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Editors rank restructuring top news story of 1995

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- A massive restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention topped Baptist news stories in 1995, according to an informal poll of Baptist state paper editors.

The restructuring, the product of an 18-month study by a blue-ribbon committee, includes a mission statement, the first for the nation's largest non-Catholic religious organization. It reduces the number of convention agencies from 19 to 12, the most radical retooling in the convention's history.

Twelve of 15 editors responding to a survey by Associated Baptist Press ranked the restructuring as the year's top story.

Despite winning overwhelming approval at the SBC annual meeting in June, the reorganization plan was debated in the denominational press because of its far-reaching scope and the fact it was done with no study of costs or feasibility.

The plan will merge three of the largest SBC agencies -- the Home Mission Board, Radio and Television Commission and Brotherhood Commission -- into a new North American Mission Board to be based at a new HMB-headquarters building near Atlanta.

Trustees of other smaller agencies on the chopping block, including the SBC Historical Commission, protested recommendations to eliminate their agencies.

Another controversial measure eliminated traditional roles for missions education and promotion of special offerings by Woman's Missionary Union, an SBC auxiliary. Members of the study committee cited a technicality -- since the convention does not control WMU it cannot hold it responsible for an assignment. Critics, however, viewed it as a snub. An amendment added to the plan "welcomed" the WMU to continue its historic role in supporting SBC missions.

An implementation team was appointed by the SBC Executive Committee in September. Following routine votes on bylaw changes at this year's annual SBC meeting, full implementation will begin. The new structure is scheduled to be in place by 2000.

Another story from the SBC meeting in June ranked second in the editors' poll. On the eve of a gala celebration of the convention's 150th anniversary, messengers approved a resolution renouncing the SBC's racist roots.

The resolution apologized to African-Americans for "racism of which we have been guilty, whether consciously or unconsciously."

The SBC was established in 1845 by Baptists in the south defending the right of slaveholders to be appointed as missionaries. While the SBC had renounced racism in general, the June resolution was the first to publicly acknowledge the role of slavery in the convention's founding.

Turmoil surrounding the Carver School of Social Work in Louisville, Ky., came in at No. 3 in the poll. The March firing of Dean Diana Garland by President Albert Mohler set off a protest by students at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The turmoil left the fate of the Carver School undecided. While accreditation questions arose, Samford University appeared poised to buy the social work program from the seminary, but talks broke down suddenly.

The April bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City gripped the nation with the realization that America is not safe from terrorism. Baptists churches in mourned victims and helped with rebuilding lives. Editors chose the story as No. 4.

The No. 5 story was an announcement by WMU leaders in July that the auxiliary would begin producing missions education supplements for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate organization deemed competitive by SBC leaders. Jerry Rankin, president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board, protested the move in a letter to local churches. WMU leaders said their intent was not to undermine loyalty to SBC missions, but to promote missions work among all Southern Baptists.

The 2.5 million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas, largest contributor to the SBC, voted in November to decrease funding to the SBC. Texas leaders said they needed the money to start new churches in the state. SBC leaders said it would hurt foreign and home missions efforts nationwide. Editors ranked the story No. 6.

The No. 7 story was the Nov. 28 death of Southern Baptist statesman Herschel Hobbs. Hobbs, 88, chaired the committee which developed the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message, the SBC's official doctrinal statement.

A revival led by Texas preacher John Avant broke out at Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas, and spread to college and seminary campuses across the country. Prolonged chapel services featured public confession of sins. Editors ranked the story No. 8.

No. 9 in the ranking was news in May that the Foreign Mission Board had applied for a trademark on the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, traditionally promoted jointly with Woman's Missionary Union, without the knowledge of WMU leaders. FMB leaders said the failure to communicate was accidental and eventually dropped the trademark application.

Editors ranked the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin No. 10 in the poll. Among dignitaries attending the state funeral was SBC President Jim Henry.

Editors' ranking of year's top ten stories

(ABP) -- The top ten stories selected by editors, with first-place votes in parentheses:

Story	Points
1. SBC restructuring (12)	147
2. SBC resolution renounces racist past	94
3. Turmoil at Carver School of Social Work (1)	84
4. Bombing in Oklahoma City (1)	71
5. WMU offers study materials to Cooperative Baptist Fellowship	65
6. Texas Baptists decrease funding to SBC	64
7. Herschel Hobbs dies (1)	59
8. Revival spreads to college and seminary campuses	34
9. Foreign Mission Board plans trademark on Lottie Moon offering	31
10. Assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin	26

Editors were provided with a list of 25 suggested top stories or choose their own. They were asked to rank top stories 1-10. Scores were compiled, using 10 points for each story chosen as "No. 1," nine points for "No. 2," and so on. The highest possible score was 150. Scores are listed with rankings. The number of first-place votes is in parentheses.

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-- By Bob Allen

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