

Associated Baptist Press

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Prospective NAMB trustees question salaries, governance

By Mark Wingfield and Greg Warner

DALLAS (ABP) -- When the trustees of the North American Mission Board officially convene for the first time June 19, they will launch something new, but something they have not created.

That's a source of tension for some of the 80 trustees, each of whom has served as a trustee of one of the three agencies dissolved to form NAMB.

While generally supportive of the plans laid out for the Southern Baptist Convention's newest mission board, some trustees express concerns about decisions already made that they may not be able to change easily.

The most frequently listed concerns include the pay scale for NAMB employees, which some trustees believe is excessive, and the structure of the new board's trustee committees, which some believe consolidates too much power in too few hands.

During the last two years, messengers to SBC annual meetings have approved creation of NAMB as part of a massive restructuring of denominational agencies and institutions. However, details of creating NAMB have been left to a 10-member group known as the implementation task force.

That group was not appointed by the convention but by the SBC Executive Committee. It is accountable only to the Executive Committee, and it has held all of its meetings behind closed doors.

The implementation task force has held two advisory meetings in recent months with the potential NAMB trustees, who are to be elected by messengers to this year's convention in Dallas.

"We don't have any power yet because we haven't been elected by the convention," explained potential trustee Mark Bond, pastor of First Baptist Church of La Center, Ky. "We have no more power than anyone else. The power has all been given to the implementation task force."

This creates an awkward situation, according to Bond and other potential trustees.

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For example, the implementation task force and a related ad hoc group called the incorporators have drafted a pay scale and have begun offering positions with specific salaries to potential employees.

That bothers potential trustee Billy Bissell of Muskogee, Okla., and others. Bissell says the proposed pay scale is too high, yet he fears it's too late to undo what's already been done.

The proposed pay scale -- obtained from another potential trustee -- lists salary ranges for every position, although information has not been given to trustees about where employees will fall within the ranges.

Robert Reccord, the nominee for NAMB president, will be paid from \$140,000 to \$210,000 annually. Each of five vice presidents, who have not yet been named, will be paid from \$100,000 to \$150,000 annually. Directors of the next units downline will be paid from \$75,000 to \$98,000 annually.

According to Bill Hogue, chair of the incorporators group that nominated Reccord and recommended salary ranges for NAMB's top executives, almost all employees will start near the bottom of the pay ranges. "It is very unlikely that anybody's going to start [at] much more than the low end of the scale," he said.

That explanation is not enough to satisfy Bissell, who is among a handful of trustees who already have expressed concern about the pay scale. Although he said he is not part of any orchestrated effort to oppose the pay ranges, Bissell predicted the issue will be a source of discussion at the June 19 meeting.

"It will be a concern of a significant number of trustees," said Bissell, pastor of Boston Avenue Baptist Church in Muskogee, Okla. "Part of the issue is going to hinge on exactly how much we can do. If those who have been promised employment have had a certain amount committed to them, then it's going to be more difficult."

Bissell said the NAMB pay scale is too high in comparison to salaries at other SBC agencies. The proposed pay scale shows about a 35 percent increase over the HMB's current pay scale, said Bissell, who has been an HMB trustee six years.

"I think this is going to cause some questions among churches, especially among pastors, about how much of a savings we really have [from restructuring] and how much of this is going to missions and how much is going to administration," he said. "I think there's going to be a perception problem as to how effectively we can call on volunteers and regular missionaries to sacrificial service with the appearance that the salaries at the board have increased significantly."

Nevertheless, Hogue defends the NAMB pay scale as fair.

"The salary structure has to be developed for a total new agency and not the other three agencies," he said. "A great deal of research has gone into this decision. It did not come lightly, but with a great deal of research into non-profit groups, even a look at what others were being paid inside the convention."

Jerry Rankin, president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board, is paid \$114,225 a year, according to that agency. The Home Mission Board, forerunner of NAMB, pays its president between \$91,839 and \$137,759 -- specific salaries are not released.

As for the other two agencies being replaced by the NAMB, the chief executive is paid in a range of \$106,087-to-\$158,644 at the Radio and Television Commission and \$66,210-to-\$99,315 at the Brotherhood Commission.

The highest-paid Southern Baptist chief executives are at the Sunday School Board and Annuity Board, neither of which receives funds from the SBC's central budget, the Cooperative Program.

Although specific figures are not released for any employee at the Sunday School Board, President Jimmy Draper's job has a pay range of \$210,000-to-\$315,000. All salaries at the agency are determined using a rating system that evaluates a position in relation to other jobs in the organization and practices in the publishing industry.

In 1994, the last year for which figures are available, Annuity Board President Paul Powell was paid \$195,900.

Hogue said he believes NAMB must be willing to pay good salaries to attract good employees. "If you get quality leadership, you're going to have to pay for them."

Accusations that the proposed pay scale is outlandish are not true, Hogue said. "Whenever you look at what pastors are making in good-sized churches, this [accusation] is not fair at all."

A 1996 study of ministerial pay across 13 state or regional Baptist conventions recorded the average pastor's pay (salary and housing allowance) at \$33,125. The average pay for pastors of churches with 1,000 or more members was \$76,682.

The highest salary reported for a pastor in the 13-state survey was \$133,050.

Hogue said he believes the pay scale proposed for NAMB headquarters employees will provide incentive to raise the pay scale for field missionaries as well. "We were hoping to have a very good salary scale in order to enhance the missionaries out on the field," he explained.

Another point of concern expressed by potential NAMB trustees is the board's governing structure, also drafted by the implementation task force. The board reportedly is to meet only twice each year, with decisions between those sessions delegated to a 10-member executive committee.

Details of the proposed board structure have been given to potential trustees in a closed meeting but have not been released to the press.

Charles Fuller, pastor of First Baptist Church of Roanoke, Va., and nominee to become chairman of NAMB trustees, acknowledged concerns have been expressed about the number of people involved in decision-making. "When you go from the Home Mission Board concept of an executive board to this structure, there is a sharp decrease in number," he said.

The HMB, the largest of the three agencies being merged, had a 30-member executive committee -- about one third of the full board's 88 members. NAMB's trustee board will be reduced from 80 to 56 in coming years, meaning a 10-member executive committee eventually would represent about one sixth of the full board.

To Bissell and other trustees, this is a dangerous consolidation of power. "I'm concerned about what seems to be a move within the convention as a whole toward a centralization of authority," he explained.

Fuller responded that this issue may not be settled. The final number of executive committee members "remains somewhat in the hands of this new board," he said.

Despite concerns about the pay scale, board structure and the way NAMB has been created, potential trustees uniformly expressed enthusiasm about the new agency.

Although Bissell thinks Reccord may be paid too much, he is excited about Reccord's vision for NAMB. "The vision he has is one that will take Southern Baptists into areas of home missions that we need to be involved with," he said.

Bond, the Kentucky trustee, said he isn't concerned about the salary scale or the executive committee structure so much as other things he fears may be lost in the transition. But overall, he's optimistic.

"We've all got some concerns about what's going to take place after June 19, but I believe the Lord's going to take this and make it a blessing to Southern Baptists. I wasn't convinced of that at the beginning. I really wasn't in favor of restructuring."

Now he is excited about the future, Bond said. "I believe it's going to prove to be a blessing."

Fuller agreed. "There are questions, naturally. But I don't think the questions are concerning the validity of restructuring. That's a settled matter."

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Virginia pastor Charles Fuller to be nominated as NAMB chair

By Mark Wingfield

ROANOKE, Va. (ABP) -- Charles Fuller, pastor of First Baptist Church of Roanoke, Va., and former chairman of the Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee, will be nominated as the first chairman of trustees for the SBC's new North American Mission Board.

Fuller confirmed May 22 that he has been nominated by the NAMB incorporators, one of two small groups responsible for launching the new missions agency June 19. Potential NAMB trustees learned of the nomination in a closed-door meeting several weeks earlier.

The new mission board, which replaces the work of three current SBC agencies, is the centerpiece of a massive restructuring of the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group. The reorganization, approved at SBC meetings in 1995 and 1996, reduces the number of convention agencies from 19 to 12.

Most deliberations during the two-year process to launch the new mission board have been closed to the press. Both an implementation task force formed to oversee the SBC reorganization and the incorporators, named to carry out legal work and to nominate the NAMB's first president, have held their meetings in private.

Neither group was elected by the convention. Both were appointed by the powerful SBC Executive Committee, which has received only brief reports about the two groups' work.

Leaders said executive sessions were needed because of sensitive personnel and legal issues involved in the restructuring.

Fuller said he anticipates NAMB trustees won't follow that same pattern.

"I don't think the inclination of the North American Mission Board would be to have closed meetings," he said. "Once a board is elected by the convention, I think we have a responsibility to be as open as possible. You always want to favor on the side of openness."

Although certain circumstances require executive sessions, that should not be the norm for NAMB trustee meetings, Fuller said.

NAMB trustees are scheduled to meet twice annually. They will conduct an organizational meeting in Dallas upon the adjournment of the SBC annual meeting June 19. The next full board meeting is proposed for November.

At the June 19 meeting, the first orders of business will be to adopt a constitution and bylaws, name trustee officers and elect a president. Virginia pastor Bob Reccord has been announced as the presidential nominee.

The trustees also are expected to elect several NAMB vice presidents. In addition, the board will consider numerous recommendations related to structure, personnel and oversight of the domestic missions agency.

NAMB trustees won't officially be trustees until messengers to the SBC annual meeting elect them two days prior to the first NAMB meeting.

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Fellowship cuts funding for Baptist World Alliance

By Bob Allen

McLEAN, Va. (ABP) -- Tightening finances have prompted the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to drop \$102,000 earmarked in its global-missions budget for the Baptist World Alliance, Fellowship leaders say.

The proposal to drop funding for the worldwide network of Baptist leaders was included but not reported in detail in a \$14.3 million budget approved by the Fellowship's Coordinating Council in April. The 1997-98 spending plan will be voted on at the Fellowship's June 26-28 General Assembly in Louisville, Ky.

The cut was not discussed in a plenary session by the Coordinating Council, but as news spread by word of mouth, some BWA supporters have complained to Fellowship leaders about the defunding.

The BWA, based in McLean, Va., is comprised of 187 Baptist conventions and unions around the world. Among BWA members is the Southern Baptist Convention, which is budgeted to give just under \$415,000 to the organization this year.

Denton Lotz, BWA general secretary, said the group "understand[s] financial restraints upon all the organizations" that support the BWA. He said the BWA is "grateful" for support it has received in the past and hopes funding will be restored in the future.

"The Lord has supplied the needs of the Baptist World Alliance in the past and will continue to do so in the future," he said.

The Fellowship, an Atlanta-based group opposed to the SBC's conservative leadership, has not sought membership in the BWA but has been funding the alliance through its global-missions ministry group.

This year, the Fellowship's four ministry task groups hammered out a proposed next-year's budget in the shadow of a funding plateau which in January forced the Coordinating Council to cut spending for the current year by 10 percent.

Next year's budget proposes 5 percent growth, calls for spending \$584,000 from global-missions reserves and adds a 2.5 percent reserve fund to cover any shortfall. It projects a net gain of six in the Fellowship's 140-member missionary force.

In a context of tough budget decisions, Fellowship mission leaders determined "we don't have enough money" to include the BWA in the 1997-98 budget, said Keith Parks, global missions coordinator.

"We're just having to make some tough, hard decisions, looking at money designated for missions and asking what is our priority scale in terms of missions priority," Parks said. "BWA didn't make the cut."

Parks said funding for BWA was placed under global missions in early Fellowship budgets for convenience sake. He said he has long felt it would be more appropriate for the BWA to be in the Fellowship's general budget.

As long as giving to the Fellowship remained ahead of growth in its missions program, it didn't matter. This year, however, the global-missions group pondered the prospect of receiving more applicants for missionary service than it can afford to appoint or canceling a popular missions-and-evangelism conference.

"It's not that we have any lack of support for what BWA is doing," Parks said. "Many CBFers are very supportive of BWA. As we tried to evaluate mission priorities and looked at financial resources, that just didn't hit as high a priority as some other things."

Fellowship spokesman David Wilkinson confirmed the decision was based on finances and was not a question of dissatisfaction with the BWA. He added, however, that tighter CBF budgets might prompt more philosophical discussions of how the Fellowship defines its relationship to "partner" organizations.

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BWAid donates \$10,000 to cyclone-relief effort

McLEAN, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist World Aid, the Baptist World Alliance's relief and development arm, is sending \$10,000 following a May 19 cyclone that devastated parts of that country.

Government forces confirmed 112 deaths by May 21 but unofficial death estimates were much higher. As many as 1.5 million people were estimated to be left homeless by the storm.

The grant will provide food, clothing and shelter to victims through Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship and the Bangladesh Baptist Sangha, according to a news release.

The BWA is soliciting additional gifts for Bangladesh relief, said officials at the organization based in McLean, Va.

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-- By ABP staff

Conversations proposed for Baptists, Orthodox

McLEAN, Va. (ABP) -- Representatives of the Baptist World Alliance and the Orthodox Church are calling for full conversations between the two groups on an international level.

Leaders in the McLean, Va.,-based BWA and representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate proposed the talks in preliminary meetings at Regent's Park College in Oxford, United Kingdom, May 16-19.

For the conversations to take place, the recommendation would have to be approved by each of the 15 independent Orthodox churches, officials announced.

The Oxford meeting was the fourth meeting between the representatives of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the BWA. A fifth pre-conversation may take place before full conversations would begin, leaders said.

"We were encouraged by these conversations and hope that future talks will lead to better understanding between our members for the advancement of Christ and his kingdom worldwide," said BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz.

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-- By ABP staff

Texas Baptist executive board criticizes seminary's hiring move

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- The executive board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas has rebuked Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for recently rejecting a teaching candidate, apparently over his view that churches should be free to ordain or call a woman as pastor.

A board resolution accuses the school in Fort Worth of "hiring practices that violate historic Baptist principles" regarding the autonomy of local congregations.

The 2.5 million-member Baptist state convention's chief governing board approved the statement by a show-of-hands vote during its spring meeting, May 20.

The resolution came in response to a decision by seminary administrators to abort efforts to hire doctoral candidate Steven Harmon as a theology instructor.

Southwestern administrators backed away from nominating Harmon to the vacant post during a seminary trustee meeting in March. Harmon's nomination ran into trouble after two interviews with trustees and a closed-door discussion in the academic-affairs committee.

Neither President Ken Hemphill nor School of Theology Dean Tommy Lea would say what led them to pull Harmon's nomination. It previously had their endorsement, as well as the unanimous approval of a faculty committee.

But Harmon, pastor of Round Grove Baptist Church in Dublin, Texas, said he was questioned closely by both trustee teams about his position on women in ministry.

Harmon told trustees he believes the issue -- including whether to ordain a woman or to call a woman as senior pastor -- should be decided by individual congregations, he said.

Trustee responses indicated they felt Harmon's answer raised doubts about his earlier affirmation that he believes in the inerrancy of the Bible, Harmon reported. Lea told him trustees felt his beliefs about Scripture were "not in conformity with the statement on 'Baptist Faith and Message'" adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963, he added.

In the statement adopted by the executive board, however, Texas Baptist leaders accused the seminary trustees of violating another section of the "Baptist Faith and Message," a statement on local-church autonomy.

The resolution notes the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement -- which Southwestern trustees have adopted "as a guideline for their hiring practices" -- claims the church "is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the lordship of Christ."

Harmon's faculty nomination was withdrawn "because he affirmed the historic Baptist principle of local-church autonomy in relation to women in ministry," the resolution states.

"We ... wish to formally record our disapproval of institutional hiring practices that violate historic Baptist principles," the resolution says. It also reminds Southwestern trustees "of their spiritual obligation to honor the democratic processes under which autonomous local churches discern the lordship of Christ."

Bruce Prescott, pastor of Easthaven Baptist Church in Houston, proposed the resolution. "We should be concerned about Texas Baptists who are not given the opportunity to serve [the Southern Baptist Convention] because of a violation of Baptist principle," he said.

After the vote, Southwestern administrators said the resolution was based upon "some misinformation."

"There never was a vote of trustees or of a trustee committee in this matter," the seminary said in a statement released by its public relations office. "The administration did what it felt best, both for the seminary and for Mr. Harmon."

The resolution does not claim trustees voted on the matter, however. It says a trustee committee "rejected the unanimous recommendation of their theology department and their administration and caused the administration to withdraw its recommendation."

The Southwestern administration's response noted the seminary "honors her long and mutually beneficial partnership with Texas Baptists" and expressed "regret that the BGCT executive board spoke publicly about Southwestern without first talking with the administration."

The executive board debated the resolution and declined a request to table it before approving it by about a 2-1 margin.

The intent of the resolution "was not to question process but to emphasize Baptist belief in the autonomy of the local church," said Bob Campbell, executive board chairman.

"The public perception of the matter at Southwestern was that a major factor in a prospective faculty member not being employed was his stated conviction that certain matters related to churches were to be determined by those local churches," said Campbell, pastor of Westbury Baptist Church in Houston.

"A reaffirmation of Southwestern Seminary to that basic Baptist distinctive would please me," he said. "Because the matter had been publicly reported, it did not seem inconsistent ... to propose a public response."

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Supreme Court strikes down unequal tax treatment of charities

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Church-state attorneys hailed a May 19 court decision forbidding a state from taxing a church camp that otherwise would be exempt from property taxes because it caters primarily to out-of-state residents.

A Maine law, which generally exempts from taxation property owned by charities but effectively denies that benefit to charities serving mostly non-Maine residents, violates the Constitution by interfering with interstate commerce, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4.

The high court reversed a decision by Maine Supreme Judicial Court that a summer camp for Christian Science children in Harrison, Maine, owed the \$20,000 annually it paid in property taxes from 1989 to 1991. The camp, operated by Camps Newfound/Owatonna Inc., attracts more than 95 percent of its campers from out of state.

Writing for the majority, Justice John Paul Stevens said the Maine law basing tax exemption on whether consumers live within or outside the state "facially discriminates against interstate commerce."

Stevens, joined by Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Anthony Kennedy, David Souter and Stephen Breyer, said both for-profit and nonprofit organizations are protected by the "commerce clause" in the U.S. Constitution.

The court rejected arguments by lawyers that the state should be allowed to discriminate in its tax code as a way to subsidize charities which "cater principally to local needs."

Justice Antonin Scalia, in a dissent joined by Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Justices Clarence Thomas and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, said that Maine should be able to excuse from taxation "only that property used to relieve the state of its burden of caring for its residents."

The court's ruling was hailed by church-state attorneys.

"By striking Maine's law, the court slammed the door against state assaults on the skimpy coffers of charities nationwide," said Steven McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom. "Otherwise, we could have expected revenue-hungry states and cities to tax all but the smallest of charities."

McFarland's organization, which filed a friend-of-the-court brief on behalf of the camps, estimated that losing property-tax exemption would cost \$22 million in annual taxes for Christian Camping International's 900 member camps.

"This is good news for all nonprofit groups, including churches and religious organizations," added Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee.

"It is a resounding 'no' to those states that want to whittle away at tax exemption," Walker said.

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