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Motion to force Fellowship to declare itself a denomination dies

By Bob Allen and Greg Warner

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- A motion that would have forced the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to vote next year on whether to declare itself a denomination died a parliamentary death at the group's general assembly July 21.

Bill Montgomery, a retired Air Force chaplain from San Antonio, Texas, announced earlier to the Fellowship's Coordinating Council that he planned to present the motion asking the organization to declare itself a denomination separate from the Southern Baptist Convention in 1996.

Fellowship moderator Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler, however, ruled the motion out of order in a business session at the Tarrant County Convention Center in Fort Worth, Texas. Parliamentarian Bart Tichenor explained that based on Robert's Rules of Order, the motion was "dilatatory," because it wrongfully tried to instruct next year's general assembly to take a specific action.

Asked from the floor if Montgomery's motion would be in order if it were changed to simply instruct the Coordinating Council to study declaring a new denomination, Crumpler responded, "That was not the motion."

No more introduction of new business is scheduled at this year's general assembly.

Crumpler said Fellowship leaders talked with Montgomery at length about problems with the motion's form. "We feel that we've been fair in this," she said.

Speaking to a motion to sustain the chair's ruling, Montgomery told the general assembly "it's time we changed this guise" of existing only as a "fellowship" within the Southern Baptist Convention.

"We are producing a lot of programs that are done primarily by denominations," Montgomery said.

The vote to sustain the ruling passed overwhelmingly, by voice vote.

Montgomery's motion called for a one-year study by the council before the 1996 vote.

The Fellowship was chartered in 1991 as an alternative for Southern Baptist moderates shut out by the conservative leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention. The Fellowship supports 77 missionaries and a variety

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

of other ministries.

Although Southern Baptist leaders have encouraged the Fellowship to withdraw from the SBC and has stopped accepting donations from the group, the Fellowship has denied it plans to start a new denomination.

But Montgomery said it is "ineffective and pointless" for Fellowship members to try to remain Southern Baptist when the SBC doesn't want them. "Friends, we just don't have a home to go back to. We need to build our own," he told the Coordinating Council.

Cecil Sherman, Fellowship coordinator, told Associated Baptist Press the Fellowship is not yet ready to be a denomination. "I would be surprised if this group votes to do that next year, but I'd be a lot surprised if this group hasn't done that within 20 years," Sherman said.

Montgomery said he is particularly concerned about chaplains who serve in hospitals, prisons, the military and other roles that require denominational endorsement. Until the Fellowship declares itself a denomination, he said, moderate chaplains must continue to seek the endorsement of the SBC.

So far, however, moderate Baptists have had no problem getting endorsement through the Home Mission Board, which handles the chaplaincy assignment for the SBC, said Ed Beddingfield, who serves on a Fellowship committee studying chaplaincy.

"There has been no one turned down," Beddingfield, a council member from Sylva, N.C., told Associated Baptist Press. "The Home Mission Board has bent over backward."

Although the issue of chaplain endorsement is "dearest to my heart," Montgomery said in an interview, he would support a clean break by the CBF for other reasons, such as to protect retirement funds for moderate ministers.

In response to a question during the business session, Crumpler acknowledged that members of the Coordinating Council are aware that significant numbers of Fellowship members share Montgomery's sentiment.

A recent constituency survey conducted by a marketing firm asked Fellowship members if they believed the organization should declare itself a new denomination. Sixty-five percent of respondents said they either disagreed, strongly disagreed or were undecided while only a "very small percentage" said they would advocate the change, said Fellowship spokesperson Dawn Richerson. One fourth of the survey respondents disagreed strongly with the idea, she said.

Montgomery said he has no idea how such a vote would turn out. But he added, "I don't see any reason for us to deny what we are right now."

While taking such a stand would scare some churches away from the Fellowship, it would attract others, Montgomery said.

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Cooperative Baptist Fellowship speakers emphasize Baptist 'freedoms'

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Freedom undergirds the Baptist understanding of the Christian faith, said speakers at the opening session of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's 1995 general assembly.

Successive speakers gave brief theme interpretations on Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom and religious freedom at the July 20 plenary session at Tarrant County Convention Center in Fort Worth, Texas.

The presentations laid down bedrock beliefs guiding the 5-year-old moderate organization. Later in the three-day meeting, delegates will vote on a new mission statement built on those and other core values designed to carry the Fellowship into the future.

"Freedom lies very deep in the DNA and chromosomes in the life of Baptists," said Russell Dilday, acting dean of Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. "The only true Baptists are free Baptists."

One important aspect of that freedom has been called "Bible freedom," Dilday said.

Baptists interpret the Bible according to the dictates of individual conscience and historically have rejected "all manmade creeds and look(ed) to Jesus alone" as the object of their faith, Dilday said.

The "aimless, uncertain, postmodern type of culture" modern Baptists live in, however tempts "even Baptists" to adopt creeds or "draw up firm statements of orthodoxy," Dilday noted.

"Authentic Baptists," however, "must reject" that temptation, he said and "affirm our unashamed allegiance to the authority of the Bible."

Noting that early Baptists died for the freedom to interpret the Scriptures, Dilday said "we need some Baptist freedom fighters" for today.

"If we're found faithful to our heritage of freedom, then this species, authentic Baptists, will no longer be an endangered species, but will thrive and grow for another century or until our Lord returns," Dilday said.

Molly Marshall, professor of theology, worship and spiritual formation at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kan., emphasized the Baptist distinctive of freedom of conscience, also known as "soul liberty."

"Soul liberty is wonderfully liberating and downright risky, as I can readily testify," Marshall told the audience to a wave of applause.

Just a year ago, she was forced to resign as professor of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary by President Albert Mohler, who charged she taught outside the seminary's guiding documents.

That moment stood an era apart from her early days in Baptist Training Union, where "I was taught to prize voluntary faith," Marshall recalled. Such faith involves "personal responsibility before God, priesthood of all believers and liberty of conscience," she said.

Soul liberty springs from "the responsibility of each person before God to respond to God for herself or himself," she added, quoting Baptist theologian E.Y. Mullins, who was president of Southern Seminary from 1899 to 1928.

She noted the contrast between Mullins' emphasis on soul liberty, or what he called "soul competency," and the Calvinist theology that dominated the early years of the Southern Baptist Convention and the SBC in the past few years. Calvinism emphasizes the sovereignty of God, as opposed to Mullins' emphasis on blending the understanding of God's power with human responsibility and freedom to respond to God.

"E.Y. Mullins warned against creeds, the intervention of clergy and the intervention of civil government," Marshall said. "That warning was applicable in 1908. How much more so today?"

Soul liberty is deeply personal, Marshall acknowledged, noting it is part of each Christian's individual pilgrimage.

Her own journey led her to accept a call to ministry at age 14, she reported. At the time, she felt she had only three ministry options.

"I could be a foreign missionary, which meant I could do whatever I wanted, as long as it was far enough away," she said. "I could be part of the Woman's Missionary Union. Or I could be a youth minister ... and do junior high lock-ins until Jesus comes."

But her responsibility before God led her to become a theology professor. She referred to the anguish she felt at being forced from that calling, or at least its manifestation at Southern Seminary. And she acknowledged many in the audience had felt similar pains.

"Is the cost of standing for soul liberty worth it?" she asked. "It is the way of faith, of liberty and of creating opportunity for service. 'For freedom Christ has set us free. ... Do not submit again to the yoke of bondage.'"

Baptists also believe in church freedom, said Sam Medina, an attorney and pastor of Alliance Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas.

"I believe in church freedom because without it the local church would cease to exist," he said.

The local church is the primary unit of Baptist organization, Medina declared. "There is no Southern Baptist Convention church. There is no Baptist General Convention church. There's not even a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship church. There's only the local Baptist church."

While voluntarily united for missionary purposes, each local Baptist church retains the right to pave its own way, Medina said. "There cannot be and must not be any organization that legislates for ... the local Baptist church."

Texas evangelist Richard Jackson said he could sum up everything he knew about his assigned topic, "Religious Freedom," in seven words: "Religion and liberty can never exist together."

Jackson, long-time pastor of North Phoenix (Ariz.) Baptist Church, said that religion inevitably results in a list of dos and don'ts and is "the common thread that gets woven into a rope of bondage."

"Religion never has and never shall bring true freedom," he said.

When reduced to a religion, Jackson, said, Christianity brings bondage just like every other religion.

At one point in history, Jackson said, the United States was "well on its way to following the disastrous footsteps of other nations which had distorted Christianity into a state church."

"That did not happen in no small part because there were some folks called Baptists who insisted upon and celebrated faith and freedom and demanded the same for others."

Jackson said it can be argued that the U.S. Constitution is the "most significant document in human literature outside Holy Scripture itself."

He said he disagrees with those who say the First Amendment protects freedom of religion but not freedom from religion.

"I believe that the First Amendment gives us both," he said. "I believe that the First Amendment makes us free to be under the bondage of religion if we so choose, and I will stand for that freedom."

"But on the other hand, I believe that the First Amendment makes me free from religion," he added.

According to the Constitution and Scripture, Jackson said, people are free from any religion that would control them as well as from religion of conformity that denies individuality.

"And on the other hand, we are free from any religion of doubt that would rob us of our absolutes. We are free from any religion of arrogant intellectualism that would mock even one certainty of Holy Scripture," Jackson said.

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Women in Ministry adopts name change

By Bob Allen

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Women in Ministry voted overwhelmingly to remove "Southern" from the group's name July 20.

Members voted 63-1 to accept an executive board recommendation changing the name to Baptist Women in Ministry at the group's 13th annual meeting in Fort Worth, Texas.

"It's a very symbolic and significant act to change your name. It talks a lot about your future and where you stand and what your identity is," said Mary Zimmer, outgoing president of the group.

One member spoke against the change, which was recommended at last year's meeting before being studied and formally proposed by the executive board.

Terri Luper of Waco, Texas, said Southern Baptists need a continuing voice for women in ministry.

"I would like to speak against the motion somewhat tentatively; I have mixed feelings about it," said Luper, a recent graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary. She said when she tells people she aspires to be a Southern Baptist minister, they typically respond that women cannot be Southern Baptist ministers.

"Until all of our bodies decide to become a different denomination and call ourselves 'Baptist,' I would encourage us to continue speaking out for women in leadership in Southern Baptist churches," she said.

But Eleanor Harwell, who made the original motion to change the name, said it was offered "not with the intent of disassociating ourselves with Southern Baptists, but to enlarge who we are."

"Almost all the related organizations that have come out of the Southern Baptist Convention ... have deleted the word 'southern' from everything they are doing so we can have a broader sense of ministry and inclusiveness, not just to distance ourselves from Southern Baptists," said Harwell, of Jonesboro, Ga..

Southern Baptists have been reluctant to change the denomination's name, although many acknowledge "southern" is no longer representative of the convention's geographical makeup, Harwell noted in written rationale supporting her motion.

She also pointed out that Women in Ministry differs theologically with most SBC leaders over the role of women in church life. "I have not considered myself a 'Southern' Baptist minister since the Home Mission Board withheld financial support for ordained women in pioneer missions in 1984," she added.

Kathy Manis Findley, the new president of Baptist Women in Ministry, said she hopes the name change will permit the organization to broaden, and not limit, its influence.

"I pray we will go into the classrooms of seminaries and divinity schools to the women who are preparing for ministry and we will give them a word of hope for the future that they feel is hopeless," Findley said.

Women in Ministry maintains a membership roll of about 400, Zimmer said. Though the conservative-dominated SBC is not supportive of the group, it has flourished in 12 years, leaders say.

When Southern Baptist Women in Ministry formed in 1983, the group knew of 126 women ordained in Southern Baptist churches. Today, they document 1,150 and estimate the total number at near 1,300.

"There are many, many people in Southern Baptist churches that believe Southern Baptists don't ordain women, but we have 1,150 witnesses to the contrary," Zimmer said.

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Friends of New Churches
adopts constitution, budget

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- A seven-month-old organization for starting "free and faithful" Baptist churches established itself firmly as a "friend" of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship July 20 in Fort Worth, Texas.

Friends of New Churches adopted a constitution and a budget at the group's annual meeting, one of several ancillary meetings at the Fellowship's July 20-22 general assembly at the Tarrant County Convention Center.

About 80 delegates adopted a \$125,000 budget, to be funded almost in full by a grant from the Fellowship. The budget includes \$25,000 for assistance to new churches; the rest for operating the group's office in Knoxville, Tenn., and programs.

Knoxville pastor Will Carter, who serves half-time as the Friends of New Churches' coordinator, announced that in addition to the operating funds, the Fellowship's Global Missions Ministry Group planned to set aside \$1.5 million in 1995-96 to be used to guarantee loans for new churches.

Most churches which affiliate with the four-year-old Fellowship are established congregations that continue to relate also to the Southern Baptist Convention. Beginning in 1993, however, a network began to emerge of new churches affiliated primarily with the Fellowship.

Currently, Friends of New Churches has identified 51 such congregations, Carter said.

The organization, which formed in January, plans to conduct regional new church conferences during the next year, along with continuing to locate other new and existing missions.

"Our goal when in Richmond next year is to say we have 100 new churches, at least," Carter said.

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-- By Bob Allen

Focus on Family to monitor religious freedom violations

By Mark Wingfield

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (ABP) -- Focus on the Family ministries has declared itself a clearinghouse for people to report incidents where religious freedom has been violated.

This effort was spawned by a conversation between Focus on the Family President James Dobson and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, R.-Ga., Dobson said in a July letter to his supporters.

Dobson's ultimate goal, he said, is to get Congress to pass a religious liberty amendment to the Constitution.

Religious conservatives have been calling for such an amendment, which they believe is necessary to set the record straight on what is allowable religious expression in places such as public schools. Other religious groups have said such an amendment is unnecessary but that courts and school administrators need a clearer understanding of the freedoms already afforded by the First Amendment.

In his July letter, Dobson cited the case of a Salt Lake City high school graduation ceremony where a student choir was barred from singing two religious songs.

"It is estimated that more than 1,000 incidents like the one in Salt Lake City occur every year, but the national media typically ignore them unless they involve 'homosexual rights' or other politically correct viewpoints," Dobson wrote.

The Salt Lake City incident was widely reported in both the secular and religious press.

Dobson said Gingrich suggested congressional understanding of the problem would be enhanced by more careful recording of alleged religious liberty violations.

"What is needed is a central registry through which violations of religious freedom can be reported," Dobson said. "Henceforth, Focus on the Family will serve as the repository of that information, which will later be reported, hopefully, in congressional hearings.

In the same letter, Dobson reported on findings from a recent survey of Focus on the Family supporters. More than 95 percent of the 115,000 respondents said they favor the idea of a religious liberty amendment, he reported.

Further, more than 95 of the ministry's supporters favor Dobson's involvement in "the great moral and social issues of our time," he said.

As examples, the Christian psychologist and radio talk-show host cited his ministry's opposition to former Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, to homosexuals serving in the military and to allowing women to serve in military combat. He also cited the ministry's efforts related to abortion, "local control of schools" and a "more reasonable tax structure for families."

"These are not 'political' activities, even though most of them occurred within the political arena," Dobson explained. "They have profound moral and spiritual implications."

Dobson said the most frustrating comment he hears comes occasionally from "sincere friends who misunderstand this passion and say 'Don't get political.'"

"Focus on the Family has no intention of becoming a political organization," he wrote. "By that, I mean we will never endorse political candidates or align ourselves with political parties. Despite some perceptions to the contrary, we are not 'owned' by Democrats, Republicans or independents."

Dobson said his ministry has spent only 4 percent of its total budget in the past year on "public policy" issues. "That ratio is not likely to change in the future -- but please don't ask me to snuff out the remaining 4 percent in order to avoid 'getting political.'"

Focus on the Family's main political action arm has been incorporated as a separate entity known as the Family Research Foundation. Gary Bauer, head of the Family Research Foundation, is a prominent figure among Religious Right figures in Washington, D.C.

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