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Brotherhood Commission announces four staff cuts

By Bob Allen

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission announced four job cuts Feb. 3 as part of an ongoing restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention, President Jim Williams confirmed Feb. 3.

The restructuring, which reduces the number of SBC agencies from 19 to 12, calls for merging the Memphis, Tenn.-based Brotherhood Commission with the Home Mission Board in Atlanta and the Radio and Television Commission in Fort Worth, Texas.

Among the four eliminated positions is the editor of "Missions Today," one of three denominational magazines to be replaced by a new publication of the Atlanta-based North American Mission Board, a new agency formed by the merger.

Bob Carey, editor of "Missions Today" for three years, said he is not bitter about losing his job.

"God brought me to the Brotherhood Commission and he will continue to show me where he wants me to be," he said.

Williams said other cuts are forthcoming at the Brotherhood Commission. "It is now time to bring a close to the Brotherhood Commission," Williams said. The agency officially closes in June.

The three affected agencies employ a total of about 500 people. The North American Mission Board will have 350 employees, according to an organizational outline released in late January.

Since approval of the restructuring, agencies slated for dissolution began reducing their staffs by attrition. The number of Brotherhood Commission employees has declined from about 100 to about 60, Williams said.

The first wave of layoffs resulting from the merger came early in December, when five Radio and Television Commission workers learned their jobs were being eliminated.

Jack Johnson, president of the Radio-TV Commission, said Feb. 4 it is still uncertain how many jobs will be lost. Unlike the Brotherhood Commission, which is being closed down completely, television production facilities for the North American Mission Board will remain in Fort Worth.

"There will be other people we will have to lay off," he said. "At this point we don't have any idea who that will be."

Those decisions will probably be made within four to six weeks, he said.

"Everyone needs to start moving toward the inevitable," Johnson said. "It's difficult but it has to be done."

Johnson said attrition has taken about "half a dozen" workers who have left the commission since the restructuring was approved and have not been replaced.

When the restructuring plan was adopted, the commission had already gone through a 19 percent staff reduction since 1990, Johnson said, leaving about 100 employees.

Home Mission Board staff met Feb. 3 to discuss staffing of the new agency but were given no estimate of how many jobs will be lost or when those decisions would be announced, said Martin King, director of public relations and development.

King said vacancies occurring in recent months have not been filled by permanent employees. He said that 12 to 15 employees hired since last fall are temporaries.

In other news related to the restructuring, the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives will remain in Nashville, Tenn., after the Southern Baptist Historical Commission closes in June.

Responsibility for maintaining the archives shifts to the council of presidents of the six Southern Baptist seminaries.

Bill Sumners, director of library and archives for the Historical Commission, will stay on as executive director of the collection, said Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

In addition to Sumners, the library and archives staff will consist of an assistant librarian, a library clerk and an archival assistant.

Two other employees will be allowed to stay on a few months after the agency closes until they retire. Another commission worker is taking early retirement and two are being laid off, Historical Commission spokeswoman Kim Medley said Feb. 3.

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-- The Alabama Baptist contributed to this story.

Southeastern loses bid for mobile-home park

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- Last year, the town of Wake Forest, N.C., spurned Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary's plea for a zoning change that would have cleared the way for a property sale to be used for a strip mall. Recently, the seminary suffered another zoning setback, this time rebuffed by Franklin County officials who refused to allow a 52-lot mobile-home park to be used for student housing.

It was the second time in less than a year for the county board to deny plans for seminary-related housing, according to the Wake Weekly community newspaper. The board denied in April a conditional-use permit that would have allowed the seminary to develop a 250-lot mobile-home park. Officials said the property owned by the seminary would be exempt from property taxes and would strain services such as schools and police.

A second proposal, denied by the Franklin County Board of Adjustors Jan. 27, called for development by a private owner, with the seminary guaranteeing occupants for the first 52 homes for at least five years.

The board ruled the plan went against the county's 1983 land-use plan, which identified the site along North Carolina Highway 56 as an industrial corridor.

Board member Michael Goswick said the zoning plan also gives priority to standard housing. "I think they [zoning plans] were talking about taking care of the residents we have," he said. "These [seminary] residents are coming from the outside."

Last year, the seminary locked horns with the town of Wake Forest, which twice refused to rezone the seminary's land at U.S. 1 and Stadium Drive, to allow a shopping center to be built there. The seminary had wanted to sell the land so it could use the money for other purposes, perhaps for more student housing or endowments.

The seminary responded by registering students to vote and encouraging them to monitor local elections.

One seminary opponent responded by seeking to petition the Internal Revenue Service to reconsider Southeastern's tax-exempt status, and another tried unsuccessfully to set up new voting districts to dilute the impact of the school's 1,300 students and 200 employees.

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-- By ABP staff

Christian Coalition unveils agenda to address poverty

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Christian Coalition is asking the 105th Congress to address issues such as drug addiction, gangs, education and poverty through "faith-based" solutions.

Christian Coalition Executive Director Ralph Reed unveiled the coalition's legislative agenda Jan. 30. Titled "The Samaritan Project," it calls for a tax credit for charitable giving, tax relief for low-income communities and a national program to provide vouchers to allow low-income children to attend private and parochial schools.

In a sharp departure from the coalition's 1994 Contract With the American Family -- which addressed abortion, a balanced budget and other issues -- the conservative group's new agenda attempts to reach out to minority communities and provide aid to the poor through private and religious groups.

The new agenda also emphasizes bipartisanship. The Christian Coalition has been criticized for being too closely aligned with the Republican Party, and the Federal Election Commission is pursuing a lawsuit against the coalition for violating election laws through partisan activity in recent federal campaigns.

"For too long, our movement has been a predominantly -- frankly almost exclusively -- a white, evangelical, Republican movement with a political center of gravity centered in the safety of the suburbs," Reed said. "The Samaritan Project is a bold plan to break that color line and to bridge that gap of separation that has divided white evangelicals and Roman Catholics from their Latino and African-American brothers and sisters."

Reed said the proposals are "designed specifically to revitalize the church and to strengthen the family."

"Now that we've ended welfare as we know it, we can no longer blame the liberals for the carnage that is our inner cities," he said.

He said the agenda was neither Republican nor Democrat but for a partnership between the government and churches.

Critics of the Christian Coalition questioned the motives behind the agenda.

Carole Shields, president of People for the American Way, said the Christian Coalition's real agenda is tax dollars for sectarian causes. "The problem with vouchers is the children we leave behind," Shields said.

She also criticized the coalition's record on helping low-income families. "At every critical moment in the public-policy debate in the last session of Congress, the Christian Coalition turned its back on the nation's poor," she said.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said, "The Christian Coalition proclaims its interest in the poor only when that advances its true goal of a 'Christianized' nation." He said Reed's claim that the Christian Coalition's agenda is nonpartisan is "absolute nonsense." Lynn said the coalition was an "appendage of the Republican Party."

The Christian Coalition's agenda also calls for:

- Incentives to encourage states to require couples with young children to receive counseling and undergo a waiting period prior to divorce.

- Additional funding for sex-education programs which promote abstinence.

- Educational scholarships to allow low-income children in 100 of the most impoverished, violent or drug-ridden school districts to attend a private or parochial school.

- Bonuses to states that reduce juvenile crime or have adequate policies to address juvenile, crime such as neighborhood patrols and public access to juvenile records and court proceedings.

- A tax credit for taxpayers who give money and at least 10 hours of volunteer time to a private charity.

- Establishment of 100 "empowerment zones" in low-income communities that would receive federal tax relief and investment incentives.

- Amending the Public Health Service Act to allow faith-based drug programs to participate in voucher plans even if part of the drug program is pervasively sectarian.

The Christian Coalition also plans to hold a Congress on Racial Justice in May to bring African-American and white ministers together to discuss racial issues.

Also included in the Samaritan Project is a section titled "additional items on our legislative agenda," which includes passage of a religious-freedom amendment to the Constitution, a ban on a late-term abortion procedure known as "partial-birth abortion," restrictions on federal funding of abortions, passage of a balanced-budget amendment to the Constitution, passage of "parental-rights legislation" and the privatization of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Legal Services Corp.

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American men 'most pagan' on earth, researcher says

By Marv Knox

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- American men "represent one of the most pagan subcultures on earth today," according to the Barna Research Group, a leading surveyor of religion in American life.

"There are 94 million adult males in America. Unfortunately, the church does not have much influence in the lives of most of them," notes the organization's president, George Barna, in the latest edition of its newsletter, The Barna Report.

One third of adult males claim to be born-again Christians, the Barna Research Group discovered in a 1996 nationwide survey. That means non-Christian American males outnumber Christian men by a 2-to-1 margin.

Barely one in four adult males (28 percent) attends church services on a typical weekend. And just 29 percent of American men read the Bible other than at church each week.

"The trend lines show that there has been little positive change recently within the male population," Barna reported. "Since 1991, church attendance, Bible reading, Sunday-school attendance, volunteering at church and donating to a church have all declined among men. The proportion of born-again men has remained unchanged.

Reversing those trends "would represent a major step forward for men, families, the church and our society," Barna said. It would require a change in American men's religious beliefs and expectations of church, the survey results showed.

Fewer than half (47 percent) of Christian men say they believe "there are moral truths which are unchanging," Barna said. Among non-Christians, one man in four (26 percent) professes to believe in absolute moral truth. The Bible and religious beliefs are the primary influences on moral thinking for only about 40 percent of men, the survey found.

Similarly, heaven and hell do not figure prominently in the religious thinking of men nationwide.

Just 21 percent of non-Christian men believe "hell is a place of physical torment." That compares to 56 percent of Christian men who believe in hell. On the other end of the spectrum, 39 percent of Christian men and 58 percent of non-Christians believe "a good person can earn their way into heaven."

The closest the two groups come to agreeing is about life after death. Fifty-five percent of Christians and 50 percent of non-Christians said they believe "all people experience the same outcome after death, regardless of their beliefs."

Doctrinal confusion among non-Christians may be exacerbated by unorthodox beliefs held by many Christians, Barna said. Of Christian men surveyed, 27 percent said they believe "Jesus Christ committed sins," 28 percent denied the physical resurrection of Jesus and 48 percent said Satan "is not a living being but is a symbol of evil."

Apart from their religious beliefs, many men apparently avoid church because it does not live up to their expectations, the newsletter reported. Eighty-five percent of men who do not now attend church have been active in a church before, the survey found.

"Their rejection of the church is a deliberate and substantive, rather than casual and uninformed, choice," Barna insisted. "Why have so many men rejected Christ or his church at the same time they are searching for meaning, purpose, significance, influence and inner peace?"

"The bottom line is that men tend to be bottom-line oriented. Most men contend that churches and Christian ministries do not provide them with sufficient value. ... Most men perceive the costs of church involvement too far outweigh the benefits."

In a recent Time magazine cover story, Bill Gates, billionaire head of the Microsoft computer software firm, articulated that notion. "Just in terms of allocation of time resources, religion is not very efficient," Gates said. "There's a lot more I could be doing on a Sunday morning."

The Barna survey uncovered "five elements that most unchurched men look for" -- and thus far are not finding in Christian churches.

They are:

-- "Gaining a practical understanding of the Bible."

-- "Getting to truly know God personally and meaningfully."

-- "Developing lasting friendships with other men."

-- "Gaining competent and comfortable religious instruction for their kids."

-- "Having exposure to pragmatic solutions to the complex personal issues they struggle with every day."

Much is at stake in the church's struggle to meet those needs and reach American men with the gospel, Barna noted.

"If America is to experience a significant moral and spiritual revolution, it must integrally involve men," he said. "The need for such a transformation is undeniable."

Churches must be practical to reach men, Barna says

OXNARD, Calif.(ABP) -- Churches must be practical if they expect to reach men, religious pollster George Barna advises.

His Barna Research Group surveyed U.S. adult males to determine their religious beliefs and attitudes toward the church. The findings were released in the latest issue of "The Barna Report" newsletter.

The survey responses point to four steps churches can take to "challenge men to grow in the faith," Barna said. They are:

-- Address their needs.

"Men automatically search for value," he noted. "When you deal with the unique needs, interests and desires of men, they perceive benefits to be delivered. If you can relate Christianity to the issues they are battling, then they have 'ears to hear.'"

The nationwide survey showed men look for practical understanding of the Bible when they attend church. They also seek "to truly know God personally and meaningfully," desire strong friendships with other men, want solid religious teaching for their children and look for "pragmatic solutions to the complex personal issues they struggle with every day."

-- Design a male-friendly ministry.

"For most men, the first few times they visit a church, their objective is to gather sufficient information to figure out if the church is the type of place, has the kinds of ministries and opportunities and incorporates the types of people they find attractive," Barna reported.

But as a group, men don't want to be singled out and pressured, the survey revealed. "In particular, they dislike telephone calls from church people to discuss their visit; unscheduled home visits by church representatives; unsolicited gifts being brought to their home; or pressure to identify their presence at the church -- name tags, introductions, special acknowledgments."

Church-sponsored events other than weekend worship -- such as "Christian concerts, social gatherings, community service projects or seminars on topics of personal interest" -- would attract numerous men, survey respondents claimed.

Men respond best to church leaders who are accessible, respectable, experienced and practical, the survey found. It also showed that men expect information about the church to be "communicated relevant to the real world in which men operate."

-- Pray for men.

"The power of prayer cannot be overestimated," Barna stressed. "The ministries which attract men and which show evidence of transformation among men are led by individuals who specifically pray for the men to whom they will minister."

-- Challenge men without destroying them.

Men are wary of guilt and manipulation used as tools to involve them in the church, they told pollsters.

"Already overburdened with responsibilities, they are not looking for more things to do," Barna explained. "Effective ministry is positioned as faith which produces a way of life that reduces their burden, lightens their spirit and enhances their quality of life."

'Souper Bowl' planners report \$1.4 million in gifts

COLUMBIA, S.C. (ABP) -- More than \$1.4 million has been collected for anti-hunger and anti-poverty ministries through this year's "Souper Bowl" fund-raising campaign.

More than 5,000 churches in all 50 states, representing 40 denominations, have donated directly to charities that help the poor in this year's campaign, Presbyterian News Service reported Feb. 4.

Based on past giving trends, organizers expect Souper Bowl totals to reach \$1.6 million.

The Souper Bowl program was inspired by a pastoral prayer on Super Bowl Sunday in 1990 by Brad Smith, associate pastor of Spring Valley Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C.

The first Souper Bowl involved 22 churches in 1990. Last year, 4,600 participating congregations raised more than \$1.3 million.

Youth invite parishioners to drop one dollar into large soup cauldrons as they leave worship on the morning of the National Football League championship game.

Participating churches report their totals by phone and then send funds directly to the charity of their choice.

Organizers do not handle any money or tell people where to send their donations. They ask only for a phone report so national totals can be tabulated.

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-- By ABP staff

Former Samford president Leslie Wright dead at 84

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Long-time Samford University President Leslie Stephen Wright died Jan. 27 after a two-month illness.

Wright, 84, was president of the Baptist school in Birmingham, Ala., for 25 years, longer than any of his predecessors. He was named the school's chancellor when he retired in 1983.

Wright became president of the school, then known as Howard University, five months after the campus moved to suburban Homewood. He led in funding and building a dozen major buildings and a stadium on the campus, completing the original campus plan.

"Dr. Wright led Samford University during a time of unprecedented change," said Thomas Corts, Samford's current president. "He was a stable presence during turbulent times and the university is eternally indebted to him for his leadership."

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-- By ABP staff

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