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# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Executive Committee proposes two-day SBC annual meeting**

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention will be shortened from two-and-a-half days to a two-day format, if recommendations by the SBC Executive Committee are approved.

An ad-hoc study committee proposed the shorter convention format to the Executive Committee Feb. 16. The Executive Committee will propose bylaw changes at this summer's SBC annual meeting to implement the shorter schedule beginning in 1999.

The current convention format opens on Tuesday morning and lasts until Thursday noon. In recent years, however, the closing session has been so poorly attended that at times business could not be conducted for lack of a quorum.

"We're going to vote tonight on what we practice every June," said Frank Cox, a member of an annual-meeting study committee appointed last fall.

The change would not cut into the amount of time scheduled for conducting business. Most of the savings would come from time formerly allotted for reports by denominational agencies that were eliminated or merged in a recent SBC restructuring.

In other business at the Feb. 16-17 meeting in Nashville, Tenn., the Executive Committee recommended a \$155 million unified budget to be presented at the convention's annual meeting June 9-11 in Salt Lake City.

The proposed 1998-99 budget allocates 50 percent of Cooperative Program receipts to the SBC International Mission Board, about 22 percent to the North American Mission Board, 21 percent to seminaries and 1.5 percent to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commissions. Other funds go to "facilitating ministries" including the Annuity Board, the SBC operating budget, SBC Foundation and the Baptist World Alliance.

Those percentages are virtually unchanged from this year's budget, which was presented last year as a "transitional" spending plan for the massive denominational restructuring implemented last year.

The Executive Committee postponed until next February a vote on a new budgeting process proposed by an another ad-hoc committee. Under the new process, percentages allocated to various entities would remain in force for three years. Now, they are determined annually. The change would provide entities with more stability for long-range planning, the study committee said.

The new plan also called for any budget surpluses to be used for "special missions initiatives" such as projects for urban evangelism or international missions. Surplus funds now are used for capital needs at agencies and institutions. Presidents of the six SBC seminaries said loss of those funds would create a financial crisis. After debate, the Executive Committee adopted a motion to postpone a vote pending further study.

In other business, the Executive Committee:

-- Recommended that the convention rename its Inter-Agency Council the Great Commission Council. The council correlates the work of the various convention entities. It is composed of chief executives of SBC entities, the Executive Committee and Woman's Missionary Union.

The Great Commission Council was originally to be the designation for a new committee formed to coordinate work of the International and North American Mission boards. The Executive Committee is proposing that body instead be called the Inter-Missions Council.

-- Declined to recommend a new track for Cooperative Program giving. Ron Wilson, a pastor from California, made a motion at the SBC in 1997 calling for an additional track allowing churches to give money directly to the Executive Committee, which would split the funds and send 50 percent to the church's state convention. The motion was referred to the Executive Committee.

Typically, Cooperative Program gifts are sent to state conventions, which forward a percentage determined by the state to the SBC. States will honor church's requests to disburse their gifts in other ways, but such funds are usually credited as "designated" gifts and not as part of the unified "Cooperative Program" budget.

Citing a 1995 policy change under which gifts sent directly to the Executive Committee for distribution only to SBC entities are reported as Cooperative Program gifts, the Executive Committee responded to the referred motion that "adequate options are presently available for churches to use as they exercise their autonomy in supporting Southern Baptist ministries."

-- Received as information a report that a contract had been signed with Barry McCarty to serve as chief parliamentarian at the upcoming SBC annual meeting.

-- Requested more information from the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission regarding an SBC motion to establish a proxy-vote system allowing Southern Baptists to exercise moral influence in corporations in which convention agencies own stock.

Richard Land of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission suggested the creation of a standing committee to "use the investment influence" of Southern Baptists. The Executive Committee asked Land to provide specific information about costs, predicted areas of impact, a time line for implementation and concerns about ascending liability.

-- Received as information a report of the North American Mission Board regarding the use of television and radio spots by Southern Baptists. An SBC motion referred to the Executive Committee called on NAMB to develop TV and radio spots to "reach people for Christ, strengthen families and enhance the image of Southern Baptists across America."

NAMB President Robert Reccord said the motion's intent was for Southern Baptists to develop spots similar to those done by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"At the North American Mission Board, we have no desire to do something the Mormons do," Reccord said. "We have the desire to do things as Southern Baptists do."

Reccord estimated it would cost between \$28 million and \$35 million a year to produce the spots.

Commercials are the primary way the Mormon church conducts home missions, while Southern Baptists emphasize missionary personnel, Reccord said. "Their whole home mission thrust is commercials. We Southern Baptists have said it works better when it is person to person, supported by media, not driven by media."

Executive Committee chairman James Merritt noted that Mormons are required to give 10 percent of their income to their church. "Quite frankly, if Southern Baptists tithed, it wouldn't be an either/or, it would be a both/and," Merritt said.

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## **SBC/BWA study committee calls for continued relationship**

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention will not pull out of the Baptist World Alliance, reported a committee named to investigate charges of liberalism within the worldwide Baptist fellowship.

Based on "good faith discussions" with BWA leaders, the study committee recommended that the SBC continue to fund the organization while calling for "ongoing review" of the relationship.

At the study committee's recommendation, the SBC Executive Committee approved \$425,000 in funding for the BWA in 1996-97, an increase from the \$417,838 budgeted this year. The budget, however, moves the BWA from a percentage allocation of the SBC's unified budget to a flat dollar amount.

Executive Committee chairman James Merritt appointed an ad hoc committee last fall, at the request of the convention's president, Oklahoma pastor Tom Elliff, to "evaluate the relationship" between the SBC and BWA.

Prompting the study were "concerns and questions" raised by Southern Baptists about the BWA, according to a one-page written report of the study committee. Those concerns reportedly included anecdotes of liberal theology being espoused at BWA meetings and a perception that some member groups are not evangelistic.

In announcing the committee's formation last September, SBC president Elliff said "questions have arisen regarding perceived changes in the mission, focus and doctrinal positions of the BWA."

The BWA study committee "met on several occasions" with Baptist World Alliance leaders, Morris Chapman, Executive Committee president and chief executive officer, reported Feb. 17.

The study committee's written report listed three "observations" from discussions with BWA leaders:

-- BWA personnel "affirmed a definite commitment to historic Baptist theology, particularly in reference to the Bible, the person and work of Christ, evangelism and missions," the committee found.

-- The BWA's constitution lists the organization's objective as, "To act as an agency for the expression of biblical faith and historically distinctive Baptist principles and practices." The BWA "has declared its intention to reflect that objective in its conference planning," the study committee reported.

-- Officers and staff of the BWA "have indicated their desire for current Southern Baptist leaders to become more involved at all levels" of the organization, the report continued. "Without reservation, the committee affirms Southern Baptists need to relate to Baptists of the world and strongly desire that this may be facilitated in part through participation in the Baptist World Alliance. Good stewardship requires the Southern Baptist Convention continually to evaluate and assess supporting relationships with non-SBC organizations."

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## **Southern Baptists in Utah face 'divine appointment,' leaders says**

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- This year's Southern Baptist Convention in Salt Lake City will be a "divine appointment" for Baptists, Utah-Idaho's top Baptist executive told Southern Baptist leaders Feb. 16.

"Utah has never experienced what they are getting ready to experience this summer," Jim Harding, executive director of the Utah-Idaho Southern Baptist Convention, said in a report to the SBC Executive Committee. "There has never been a major evangelical group come into Utah and do what we are planning to do this summer."

"It is an answer to prayer ... for Southern Baptists to center their great resources on this area," Harding said. "There's so much more than a meeting going to take place this summer. ... This is, my friends, a divine appointment, I am convinced."

Harding likened ministering in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints stronghold to being in a foreign country. Baptist pastors cannot be bivocational because they and their families will be "blacklisted" by Mormon employers and unable to find secular work, he said.

"There is a spiritual cloud of oppressiveness that I can only describe to you. You would have to experience it to understand it," Harding said.

When Baptist leaders first began discussing holding a convention in Utah, Harding said, he said he was asked why Southern Baptists should go there.

"The reason Southern Baptists must come to Salt Lake City is if we are who we say we are, and that is a people on mission for Christ, we must go where we have never been before and share the gospel," Harding said.

Harding asked Southern Baptists to begin praying for evangelistic outreach at the annual meeting.

"The closer we get to the convention in June, the more Satan works to try to disrupt," he said. "We're having front-page articles now in the Salt Lake Tribune by apostles of the Mormon Church trying to reaffirm that they are in fact Christian."

"I plead with you to go home ... to your friends, to your churches, to your associations, to your states and begin bathing the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention and everything associated with it ... begin bathing it in prayer as never before."

"I'm convinced God's going to do something eternal this summer in Salt Lake, but it can only happen through prayer."

Executive Committee chairman James Merritt asked fellow members to pray for him as he prepares to preach the convention's keynote sermon in Salt Lake City.

"The Mormon influence is overwhelming out there, but they need Jesus," said Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga. "We're not going as messengers. We're going as missionaries."

## Elliff poses 'non-negotiables' for authentic Christianity

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Christian faith is characterized by holy living, unapologetic witness and inward assurance, Southern Baptist Convention president Tom Elliff told denominational leaders Feb. 16.

In remarks to the SBC Executive Committee last year, Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla., urged every Southern Baptist to "certify his or her experience with Christ" by revisiting basic Christian beliefs.

In his final address to the same group, Elliff, who concludes his term as SBC president in June, sounded a similar theme, outlining what he views as "non-negotiables" in determining whether a person "truly has repented."

Elliff posed three questions "every man and woman ought to ask ourselves" as church members, Sunday school teachers and family members:

-- "Am I on an upward path?"

Elliff urged all Southern Baptists to "go back to the moment you consider the moment of your conversion" and to ask "are there some definite signs of progress in my life?"

"To hear some people pray today was to hear them pray 20 years ago," he said.

Elliff said for too many Southern Baptists, their initial profession of faith was their most intense spiritual experience. "And from that moment on, it's been a cooling-off period," Elliff said.

Elliff said he wanted to "be very careful" about his next statement, because several people have asked him about allegations of moral wrongdoing against President Clinton, who is a Southern Baptist.

"There's a common misconception -- and it's not a misconception that exists only in the White House; it exists in the church house -- that there is a difference between becoming a Christian and being a Christian."

Elliff said it is impossible for someone to be a Christian and yet remain comfortable with sin. "That cannot happen," he said.

Elliff said Baptists believe people are saved by faith in Jesus and do not earn merit through good works. But that doesn't mean good works don't matter, he said.

"We have this idea: you have a moment in time where you make a decision and [then] God has no concern with how you behave. Where do you find that in Scripture?" he asked.

"While we are not saved by our works, neither are we saved by a faith that doesn't produce good works," Elliff said. "Good works are always attendant by faith."

-- "Am I making an outward profession?"

Elliff said he sometimes carries a "slim-line" Bible because it is lighter and smaller than a full-size version. "What if I choose a slim-line Bible because it's not as visible or obvious?" Elliff asked. "What if I begin practicing a slim-line faith?"

Elliff said reporters often ask him if Southern Baptists intend to go to their convention in Salt Lake City this summer and witness to Mormons there. "Yes, we're going to be salt in Salt Lake," he quipped.

That brings a follow-up question. Do you believe Mormons need to be saved? "My answer is I believe everybody ought to be saved," Elliff said. "I know a lot more Baptists than I know Christians."

Elliff scoffed at the suggestion that Southern Baptist witnessing efforts will offend Mormons, noting that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is legendary for aggressive proselytizing. "These folks are knocking on my door and telling me I'm apostate," he said.

"I'm not poking fun at them," Elliff said. "I'm just saying what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander."

Elliff criticized people who refuse to discuss their faith because it is "personal."

"Your faith is very personal, but it is never private," Elliff said. "I've discovered that true believers are unashamed to share about their faith in Christ."

-- "Do I have an inward peace?"

Elliff confessed his third criteria of "inward peace" is more "subjective" than the others. "I don't know how you explain it other than it's knowing and knowing and knowing that you know."

"It's the Holy Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God," Elliff said.

Elliff said his wife was involved in church life and ministry for years before making an authentic profession of faith as an adult. While most people regarded her a spiritual person before her conversion, the difference the experience made in her devotional life was "like night and day," Elliff said. He wondered how many people in Baptist church pews are similarly just going through the motions of their faith.

"What about all those people on our rolls that never show up? If that could be real for them, what a revolution. Talk about a revival," he said.

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## **Editors vote to dialogue, call for journalistic standards**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Baptist state newspaper editors voted Feb. 12 to seek dialogue with Southern Baptist Convention entities about giving denominational journalists more access to news about those agencies, boards and committees.

The Association of State Baptist Papers, in its annual meeting, voted unanimously to seek conferences with the SBC entities after discussion of various concerns. During discussion, editors called on decision-making bodies to develop a consistent approach regarding executive sessions and expressed concern that agency writers are sending fewer feature stories to state papers.

In other business, Baptist editors called for a committee to develop a "code of ethics" to promote professional journalistic standards among Baptist papers.

Michael Chute, chairman of the association's press services liaison committee, acknowledged both the autonomy and diversity of state papers and their editors. However, all editors "need to maintain a high degree of professional standards," both as journalists and as Christian leaders, added Chute, editor of the Florida Baptist Witness.

The association also adopted a rule barring current directors of two news services from serving on the press services liaison committee. The committee relates to Baptist Press, official news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, and Associated Baptist Press, an independent news service. Both BP and ABP are associate members of the press association.

Currently, two members of the association serve on ABP's board of directors. One state paper editor serves on the SBC Executive Committee, which oversees the work of Baptist Press.

The new rule is aimed at removing any potential conflict of interest for members of the liaison committee, which is responsible for monitoring the news services for fairness and journalistic quality.

Both news services provided policy documents pledging their commitment to such standards.

Trennis Henderson, editor of the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine and a member of the liaison committee, said editors "have a responsibility to see these as documents of accountability."

Also at the meeting, Mike McCullough, editor of the Nevada Baptist, completed a one-year term as ASBP president. Marv Knox, associate editor of the Baptist Standard in Texas, became the new president at the end of the meeting, as a result of his election last year.

ASBP members chose Mark Wyatt, editor of the California Southern Baptist, as president-elect for the coming year.

In other action, the editors unanimously passed a resolution honoring Fletcher Allen, editor of Tennessee's Baptist and Reflector, who retires April 1 after more than 30 years at Baptist state newspapers in South Carolina, Maryland and Tennessee.

The editors also voted to break with tradition and meet separately next year from executive directors of state conventions. After several meetings between representatives of the two groups to discuss a scheduling mixup, however, the editors voted to reconsider. Members will be polled to decide whether to meet separately in New Mexico next year or join the executive directors in Colorado.

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-- By Michael Chute and Bob Allen

## **Christians losing influence in society, Barna reports**

By David Winfrey

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- Christians in America can talk the talk, but not enough of them are walking the walk to have an impact on society, according to Christian researcher George Barna.

"Our research for close to two decades has shown that Christians have had an alarming lack of impact on the national culture as a direct outgrowth of their faith," Barna wrote in a recent issue of his bimonthly newsletter, the Barna Report.

The Barna Research Group analyzed 131 measures of attitudes, beliefs and behaviors to determine if Christianity is making a difference in the United States. The results were a harsh indictment of churches and individual believers in America.

"The Christian faith appears to have a minimal influence on the thoughts, words and deeds of people under the age of 40 -- a trend with foreboding implications for the future," Barna wrote.

The polls compared beliefs and behaviors of Christians and non-Christians.

Most significant differences between Christians and non-Christians occurred in the area of religious behavior such as prayer, giving money to a church or volunteering for a church ministry.

But "non-Christians expect Christians to differ in the religious realm," Barna wrote. "There are few instances of visible differences outside of the religious domain."

The one visible difference between Christians and others related to non-religious behavior: Christians were half as likely as non-Christians to have drunk an alcoholic beverage in the past month.

"The bottom line is that in the dimensions of life where Christians can truly influence their world ... we have failed to demonstrate the power of our faith," Barna wrote. "Christianity is not losing influence in America because it is overmatched by the challenges of the day; it is losing impact because believers have been unsuccessful at merging faith and lifestyle outside the walls of the church.

Christians are losing their impact, Barna stated, despite data indicating Christianity should be on the rise. For instance:

- Nine out of 10 adults have a very positive impression of the Christian faith.
- More than two-thirds of adults say they want a significant personal relationship with God.
- Most Americans (84 percent) consider themselves to be Christians.

Despite those numbers, Americans increasingly are likely to state that Christianity is losing its influence, that they have no Christian role models and that the Christian faith teaches the same principles as other major faiths.

"No one can deny that millions of Christians are doing their best at living in ways that honor Christ," Barna wrote. "But it also appears that not enough of us are mastering the art of living Christianly and thus being agents of transformation."

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## **British agency seeks allies to reverse church's decline**

By Mark Wingfield

WARWICK, England (ABP) -- Brian Pearson, general director of the Church Pastoral Aid Society in Warwick, England, is a man on a mission to introduce Britain's children to Jesus.

Regular church attendance in Britain has fallen below 10 percent of the population, Pearson explained. And the picture is even bleaker when narrowed to children and teens.

Among British children age 16 and younger, only 4 percent have had any encounter with the work of the church.

"It's staggering," he said. "What we now have is not just one generation but two generations who haven't even had the opportunity to reject the gospel."

The problem is compounded by the fact that few British churches offer any programming for children or teens, Pearson said. "Less than 50 percent of our churches in England have any youth and children's work."

And the bulk of that work is with youth, he said, adding that only 20 percent of British churches offer anything for children. "You can go to a moderate size town and find no church with anything for children."

"I'm not proud of that," Pearson said. "We've got a lost generation. Unless we act quickly, we are not going to lose just Generation X but Generation X minus 1. We are a church one generation away from extinction."

Equally sobering, Pearson said, is the way American church leaders are able to identify with Britain's problem when he explains it. He has been told repeatedly that the church in the United States could be on the same path unless something is done to reach younger generations more effectively.

Pearson is appealing for help in Britain, and Southern Baptists should have at least two reasons to respond, he said. First, Southern Baptists' missionary spirit should compel them to help their sister churches across the ocean, he said. And second, by working to stem the tide overseas, Americans could learn how to do more to reach children in their own country as well.

Pearson and the missionary society he directs have launched an ambitious plan to recruit, train and place children's workers in churches across Britain and Ireland. The Promise Plus appeal seeks to help 2,000 new leaders begin new work with children and youth over a four-year period.

Pearson made his first international appeal for the Promise Plus project during last year's Reconciliation '97 conference in Coventry, England. He since has been working with Southern Baptists and others to plan for the Reconciliation '98 conference to be held in Louisville, Ky., in November.

"We are looking for partners in mission," he said. "We are looking for people who will come alongside and help us."

To date, 1,500 potential volunteer workers have been identified, and many have been trained. But the recruiting, educating and lending of support must become an ongoing process, Pearson explained.

"We're not prepared to work short-term on this. We must help sustain the work."

The task at hand requires rebuilding ministries to children and youth from nothing.

It's not just a matter of restarting programs, but of explaining the need and training people to do the work, he said. "It's starting to sow the seed all over again. We should never have let the field go fallow."

The Church Pastoral Aid Society is an Anglican mission agency with an emphasis on evangelism, church-starting, producing ministry resources, training church leaders and supporting work with children and youth.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information about the Promise Plus appeal in Britain, contact Pearson at the Church Pastoral Aid Society, Athena Drive, Tachbrook Park, Warwick, England CV34 6NG. In the United States, questions also may be addressed to Larry Martin, director of the Kentucky Baptist Convention's missions and evangelism division, at (502) 245-4101.

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