

# Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Greg Warner  
Associate Editor: Bob Allen  
Phone: (904) 262-6626  
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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## **Rankin decries WMU decision to publish materials for CBF**

By Bob Allen

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board has written a letter asking 40,000 pastors and Woman's Missionary Union directors to "pray with us" that national WMU leaders will change their minds about producing study materials for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

FMB President Jerry Rankin wrote Southern Baptist churches Aug. 25 saying he was "disappointed" by the July 12 announcement that WMU planned to offer materials for local WMU organizations desiring to supplement their studies about SBC missionaries with information about missionaries appointed by the CBF.

The letter, written with the encouragement of FMB trustees, was Rankin's first public response on the issue. He was unavailable for comment in July when news of the decision by the WMU Executive Board became public. A spokesman for Rankin said there was no official statement at that time.

WMU leaders said the decision to publish the supplements, which will go only to churches which specifically order them, was an acknowledgment there are WMU members on both sides of the controversy between conservatives and moderates in the SBC. The decision was prompted by a desire to enhance missions support among all Southern Baptists, they said.

While Southern Baptist missionaries cooperate with other evangelical Christians on mission fields, SBC officials have taken a harsh stance on the Fellowship, a group opposing the SBC's current conservative leaders and offering churches alternatives to official denominational programs.

In his letter, Rankin termed it "counterproductive" for WMU leaders to "endorse or promote any organization which would divert funding and undercut support for the Southern Baptist Convention and our missions agencies."

The decision by WMU leaders to offer materials for the Fellowship "undermines a cooperative spirit" between the WMU and SBC agencies, Rankin said.

Rankin, while on a tour of mission sites in northern Latin America, said from Colombia Aug. 29 he wrote the letter to express his concern to pastors and local WMU directors that the decision by the national WMU executive board "departs from what has been the historical relationship" between the 107-year-old women's

auxiliary and the Southern Baptist Foreign and Home Mission boards.

"We feel like support of the WMU is essential to our successfully fulfilling our mission and moving in the directions we are going," Rankin said. "We have always had that support and feel this decision will begin to divide and fragment that support."

WMU Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien was traveling and unavailable for comment but planned to issue a statement later, according to a spokesperson at the WMU headquarters in Birmingham, Ala. Other national WMU leaders declined to comment.

But Fellowship leaders said the letter sends mixed signals by calling on Southern Baptists to capitalize on unprecedented missions opportunities overseas while presenting the Fellowship's missions efforts as unwelcome competition.

"The emphasis of this letter just really kind of brought hurt to my heart," said Keith Parks, missions coordinator for the Atlanta-based Fellowship. "On the one hand you talk about all the needs (and) we need to harness every available resource to meet those needs. On the other hand, 'We don't want to do anything to help these (Fellowship) people.'"

Parks pointed out that the FMB recently entered a covenant with a new organization to develop innovative missions plans for Southern Baptist churches, even though the group -- Global Focus -- appeals for funds in the same churches as the FMB. The SBC agency also recently joined an association of evangelical missions organizations, Parks noted.

SBC leaders seem to exercise a different standard, however, when it comes to the Fellowship, Parks said. "I'm confused as to what they mean by competition," he said.

"I think we've gone out of our way not to be competitive or duplicative of what the FMB is doing," echoed Fellowship moderator Pat Anderson of Lakeland, Fla.

The Fellowship is appointing missionaries who could not or would not want to be appointed by the SBC, is working with Christian groups overseas that have had "negative experiences" with the FMB and is focusing on unreached people groups "in ways that the FMB historically has not been willing to do," Anderson said.

"If we're in competition to win the world to Christ, I say, 'Up with competition,'" Anderson said.

But Rankin said there is no inconsistency for the FMB to affirm working with other evangelical groups while rejecting the Fellowship.

"Basically, these [Fellowship churches] are Southern Baptist churches and there is nothing to prohibit them from cooperating with the FMB and our mission program. They can apply for missions; they can go as volunteers," he said.

"The CBF exists because they have said, 'We do not want to cooperate with the SBC and SBC leadership and agencies.' What is the problem? How do you cooperate with those who say they don't want to cooperate?"

Parks countered that Rankin's assessment ignores two things. One is that the Fellowship has by policy made a commitment that it will not be "competitive or confrontive" in placing its missionaries.

The Fellowship has "steadfastly refused" requests to send missionaries to places where they might create problems for FMB missionaries, Parks said.

The second is that the Fellowship was giving money to Southern Baptist work until the SBC voted to refuse it, Parks said.

"It's strange to me [Rankin] would talk about us not wanting to cooperate when we were channeling hundreds of thousands of dollars to the FMB when they told us they were not willing to receive it," Parks said.

Rankin said he is not opposed to the work of CBF missionaries. "There's plenty for everyone to do," he said. "I think the issue is the organic cooperative unity as Southern Baptists. The WMU has always presented themselves as an auxiliary of our convention missions program."

He said he believes the decision by WMU to help the Fellowship promote its missions program represents a significant departure for the organization and has spawned a "crisis" in the auxiliary's relationship to the SBC.

Rankin said concerns raised by the FMB "have largely been ignored" since WMU adopted a new program statement in 1993, opening the door for the auxiliary to venture beyond its traditional role of promoting the work of the SBC mission boards in local churches.

Regardless of what WMU leaders say about their good intentions, the action to produce the CBF supplements "is a very clear endorsement of a fragmented approach of those who do not want to cooperate with us," Rankin said.

Rankin said he recently told O'Brien, however, he remains "confident we will work through any crisis in our relationship and forge an even stronger alliance because of (it)."

Rankin said FMB trustees encouraged him to issue a formal statement regarding the WMU action. Trustees discussed the WMU action at length at their recent meeting. They "were very, very upset with this direction" and "see it as just a subsequent step" in an increasingly rocky relationship between the two organizations, Rankin said.

"I feel like they were very restrained in not making a public issue of it in our board meeting," Rankin said.

Rankin said he did not know the cost of the mailing, but the FMB has used direct mail to communicate with churches occasionally in the past.

The Fellowship's Parks also objected to the letter's tone. "I find it totally incomprehensible that anyone representing the FMB would bash WMU and the decision they've made in almost every paragraph," he said. "This letter really is critical, discrediting. I just couldn't believe that kind of statement was being made about WMU action."

Rankin denied the letter was designed to drive a wedge between grassroots WMU members and the organization's national leadership. "We just want the concerns to be expressed as clearly as possible and as widespread as possible," he said.

Texas WMU president Mary Humphries of San Marcos lamented that "so much time and energy are wasted in opposing our Baptist brothers and sisters."

"If the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is of the Lord, it cannot be stopped anyway. If it's not, it will die out eventually. Let's get on with the work of sharing the gospel and making disciples," said Humphries, a former SBC missionary to Vietnam.

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## Road to Beijing paved with conflict

By Pam Parry and Greg Warner

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The United Nations conference on women, slated for Sept. 4-15 in Beijing, China, has been encased in controversy. The rub? Whether the meeting is viewed as a global dialogue on women's rights or a mechanism for a destructive feminist agenda.

Add to the mix that China, the host country, is frequently cited for human-rights abuses against women, and the division grows too deep to unite politicians, faith groups and others devoted to democracy.

In the United States, much of the furor focused on the administration's decision that Hillary Rodham Clinton would lead the U.S. delegation. Women's groups applauded; GOP leaders and pro-family groups complained.

Religious leaders and organizations have been split as well. Orthodox Muslims, the Vatican and some conservative evangelicals have opposed the meeting. Other groups have not.

Among the conference opponents is the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission. James Smith, CLC director of government relations, said his agency stands "against the purposes and intent" of the conference because of its "radical agenda" concerning the sanctity of human life, definition of the family, teenage sexual activity and family planning.

The location also indicates the United Nations' distorted understanding of human rights, he said.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said his agency has not taken a position on the conference. But he said he was disturbed by a U.S. State Department warning that conference delegates could be arrested if they take their Bibles or participate in religious activities while there.

A State Department official, according to news reports, warned Americans planning to attend that the United States would not be able to protect them if they violate the laws of the communist nation.

"The warning to delegates that they should leave their Bibles at home is alarming," Dunn said. "It signals the serious challenges to religious freedom. If there is any human right that is basic, it is the right to freedom of conscience regarding religion."

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, said he had "serious reservations about U.S. government involvement in an international meeting in a nation which so persistently and repugnantly violates basic human rights. And, he added, the location will shape the content.

"I am not certain that the good which will result from this conference will outweigh the legitimacy gained by the Chinese government," Parham said.

Nancy Schaefer of Atlanta, who will represent the SBC Christian Life Commission at the conference, agreed.

"It is ironic that a totalitarian police state like China would host a United Nations conference on women, since women have absolutely no rights there," she said, citing reports of forced abortions, forced sterilizations and other human-rights complaints. But, Schaefer added, the conference already has called attention to such abuses and could bring worldwide pressure for reform.

If not Beijing, where?, asked Catherine Allen, immediate past president of the women's department of the Baptist World Alliance. "You cannot find many places in the world that do not have a stained reputation in women's rights," said Allen, who worked 26 years with the SBC Woman's Missionary Union in Birmingham, Ala.

The United States' record in this area is blemished, she said, noting that it is the only world power that has failed to sign a U.N. statement on women's rights.

"Where better to have dialogue?" she asked. Holding the meeting in Beijing "could be helpful to a dialogue process in China," she said.

"Anyone detracting from U.S. participation [in the meeting] is anti-women," she said. "I see no harm at all. In fact I see every reason to think Christians should be present and vocal in any kind of a forum like that."

Allen also discounted criticism that the conference promotes an abortion-rights agenda. Abortion should be discussed in such a setting, she said. And staying home doesn't help, she said. It is important for the United States to have a voice in the abortion debate, even if that voice is unclear, she added.

Allen listed women's rights as the No. 1 human-rights issue facing the world, adding that the conference focus on it is a breakthrough.

While a conference on women's rights is needed, Schaefer said, the official platform statement for the meeting is skewed to favor the causes of "radical feminists." She said the platform document promotes abortion rights, gender sensitivity training, and sexuality outside of marriage.

"Gender may be redefined to include not only male and female but homosexuals, bisexuals and transgender -- five genders instead of two," added Schaefer, president of the Atlanta-based Family Concerns and a CLC trustee.

"I don't think that is the position of the Southern Baptist Convention or of women around the world," said Schaefer, a member of First Baptist Church of Atlanta.

The U.S. delegation to the meeting is dominated by "radical feminists" like Bella Abzug, Schaefer charged. Meanwhile, those who hold "pro-family values" -- such as the sanctity of human life and parental rights -- have little influence over the direction of the meeting, she said.

"Women are suffering in many parts of the world, and I would uphold them being granted rights," Schaefer said. But if the feminist agenda takes centerstage in Beijing, she said, "it could overshadow the true meaning of why this meeting was proposed."

"If we had stuck to generic women's rights, something could have been accomplished," she concluded.

But Schaefer stopped short of predicting failure for the meeting. "It is my prayer ... that God will shine his light on this conference. Maybe the radical feminists have overstepped their boundaries ... and those who uphold life, motherhood and the family will be able to speak."

More is at stake in the conference than policies and politics, Catherine Allen said.

"The integrity of the Christian witness for the future is going to be largely determined by what the church has to say about human rights for women," she said. "The world is clearly moving toward rights for women. The church should be leading the way and doing so in the name of Christ.

"Not all things being done and said in the name of rights for women have helped women, because Christians, for the most part, have not found the mind of Christ for treatment of women. Whenever Christianity confronts culture, the role of women is one of the dividing points. I hope, whether in the local pulpit or Beijing, the cross of Christ and the women clustered around it will always be kept in focus."

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## **Roman Catholics surpass Baptists as Texas' largest religious group**

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Roman Catholics now outnumber Baptists in Texas, according to a new poll.

The shift, officials say, is due more to immigration patterns than outreach efforts.

Figures from the Texas Poll indicate that more than one in four Texans (27 percent) is Catholic and one in five (21 percent) is Baptist. Almost half the state's 17.9 million residents identify with those two religious groups.

Five years ago the Baptist-Catholic preferences were reversed in the state. Results of a 1990 Texas Poll indicated that 30 percent of respondents were Baptist and 21 percent were Catholic, said Beverly Barnum, coordinator of the Texas Poll.

A Catholic official in Texas said leaders are well aware of the church's growth in the state and find it challenging.

"Two things are happening," said Richard Daley of Austin, executive director of the Texas Catholic Conference. "The Hispanic population continues to grow, and we still have an influx of Catholics from the Northeast."

Baptists are not overly concerned about the poll finding, said Clay Price, a research specialist with the Baptist General Convention of Texas in Dallas, the state's largest Baptist organization.

"Southern Baptists are very concerned, though, that we haven't been able to keep up with Texas' huge population growth," he said, noting that a "Texas 2000" campaign to build more churches is aimed at reaching more than half the state's population not identified with any church.

The poll of 1,001 randomly selected adults was conducted Aug. 3-15 for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and Harte-Hanks Communications, Inc., by the University of Texas Office of Survey Research. The poll's margin of error is plus or minus 3 percentage points, which means its results could vary by that much from the results if all adult Texans were asked the questions.

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-- By Jim Jones

## **Wisconsin Supreme Court blocks parochial aid plan**

MADISON, Wis. (ABP) -- The Wisconsin Supreme Court Aug. 25 blocked implementation of the country's only voucher program for religious schools.

The program, touted by Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson, was designed to expand the state's current voucher system to include private religious schools. Currently, low-income students receive vouchers to attend the public or private, non-religious schools of their choice.

Religious-liberty groups argued that state funding of sectarian schools violates the Wisconsin and U.S. constitutions.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin and Americans United for Separation of Church and State have challenged the program. The state's high court barred implementation until the lawsuit can be resolved.

"The Wisconsin court wisely said 'no' to the blatant attempt to funnel taxpayer dollars to the coffers of sectarian schools to teach religion," said Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United, said, "This action by the court sends a strong signal that voucher programs violate the separation of church and state. ... If I were a voucher advocate, I would be pretty worried right now. This ruling does not bode well for these unconstitutional schemes."

But proponents of the program called the court action a temporary setback and predicted that the final verdict will be in their favor.

The Baptist Joint Committee has opposed every plan to channel public money to religious schools since its inception nearly 60 years ago. Walker said, in addition to the constitutional arguments, that so-called parental choice schemes for low-income families give them false hope.

"The Wisconsin experience makes clear that this program gives the 'choice' to the private schools, not to the parents," Walker said. "It's a cruel hoax on the poor who, even with state aid, are unable to pay the high price of private schooling. And the schools are free to pick the best and the brightest, leaving the problem students to the already financially strapped public schools."

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-- By Pam Parry

## **Three faiths urged to go beyond 'exclusivist' claims to Jerusalem**

AMMAN, Jordan (ABP) -- Muslim, Jewish and Christian leaders gathered recently to issue statements on the importance of Jerusalem to their religious groups, urging adherents to move beyond "exclusivist" claims to the city claimed as holy by the world's three monotheistic faiths.

The statements from religious leaders who live in the Middle East were released by Jordan's Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies, ENI reported Aug. 24.

Rabbi David Rosen, the Jerusalem director of interfaith relations for the Anti-Defamation League, said the site of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem was "the only real holy site for Judaism".

Pious Jews around the world face Jerusalem three times a day when they pray.

Muslims believe the Day of Judgement will occur in Jerusalem, which they call "Al Quds," literally "the Holiness." For the Prophet Mohammed, Jerusalem was the first "Qiblah", or direction for prayer, before Mecca became the center of Islamic faith.

Jerusalem is of vital importance to Christians as the scene of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and the site of the birth of the church.

Because Jerusalem is holy to Jews and Muslims as well as Christians, it has "a special vocation -- calling for reconciliation among people whether citizens, pilgrims or visitors," said Samir Kafity, president-bishop of the Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East.

In the three-faith document, Bishop Kafity called on "all parties to accept the nature and deep significance of Jerusalem, the City of God." The bishop invited "each party to go beyond all exclusivist visions and, without discrimination, to consider the religious and national aspirations of others."

His vision is that Jerusalem will regain "its true universal character" and become "a holy place of reconciliation for humankind," he said.

The three statements were made public in connection with a major inter-faith conference in Amman, sponsored by the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies under the patronage of Crown Prince El Hassan.

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-- ABP staff

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