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WMU to offer study materials about Fellowship missionaries

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Three weeks after the Southern Baptist Convention reduced the role of Woman's Missionary Union, leaders of the 107-year-old missions-support auxiliary announced July 12 they will begin to produce study materials for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Beginning in 1996, WMU will, by request, supplement age-graded curriculum promoting Southern Baptist missions work with information about missionaries employed by the Fellowship, an Atlanta-based agency that provides alternative programs for moderate churches dissatisfied with conservative leadership of the SBC.

The materials will be for churches that want to study the work of both the Fellowship's 77 missionaries and the nearly 9,000 employed by the SBC's Home and Foreign Mission boards, according to a July 12 news release from the WMU's headquarters in Birmingham, Ala.

The decision to publish the new materials acknowledges there are WMU members on both sides of denominational controversy, said June Whitlow, WMU associate executive director.

"We have members in all kinds of churches and we are simply trying to meet the needs of WMU members," Whitlow said.

The WMU's executive board opened the door to the venture in 1993 when it adopted a new statement of mission, core values and specific recommendations for the auxiliary. One recommendation called for offering prayer support and producing resources "for Southern Baptist groups involved in missions, at their request."

The executive board reaffirmed that commitment as recently as June. At that time, Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien offered to back off plans to launch the Fellowship project over concerns that it might alienate some Southern Baptist leaders, but the executive board agreed to proceed with the project.

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, termed the July 12 announcement "astonishing." "In light of WMU's strong appeal to have its loyalty to the SBC recognized in the restructuring report adopted just last month in Atlanta, I am disappointed," he said.

Messengers at the June 20-22 SBC meeting in Atlanta approved a conventionwide restructuring plan that reduced the role of WMU, but approval came only after the report was amended to "welcome the continued role of WMU in supporting missions."

"The decision of the national WMU leadership to customize materials in support of the work of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- the Southern Baptist Convention's most vocal critic -- will be regretted throughout the SBC," Chapman said in a prepared statement.

Whitlow said WMU leaders were not surprised by criticism, but they do not feel their action represents disloyalty to the SBC.

"I think we're still as loyal to the SBC and home and foreign missions as we've every been and we're going to continue to support them as we always have," Whitlow said. "This CBF action is just in addition to."

"We are aware that our decision to produce materials in cooperation with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will concern some Southern Baptists," O'Brien was quoted as saying in the press release, "but we hope and pray that all Southern Baptists will see this decision as the fulfillment of our commitment to meet the needs of local Southern Baptist churches."

WMU President Carolyn Miller said the organization's reason for offering to produce missions education materials is to encourage and equip individuals to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Our effort is to win the world for Christ," Miller said. "If that is to be accomplished, all Christians must be involved."

Keith Parks, the Fellowship's missions coordinator, called the WMU decision "an appropriate response to the urgent request of many missions-minded churches." One of the most frequently-asked questions by churches that support the Fellowship is when they will be able to offer missions-education materials, he said.

"WMU has demonstrated again its strong commitment to world missions. Their passion to increase missions awareness and enhance the sharing of Jesus Christ worldwide determines their decisions. They are living out their decisions in actions like these," Parks said.

Larry Lewis, president of the SBC Home Mission Board, issued a statement saying he would prefer that WMU "continue its historic role of supporting only the two Southern Baptist mission boards."

Foreign Mission Board President Jerry Rankin was said to be visiting missionaries in South America and unavailable for comment. "The Foreign Mission Board does not have a response to the WMU action at this time," said David Button, vice president for public relations and development.

The supplements will be tied closely to WMU coeducational missions materials, which center on the work of missionaries of the Home and Foreign Mission boards, said O'Brien.

"What we're trying to do is to get these CBFers to continue to use our material and use these alongside," Whitlow explained. "We don't want them to stop buying WMU materials to buy these materials. That's why we're tying them very closely together."

Fellowship leaders said most churches requesting the materials would welcome the information about SBC missionaries, because the vast majority of Fellowship churches continue to give to Southern Baptist missions as well, Whitlow said.

Fellowship missionaries will not be featured in the WMU's magazines -- Dimension, Accent, Aware, Discovery, GA World, Share, Start or the new Missions Mosaic -- O'Brien said. The Fellowship-related materials will be sent only to churches that order them, O'Brien said. "No church or individual will receive these materials unless requested."

The Fellowship-specific content will be printed on inserts to be included in supplemental pieces highlighting the work of SBC missionaries, Whitlow said. Regular orders for missions education supplements will include only the information on SBC work, she added.

In recent months, WMU's role in Southern Baptist missions became a central focus of discussion about the massive restructuring and downsizing of the SBC proposed by a blue-ribbon committee.

In its original form, the report of the restructuring committee, chaired by Louisiana pastor Mark Brister, mentioned WMU's role in missions education and promotion only in a historical footnote. The report, which was adopted overwhelmingly by messengers, removes primary responsibility for promotion of the SBC's two missions offerings from the WMU and hands it over respectively to the Foreign and Home Mission boards.

While WMU leaders "appreciate the affirmation we got" through the amendment, adopted overwhelmingly by SBC messengers, "we don't feel it changes the actual Brister report," Whitlow said.

The decision to begin the Fellowship supplement had nothing to do with the restructuring, Whitlow said. "We're going back to what our board has been talking about since '93. We would have done it whether we had been included (in the restructuring report) or not, in my judgment. This is certainly not a reaction to it, I don't feel."

Parks said informal discussions with WMU about publishing Fellowship-oriented materials began shortly after his arrival at the Fellowship in 1993.

"It's a simple process," Parks said. "Anyone in missions knows you need missions-education material. Especially if you're Baptist, you know WMU is the expert in missions-education material. So you turn to the most competent, resourceful group and see if they can be some help to you."

The Fellowship is guaranteeing WMU won't lose any money on the project, enabling WMU to jump into production without ordinary market research, Parks said.

Whitlow said WMU is committed to publishing the Fellowship supplements for one year. After that, she said, they will be continued only if enough are sold to recover the costs of production.

In addition to the Fellowship supplement, WMU is in the production stage on similar specific inserts for use by ethnic-Korean Southern Baptist churches, Whitlow said.

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Clinton: Constitution protects student religious expression

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton has directed his administration to inform public school officials that student religious expression is protected, not prohibited, by the First Amendment.

Clinton's remarks on the volatile issue of school prayer came while Republicans in Congress tried to build momentum for a constitutional amendment on religious liberty. Several conservative religious groups, including the Southern Baptist Convention, support such an amendment.

Clinton, in a major speech on religious liberty July 12 at a northern Virginia high school, announced that he had directed Secretary of Education Richard Riley and Attorney General Janet Reno to provide the nation's 15,000 school districts with a "detailed explanation of the religious expression permitted" in the public schools. The directive calls for the information to reach school officials before fall classes begin.

While Clinton did not mention the proposed "religious equality amendment" directly, he emphasized that the Constitution already provides broad protection for religious expression by students.

"The First Amendment does not -- I will say it again -- does not convert our schools into religion-free zones," Clinton told a gathering of students, teachers, parents and religious leaders at James Madison High School in Vienna, Va.

"If a student is told he can't wear a yarmulke, for example, we have an obligation to tell the school the law says the student can, most definitely, wear a yarmulke to school," Clinton said. "If a student is told she cannot bring a Bible to school, we have to tell the school, 'No, the law guarantees her the right to bring the Bible to school.'"

Religious expression runs afoul of the Constitution only when it is sponsored or endorsed by the school, Clinton said.

"While the government may not use schools to coerce the consciences of our students or to convey official endorsement of religion, the government's schools also may not discriminate against private religious expression during the school day," Clinton's directive states.

While most schools do a good job of protecting students' religious rights, Clinton cited instances of students being prohibited from reading the Bible silently in study hall, publicizing religious meetings and saying grace before lunch.

"This is rare, but it has happened and it is wrong," he said.

Clinton said he hopes the materials sent to school districts will help protect students' rights.

"What we have to do is work together to help all Americans understand what the First Amendment does," he said. "It protects freedom of religion by allowing students to pray and it protects freedom of religion by preventing schools from telling them how and when and what to pray."

Clinton's directive will offer school officials clarification on a range of issues, including the right of students to engage in prayer and religious discussion, participate in baccalaureate services, distribute religious literature and wear religious garb.

The president said his directive "borrows heavily and gratefully" from a statement produced in April by a broad coalition of religious and legal groups who "put themselves on the solution side of this debate." The document, titled "Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law," spells out what the diverse groups agree to be current church-state law.

The statement was drafted by the American Jewish Congress, the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Jewish Committee, the American Muslim Council, the Anti-Defamation League, the Baptist Joint Committee, the Christian Legal Society, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches, People for the American Way and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. It was endorsed by 24 other organizations.

Clinton commended the organizations for putting aside "their deep differences" to produce the statement.

In his remarks, the president emphasized that the First Amendment has served Americans well.

"The First Amendment has protected our freedom to be religious or not religious, as we choose, with the consequence that in this highly secular age the United States is clearly the most conventionally religious country in the entire world, at least the entire industrialized world," Clinton said.

Later at a White House briefing, Riley and Assistant Attorney General Walter Dellinger made clear the administration's opposition to altering the First Amendment.

"The president has always been opposed to altering the First Amendment," Riley said. "It has never been altered in the entire history of this nation and it should not be altered now."

The First Amendment, Clinton said, provides "two great pillars" that keep the government from establishing religion and from interfering with it.

The president's actions drew a mixed response from religious leaders.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the president "made it clear that the First Amendment provides adequate and sufficient safeguards for the free expression of religion. Those who oppose his principled position simply categorize themselves as frantic fanatics."

"Using the presidential pulpit like no recent president has, Mr. Clinton made clear that religious liberty is the pre-eminent American value," said BJC general counsel Brent Walker. Walker embraced Clinton's rejection of the need for a constitutional amendment, saying, "Education about existing rights is the key."

James Smith, governmental affairs director of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said "there was much ... to agree with" in the president's speech but suggested it was motivated by re-election politics. The speech was "part of a larger attempt to rehabilitate the president's image among evangelicals and social conservatives who are deeply troubled about this administration's advocacy of radical social policies, especially in the area of abortion and homosexuality," Smith said.

In June, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution calling for a constitutional amendment that would protect religious liberty, including the rights of students "to engage in voluntary prayer and other religious expression" in public schools.

"We continue to disagree with the president about the proper remedy to the infringement of religion in America's public schools," Smith said.

Greg Baylor, assistant director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, commended Clinton's steps but questioned whether they removed the need for a religious-equality amendment.

"We're encouraged by the president's recognition of the problems surrounding religious expression in the public schools and his apparent willingness to do something about it," Baylor said. However, Baylor said the administration's restating of current law "doesn't change some of the problem areas in church-state law other than in the public schools."

Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice accused Clinton of "playing politics" with religious expression in public schools.

ACLJ chief counsel Jay Sekulow welcomed Clinton's recognition of religious expression in public schools but called the president's remarks "a convenient afterthought to a national debate that has been raging for years." Sekulow said Clinton's suggestions are "ambiguous and intended to appease rather than clarify this important issue."

In his speech, Clinton said he has not agreed with every Supreme Court decision on the First Amendment, specifically citing his disagreement with a 1992 decision striking down clergy-delivered prayers at commencement exercises.

"But I do believe that, on balance, the direction of the First Amendment has been very good for America and has made us the most religious country in the world by keeping government out of creating religion, supporting particular religions ... and interfering with other people's religious practices."

Clinton later added: "I still believe the First Amendment as it is presently written permits the American people to do what they need to do."

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story.

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