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SBC Executive Committee moves toward restructuring

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee initiated necessary legal steps and voted to spend up to \$495,000 on a consulting firm to begin to implement a massive denominational restructuring approved last summer.

The 79-member committee which runs the 15 million-member SBC between annual conventions closed its Feb. 19-21 meeting in Nashville, Tenn., with four and a half hours scheduled of "prayer and fasting" for implementation of the restructuring plan, dubbed "Covenant for a New Century."

The Executive Committee approved charter amendments to be recommended to messengers at this summer's convention in New Orleans that would legally dissolve five convention agencies and merge the current Home Mission Board, Radio and Television Commission and Brotherhood Commission into a new agency called the North American Mission Board.

Agencies to be eliminated in the downsizing are the Historical Commission, Education Commission, Stewardship Commission, the Southern Baptist Foundation and the Commission on the American Baptist Theological Seminary, an African-American seminary in Nashville.

The restructuring is slated to take effect in June 1997.

Spending \$495,000 to hire a management consulting company to assist in merging the three agencies will save money in the long run, predicted Ted Warren, a member of an implementation task force which recommended the expenditure.

The consultant will advise the task force on "change management, business analysis and human resources, Warren explained.

Consulting costs will be recovered in less than a year under the new streamlined structure, said Warren, while "the cost in efficiency and effectiveness of a restructuring poorly done can be millions of dollars that we have to live with year after year for many years."

Warren, a Baptist Sunday School Board executive, declined to announce the name of the firm being considered, saying it would be inappropriate to do so until a contract letter is signed. But he said the firm comes with "excellent" references.

The Executive Committee saw the four recommendations from the implementation task force only minutes before voting their approval.

Blaine Barber of Petoskey, Mich., made a motion to delay the vote overnight on the Articles of Incorporation for the North American Mission Board. "I would like to have time to read these articles of incorporation," he said. However, Michael Trammell of Mt. Airy, Md., said little would be gained by reading the complicated legal material.

The committee overwhelmingly rejected Barber's motion. Instead, chairman Ronnie Floyd of Arkansas gave members three minutes to skim over the eight-page document, after which members voted unanimously to approve it.

SBC leaders say the downsizing, approved by the convention last summer following a two-year study, will save money and make the convention more responsive to ministry needs in the 21st century. Leaders of some of the agencies targeted for dissolution or merger, however, have worried publicly that some key programs will lose priority when they are transferred to new agencies.

Such massive changes inevitably produce ambiguity and frustration, said Bob Reccord of Norfolk, Va., chairman of the implementation task force. That's one reason for the all-day prayer session, he said. "I can't be on my knees with someone and be frustrated with them."

In other business:

-- After meeting several hours behind closed doors in executive sessions during both committee and plenary sessions, the Executive Committee also approved a request by the Southern Baptist Annuity Board to restructure its investment program into registered mutual funds.

To make the change, the Annuity Board is required by the Securities and Exchange Commission to create two subsidiary corporations with trustees elected by the Annuity Board. An SBC bylaw allows agencies to create subsidiaries only with permission of the convention or its Executive Committee.

Reportedly among concerns addressed in the executive sessions was that allowing the Annuity Board to elect the trustees might remove the agency from the authority of the SBC. A statement issued after the meeting said "it is the opinion of the Executive Committee that there should be no possibility the Annuity Board would be separated from its constituency."

The recommendation approved in executive session stated that the SBC will recommend at least 14 people who are qualified to serve as trustees of two subsidiary investment companies to be created by the Annuity Board. Annuity Board trustees will choose actual board members from that pool.

According to background materials, the change will not affect earnings of retirement programs but will add security by adopting rules and regulations practiced by the mutual fund industry.

Executive Committee President Morris Chapman told Associated Baptist Press the discussion was held in executive session because of "wide-ranging legal considerations."

-- The Executive Committee declined to recommend that money formerly sent by the SBC to the American Baptist Theological Seminary be set aside for scholarships for African-American students at SBC seminaries.

The SBC helped fund the historically black seminary for 70 years through the Commission on the American Baptist Theological Seminary. The commission is one of the agencies slated for dissolution in the SBC restructuring plan.

The arrangement was necessary in the past when theological schools were segregated, leaders say, but now all SBC schools are open to all races.

The motion to set up scholarships was made at the convention last June by Steve Aubuchon of St. Louis, Mo., and referred to the Executive Committee for disposition. Executive Committee leaders said scholarships for African-Americans through the SBC budget are not needed because other scholarships are available and the seminaries are already aggressively seeking to recruit minority students.

-- The Executive Committee "continues to study" proposals to find alternate ways of providing adequate funding for Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif. Officials at the seminary charge that the SBC's formula for funding seminaries, which favors full-time, on-campus enrollment, does not adequately fund the school's off-campus programs.

-- Bill Merrell, 52, was elected vice president for convention relations. Merrell has been on the job since January, pending approval by the full Executive Committee. A former pastor and director of missions in Texas and Oklahoma, Merrell comes to the job after a brief stint as director of communications for the SBC Christian Life Commission. He succeeds former SBC vice president Mark Coppenger, who is now president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

-- The committee voted to recommend a \$145 million allocation budget for the SBC's Cooperative Program in 1996-97 and a capital-needs budget totaling \$17.1 million. The budget includes \$700,000 for implementation of the restructuring. Should this year's annual convention reject a second balloting on whether to change a bylaw to dissolve several agencies, an alternate budget without restructuring expenses will be presented instead.

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SBC forms task force to pursue racial progress

By Marv Knox

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) --Southern Baptist Convention leaders have created a watchdog group to put teeth into the convention's historic statement of repentance for racism.

An SBC task force on racial reconciliation will be comprised of representatives of all the convention's agencies and institutions, SBC President Jim Henry announced Feb. 19.

The race task force -- created by the council of SBC agency heads at Henry's request -- was unveiled during the winter meeting of the SBC Executive Committee in Nashville, Tenn.

Racial reconciliation has been a big topic within the SBC since last summer, when the convention celebrated its 150th anniversary by repenting of the racism that marked its birth.

The convention was founded in 1845, after Baptists in the North refused to appoint Southern slave-owners as missionaries. In the ensuing years, the SBC adopted statements condemning racism, but it waited until its 150th birthday to apologize for the racism that played a major role in its formation.

But that resolution of repentance initiated controversy of its own. Some critics blasted the SBC for waiting so long to say it was sorry. Others, particularly African-American religious leaders, claimed the resolution was part of a scheme to lure more African-American churches into the SBC fold.

However, most of the response Henry received regarding the resolution has been positive, he reported. "People are stunned, curious and interested," he said.

And Southern Baptists were sincere when they drafted and approved the resolution, he added, noting, "We do mean it."

As evidence, he announced the formation of the race task force. It was approved unanimously by the SBC Inter-Agency Council, comprised of the convention's agency heads.

Last year, after the race resolution was approved by the SBC, Henry approached the council about finding a way "to move forward" on race, he said.

The council's response notes the race resolution calls for Southern Baptists to "commit ourselves to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry."

It affirms the council's agreement with the race resolution and commits itself "to work as an agent for racial reconciliation" in the SBC. It also pledges to make racial reconciliation a priority for the agencies and to "strive for representation on our boards of trustees, our staff and faculties and all other bodies, based on biblical qualifications and embracing the ethnic diversity of the Southern Baptist Convention and its churches."

The race task force will be comprised of a representative from each SBC agency and will work through the year 2001. It is charged "to work toward strategy and implementation of full racial and ethnic reconciliation."

The council's statement asks the SBC nominating committee to "set a priority to nominate persons representative of all ethnic groups to our boards of trustees."

Henry emphasized that point, noting he had asked his appointees to the SBC committee on committees, which will recommend the membership of the next nominating committee, "to be sensitive to and representative of minorities and women."

The agency heads also directed the race task force to identify and involve SBC ethnic leaders in its work. They named Richard Land, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission, as the task force chairman.

The race task force will bring accountability and productivity to the convention's racial-reconciliation movement, Land predicted.

To begin with, the task force is mandated to report to the Inter-Agency Council at each of its meetings, at least twice a year, he said. That reporting requirement gives the reconciliation effort a high profile among key Southern Baptist leaders, he stressed, adding it also strengthens the drive to bring greater diversity among the SBC's trustees, staffs and faculties.

"Our goals are first to represent the ethnic diversity of the SBC, and ultimately to represent the ethnic diversity of the country," Land said.

The task force is likely to "emphasize reconciliation as a theological issue," he noted. Possible initiatives could include conferences, books and Sunday school curriculum dealing with reconciliation and race.

"This is not a politically correct mandate," Land said. "It's a biblical mandate. Racism is biblically wrong."

The task force will expand its focus beyond the relationship between Caucasians and African-Americans, he added. "We will be focused on all racial and ethnic groups in America."

Task force initiatives will be underwritten by a fund supplied by the members of the Inter-Agency Council, he reported.

In a related development, Henry reported he and Gary Frost, an SBC vice president and African-American pastor from Youngstown, Ohio, had met with leaders of the Baptist World Alliance and the nation's predominantly African-American Baptist conventions "to build a network with our African-American friends." That group will meet again in May, he said.

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Reccord says restructuring offers SBC 'divine moment'

By Greg Warner

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists, in the middle of a massive restructuring of their denomination, are "at a crossroad, a divine moment" that few religious bodies face, said Bob Reccord, chairman of the task force implementing the new structure.

"This is one of the most significant transformations that a religious body has undertaken," Reccord, pastor of First Baptist Church of Norfolk, Va., told members of the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee Feb. 19. The new structure will reduce the number of SBC agencies from 19 to 12 and save costs, although no dollar amount has been determined.

The undertaking is not easy, Reccord said. Change produces ambiguity and frustration, he noted. There is no "roadmap" to guide the kind of overhaul Southern Baptists are attempting, he said, but only "a compass and a dream." Consequently, "spiritual issues," not organizational ones, have been the first priority for Reccord's 10-member task force, he said.

Much of the task force's time has been spent in prayer, he said.

Later the task force and the Executive Committee joined in a day-long prayer session Feb. 21.

The task force has met at least three times already, not counting conference calls, and a member of the

committee has met with the head of each agency affected by the reorganization. A survey of the personnel of those agencies also has been conducted.

Reccord said the spiritual needs that called each of the SBC's agencies into existence have not changed, but the world in which the agencies operate has changed dramatically. "We can't stand on program statements written in the '60s in the '90s," he said.

Most of the affected agencies have endorsed the restructuring. Nonetheless, concerns remain in some agencies about how the plan will be enacted, particularly how the SBC will treat employees whose jobs are eliminated.

Reccord's task force issued a memo to all the affected agencies Feb. 7 urging them to get task force OK for any severance packages they adopt for employees. And the task force cautioned agencies not to promise severance or retention packages to employees if the agencies don't already have the funds to pay them.

In January, trustees of the Brotherhood Commission in Memphis, Tenn., agreed to pay employees a bonus if they continued to work until July 1997, when the agency will be merged with two others and moved to Atlanta.

The implementation task force said such agreements should be coordinated with the task force for the sake of "uniformity."

The memo also asked the agencies not to spend any reserve funds without notifying the Executive Committee. "It is our concern and desire, as we are sure is yours, that none of these assets be lost through liquidation, grants or other actions in the process of the ... implementation," the memo said.

The memo noted the assets of all SBC agencies "belong to the convention and are, therefore, held in trust by each agency or commission for wise stewardship."

David Hankins, the Executive Committee official directing the implementation, told Associated Baptist Press the memo was prompted by concern over severance agreements. He said the issue of severance pay should be handled by the SBC, not the agencies. The implementation task force "will take a comprehensive look" at severance issues, he said.

James Williams, president of the Brotherhood Commission, said the memo angered him because it interferes with the SBC-assigned duties of Brotherhood trustees and implies the SBC doesn't trust those trustees.

"Our trustees will continue to manage the assets of the Brotherhood Commission until June 1997," he told ABP.

Reccord said the purpose of the memo was "to ask that the agencies be careful, act as good stewards ... and keep us informed."

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Baptists in Northwest warned about 'harm' to Cooperative Program

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Northwest Baptist Convention, one of the smaller regional conventions that supports the Southern Baptist Convention, has been reprimanded by the president of the SBC Executive Committee for posing potential "harm" to the Cooperative Program.

The Cooperative Program is the SBC's unified budget that supports missions, theological education and other causes. Funds originate in local churches, which pass a percentage on to state conventions, which in turn pass a percentage on to the SBC.

During the fall 1995 annual meeting of the Northwest Baptist Convention -- encompassing Washington, Oregon and part of Idaho -- messengers approved a budget that changed the amount of money passed from the regional convention to the SBC. Messengers voted unanimously to take \$50,000 off the top of their national Cooperative Program contribution as a gift to Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary.

Golden Gate Seminary, based in Mill Valley, Calif., operates a regional campus in Portland, Ore., in cooperation with the Northwest Baptist Convention.

"This action is a response to the reduction Golden Gate received in its Cooperative Program budget allocation adopted at the Southern Baptist Convention in 1995," Northwest Baptist Convention Executive Director Jeff Iorg wrote in a Dec. 19 letter to Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee.

"We understand the current seminary funding formula penalizes any seminary with a commitment to regional campuses," Iorg continued. "Since the Northwest Baptist Convention cooperates with Golden Gate to operate a regional campus as a significant part of our strategy to reach the Northwest for Christ, we can no longer ignore the reality that being our partner is costing the seminary financially."

The seminary funding formula, an agreement between presidents of the six SBC seminaries and the SBC Executive Committee, distributes Cooperative Program funding to the seminaries based on a rolling average of full-time student enrollments. However, students who attend classes at off-campus centers do not count as much in the funding formula as students who attend classes on a main campus.

Each of the six seminaries operates some type of off-campus center, but Golden Gate -- the only SBC seminary in the West -- has developed regional campuses as a primary strategy for making theological education more accessible to Southern Baptists scattered across the western United States.

In his letter to Chapman, Iorg said the Northwest Convention's finance committee, Executive Board and convention "believe in the Cooperative Program and have supported it exclusively and enthusiastically as our only channel of missions support."

"We want to return to this pattern, without designations, and will do so when the funding formula is changed to recognize the validity of regional campuses as a strategically effective method of delivering theological education."

Chapman responded to Iorg in a letter dated Jan. 8.

The Northwest Convention's action "is in violation of a principle that has been affirmed and reaffirmed by the SBC since the inception of the Cooperative Program in 1925," Chapman said. That principle is that state and regional conventions will not attempt to fund national entities directly, but only through the national Cooperative Program budget as determined by the Executive Committee, he said.

"It is not the prerogative of the Northwest Baptist Convention to spend \$50,000 of the money allocated to the Southern Baptist Convention, not even if the state convention messengers vote unanimously," Chapman wrote Iorg.

"I encourage you to discuss with me in the future any such actions under consideration that may significantly harm the Cooperative Program, a God-given plan that has served Southern Baptists and the kingdom of God so well since 1925," Chapman concluded.

The issue of direct funding for Golden Gate Seminary was discussed in the Feb. 20 meeting of the SBC Executive Committee's seminaries workgroup, which develops the funding formula.

The workgroup had received for consideration a motion made at the 1995 SBC annual meeting which sought to find alternate means of funding Golden Gate Seminary "to meet the missions challenge of the West." The seminaries workgroup recommended, and the full Executive Committee approved, a response saying the Executive Committee will continue to study the issue of funding for Golden Gate Seminary.

In comments to the seminaries workgroup, Golden Gate President Bill Crews said he had backed off on the seminary's longtime appeal to change the seminary funding formula because he realized most of the other seminary presidents opposed any change.

Realizing additional funding would not come from the Cooperative Program, and being strongly committed to the regional campus model, "we had to find other ways to fund what we're trying to do," he said.

One source of new funds has been the state conventions that benefit from Golden Gate's regional campuses, he said. The Arizona Baptist Convention already has made a direct contribution to the seminary, he noted.

Crews said Golden Gate Seminary did not suggest to the Northwest Baptist Convention how much money to give or how to give it.

Some old-line state conventions have changed the way they pass money onto the SBC in recent years due to political turmoil in the convention. However, the Northwest Baptist Convention's action was based on philosophical differences with the SBC Executive Committee, not on political differences.

"This was not an act of protest," Iorg told the seminaries workgroup. "This was not a slap at the Cooperative Program."

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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 advice 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."