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China ends partnership with SBC over 'clandestine' mission work

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- China's government-sanctioned Protestant organization has ended its partnership with the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board, charging the board "secretly" sent missionaries into the country without its approval.

But officials of the Richmond, Va.,-based board, which has quietly sent mission workers into China for a decade, say they will continue that practice "through any open opportunity to do so."

At stake in the dispute is the future of an undisclosed number of Southern Baptists ministering in a variety of ways in China.

A Nov. 3 "open letter" from the China Christian Council, which claims to represent 10 million Protestants in the country, said, "We ... are disappointed that the IMB ... has, without consulting us, adopted a 'two-track approach' vis-a-vis China."

The letter, signed by Han Wanzao, president of the CCC, was placed on the Internet home page of Amity News Service, the council's communication arm.

"In this [two-track] view, while not giving up its partnership with the CCC as the 'open track,' it will try to give major attention to a clandestine track, through which church workers from abroad are secretly sent to China to carry out 'missionary' work as dictated by the IMB. These persons do not intend to make their identities or their relationship to the IMB known, either to the CCC or to the Chinese government. We cannot see how this can be justified on Christian terms.

"Therefore the CCC has informed a representative of the IMB that we will not cooperate in their deception and that we cannot have partnership with any organization holding to a 'two-track approach' and give legitimacy to secret infiltration."

The IMB opened formal ties with the CCC in 1996 and currently has eight missionaries officially registered with the group or its social service arm, the Amity Foundation.

But ever since the 1980s, the IMB -- formerly the Foreign Mission Board -- has used other channels to send workers to China. Most respond to Chinese invitations to fill secular positions in the country's universities, hospitals and businesses, and share their Christian faith as opportunities present themselves.

Others, however, are appointed as missionaries and specifically assigned the task of sharing their faith in China with "unreached people groups" -- Chinese minorities that have never heard the gospel. These IMB workers live in adjacent countries and often travel in and out of China on tourist visas.

Apparently this is the two-track approach criticized by the China Christian Council.

IMB president Jerry Rankin would not disclose how many workers the board deploys in China. An IMB press release estimated at least 25,000 Southern Baptists visited China in 1994 and many of them "share[d] their faith as a natural part of their lifestyles." It is unclear what will happen to the eight IMB missionaries that relate to the CCC.

"Southern Baptists love the people of China, and the board wants to facilitate Christians responding to requests for teachers, consultants and other personnel through any open opportunity to do so," said Rankin.

"There has been no change or recent development in what we are doing," added Rankin. "While we do not work exclusively with the CCC, we have been grateful for the opportunity to provide personnel and resources for ministries and projects through the Amity Foundation.

"We would not consider other things we are doing as secretive, deceptive or clandestine, simply because it is not channeled through the China Christian Council."

Rankin's predecessor, Keith Parks, agreed the board's China policy is rooted in decisions made during his tenure as president, from 1979 to 1992.

"Through the years we struggled with this [two-track approach] with the CCC," said Parks, now global missions coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. "I tried to make concessions, but we were never able to [work it out]."

In every discussion with the CCC in the 1980s, Parks and other board officials pressed their interest in working with Chinese minorities, he said. But the CCC was unprepared to support that kind of ministry at the time and "we never came to a mutually agreeable solution," although he said recent conversations indicate a greater willingness to work with minorities. Parks said the FMB subsequently developed its own plans independent of the CCC, though within the parameters of Chinese legal restrictions.

"They [the CCC] never fully liked it," he said. "We didn't go into detail [about the board's strategy], but they were aware of what we were doing."

It is unclear why the China Christian Council acted when it did.

Not all IMB staffers have supported the "two-track" approach and some have pushed unsuccessfully for the board to restrict its work to the CCC.

The council's Nov. 3 letter expressed "respect for Southern Baptist colleagues who have given up their jobs in protest, rather than be a party to IMB deception."

Rankin acknowledged two missionaries have resigned in disagreement over the policy -- Judith Richards and another unnamed missionary who quit shortly after being employed and never traveled to the field.

Others mission workers have retired but may have been motivated in part by opposition to the policy, Rankin said.

Parks said the CCC's decision is not likely to affect others organizations working in China. While the CBF, for instance, is sending mission workers to China, "everything we're doing is above board," he said. Asked if the CBF is following a two-track approach, he responded, "Not in China."

An IMB spokesperson said it's not yet been decided if IMB workers registered with the CCC will return to the United States or remain in China in a different capacity. Parks said he'd received reports that some IMB workers "are so committed to staying in China that they are trying to find ways to get funding from others sources, like the CBF."

At least one state Baptist convention has ties with Chinese Christians. The Baptist General Association of Virginia recently signed a "prayer partnership" with China Christian Council churches in Shanghai. The partnership -- which will involve Christians in Virginia and China praying for one another -- was undertaken in conjunction with the IMB, but Rankin said he expected the partnership to be unaffected by the CCC's decision.

Concern for religious believers in China is rising in the United States and was reflected in widespread protests that greeted Chinese president Jiang Zemin on his U.S. visit last month. The SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission has been a vocal proponent of congressional legislation dealing with alleged religious persecution abroad.

There is some evidence of growing discomfort among Chinese officials at the way their treatment of believers is viewed in this country. In August, Bishop K. H. Ting, retired president of the China Christian Council, criticized a report by the U.S. State Department detailing Christian persecution around the world. The report says China has cracked down on the activities of unregistered Catholic and Protestant churches the last three years. President Jiang has invited three prominent American religious leaders to visit China at the end of the year to investigate religious-freedom concerns.

But Rankin dismissed the possibility that the CCC broke ties with the IMB over protests by American Christians or, specifically, Southern Baptists.

"We have been very circumspect in our comments on that issue [religious persecution]," Rankin said. "The decision is directed only at the IMB, and not at evangelicals in general or Southern Baptists in particular."

Bill O'Brien, director of the global center at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala., also doubted international politics played a role in the decision.

"I don't think that has anything to do with it," said O'Brien, a former vice president at the International Mission Board. "That's on a different page."

Parks said he doesn't know what motivated the council's decision. But he suggested it may have been triggered both by new leaders of the CCC who have become frustrated at the IMB's refusal to work exclusively with the council and by the recent appointment of new IMB personnel to oversee the board's ministries in China, who may be uncomfortable with the council's ties to China's communist government.

However, Rankin said the board is willing to continue working with the CCC. "We're uncomfortable with their claims to have complete control, but we're appreciative of their work and haven't closed the door."

China holds a strong place in Southern Baptist hearts. It was to China that they appointed their first missionary in 1845. At one time more Southern Baptist missionaries served in China than any country in the world. The SBC's annual offering for international missions is named for Lottie Moon, a revered missionary who spent most of her life in China.

Though the SBC pulled out all its missionaries following the communist revolution in 1949, many Christians in China today trace their roots back to Southern Baptist mission efforts.

Today Chinese Christians view their society as post-denominational and many traditionally Baptist churches are affiliated with the China Christian Council.

The council coordinates the work of Protestant churches in China through its "three-self" policy: self-government, self-support and self-propagation of churches. While the CCC claims 10 million members, some Chinese government statistics report as many as 65 million Protestants in the country.

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Seminary official admits misstating growth claims

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A claim published in a newspaper that Southern Baptist Theological Seminary experienced 20 percent enrollment gains three straight semesters was inaccurate, seminary officials acknowledge.

In a letter to the editor, seminary spokesman David Porter criticized the Louisville Courier-Journal for negative coverage of the recent firing of a seminary librarian and charged the newspaper with ignoring positive developments, including "a 20 percent increase in enrollment for the third semester in a row."

Contacted later by the Kentucky Baptist newspaper, Western Recorder, which had repeatedly requested enrollment figures, Porter said his statement was imprecise.

In a Nov. 5 letter, Porter said the statistic he cited in the Courier-Journal should have referred to a 20 percent increase in the number of new students on campus in each of the last three semesters. "My letter to the editor two weeks ago did not clarify that point," he said.

While acknowledging the error, seminary officials reported that total enrollment has increased this fall for the first time since 1995.

"We hope we have reached the bottom and now are on the upturn," said Doug Walker, vice president for institutional advancement. "From 1995 on, the numbers have been declining. We're not trying to hide any of that."

Between the first week of August and the first week of November, the Western Recorder made at least 10 requests for 1996-97 enrollment figures from the seminary. The seminary's academic year ended July 31.

After failing to provide the requested statistics for three months, Walker on Nov. 6 provided most, but not all, of the information requested. That came after the Recorder questioned a statement by Porter, the seminary's public relations director, in a letter he wrote to the Courier-Journal.

Porter's letter, written as a rebuttal to a Courier-Journal editorial strongly criticizing the seminary's firing of reference librarian Paul Debusman, was published Saturday, Nov. 1.

The Courier-Journal editorial called the firing of Debusman -- 10 months shy of retirement after 35 years of service -- a "cruel purge" by "petty, thin-skinned bigots."

In his letter, Porter accused the Courier-Journal of having a "hostile agenda toward the seminary" and refusing to report on "the plethora of newsworthy developments" at the seminary.

As unreported stories, he cited new buildings and renovations, the hiring of "one of the finest [faculties] at any theological institution" and enrollment increases.

After the letter's publication, the Recorder again asked Porter for enrollment figures and for statistics to document his statement about the 20 percent enrollment increase.

Walker, the seminary vice president for development and public relations, explained Nov. 6 that Porter "was not trying to mislead anyone" by including the inaccurate statement in his letter to the editor. In contrast, he said, President Albert Mohler has been "very precise" in what he has said about seminary enrollment.

The Courier-Journal published a brief correction of Porter's statement about enrollment Nov. 7.

At the Recorder's request, Walker and Porter provided statistics on new student on-campus enrollment to show a pattern of increases since fall 1996. They said the number of new students on campus increased from 283 to 344 in fall 1996 (21.6 percent), from 161 to 192 in spring 1997 (19 percent) and from 344 to 517 this fall (50 percent).

Walker said increasing new-student enrollment has been a key strategy of the administration's efforts to rebuild a total student population that in Mohler's first three years as president declined 34 percent.

The new-student on-campus enrollment figures include every seminary program that meets on the Louisville campus, including master's and doctoral degree programs, Boyce Bible School classes and other classes, Walker said.

Walker acknowledged that the seminary's total enrollment has not shown the same level of increase as the new-student enrollment figures. He cited two reasons: large graduating classes in recent semesters and a "retention issue."

However, he said the next couple of semesters will be "critical" to making the gains in new-student enrollment translate into increases in total enrollment. As evidence that this trend is positive, he cited a 14 percent increase (from 1,131 to 1,292) in total on-campus enrollment this fall.

Figures provided by Porter showed this to be the first increase in fall enrollment on campus in this decade. That "says a lot" about the progress the seminary is making, Porter commented.

Although the seminary did not release comparative breakdowns by degree program of the new student enrollment, a picture of where the seminary is growing emerges from annual data reported to the Association of Theological Schools, the seminary's primary accrediting agency.

Each accrediting agency, and even the SBC Executive Committee, calculates enrollment figures differently. Walker and Porter said the comparative annual figures provided to the SBC for the 1996-97 academic year will not be prepared until February and therefore were not available.

According to figures reported by the seminary to ATS, total seminary enrollment actually began increasing last fall for the first time since Mohler became president in 1993. From 1992 to 1995, total enrollment reported to ATS dropped 34 percent, from 2,269 to 1,497.

Total enrollment gained 4 percent in fall 1996 and another 7 percent this fall, bringing total 1997 fall enrollment both on campus and at 33 off-campus centers to 1,668, according to ATS figures. Despite the increase, that still is 601 fewer students (26 percent less) than the fall semester prior to the new administration's arrival.

The decline during that period, according to ATS figures, affected all academic areas and degree programs. As of this fall, according to figures reported to ATS, two categories account for the recent gains in total enrollment: a 7.5 percent increase in master of divinity students and an 18 percent increase in an "other" category that includes Boyce Bible School's certificate and diploma programs and students with special classifications who are not admitted to degree programs.

Enrollment in master's degree programs other than the master of divinity have declined every year since 1992, from 320 to 173, a 46 percent drop. Declines also have been registered in doctoral programs.

While enrollment in the master-of-divinity degree, the seminary's basic degree program, has increased this fall, the number of students in that program remains 21 percent less than in 1992.

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Elliff alleges 'misinformation' about firing of seminary librarian

DEL CITY, Okla. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Convention President Tom Elliff said he has been "overwhelmed by the massive amount of misinformation being disseminated" about the firing of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary reference librarian Paul Debusman.

What that misinformation is, however, he did not explain.

Debusman, a 35-year employee of the seminary who was 10 months away from retirement, was fired Sept. 26 apparently for writing a personal letter to Elliff that questioned the historical accuracy of statements Elliff made in a seminary chapel address.

Baptist Press, the news service of the SBC Executive Committee, did not run a story about the firing but published a Nov. 6 article citing Elliff's dismay over other news reports about the firing.

The original story about the firing, which first appeared in the Kentucky Baptist newspaper Western Recorder, was published by Associated Baptist Press, Associated Press, Religion News Service and many daily and weekly newspapers across the nation.

Elliff declined comment for a news story released by ABP Oct. 2.

In the Nov. 6 Baptist Press release, Elliff reiterated his earlier statement that as a matter of presidential protocol, and unless otherwise requested, copies of all correspondence he receives are forwarded to the boards, institutions or agencies to which they relate.

"Dr. Debusman's letter, sent on Southern Seminary letterhead, contained no such request and was routinely sent, without comment, to that institution," Elliff said in the Baptist Press statement.

"I have steadfastly refused to register any criticism, complaint or offense regarding Dr. Debusman, to any entity, either publicly or privately, in verbal or written form.

"It is unfortunate that some have been left to extensive journalistic speculation regarding this situation," Elliff said. "I have discovered evolutionary theorists are not alone in producing prodigious speculation from scant and falsely interpreted facts. Be that as it may, I have consistently refused to publicly add fuel to this issue by making repeated statements regarding it. I hold no malice or grievance toward anyone in this matter but am aware that only God can show others the sincerity of my heart."

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-- By Mark Wingfield

Voucher foes score narrow win in House

By Andrew Black and Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- House lawmakers defeated a bill Nov. 4 that would have allowed states to give federal education funds to low-income families to pay for tuition at private schools, including religious schools.

The House voted 228-191 against the Helping Empower Low-Income Parents (HELP) Scholarships Amendments, which would have used funds provided through Title VI of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 for the vouchers. Those funds are typically used for instructional materials, library materials, magnet schools, literacy programs and other programs.

The bill would have established the first national program to provide vouchers for education. The negative vote followed hours of contentious debate over how best to improve America's education system.

Voucher proponents said the plan would allow low-income students to escape a failing system and improve public schools through competition. "Are we going to help these kids or are we going to sacrifice them on the altar of a system that is failing them and failing the country?" asked Rep. James Talent, R-Mo.

Opponents countered that vouchers would hurt public schools and that private schools' discriminatory admissions policies would give them an unfair advantage in competing for federal funds.

Rep. Marge Roukema, R-N.J., said the measure would be found unconstitutional because it would allow indirect funding of religious institutions, creating an establishment of religion banned by the First Amendment. "The Constitution provides for a division between church and state, and this proposal will interfere with that division," she said.

Democrats charged Republicans with doing the bidding of the conservative Christian Coalition.

Rep. Matthew Martinez, D-Calif., quoted Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson as saying that the public education movement has been an "anti-Christian movement." Martinez also quoted televangelist Jerry Falwell as saying: "I hope to live to see the day when we won't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again, and Christians will be running them."

Rep. Frank Riggs, R-Calif., sponsor of the HELP proposal, spoke after Martinez and said that "Christian bashing" should not take place on the House floor.

Martinez later responded: "I did not bash any Christians. I bashed two particular people for what they said."

In a related action, the Senate failed Nov. 4 to get the 60 needed votes to cut off debate on a proposal to allow tax-free expenditures from education IRAs.

The 56-44 vote stopped further action on a bill that would have allowed expenditures from the accounts for elementary and secondary school expenses, including tuition at parochial schools. The House approved a similar bill in October.

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