibility of the North American Mission Board.

The restructuring eliminates five Nashville-based denominational agencies -- the Stewardship Commission, Education Commission, Historical Commission, the Southern Baptist Foundation and the Commission on the American Baptist Theological Seminary -- transferring their work to other denominational entities.

The Nashville-based Sunday School Board will take on new assignments for ministries to women, stewardship education and capital fund-raising.

The six SBC seminaries will manage the denomination's archives and historical library, which are currently housed at the Historical Commission.

Financial management services currently performed by the Foundation will move to the SBC Executive Committee, which already handles budget development and disbursement of funds.

The Education Commission, which services and promotes colleges and universities sponsored by Baptist state conventions, will be phased out, along with the Southern Baptist Commission on the American Baptist Theological Seminary, an African-American school which the SBC helps support. Growth and changes in theological education make those agencies no longer necessary, the committee said.

The plan will take several years to implement, with a target date in the year 2000. And some elements, such as bylaw changes, will require approval by the convention this year and next.

Messengers agreed to elect agency trustees who are committed to the plan and authorized the SBC Executive Committee to bring additional recommendations to implement the changes.

Since the plan was unveiled last February, much of the debate focused on what appeared to be a reduced role for Woman's Missionary Union, the 107-year-old mission-support auxiliary, which is not given an assignment in the restructured SBC.

Dellanna O'Brien, WMU executive director, told the group's members a day before the vote that the plan was unacceptable without some recognition of the work of the auxiliary. Later that day, the SBC Executive Committee turned back such a proposal, opting instead to affirm WMU in a resolution.

When the report was introduced to messengers June 20, Brister affirmed WMU and its continued work in the SBC. But, he noted, WMU was not given a ministry assignment because its executive board is not elected by the SBC. "They expressed their desire to remain an auxiliary. We honored their request."

Although the plan assigns WMU's traditional task of promoting the SBC's mission offerings to other agencies, Brister said those agencies are free to ask WMU for help.

Two Baptist leaders offered an amendment to include an affirmation of WMU as a footnote to the report.

The amendment, offered by Roy Smith, executive director of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, said the SBC "welcomes the continued role of WMU in supporting missions." John Bisagno, pastor of First Baptist Church of Houston, endorsed the amendment.

WMU's O'Brien later told reporters she was "very satisfied" with the amendment to the report. The amendment "affirm(s) WMU's partnership and presence" in the convention, she said.

The omission of any mention of WMU in the original report "was rather disturbing to us," O'Brien said, even though convention leaders assured them the restructuring would not change the way the auxiliary has related to the convention's mission boards.

"If WMU were not included in that report and only mentioned as one not accountable to the convention, we were not sure what that would mean five or 10 years from now. We wanted to secure a future for WMU," she said.

O'Brien said WMU would not have been satisfied with just a resolution of support, such as the one passed by the Executive Committee.

"Our concern was that while there were many published statements of support for WMU, what would be part of history was the document itself," she said.

Bisagno later told Associated Baptist Press he hoped the amendment would alleviate the concerns. "It was my desire to say, 'WMU has been an integral part of what we've done, and I certainly hope we keep doing it a long, long time.'"

Bisagno said both he and Smith earlier suggested the amendment to the Program and Structure Study Committee, which "looked favorably upon the idea."

"The committee suggested I join with Roy in making the amendment, and I was only happy to do so," Bisagno said.

"There had to be some public acknowledgement of Woman's Missionary Union's role in our convention," Smith said. "We needed an invitation for that relationship to continue."

Another amendment, introduced by HMB President Larry Lewis, asked for three minor changes in the wording of the report regarding home missions.

-- "Direct mission strategies," the focus of the new North American Mission Board's assignment, was changed to "cooperative mission strategies," emphasizing the traditional joint relationship of the mission board with state and local evangelism efforts.

"This might appear at first glance to be of little significance," Lewis told messengers, but without that cooperation "there would be two competing mission strategies in each state."

-- A reference to "career" missionaries was deleted from the North American Mission Board's ministry statement. Three-fourths of current HMB missionaries, such as mission pastors, serve as term missionaries, typically for three-to-five years, Lewis said. Having only career missionaries "would devastate our mission strategy," he said.

-- The proposal to make the larger state Baptist conventions totally responsible for funding home missionaries in their states was softened. Instead, those old-line states will be asked to assume "a greater portion" of that funding. Cutting out the mission board's role in the larger states would reduce the agency's national presence and eliminate its control over the doctrinal integrity of missionaries, Lewis warned.

Lewis' three-part amendment was approved overwhelmingly.

A motion to keep the Historical Commission as a separate agency was defeated by a margin estimated at 2-1. Slaydon Yarbrough of Shawnee, Okla., a trustee and interim executive director of the Historical Commission, said the elimination of the commission would be unwise. He noted the commission's administrators and trustees were not consulted by the restructuring committee.

Messengers tried twice to get the vote on the restructuring plan postponed but were ruled out of order.

"We can vote it up or down, but it cannot be postponed beyond this convention," said John Sullivan of Jacksonville, Fla., one of the SBC parliamentarians.

Chief parliamentarian Lester Cooper, a pastor from Jonesboro, Ga., later explained: "Robert's Rules of Order state that in any organization that does not meet within a quarterly time frame -- such as our convention, which meets

only annually -- the motion to postpone definitely may not be used to postpone an order of business beyond the end of that session."

Cooper noted, however, that a different sort of motion, such as a proposal to postpone the recommendation indefinitely, would have been allowed. "Yes, a motion to postpone indefinitely would have been appropriate," he explained. "As it was, a motion to postpone definitely was an attempt to kill (the recommendation) outright."

In a news conference after the report was adopted, Brister said the committee was pleased the report passed. He declined to elaborate on the committee's feelings about the amendments to the report other than to say, "The amendments were consistent with our report."

Committee member Ronnie Floyd of Springdale, Ark., told reporters the restructuring plan "puts the local church back at the center of the Southern Baptist Convention." The changes should place a greater emphasis on missions and increase giving from local churches, he predicted.

The committee deferred all questions about the cost of implementing the restructuring. Prior to the report's adoption, many questions had been raised about the financial ramifications of the report, especially the cost of merging three existing agencies into a new North American Mission Board.

Committee member Bob Sorrell of Memphis, Tenn., reiterated the committee's position that their work was "a spiritual decision" rather than a business decision. However, he admitted the changes do carry "business implications."

The committee has predicted overall cost-savings will result from the changes but has provided no estimates or analyses to back up the claim.

Also in the news conference, the committee attempted to fend off criticism that their plan centralizes more power in the hands of fewer people.

"This really is a decentralization of power," Sorrell said. "It puts more decision-making back in churches.

"To my knowledge, we really have not centralized any power," he said.

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## **Henry cites essentials to secure SBC's future**

By Michael Clingenpeel

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Moments after messengers voted on a sweeping reorganization called a "Covenant for a New Century," Southern Baptist Convention president Jim Henry challenged messengers to choose to continue another "sacred covenant" begun 150 years ago by the convention's founders.

Henry stressed the importance of missions, Baptist identity, openness to change and devotion to God in his June 20 president's address -- themes he often voiced during his year as the elected leader of America's largest Protestant denomination.

But Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla., also warned messengers against both "the slippery slope of compromise" and "the lasso of legalism."

"We should not be so inclusive as to compromise the great basics of the faith, nor so exclusive that we become ingrown, and inbred, keeping deserving people away from the table of fellowship and service," he said.

Recalling Joshua's covenant made before moving into the Promised Land, and quoting from the purpose statement adopted at the SBC's initial meeting in 1845, Henry cited five conditions necessary for the covenant to be extended:

-- A commitment to missions. "This is our noblest and most unifying commitment," said Henry, noting that almost every SBC president's address over the past quarter century emphasized this priority. Failure to do missions would make the SBC's other successes "empty relics in the dusty museum of missed opportunity."

-- An awareness of Baptist heritage. "One of the major challenges facing the SBC is passing on a Baptist identity to future generations. This we must do," he said.

Citing concerns about the vote that eliminated five agencies, including the SBC Historical Commission, Henry pledged the reorganization will not diminish the denomination's emphasis on history.

-- An openness to change. "The status quo will not do in a rapidly changing world," said Henry, who had voiced strong support for the SBC restructuring. He called for Southern Baptists not to be "cautious servants of what is" but "shapers of what might be."

"We have a principle, and the principle is to be on the cutting edge," added Henry.

-- Alert to potential dangers. "Trials will come," warned Henry, who used more than one third of his 32-minute address to describe the "perils" that face the SBC. He cautioned against diversions, inertia, the tendency to "depend on Caesar to Christianize our earthly colony" and a "dedication to narrowness."

Henry acknowledged recent divisions in the SBC, and compared opponents of the conservative resurgence with the tribes who chose not to cross the Jordan River. Three times the president's comments were interrupted by applause as he affirmed conservatives' devotion to biblical integrity as "a guarded commitment never to be relinquished," then admonished messengers against "the tendency to be biblically correct but reflect a spirit that is not of our Lord Jesus Christ."

But messengers' strongest applause came when Henry warned them "to resist the tendency to pit conservative against conservative."

-- A devotion to God. Southern Baptists survived 150 years of conflict and crisis, said Henry, because God is in control. "If we keep choosing the way of the unstoppable King of the universe nothing can stop him and nothing can stop us."

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## 'Pro-life agenda for children' needed in U.S., Garland urges

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (ABP) -- America needs "an imperative pro-life agenda for children after birth," family specialist Diana Garland told the Southern Baptist Ministers' Wives' Luncheon June 20 in Atlanta.

"In His Sight" was the theme for the luncheon, held during the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Atlanta. Garland is director of the Gheens Center for Family Ministry and professor of church social work at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

"It is not enough only to get born," Garland said of the plight of the nation's children. Sixty percent of them will live at least part of their young lives with only one parent, 25 percent live in poverty and 10,000 are homeless, she reported.

Those figures -- and the lives they represent -- present an indictment against the moral climate of the nation, Garland said. "Children are neglected in our country because our country has lost its spiritual bearing. The kind of help children need will cost us money and require our involvement. ...

"However, social services are only half the answer. The other half is much more costly. It will cost you and me. We must be willing to care, to reach out and offer children encouragement and hope.

Unfortunately, the nation is selfish, she said. "We only want to care for 'me and my own.'"

In such a society, poverty is "the unforgivable sin," she declared, adding that poverty flies in the face of society's expectations and casts suspicion on the poor.

In the United States, many of the poor are single-parent families, she said, noting the average monthly welfare check for a single mother of two children is \$367, and food stamps average about 50 cents per person per meal.

"The most common reason for women to be on welfare is that their husbands have left them and provided no child support," she said. "Do we really believe people choose such a life because it is easy?"

"We must stop punishing women for being poor, for feeling hopeless and helpless to get their lives together. If there is one thing we know from Scripture, it is that God values poor folks. God is with poor folks. And if God is there, where are we?"

Christians must take God's side and aid poor people by debunking the myth that "poor people are poor and we are not because they deserve it and we are better than they are," Garland urged. "None of us deserves what we have. It is only by the grace of God that we have what we have, and we are called to be God's grace in the lives of others."

That sense of Christians becoming "God's grace" in other's lives echoed throughout Garland's presentation.

She told the Bible story about seven-week-old Jesus, who was blessed by two elderly worshipers when his parents took him to the Temple to be committed to God.

Anna and Simeon, the people who offered those blessings, were part of a caring community that helped Mary and Joseph raise young Jesus, she said. And the church today must provide that kind of community to help parents bring their children up well.

"Parents need other adults who will love their children and hold them," Garland insisted. This especially is true for children of single parents, but it's also imperative for all children in today's stressful and challenging society, she noted.

"Parents have paid substitutes, but the children need more," she said. "They need aunting and uncling and grandparenting."

She told about surveys of children who were raised in traumatic circumstances but went on to "lead satisfying, healthy lives with careers and strong families of their own." Those successful adults who grew up out of abuse and decay had one thing in common in their lives, she reported.

"They had an adult friend -- a neighbor, an aunt or uncle or grandparent, a teacher or a coach -- some adult somewhere who loved them with big doses, who thought they were very, very special," she said.

"These people were prophets -- people who called out the very best in these children," she said.

And that's a role churches must provide to bring out the best in America's children, despite the nature of their own circumstances, she added.

Garland exhorted churches to take on three tasks that will support a "pro-life" agenda for the nation's children.

First, churches must provide strong communities that build and support strong families, she said.

"Every child and parent in our churches needs to be adopted by caring adults who are committed to be in their church family," she said. "Every child needs several adults who know that child's name and gifts and interests."

"Children need to be folded into the life of the church with adults, not just in age-graded programs."

Second, churches must reach out to the vulnerable families in their communities, offering the parents "love and family-like support."

"This is one of the most effective ways of living and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ--that every child is precious in his sight, even his grown-up and despairing children," she said.

Third, churches must challenge the "values and myths of our society about poverty and violence and the needs of children," she stressed.

That challenge also will lead to a shift in national values, Garland predicted.

"In the end, the question must be, 'How can we place children first in our priorities?'" she said. "Children should be the first concern for the government and the church."