

Associated Baptist Press

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Virginia-SBC partnership not a true one, says president

By Michael Clingenpeel

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The relationship between the Baptist General Association of Virginia and the Southern Baptist Convention is not a true "partnership" and needs to be re-examined, the new BGAV president told a gathering of Virginia Baptist leaders Dec. 3.

William Wilson, in his first address to the Virginia Baptist Mission Board since his election in Roanoke in November, said the SBC holds "a strange definition of partnership" because it accepts money from BGAV churches while giving only token representation on national denominational committees to the state group.

Wilson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Waynesboro, Va., cited statistics showing BGAV churches gave more than \$11 million to SBC causes in 1997, while 75 percent of trustees of SBC agencies from Virginia came from churches related to the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, a new state convention that split off from the BGAV last year.

"I'm not the smartest person in the world, but I get the idea, 'We want your money but we don't want you,' Wilson said about the Southern Baptist Convention. "We in effect are funding things [while] we have absolutely no say in how money is spent, and personally I'm responsible for being a better steward than that."

Wilson, who has served on the Coordinating Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, added he would ask next year's BGAV budget committee to consider the meaning of partnership as it prepares the 1999 budget. He said he will ask the group to bring a budget at next year's annual BGAV meeting that is "simpler and clearer" and which recognizes "those who want to join with us in our mission and will treat us as a full partner in God's family."

Wilson's comments on the BGAV's still-unsettled relationship with the SBC came in a largely positive address in which he characterized the final years of this century as "a wonderful time to be a Baptist, a Virginia Baptist."

Virginia Baptists were forced by years of denominational conflict to rediscover "how we see ourselves and what we value." This process of "self-identification," Wilson said, resulted in new commitments to autonomy, mission and partnership.

"The future lies in helping local churches be God's people in their place," said Wilson, but he called the challenges in Virginia greater than churches can handle alone. "We're looking for partners ... people that can help us." Such future partnerships, cautioned Wilson, should "perform ministry consistent with the vision and values of the BGAV" in addition to accepting BGAV money.

The SBC, Wilson continued, has not wanted a true partnership. Instead, they have used the Cooperative Program unified budget "as an instrument of coercion," he said.

According to statistics prepared for Wilson by the BGAV treasurer's office and confirmed by the Religious Herald, newsjournal of the BGAV, 24 trustees from Virginia serve on SBC trustee boards including the Executive Committee, International Mission Board, North American Mission Board, Sunday School Board, Annuity Board, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, Committee on Boards and Committees and six seminaries.

Half, or 12, are in churches uniquely aligned with the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia. Three are in dually aligned churches. Two are in churches whose giving plans give only minimal financial support to BGAV ministries.

Of the remaining seven trustees in Virginia, five belong to churches which support both the BGAV and SBC through a giving track that divides funds between the two. Two others belong to churches which support other BGAV giving options which do not include funding for the SBC.

During the past year BGAV churches gave more than \$4.3 million to the Cooperative Program, \$3.9 million to Lottie Moon offering for international missions, \$1.8 million to the Annie Armstrong offering for home missions and about \$400,000 to world hunger relief through the International and North American Mission boards.

But the flow of money is not one way. Last year, for example, SBC entities returned about \$400,000 to Virginia to share costs of missionaries, retirement benefits for pastors and some members of the BGAV staff.

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Virginia's conservative convention hires four new staff members

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Virginia's year-old conservative Baptist convention has added four people to its staff to coordinate ministries around the state.

The executive board of the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia unanimously elected the four men Nov. 23, said SBCV President Terry Harper, pastor of Colonial Heights (Va.) Baptist Church. They will join SBCV Executive Director Doyle Chauncey as full-time employees on Jan. 1.

The SBCV separated from the Baptist General Association of Virginia in 1996, charging the older BGAV is theologically liberal and is loosening ties to the national Southern Baptist Convention.

Since then 113 congregations have affiliated "uniquely" with the SBCV and another 49 maintain dual ties with both the SBCV and the BGAV. About 1,460 congregations now affiliate with the BGAV.

Joining the SBCV staff are:

-- Mark Baldwin, church-growth consultant. Baldwin will serve as a Christian education consultant for churches and assist Chauncey with administrative duties. He has been minister of education at Grove Avenue Baptist Church in Richmond for the past four years and will continue to live in Richmond.

-- Kenneth Gooch, missions catalyst. From a base in Newport News, Gooch will coordinate the SBCV's mission endeavors in the United States and abroad, including the group's continuing work with Baptists in Romania. He has been pastor of Warwick Baptist Church in Newport News for the past six years.

-- Ken Nienke, church-growth consultant. Nienke also will serve as Christian education consultant from a base in Roanoke. He has been director of education and discipleship at West Salem Baptist Church in Salem since 1983.

-- Mark Reon, evangelism assistant. Reon will plan evangelism conferences and programs in conjunction with the SBCV's evangelism committee, but primarily will coordinate ministry to students on Virginia's college and university campuses. He has been minister to students at Colonial Heights Baptist Church.

In addition to their specialized responsibilities, all four staff members will be involved in starting new churches and encouraging growth in existing churches, said Harper. The SBCV has set a goal of starting 100 new churches in the next two years, he said.

Harper acknowledged some confusion could result from the SBCV's ministry on college campuses, an area in which the BGAV has been at work for many years.

To minimize the confusion, he said, the SBCV will avoid the term-"Baptist Student Union," a name long used by Southern Baptists engaged in campus ministry.

Already, the SBCV has a presence on three campuses in the state -- Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Longwood College in Farmville and Virginia State University in Petersburg -- and is developing a fourth at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, said Harper.

The student ministries group of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board -- the BGAV's executive body -- maintains work on 44 Virginia campuses.

In other business at a Nov. 23 board meeting, Chauncey reported on the recent move of the SBCV's main offices from Virginia Beach to Richmond, where temporary offices are being leased in the city's western suburbs. A strategy committee is studying whether to obtain permanent facilities.

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Mackey elected Kentucky executive

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Bill Mackey, a 56-year-old Baptist leader from South Carolina, was elected Dec. 8 as executive secretary-treasurer of the 770,000-member Kentucky Baptist Convention.

The Kentucky Baptist executive board unanimously elected Mackey, a former Kentucky pastor who currently serves on the staff of the South Carolina Baptist Convention. He was nominated by a 14-member search committee that worked 15 months.

Search committee chairwoman Peggy Hicks of Louisville described Mackey as "conservative by conviction and non-political" and predicted he will "work well with the entire constituency."

Since 1992, Mackey has been director of the South Carolina convention's leadership development and evangelism growth team. From 1979 to 1992 he was the South Carolina convention's evangelism director.

Mackey addressed the board briefly, talking about his roots in Kentucky as a seminary student, then as an associate pastor at First Baptist Church in Middlesboro and as pastor of First Baptist Church of Whitesburg.

He cited two words that are "very important" to him: relationship and service.

"We can't control the issues and challenges that come," he said. "But we can control the relationships in which we confront those issues and challenges."

He said the state convention's main function is to serve churches by helping them experience growth and ministry.

When KBC President Gayle Toole then opened the floor for questions, none were asked. Asked to signify an affirmative vote by standing, board members did so unanimously.

Mackey begins his new job Feb. 1. He succeeds Bill Marshall, who retired last year after 14 years as KBC executive secretary.

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Mercer trustees approve reconciliation plan

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Mercer University trustees overwhelmingly approved a plan designed to ease tensions and chart future cooperation between the Macon school and the 1.2 million-member Georgia Baptist Convention.

In a closed-door meeting Dec. 4, Mercer trustees voted 38-5 in favor of a nine-point reconciliation plan drafted by a study committee and approved by GBC messengers in November.

Some trustees said they were displeased, however, with a resolution passed by the state convention threatening to cut off \$2.8 million in funding to the university unless trustees approved the plan. Past trustee chairman Lee Burge said he voted against the measure not because he was particularly opposed to the reconciliation plan but due to the "punitive and mandatory terms" in which it was presented.

The plan is aimed at calming tensions over a recent book by Mercer President Kirby Godsey, "When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest." A Georgia Baptist committee labeled some of Godsey's views heresy and some Georgia Baptists called for his resignation. Mercer trustees defended Godsey, who denies he is a heretic.

The reconciliation plan included recommendations to give the state convention more input in selection of Mercer trustees and future presidents and for creation of a "joint liaison committee" to foster communication between the two groups. It also asks that all future presidents affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message," a 1963 confessional statement of Baptist teachings.

Trustees issued a statement pledging "a clear and unequivocal commitment to work with the convention in ways that are constructive and reasonable" while spelling out that trustees are ultimately responsible to govern the school.

Godsey said the vote to approve the plan affirms both trustees' responsibility to "oversee, without interference, all the affairs of the university" and a "continuing desire to foster cooperation and partnership" with the state convention.

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-- By ABP staff

American Baptist commission proposes unity recommendations

CHERRY HILL, N.J. (ABP) -- An American Baptist Churches USA panel named to "deal constructively" with divisive issues -- including whether churches kicked out an ABC regional affiliate group for affirming homosexuals may continue to relate to the national denomination -- has submitted its report for a first reading.

The 1.5 million-member denomination's General Board received the anticipated Commission on Denominational Unity report at its semi-annual meeting Nov. 22 in Cherry Hill, N.J. Following input by General Board members, which could result in textual changes, the report is scheduled for action by the full board in June.

The General Board established the "broadly representative" commission in November 1995 to study issues generating "considerable disagreement" among American Baptists, according to American Baptist News Service.

Among those issues is a polity question regarding the status of congregations kicked out of their region over membership in the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, a group which advocates inclusion of gays, lesbians and bisexuals in American Baptist churches.

The report recommends that the General Board:

- "Maintain" both a 1992 resolution calling homosexuality "incompatible with Christian teaching" and another statement calling for dialogue on sexuality issues that acknowledges a "variety of understandings" among American Baptists concerning homosexuality.

- "Recognize and uphold" the right of American Baptist regions to admit and dismiss churches using criteria that are in addition to those in the standard relationship covenant.

- Recognize the right of churches dismissed from their region over issues like homosexuality to appeal to the General Board if they feel due process was denied.

- Recognize the right of churches dismissed from one region to apply for admission into another.

- Require that a church dismissed from one region either appeal or join a new region within two years in order to remain a "cooperating church" in the ABC.

Other recommendations address other "broadly felt" concerns, including what American Baptists believe about the Bible, how American Baptists should handle disagreements and the perceived "distance" between local congregations and denominational leaders.

The commission acknowledged "there is no perfect solution to potential disunity" which would please all American Baptists. The group said its report aimed to reaffirm the centrality of the Bible; affirm the balance between local, regional and national polity groups; promote unity and common mission; and "create time and space" for the development of common-ground solutions to disagreements.

Daniel Weiss, general secretary of American Baptist Churches, USA, predicted the report would produce some disagreements but challenged General Board members to "discuss the recommendations ... without jeopardizing our unity."

Weiss predicted recommendations on how to handle future conflicts would be particularly helpful. "We will always have differences," Weiss said. "They are a necessary consequence of the very thing that is at the heart of being a Baptist -- freedom."

Brenda Moulton, national coordinator of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, said she is "not in a position to comment" on the group's official response until its council has an opportunity to discuss the report. But she said she is "personally encouraged" that the diverse group was able to "reach a compromise" on potentially divisive issues such as biblical authority and "the delicate balance between autonomy and interdependence in our polity."

In other business, the American Baptist General Board:

- Passed a resolution calling for a complete ban on landmines.

- Approved leasing guidelines for the American Baptist Mission Center in Valley Forge, Pa. Some American Baptists recently protested the leasing of office space to a defense contractor. The new guidelines forbid leasing space to businesses that are "substantially engaged" in the manufacture of war material.

- Based on a consultant's report, determined the "timing is not appropriate" for moving forward with a \$98.5 million national capital campaign.

New NIV completed minus gender revisions

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (ABP) -- A new, easier-to-read New International Version Bible translation is complete -- minus the so-called "gender-accurate" revisions which spawned controversy in an earlier edition.

The updated New International Reader's Version (NIrV) has been completed on schedule, according to Gene Rubingh, vice president for translations at the International Bible Society in Colorado Springs, Colo. The Bible, due for release in August, contains simpler language than the regular NIV and is geared toward children and readers for whom English is a second language.

But the new Bible treats gender exactly the same as the current NIV. Earlier, translators had planned to replace some male references in the Bible with gender-neutral terms. But they abandoned those plans when a controversy erupted over news reports about the planned revisions.

For example, the NIrV originally was going to translate Gen. 1:27 as: "So God created human beings in his own likeness. He created them in the likeness of God."

The revised edition will render Gen. 1:27 as: "So God created man in his own likeness. He created him in the likeness of God."

Bible society officials insisted the dispute was based on misunderstanding and distortion. They said their intent was not to create a "unisex" Bible, as some critics charged, but to more accurately render certain passages which use gender-specific language though context implies that both males and females are concerned.

Still, the IBS scrapped those plans in May, citing "significant response" to the proposed updates. To proceed with "gender-accurate" revisions in spite of the controversy would "cause division in the body of Christ and compromise our mission," IBS President Lars Dunberg said.

A team appointed to tackle the recent gender-related changes included representatives from two religious groups which expressed concerns about the original translation.

Paul House, an Old Testament professor from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and Ben Aker, a New Testament professor at Assembly of God Theological Seminary in Springfield, Mo., were placed on the team. They joined Ronald Youngblood and Kenneth Barker, members of the international group which first produced the NIV in 1978.

The NIrV is translated thought-for-thought from biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, as compared to the word-for-word translation method used in more literal versions such as the King James Version. The NIrV uses shorter sentences and simpler grammar than the regular NIV, gearing it to a third-grade reading level. A 40-member translation team worked four years on the project.

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-- By Bob Allen

Baylor names Ferdon chair of journalism department

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Following a yearlong search, Baylor University has named faculty member Douglas Ferdon as chair of the Texas Baptist school's journalism department.

Ferdon, a member of Baylor's faculty since 1982, has been the department's acting director since last October. His predecessor in the post, Michael Bishop, and another administrator were demoted last year in a publicized dispute with Baylor's president.

Ferdon's three-year appointment follows a national search, according to Baylor officials.

Ferdon "brings a great deal of practical experience as a journalist to this experience, as well as outstanding leadership skills," said Wallace Daniel, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

A graduate of the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh, Ferdon earned a master's degree from the University of Florida and a doctorate from the University of North Texas. Before teaching, he worked as a sportswriter in Florida, in public relations for a college in Arizona and as an editor for the U.S. Army.

He joined Baylor's journalism department as a lecturer in 1982. He was named assistant professor in 1989 and associate professor in 1995. He previously taught at Gulf Coast Community College in Panama City, Fla., and at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas.

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-- By ABP staff

Principal no fan of state-backed school prayer

By David Winfrey

WEST PADUCAH, Ky. (ABP) -- The separation of church and state does not mean students can't pray in school, according to the principal of the Kentucky high school where eight students were shot in a student-led prayer circle Dec. 1.

"When people talk about, 'Kids can't pray in school,' that just bothers me a lot because I know good and well they can," said Bill Bond, principal of Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky. "I know they can if they want to. That's not an issue."

Bond, a member of First Baptist Church of Paducah, said one positive outcome of the tragic shootings, which killed three girls, is that more students are now going to the morning prayer group.

Bond said he believes in prayer but would not want to see the return of school-sponsored prayer.

"The law says -- and I believe in the law -- that we should not promote any religion in public school," he noted. "But it also says we should not suppress.

"If we had a Muslim group that wanted to have a prayer group, they would also have a prayer group, and I would support their right to do that before school just as much as this group," he added.

Bond said when his Sunday school class visited a synagogue to better understand the Jewish faith, he saw a Heath student who regularly goes to the prayer group reading from the Torah.

"I see him in the prayer group almost every day, and he's praying to his God and I think that's so cool."

Students are free to pray not only before school but between classes and before meals, Bond said.

"If students want to pray there's plenty of time to pray," he said. "I've never known a principal anywhere in the nation that stopped a kid from praying over their meal when they got ready to eat it."

Bond said he is not an advocate of state-supported school prayer, in part, because he's seen the student-initiated prayer group work at Heath.

"When I see the politicians going with that issue, I think they're just going after votes of people who don't know what the rules are, what the law is and what the rights of students are."

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UPDATE: Here is an updated figure for the Dec. 4 ABP story "Hunger relief opening doors for diplomacy, Baptist leader says." Please replace the 26th paragraph with the following:

Yoon, who also serves on the Coordinating Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, was instrumental in getting that group to establish a famine-relief fund for North Korea at its general assembly in June. The fund had received nearly \$40,000 through November.

END