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Reccord tells Norfolk church he's leaving to head mission board

By Diane Tennant

NORFOLK, Va. (ABP) -- Flanked by leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, Robert Reccord on April 20 announced to his congregation that he has been asked to head the denomination's new North American Mission Board.

His departure would leave the 5,000-member First Baptist Church of Norfolk, without a senior pastor.

Reccord's nomination must be formally accepted by the mission board's trustees on June 19. But his selection has heavy support, as he was joined at Sunday night's service by Morris Chapman, president of the SBC's executive committee, and by C.B. Hogue, the president of the search committee.

"I know I must be obedient to what God is saying to me at this point," Reccord said, his voice breaking. "Tonight I would just ask you a big favor: please love us enough to grant us a release to take that step, because we feel like it's a step we must take."

Reccord has been senior pastor at First Baptist for five years. His predecessor, Ken Hemphill, also left to take a leadership position in the SBC.

Reccord, 45, has been rumored for months to be the leading contender to head the new mission board, which will be responsible for evangelizing and starting new churches in the United States and Canada. He has worked side by side with SBC leadership to restructure the nation's largest Protestant denomination, which has 15.6 million members.

The North American Mission Board was formed from the merging of three SBC agencies: the Home Mission Board, Brotherhood Commission and Radio and Television Commission. It will be headquartered in Atlanta.

Reccord was chairman of the task force which guided the SBC restructuring, reducing the number of denominational agencies from 19 to 12 and creating the new mission board.

Reccord's wife, Cheryl, joined him before the congregation to say she knew three years ago that her husband might be called to the new position. She told of discussing the restructuring over lunch one day.

"At that table, on that day, it was as though God sat down and said, 'This is where you must be ready to go,'" Cheryl Reccord said. "It startled me. Since that day, I've prayed, 'God, make me willing.'"

She then recited a line from "Father of the Bride," which she called one of her favorite movies: "I know I can't stay, but I don't want to go."

Reccord was born in Norfolk, but raised in Evansville, Ind. He has been known in the community for his dramatic style of preaching and for bringing contemporary topics into First Baptist's classes.

"The church of the 21st century is going to be more and more one that can grab hold of traditional anchors without becoming bogged down in traditionalism," Reccord said during a December 1996 interview. He said that

during his tenure, First Baptist began offering money management seminars, Christian weight loss classes and other sessions that spoke to people's lives today, as well as traditional Bible studies. Class attendance tripled, he said, from 500 to nearly 1,400.

If accepted as president of the North American Mission Board, Reccord will try to increase the number of people in Christianity and, specifically, in the Baptist faith.

Chapman, in his remarks to the congregation, referred to the SBC's renewed emphasis on conversion and evangelization. "Southern Baptists are dead serious about saying we want to lead North America to Jesus Christ," he said. "We're talking tonight about shaping the history of America."

Chapman invited the congregation to join the Reccords at the altar, and people swarmed from the pews. Reccord, in his remarks, downplayed his own importance.

"God does not build his churches on men or women," he said. "God builds his churches on Christ, and that's why they stand."

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Fellowship's Coordinating Council projects modest budget growth

By Bob Allen and Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- After being forced by plateaued income to make mid-year budget cuts two years in a row, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Coordinating Council is projecting modest growth in next year's spending plan but this time is hedging its bet.

The Fellowship's proposed 1997-1998 budget includes a new 2.5 percent reserve fund to cover any surprise shortfall. The \$14.3 million budget will be considered at the Fellowship's General Assembly, June 26-28 in Louisville, Ky.

"If we've done our work correctly, we will not have to make budget adjustments like the last two years," finance committee chair Ed Vick told the Coordinating Council at an April 17-19 meeting in Atlanta. "Unless we have a major change in our giving patterns, we will have some money there for a shortfall," said Vick, a businessman from Raleigh, N.C. "We hope to have a surplus."

The budget, developed in a series of meetings since January involving staff, officers and members of each of the Fellowship's four ministry task groups, sets funding in each area at the "must-spend level," Vick said. "It's the minimum we can get by with and still serve our mission."

The new budget anticipates \$8.1 million in undesignated receipts, a 5 percent increase, and sets a goal of \$4.5 million for an annual Global Missions Offering. The budget requires spending \$584,487 from a global-missions reserve fund. Global missions currently has about \$7 million in reserves, said financial coordinator Gary Skeen, accumulated from unspent funds in previous years' Global Missions Offering.

It calls for a net gain of six in the Fellowship's 140-member missionary force.

Amounts budgeted for student scholarships and institutional support at 11 theological schools supported by the Fellowship drop significantly in the proposed budget but are similar to amounts actually spent this year, Vick said.

Two new schools were added to the list of schools receiving Fellowship support: Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology in Abilene, Texas, and Campbell University in Buies Creek, N.C. The others are Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Gardner Webb University, Mercer University, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Wake Forest University and Baptist

"houses" at Emory, Texas Christian and Duke universities. A \$15,000 line item in the current budget for scholarships at Lexington Theological Seminary in Kentucky was dropped.

The proposed 1997-1998 budget also includes \$8,000 to the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America to produce resource material for the group's annual "Peace Sunday" observance. The Coordinating Council defunded the Peace Fellowship as a line item in 1995 after the group declared itself a "welcoming place" for gays and lesbians but left open the possibility of funding projects.

The Fellowship, formed in 1991 to protest a conservative swing in the Southern Baptist Convention, at first grew rapidly as disenfranchised moderates embraced its alternative missions and ministry programs. Leaders knew such rapid growth would end but were surprised that it leveled off so soon.

A budget approved last year anticipated revenues to increase 20 percent in 1996-1997. Halfway through the fiscal year, however, receipts were running 2 percent above previous year totals, forcing the Coordinating Council to slash the budget by 10 percent in January.

That interim spending plan appears to be on track, Vick said, bolstered by a strong March after February receipts lagged about 6 percent under budget.

"If we finish the next three months strong, we should be able to meet those revenues we anticipated in January and have a whole budget," Vick said.

Coordinator Daniel Vestal blamed "fear, ignorance and indifference" for slowing growth in the Fellowship. The clergy know about CBF but are fearful of associating with the group, he said. "Laypeople really don't know what is going on," he added, and both groups are indifferent.

The group is not "lusting after growth" but must be intentional about expanding, he said. "We grow by being faithful to the mission we have set forth."

Vestal outlined five "essential initiatives" to spur growth in the Fellowship:

- Starting new churches. The CBF must be "intentional" about planting churches that are committed to its principles, rather than serving only as a support system for those people who are starting churches.

- Developing a job-placement service for ministers. "We are not going to try to play the role of the Holy Spirit, but we have got to be intentional about placement," he said.

- Advocating women in ministry. "One of the places where the wind of God's spirit is blowing is women in ministry," he said.

- Becoming a multi-cultural, multi-language, multi-ethnic fellowship. While such diversity was part of the CBF's original vision, the group remains mostly white and Anglo-Saxon, Vestal said.

- Exploring annuity and medical insurance programs for churches and ministers.

Vestal said the Fellowship must resist the "tendency to recreate the Southern Baptist Convention" by creating institutions to solve every problem. "The pressure is intense to act like we own and operate institutions," he warned.

"Our tendency is always to revert back to what we came from," he said.

The test for the Fellowship, he said, is "can we network churches without becoming a convention?"

The budget plateau prompted competition for scarce funds among the various ministry groups and "partner" organizations which depend on the Fellowship for part of their budgets.

Leaders spoke of "frank" and "healthy" discussions during budget planning, which they said helped council members to understand pressures facing all the ministry groups.

Those differences apparently were smoothed over before the closing plenary session on Saturday morning, where the budget passed unanimously with no discussion.

"I can't speak for [all] the seminaries, but I'm very happy with what the folks have done for us," Tom Graves, president of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, told a reporter.

Beverly Greer, chair of the Global Missions Ministry Group, told the council her group would like more interaction with the Baptist Principles, Church Resources and Administration ministry task groups.

"We feel like we need some time to get together and interface," said Greer, a homemaker from Laurens, S.C. "When we get into a big group, we're all friends. When we divide into our ministry groups, we get kind of territorial."