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Pastors protest women's role on state convention staff

By Bob Allen

BENTON, Ill. (ABP) -- Several Illinois Baptist ministers are criticizing a proposed reorganization of the state's Baptist convention staff because it places women in two ministry leadership positions.

The critics say the Bible forbids women from holding authority over men in church offices. Other Baptists disagree, saying passages which restrict women are conditioned by the culture of biblical writers and are not binding today.

Illinois Baptists' top official, however, says that debate does not apply, insisting that the reorganization does not place women in authority over men.

A new Illinois Baptist State Association staff structure names Janet Craynon as associate executive director and Evelyn Tully as facilitator of a service/ministry leadership team. Craynon currently is director of the resource management department. Tully would assume the new duties while retaining her current job as director of Woman's Missionary Union services.

The plan, unveiled recently by Executive Director Bob Wiley in a series of meetings across the state, was criticized in two letters to the Illinois Baptist and has been discussed among pastors in a series of phone calls, the newspaper reported Aug. 27.

"Are we as Illinois Baptists ready for a female director of our Illinois Baptist State Association?" asked a letter signed by eight pastors and the director of missions for Franklin Baptist Association in southern Illinois. "How about an associate executive director? Who will take charge if something would happen to the executive director?"

"Are we as Illinois Baptists ready to appoint a woman as leader over men in the offices of IBSA? Are we as Illinois Baptists ready to place a woman who is unordained in leadership over ordained men?"

"Make no mistake about it, that is what we are doing in the ministry of IBSA. Is this theologically compatible with Scripture? We believe the answers to these questions are no! The roles of men and women in the ministry of the Word, in teaching and in authority are clearly spelled out in Scripture," the letter continued.

The letter quoted New Testament passages from First Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians and First Timothy before concluding that the Bible "clearly means that women are not to be placed in authority over men regardless of ability and knowledge."

North Benton Baptist Church pastor James Endsley, who drafted the letter, told the paper in an interview that the Bible's injunctions pertain to ministry situations and not secular businesses. Endsley acknowledged that both women are qualified to do the jobs but said their promotions would violate Scripture.

"We are people of the Book," Endsley said. "We need to remain people of the Book, and the Book says in many places that women are not to be in authority. I don't know that I like that, but I can't do anything about it. I can't change the Scripture."

Craynon and Tully declined comment.

Wiley, who assumed leadership of the 250,000-member state convention last fall, denied the new structure gives women authority over men. The new team leadership approach is designed to "take away positional authority" and "flatten the lines of authority," he said.

Team facilitators are assigned to "coordinate, arrange and secure effective follow-through" of team meetings and are responsible both to team members and to the executive director, according to a written description of the new structure.

The people in those positions "have no right to command," Wiley said. "There is no positional power that places a female in a superior role over anybody else."

The Franklin Association pastors dismissed that argument as "a ridiculous use of semantics."

"Call this person what you will, they will be meeting with the director and passing directions to the team. They will be supervising the flow of information and instructions from the director to the team and vice versa," their letter said.

Wiley said facilitators would not be used "to pass responsibilities" to team members and that all staff would have access to the executive director.

Southern Baptists lack a consensus on the issue, but the Southern Baptist Convention's conservative leadership generally opposes having women in church leadership positions such as senior pastor.

One seminary president in a 1996 speech called women preachers an "affront to home and family" and a "raging" heresy. The president at another seminary announced that all new professors must oppose female pastors.

Other moderate Baptists, however, read the Bible less literally on the subject. Daniel Vestal, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's top executive, said in June that God had led him to "repent" for previously opposing women in the pulpit.

Becca Gurney, president of Baptist Women in Ministry, decried "prooftexting" of certain Bible verses to limit women's ministries. Gurney, associate pastor of University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, said she views the passages cited by the Illinois pastors in light of "their context and the specific situation from which they sprang."

"If we're going to prooftext," she cited Galatians 3:28. "God doesn't make distinctions, because we are all one in Christ," she said. "The human distinctions detract from what we are all trying to do, which is share the love of God with all humankind."

Another southern Illinois pastor said his church is very supportive of women in Christian leadership. "We think God can call women as easily as he can call men," said Jeffery Scott, pastor of University Baptist Church in Carbondale.

Scott termed opposition to the restructuring "regrettable," and said in the future women ought to have more representation on state convention committees and staff, not less.

-- Ferrell Foster contributed to this story.

Newspaper says Dallas pastor considering Annuity Board post

DALLAS (ABP) -- Conservative mega-church pastor O.S. Hawkins is considering an offer to become president of the Southern Baptist Convention Annuity Board, the Dallas Morning News reported Sept. 4.

Hawkins, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, told his Wednesday night congregation he might leave for another job. He did not say what job he was considering, but it has been rumored for weeks he is being considered by the Annuity Board, the paper said.

Hawkins said he had not been formally offered another job and that he had not made up his mind whether to accept. He said he would decide within a week to 10 days.

Officials of the Dallas-based Annuity Board said the committee seeking a new president has not yet made a recommendation. Officials said they have no information about who is being considered.

Hawkins told church members he had discussed and prayed about the offer with W.A. Criswell, the church's longtime pastor who retired in 1994.

Criswell, now pastor emeritus, said Hawkins is a good candidate for the Annuity Board post. "They'd be lucky to have him," he said.

The new Annuity Board president will succeed Paul Powell. Powell, who will turn 65 in December 1998, asked trustees last year to begin a search for a new president. A search committee was formed in November.

Hawkins became pastor of the Dallas church in 1993. He followed Joel Gregory, who resigned after two years over conflict with Criswell, who had led the church 50 years.

Criswell, a longtime Hawkins supporter, said it would be difficult to replace Hawkins but that he had advised the younger pastor to "pray about it and do what God says."

Hawkins told church members he and his wife "have never felt more loved, more respected than I am here."

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-- By ABP staff

Texas conservatives, SBC leaders criticize committee's report

By Marv Knox

MESQUITE, Texas (ABP) -- Recommendations from a Baptist General Convention of Texas' "effectiveness and efficiency" committee could splinter the state into two conventions, a leader of the BGCT's most conservative faction warned.

The report, which proposes several changes in the way the 2.5 million-member state convention conducts missions and ministry, "will most likely prove to be the document that gives birth to a new state convention of Southern Baptist churches in Texas," predicted Ronnie Yarber, administrator of Southern Baptists of Texas.

The 20-page study report, released in late August, proposes the state convention publish its own literature, develop programs of theological education and affirm itself as an "autonomous body which will support mission causes in Texas, the nation and the world."

"The tenor of the document is that of a defense of the Texas convention's departure from the causes and purposes of the SBC," Yarber said. "If this document is approved, it will be the equivalent of firing on Fort Sumter," which launched the U.S. Civil War, Yarber claimed.

Committee chairman Darold Morgan expressed shock at Yarber's assertions, and similar claims made by SBC leaders.

"I'm absolutely surprised," said Morgan, former president of the SBC Annuity Board. "That was never our intention at all."

"Every time we met, the emphasis was on support for the SBC," Morgan added, noting the BGCT's financial support for the national convention is at an all-time high.

Yarber's criticism echoed charges leveled at the report by at least four SBC leaders.

-- "This report seems to signal a substantial departure from cooperative relationships of long duration," cautioned Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee. It "has the potential to significantly impair those relationships, specifically in reference to home and foreign missions, literature production and theological education."

"If this causes Southern Baptist churches in Texas to have to decide whether they are principally Baptist General Convention Baptists or Southern Baptists, it would be extremely unfortunate," Chapman warned. "Should that climate prevail, it would mean that more direct relationships would have to be forged between Southern Baptist Convention entities and the Southern Baptist churches of Texas."

BGCT Executive Board Chairman Bob Campbell countered Chapman's warning.

"There is nothing in the report that would threaten Texas Baptists' relationship to the SBC or any other entity," said Campbell, pastor of Westbury Baptist Church in Houston and an ex-officio member of the committee.

"I heard nothing advocating 'impairment' of our cooperative association with the SBC," Campbell said. "It is unfortunate that they have read into the report ideas that did not surface in our meetings."

-- Jimmy Draper, president of the SBC Sunday School Board, took exception to the proposal that the BGCT begin publishing church literature.

"We must register our strong concern regarding contentions in the report about the quality of literature available to Southern Baptist churches in Texas," Draper noted. "While the report does not specifically name the Sunday School Board, it suggests that the best possible biblically based materials to meet the needs of Texas Baptists cannot be provided by a national entity.

"We take exception to that. We have the ability to customize resources for a geographical area such as Texas, and even for individual churches."

Draper also disputed the report's implication that the Sunday School Board is "increasingly" focusing on a non-Baptist market.

"That is not accurate," he said. "Serving Southern Baptist churches is our No. 1 priority. Our conservative, biblically based materials, including their references to Southern Baptists, are increasingly appealing to non-Baptist churches because they are relevant to life needs, high in value and quality, and assist churches in making disciples better than any other resources available."

Ferris Akins, chair of the subcommittee that considered literature options, declined to dispute Draper. "This is a free country, and he has the privilege of saying what he wants to say," said Akins, a retired associational director of missions from Ballinger. "And we're free to speak as we wish. That's Baptist."

-- Bob Reccord, president of the SBC's new North American Mission Board, called for continued cooperation between the Texas and Southern Baptist conventions.

"My earnest prayer is that the Baptist General Convention of Texas would be careful not to take any steps that could jeopardize the fragile but vital 'rope of sand' which characterizes and virtually defines Southern Baptist cooperative missions," Reccord said.

-- Ken Hemphill, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, said the seminary "has already responded to many of the issues that the report addresses."

Specifically, he noted Southwestern already offers a master of lay theological studies degree and a diploma program for ministers who have not earned undergraduate degrees.

However, the Texas committee's recommendations on theological education "only enlarge and formalize what has been going on for years in some of our Texas Baptist universities," noted Michael Chancellor, chair of an education subcommittee.

Hemphill affirmed the seminary's "long-standing partnership with our Southern Baptist family in Texas."

"I personally do not want to see Texas Baptists do anything that would even give the appearance that we are distancing ourselves from our larger Southern Baptist family," he said.

Chancellor noted Hemphill and other SBC leaders stressed "cooperation and binding ties" and noted: "What is it that has strained our ties to the SBC?"

"Texas has continued to do business the way it always has done its business. The SBC has redefined its relationship to Texas and has indicated that it did not want to work with our elected leadership.

"The way to strengthen our ties is for the SBC to realize that if they want to work with us, they must let us be an equal partner in all that is going on. Our leadership must be consulted, utilized, respected and cooperated with."

That contrasts with the way the SBC has been a "poor mate" to the BGCT in recent years, Chancellor said.

"They have castigated, bullied, alienated and abused this relationship," he said. "When finally Texas Baptists responded with great grace and restraint, they play the injured party and with unbelievable innocence cry out, 'We are committed to the relationship. We love Texas Baptists. We don't understand why they are doing what they are doing.'"

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Lyons survives challenge to convention leadership

DENVER (ABP) -- Henry Lyons survived an effort to have him ousted as president of the National Baptist Convention USA Inc., easily winning a vote of confidence at the convention's annual meeting in Denver.

Lyons, who is accused of adultery and mispending convention funds, won his first major battle of the convention Sept. 1 when an executive committee gave him a vote of confidence.

At a convention session Sept. 2, a motion passed giving Lyons a vote of confidence and disbanding a committee investigating his activities. Lyons opponents accused supporters of rigging the vote during a session when many delegates had left the meeting hall for lunch. They forced a vote calling for his ouster Sept. 3, which failed overwhelmingly.

The Wednesday session featured a tumultuous showdown between supporters and opponents of Lyons. Convention staff tried to forcibly remove reporters who refused to obey an order closing the meeting to the press. Meanwhile, about 100 Lyons opponents rushed the stage, demanding to be heard.

Lyons restored order and asked the press to leave. Then seven supporters and seven opponents were each given five minutes to speak.

The motion for Lyons' "immediate ouster" received about 2,000 votes out of an estimated 9,000 delegates in the hall, Ecumenical News International reported.

Lyons' defenders repeatedly issued calls for forgiveness and blamed the scandal surrounding his leadership on the white establishment and white press.

"The press killed Princess Diana," Lyons pleaded. "Don't let them kill the convention," the St. Petersburg Times reported.

In another story, the paper quoted a newspaper distributed at the convention which read: "The white establishment's target today is Rev. Lyons. Their target tomorrow, who knows? Black America, however, is the ultimate victim."

In an interview with ENI, Lyons supporter E.V. Hill criticized the media for showing interest only in the controversy. Reporters ignored a session in which the convention gave money to black colleges and evangelism by delegates in the streets, parks and jails of Denver.

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