

Associated Baptist Press

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Restructuring costs \$6 million, projected to save \$34 million

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Restructuring the Southern Baptist Convention has cost an estimated \$6 million, members of the SBC Executive Committee were told June 16.

However, that \$6 million price tag could be offset by \$40 million in savings over the next five years, for a net savings of \$34 million, according to the 10-member task force that has guided the restructuring.

The implementation task force made its final report to the Executive Committee in a special session one day prior to scheduled votes at the SBC annual meeting finalizing the restructuring. The plan, in process for two years, reduces the number of denominational agencies from 19 to 12 and creates a new domestic missions agency called the North American Mission Board.

The bulk of the projected savings was calculated by comparing estimated annual operating costs for NAMB to what it would have cost to keep operating the Home Mission Board, Brotherhood Commission and Radio & Television Commission at their current levels for the next five years.

The \$6 million cost of restructuring is based on actual expenditures and expenditures committed for the future. Most of that total -- \$4.3 million -- relates to merging the three old agencies into NAMB.

Another \$716,000 relates to dissolving five other entities: the Education Commission, Stewardship Commission, Historical Commission, Southern Baptist Foundation and Southern Baptist Commission on the American Baptist Seminary.

Another \$970,000 has been paid to consultants and attorneys and to cover printing and travel costs related to restructuring.

The task force reported that 217 denominational employees have lost their jobs due to the restructuring. The largest numbers were cut at the Home Mission Board (98), Brotherhood Commission (60) and Radio & Television Commission (30) to form NAMB.

On a percentage basis, employees of the Brotherhood Commission took the hardest hit of the three agencies merged to form NAMB. Only 19 percent of the Brotherhood Commission's 74 employees will have jobs with NAMB. That compares to 70 percent of RTVC employees and 69 percent of HMB employees.

NAMB will begin operation with 365 employees, 165 less than the 530 that had been employed by the three merged agencies.

Terminating employees at all SBC agencies affected by restructuring has required expenditures of \$1.8 million in severance benefits, the task force reported.

The HMB brings by far the most assets to the marriage of the three agencies merging to form NAMB, with reserves of \$57 million. The RTVC brings assets of \$1 million but also a \$1.5 million debt. The task force reported that a contract has been signed for sale of the Brotherhood Commission's headquarters in Memphis, Tenn. When that \$1.2 million sale is closed, the Brotherhood Commission will bring about \$1 million into NAMB.

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Women at SBC offered choice

By Greg Warner and Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- A first-ever for-ladies-only session of the Southern Baptist Convention Pastors' Conference attracted an estimated 3,000 pastors' wives and "other female Christian leaders" June 16.

Meanwhile, across the expansive Dallas Convention Center, fewer than 500 women gathered to conduct business of Woman's Missionary Union, the convention's 109-year-old missions auxiliary.

While planners of both meetings downplayed competition between the two events, the choice was symbolic of changes affecting the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group.

"We just sensed this year a real need for pastors' wives to have some speakers to speak to their needs," said Jeana Floyd, planner of the new Monday meeting for women.

Asked if she was concerned that the session might appear to compete with the WMU annual meeting, Floyd, wife of Pastors' Conference president Ronnie Floyd, said: "No. I didn't even know they were meeting at that time."

WMU, which for decades has met on the two days prior to the annual convention, has traditionally drawn 3,000 or more women to receive reports, hear missionary testimonies and conduct business.

WMU leaders, including Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien, said the two meetings were not competitive. Few of the women participating in the Pastors' Conference session would have attended WMU otherwise, they said. Most WMU leaders are not pastors' wives, for whom the other session was intended.

Instead, they said, the decline in WMU attendance in recent years mirrors the decline in SBC attendance, which this year also is expected to be the lowest in years. WMU leaders, who also meet at other times during the year, have quit coming to the SBC for a number of reasons, said Teresa Dickens, WMU communications specialist.

The Pastors' Conference crowd always has included many women, most of them pastors' wives along for the ride. Many were grateful to have an alternative this year.

Wanda Rushing, whose husband belongs to the ministerial staff at Council Road Baptist Church in Bethany, Okla., said she chose to attend the three-hour Pastors' Conference session for women over WMU because the speakers were more relevant to struggles of modern women trying to balance careers, parenting and supporting their minister husbands.

"I thought it was wonderful," she said. "I think the program spoke to the ladies of '97."

The pastors' wives, who met during one of five Pastors' Conference sessions, sang praise music and were advised on deepening their spiritual lives and assisting their husbands' ministries.

"I loved it," said Abby Jordan of Bowling Green, Ky., who said she usually attends the Pastors' Conference instead of WMU so she can be with her husband.

"It was very worshipful," said Pam Rinehart of Jackson, Tenn., who said she has never gone to the WMU meeting. She said she particularly enjoyed speakers Beth Moore of Houston and Teresa Brown of Charlotte, N.C., both leaders of local women's ministries.

Across the convention center, about 1,000 people registered for the two-day WMU meeting, down from 1,800 last year. The meeting, traditionally the only pre-convention offering specifically for women, shrank to as few as 300 at times on Monday.

Leaders said such numbers do not reflect the national strength of the Birmingham, Ala.-based organization, which claims 1.1 million members and a network of leaders in state conventions and local churches. But they conceded they face a challenge.

"What is WMU? The answer is up to you and to me," Dellanna O'Brien told WMU participants. "Will people say that it was an organization that died from lack of interest? I hope not. Will people possibly say, 'We are informed, influential and innovative women who will understand and are radically involved in the missions of God'? May it be so."

Woman's Missionary Union has traditionally been a service-oriented group -- doing hands-on mission work, teaching missions in local churches and supporting SBC missions financially.

"We are the Bride of Christ in combat boots," said O'Brien, and she challenged the women to confront problems of racism and poverty. "Will you give the time to roll up your sleeves, put on your boots and give to the 'least of these'?"

While WMU has always focused on missions, the trend toward women's ministries began as a grass-roots movement focusing on women's spiritual needs, explained Barbara Curnutt, director of the women's missions and ministries department of the Florida Baptist Convention.

The distinction also reflects changes in the American culture, she said, particularly generational differences.

WMU participants tend to be older and more committed to traditional denominational structures. Women's ministries attract a younger audience, often drawing from the non-traditional megachurches.

WMU is outwardly focused, while women's ministries are inwardly focused, observed Curnutt. "This runs parallel to everything we know about the boomer generation," she said.

Curnutt said the two camps could learn from each other. Women's groups need to lead women to reach out and serve others, she said. For WMU, the challenge is to be more sensitive to the needs of women. "We have acknowledged in today's women the hunger to nurture one's own spiritual life."

In Florida, there are about 275 churches with women's ministries and more than 1,300 with WMU organizations. Curnutt's job formerly focused only on WMU but was broadened to include women's ministries -- one of the first times a state convention has combined the approaches. Curnutt encourages churches to blend both, and that arrangement has worked in a number of churches, she said.

Curnutt said reports of WMU's demise are unfounded or at least premature, but she added all Southern Baptists should be concerned about the organization's future. "Anyone who perceives us as on the decline ought to be concerned about the decline of missions.

-- Jennifer Rogers contributed to this story.

African-Americans 'lose' in restructuring, leaders say

DALLAS (ABP) -- African-Americans in the Southern Baptist Convention have "lost" in the restructuring process, some former denominational employees expressed at the African-American Fellowship gathering June 16 in Dallas.

"We have some very serious consternations in this restructuring," said Dennis Mitchell, former consultant in the black church extension division of the Home Mission Board.

"African-Americans have lost in this. We have moved backward."

Mitchell noted that in light of the reconciliation resolution in 1994 when the SBC apologized to African-Americans for slavery, he hopes that spirit of cooperation will be able to continue in the future.

"The fact that we were not included in the process just underscores the fact that there is still work to be done," he added.

Mitchell, now executive administrator at Greenforest Unity Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., said the loss in number of divisional directors at the new North American Mission Board through restructuring presents serious questions for the future role of African-Americans in the SBC.

At NAMB, Herbert Brisbane, director of black church evangelism will become multi-cultural consultant manager in charge of all ethnic groups. He will expand his responsibilities from 2,000 churches to 10,000 and from one language to more than 100. One associate will be added.

In the black church extension division of NAMB, Robert Wilson will be manager of the African-American unit of the new church congregation implementation team of the church planting group. Willie McPhearson, former director for black church extension at HMB, plus Mitchell, Michael Cox and Michael Thurmond are no longer at the board.

There were no personnel changes in the International Mission Board, but Director David Cornelius will be responsible for all volunteers, not just African-American volunteers now.

Elgia Wells, director of black-church development at the Sunday School Board, will become a church consultant in the multi-cultural department of the church leadership division. There is no equivalent African-American presence in the discipleship or Sunday school divisions of the BSSB.

Brisbane acknowledged that "the dust is still up in the air" on how these changes will affect African-Americans, and he added that he is "happy to have a job."

"I have not talked to any powers that be, but I understand their intent is to be more inclusive of African-Americans in all areas of the SBC," Brisbane added.

However, Mitchell noted that he is distressed over the intent of the Implementation Task Force -- the group responsible for designing the convention restructuring. Mitchell believes the lack of aggressive attempts from ITF to seek input from all constituents within the convention when organizing the restructuring was a serious overlook.

"ITF did not reflect the ethnic and gender makeup of the convention," Mitchell said, noting the absence of women or African-Americans on the task force itself and the absence of input from those groups in the restructuring process.

"It was a very pale, male group," Mitchell said, "and that poses some serious questions." However, Mitchell said the fellowship would reserve many of those questions for its October meeting in New York City.

"October will be our strategy meeting where these issues will be addressed," said Mitchell, noting that the restructuring is a reality and African-Americans must now work with it.

Eugene Gibson, new president of the fellowship, expressed his resentment during the June 16 business section over the lack of African-American involvement in restructuring. But he too admonished fellowship members to stay involved in SBC to make their influence known.

"Many of us were not involved in the changes. We just had to see what was handed down," said Gibson, pastor of Chicago's Mission of Faith Baptist Church. "But we need to deal with it and hammer things out in October."

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Stop whining,' challenges evangelist David Ring

By Jennifer Rogers

DALLAS (ABP) -- Evangelist David Ring of Orlando, Fla., has advice for churchgoers who constantly complain. "Get over it," he offered in a Bible study he led June 17 at the Southern Baptist Convention.

Ring, who was born with cerebral palsy and lost both parents to cancer as a young boy, has reason to complain. But he is tired of hearing Christians say, "Woe is me."

An admitted "mama's boy," Ring said he was devastated without his mother's comfort when children mocked his disabilities. It was not until he "went to the Doctor" at an old-fashioned gospel meeting, he said, that Ring found purpose in his life and realized that "God never says, 'Oops!'"

"God can make lemonade out of anybody's lemon, but we don't want to give God the lemon," he said. "But you show me a no-whining church and I'll show you a church with standing room only. Don't whine, but shine."

Ring, who speaks more than 200 times a year despite a serious speech impediment, said he is not ashamed of being what some consider "not normal."

"You think you're normal?" he said. "I think some of you have a long way to go. But if God can use me, he can use anybody."

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