

Nashville, Tennessee

# Associated Baptist Press

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## Editors' group adopts new name, asks task force to open meetings

By Greg Warner

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Press Association, the organization of state Baptist newspapers, will get a new, more descriptive name to go along with a new constitution.

The association, meeting Feb. 13-16 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, voted to rename its 100-year-old organization the Association of State Baptist Papers.

The group also passed a resolution asking for media access to the meetings of the task force implementing a massive restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention's agencies and heard frank advise from one of its senior members who is retiring, John Roberts of South Carolina.

And the group revised its membership guidelines, which have varied over the years, by limiting membership to the 39 newsjournals of the state and regional Baptist conventions that affiliate with the national SBC.

Associated Baptist Press, an independent news service founded by a group of the editors in 1990, was granted associate membership in the association under new guidelines. The SBC's official news service, Baptist Press, which formerly held full membership, also was assigned associate status, which does not include voting privileges.

The name change was part of a revised constitution adopted Feb. 15 after more than a year of debate.

Bob Terry, editor of the Alabama Baptist and executive director of the association, said the new name -- Association of State Baptist Papers -- more accurately describes the role of the newspapers, which are not SBC entities but are owned by the various state and regional Baptist conventions that relate to the SBC.

"The new name says we are a group of cooperating state Baptist papers, but we are also in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention," he said.

Members voted 9-5 in favor of the name change but then suspended Robert's Rules of Order to reconsider their decision. Some members expressed dissatisfaction with the new name. But a motion to consider the new constitution without the new name was defeated in an 8-8 tie.

The new constitution, with the name change, was then approved 13-1.

Mike McCollough, editor of The Nevada Baptist for 13 years, was chosen president-elect by the editors' group. He will succeed Bill Webb, currently editor of the Illinois Baptist and soon-to-be editor of the Word & Way in Missouri. Webb succeeds outgoing president Toby Druin, editor of the Baptist Standard of Texas.

Protesting a decision by the Implementation Task Force to conduct all its meetings behind closed doors, the editors passed a resolution "strongly encouraging" the task force to allow media coverage of its sessions.

The task force is assigned the job of coordinating the SBC's restructuring plan, which will eliminate some SBC agencies and combine others. Southern Baptists approved the skeletal plan last June and await details before giving the required approval to certain bylaw changes in June 1996.

The resolution notes "massive changes" are anticipated in the plan, which was approved "on promise of detailed specifics to be forthcoming before the 1996 convention." "A free flow of information is essential to an informed vote in June," the statement adds.

The resolution calls on the SBC Executive Committee, which supervises the task force, to enforce its own policies, which permit media access to all its subcommittees unless sensitive personal or legal matters are involved. The resolution also asks the task force to issue regular progress reports and hold at least one press conference by mid-May.

Bob Reccord, chairman of the task force, rejected an earlier request from the editors to cover the meetings, citing "legal and personnel issues." The editors suggested only sensitive portions of the meetings should be closed to reporters.

Reccord, pastor of First Baptist Church of Norfolk, addressed the editors during their meeting and said he would take the latest request "under advisement."

"There has really been nothing significant to report," Reccord added. "What we're doing is gathering information, being briefed, listening, maybe 80 percent of our time is spent listening."

The group has met in person at least three times since being appointed last year. It is scheduled to bring its first report to the Executive Committee Feb. 19.

The press association also adopted resolutions honoring Chip Lockwood, whose position as editor of The New York Baptist was recently eliminated by the state convention, and John Roberts, who is retiring Feb. 29 after 30 years as editor of the Baptist Courier of South Carolina.

Too many state Baptist newspapers lose their prophetic voices by sacrificing their independence, warned John Roberts in the meetings' closing remarks.

"We tend to become a part of the system we are reporting about," he said. "Too many times we pick the safe topic. Too many times we try not offend. Too many times we deny to ourselves that we really have positions of influence ... because we have become cogs in the wheel."

Roberts said he was among those editors who failed the test of courage.

To truly be "prophets with pens," he said, editors must overcome three fears -- the fear of being fired, the fear of change and the fear of the future.

Anybody who lives in fear of firing "drops to an ever lower level of effectiveness," Roberts said. "It's better to get fired than to live in fear of being fired." Every editor ought to have "a plan B," another ready source of income in case he or she is terminated.

The newspaper business underwent two major revolutions in printing during his tenure, Roberts said -- from linotype to offset, and from offset to desktop publishing. But those changes in newspaper methods are overshadowed by the change in the message of Baptist newspapers, he said.

Thirty years ago, he said, most Baptist newspapers played the role of "endorser, encourager, promoter" to their sponsoring state conventions. Since the 1970s, however, most editors have become "factual, courageous reporters," he said.

However, a few have remained in the "brag and promote" mode, he said, "telling things the way they ought to be, rather than the way they are. If you're doing that because you don't know better, there's hope. But if you're doing it because someone is putting pressure on you, God help you. Because it's going to get worse and not better."

Roberts urged the editors not to fear the future, even though it promises even more technological changes for state papers. While shoppers at the check-out counter are used to being asked "Paper or plastic?" he said, "You're going to be asking your subscribers "paper or modem?"

Roberts issued a final challenge to the editors not to shirk their role as leaders. "You can make a difference. You're still the most powerful person [in your state] because you have the ear of the people."

"You can make a difference or you can choose to live a level or two lower than the mountain where the real leaders live. It may look safe there, but it's not. Baptists have no respect for wimps."

END