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Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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Moderates want to expand Baptists Committed model

By Greg Warner

NASHVILLE, Tenn (ABP) -- Moderate Baptists still looking to influence the direction of state Baptist conventions have formed a national council to help form Baptists Committed organizations in as many as 12 more states.

The state groups likely would be patterned after Texas Baptists Committed, the decade-old political organization that has retained control of the Texas convention for moderates. Already similar organizations exist in Arkansas and Oklahoma, two states where conservatives dominate.

The motivation behind the expansion effort is "to preserve the integrity of the state conventions" and "leave a lasting legacy of freedom for our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren," said Herbert Reynolds, chancellor of Baylor University and moderator of a March 2-3 meeting in Nashville, Tenn.

Reynolds and others said many moderates are not ready to withdraw from the state conventions, although many others already have redirected their energies toward the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a national moderate group that focuses on offering alternatives rather than contending for control of the state and national bureaucracies.

About 100 people from 15 states participated in the Nashville meeting, which was organized by Reynolds, Houston layman John Baugh and Jack Glasgow, pastor of Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, N.C. States represented were Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

The group, billed as a "Mainstream Baptist Gathering," agreed to form a council called Baptists Committed Connection to coordinate the work of the various organizations. Reynolds said the council would not direct the state groups but merely share resources and encouragement.

In recent years, as conservatives solidified control of the national Southern Baptist Convention, many moderates retreated from participation in the national body and some state Baptist conventions, which conservatives targeted as their next goal. Although the SBC has little control over the state conventions, the influence of the conservative movement has been felt in several states.

Moderates have resisted that trend in some states, most notably Texas and Virginia. Last fall the Baptist General Convention of Texas revamped the way it does missions work, giving churches more freedom and distancing the state convention from the national SBC. That action prompted Texas conservatives to form a competing state convention, following the pattern of Virginia conservatives.

Victory for moderates in Texas revived talk of exporting the model of Texas Baptists Committed, which is credited with enlisting the votes to approve the Texas plan.

Participants in the Nashville meeting were asked if the Baptists Committed model would work in their states. The responses were mixed.

Among Arkansas moderates, for example, "all the people have not given up on the mechanism of the state convention," said Tony Woodell of Little Rock. Arkansas Baptists Committed, which Woodell serves as part-time director, gives them a voice, he said.

Moderates in North Carolina, however, have tired of the political fight and are trying to implement "shared leadership" with conservatives, said Glasgow. Division among moderates has also hampered efforts, he added.

Working to influence the state convention won't motivate Florida moderates, said Pat Anderson, coordinator of the Florida CBF. "You are asking me to be committed to the Florida Baptist Convention, and I see that as conflict," Anderson said. "Even if I ran it, I wouldn't be committed to it because I consider it a dinosaur."

"You have to give them the Kingdom reason to do politics," suggested David Currie, coordinator of Texas Baptists Committed. "If you say, 'Let's take back the bureaucracy,' it won't work." But if people understand the issue is how best to build the Kingdom of God, they will get involved, he said.

Sometimes "the best way to build the Kingdom" is by supporting ministries not controlled by the Southern Baptist Convention, Currie said. Rather than sending money to Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, an SBC school, he said, "I would rather you drive down the street and throw your money out the window, because it is more likely to be picked up and used to build the Kingdom of God."

Participants agreed Baptists Committed organizations would take different forms in each state, depending on the situation. It is unclear how many states will follow through and form new groups.

Baptists Committed was a national group in the late 1980s. But formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship prompted Baptists Committed to disband except in Texas. However, not all moderates are ready to throw in with the Fellowship for a number of reasons, participants said.

"It's important to have two organizations in each state," said Baugh, who supports both.

"Having Baptists Committed and CBF is a help," Currie said, "because Baptists Committed can say some things CBF can't, and some people will be committed to the state convention and not to CBF."

Baptists Committed is a "maintenance organization," intent on preserving Baptist ideals within the current structures, explained Bill Sherman of Nashville. CBF is a "ministry endeavor," he said.

"The CBF is trying to focus on the future and be positive, because young adults are turned off by the sniping," said Bill Bruster, network coordinator for the Fellowship. The CBF will support Baptists Committed groups whenever possible, he said.

"The only way to have a strong Baptists Committed is to have a strong CBF, and the only way to have a strong CBF is to have a strong Baptists Committed," said Woodell of Arkansas.

Texas Baptists Committed is offering moderates in other states no-interest loans up to \$25,000 to help them form the new groups. More important than money is building the organization around laity, said Currie.

Reynolds said the expansion effort, if successful, could become "part of a larger vision" for Baptists. "We might have a body in Baptist life poised to do larger things."

Reynolds would not elaborate. But Baylor provost Don Schmeltkopf said moderates "need to think five years from now" about building a structure that can unite like-minded Baptists of different places and races. Such an organization would also offer Baptist universities that have separated from their sponsoring conventions a way to "reconnect," he said.

Baugh, who has sponsored previous efforts to expand Baptists Committed, said his motivation is to preserve the truth. The reason moderates oppose the takeover of the SBC is because "fundamentalists" used "lies" to achieve their ends, he said.

Moderates should instead be called "mainstream Baptists," he said, because they stand for the traditional Baptist values.

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Supreme Court says federal law bars same-sex harassment at work

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Federal law prohibits sexual harassment not only against members of the opposite sex, but also people of the same gender, a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court ruled March 4.

In an opinion written by Justice Antonin Scalia, the high court reinstated a discrimination lawsuit filed by an offshore oil rig worker who claimed he was sexually harassed and threatened with homosexual rape while working for Sundowner Offshore Services.

Two lower courts had ruled against the worker, Joseph Oncale, determining that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects against gender discrimination in the workplace but not same-sex sexual harassment.

Title VII forbids employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin.

Scalia wrote that Title VII does not necessarily bar claims of discrimination "because of sex" merely because a plaintiff and defendant are members of the same sex.

Scalia rejected arguments that recognizing same-sex harassment would transform the law into "a general civility code," in effect banning racy language and horseplay in workplaces.

"That risk is no greater for same-sex than for opposite-sex harassment," Scalia wrote.

He noted that the law does not prohibit "all verbal or physical harassment in the workplace" but targets discrimination in which "members of one sex are exposed to disadvantageous terms or conditions of employment to which members of the other sex are not exposed."

Also keeping Title VII from expanding into a general civility code is the requirement that the offending conduct be severe and pervasive enough to create "an objectively hostile or abusive work environment," Scalia wrote.

"We have regarded that requirement as crucial and as sufficient to ensure that courts and juries do not mistake ordinary socializing in the workplace -- such as male-on-male horseplay or intersexual flirtation -- for discriminatory 'conditions of employment,'" he wrote.

Scalia concluded the brief seven-page opinion by noting that common sense and sensitivity to social context will enable courts "to distinguish between simple teasing or roughhousing among members of the same sex and conduct which a reasonable person in the plaintiff's position would find severely hostile or abusive."

The high court's action means Oncale will now be given a chance to prove his harassment claims.

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Bill to protect tithes, donations clears Senate Judiciary Committee

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee has approved a bill that would prevent the recovery of tithes and other charitable donations given by individuals who later go bankrupt.

The Religious Liberty and Charitable Donation Protection Act would bar federal bankruptcy courts from confiscating contributions to religious organizations and other charities to pay creditors. It would also permit debtors in Chapter 13 bankruptcy to tithe during their repayment period.

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, who sponsors the bill, said current law violates religious freedom.

The bill "would prevent federal judges from undoing a voluntary act of worship in the way of tithing, as described in the Bible," Grassley said.

"It doesn't make sense that a person repaying debt under Chapter 13 can budget for a burger and a movie but not for charitable contribution to his or her church, even when that individual has demonstrated in practice that he or she believes that tithing is biblically mandated," Grassley continued.

The bill would not change a provision in the existing law which permits bankruptcy courts to recover money given to a charity with the intent to delay or defraud a creditor.

It would automatically protect contributions up to 15 percent of the debtor's annual income but could protect more if the debtor can show that giving more than 15 percent to charities has been a consistent practice.

Recent court rulings have held that donations to churches are not protected from creditors because contributors do not receive anything of reasonably equivalent value in exchange.

The Grassley bill cleared the Senate committee Feb. 26 and will now await action by the full Senate. An official from the Senate judiciary committee said a vote could take place early in March.

Before approving the bill on a voice vote, lawmakers on the Senate panel added a provision to expand the scope of the legislation to protect charitable gifts from state bankruptcy laws.

The change has been advocated by religious groups, including two lawyers who recently testified at a House subcommittee hearing on the bill. The lawyers said that state bankruptcy laws can provide even more leeway for creditors to recover funds from charities.

The House panel was considering a similar bill introduced by Rep. Ron Packard, R-Calif.

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Christian educator calls for church-based sex education

By Ken Camp

SAN ANTONIO (ABP) -- Christian kids will learn about sex: if not from churches and parents, then elsewhere, educator Lane Powell told a group of Texas Baptists.

"If we say our children are not getting sex education, we are fooling ourselves," said Powell, a professor at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. Children are exposed to messages about sexuality on television, in music and from their peers, she said.

"Teaching about human sexuality is a serious and unfulfilled need in the Christian community," Powell said in a seminar on "teaching Christian sexuality" at a recent statewide workshop of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Powell said sexuality should be viewed as a "whole person concept," instead of being limited to facts about biology and reproduction, she said.

Young people need to learn that sexuality is a "good gift" from God when it is tamed and kept within boundaries, Powell asserted.

Teens need to understand that God wants people to "use our heads as well as our hormones," she said.

Rather than simply instructing young people just to "say no," parents should equip them for a good marital relationship later in life by providing important information, modeling healthy sexuality and encouraging open communication, Powell said.

Church leaders and parents should work together in teaching human sexuality from a Christian perspective, Powell maintained.

Church-based sexuality education is most effective when integrated into an already existing program and taught by someone within the church rather than an outside speaker, she said. Relying on an outside "expert" will communicate that sex is separate from everything else they learn in church, that it is not something people in their church discuss, and that no one in their church is available to answer questions about sex, she explained.

Since most congregations lack a knowledgeable sex educator in their membership and not all churches have staff members who are able to take specialized training in the subject, Powell recommended using a good, ready-made curriculum. She suggested:

-- "Christian Sex Education Series," published by Family Touch Press (formerly LifeWay Press, Nashville). The five books, designed by the Baptist Sunday School Board, include three for parents to use with young children, older children and pre-adolescents, as well as a group study book for adolescents and a guide for parents and church leaders.

-- "Learning About Sex: A Series for the Christian Family," published by Concordia Press. The series consists of six age-appropriate books for parents, children and teens.

-- "Teen Sexuality Resources," published by Abingdon Press. They include a kit for youth leaders with a video, leader's guide and student study guides.

-- "Sex, Lies and...the Truth," produced by Focus on the Family. This youth leader's guide and video emphasizes biblical standards and stresses abstinence before marriage as a sign of strength and maturity.

-- "True Love Waits," produced by the Baptist Sunday School Board. While not a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum, the popular abstinence-based program includes both instructional and promotional materials. Powell has written a related book, "Holding Out for True Love," published by Convention Press, dealing with dating decisions and self-esteem issues.

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Intergenerational learning advocated for churches

By Ken Camp

SAN ANTONIO (ABP) -- "It doesn't take a village to raise a child," says gerontologist Sandy Abernathy. "It takes a church." And a child's Christian education is incomplete unless it includes interaction with believers of all ages.

Abernathy, director of ElderCare Services for Buckner Baptist Benevolences, led a seminar on "uniting generations in ministry" at the annual statewide conference of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"Mutual benefits come when you mix age groups so there is real dialogue," she said. "We need to think beyond the age-segregated structure that works so well in our churches."

In addition to introducing children to the wisdom of their elders, intergenerational ministry also helps senior adults stay socially and intellectually active.

She recommended that churches set up intergenerational committees with representatives from each age-segmented department.

"Get a 9-year-old and a 90-year-old together at the same table," she said. "Encourage those of ages who usually don't vote on church decisions to be a part of the creative thinking."

Abernathy suggested offering Bible studies to explore the biblical basis for intergenerational learning and ministry and prayer sessions to seek guidance for merged ministries.

Churches should "start small," she said. "Don't throw the baby out with the bath water. Remember, intergenerational activities do not have to take the place of age-segmented activities. Let your congregation grow into the 'thinking' of intergenerational activities."

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Missionaries join Chinese leaders in criticizing mission board's policy

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- While officials at the Southern Baptist International Mission Board deny the agency conducts "clandestine" or "illegal" missionary work in China, several long-time missionaries have joined the China Christian Council in criticizing the IMB's "two-track" approach in the world's most populous nation.

Despite official denials, the Richmond, Va.,-based IMB "does encourage illegal activity in China, and its current policies do promote secrecy and deception among its employees," missionary Kim Dickey wrote in an open letter last year to her home church in North Carolina.

Dickey is one of four IMB missionaries to resign recently in protest of the board's China policy. In all, at least 15 long-time missionaries have left China through a series of resignations, retirements and transfers during several years of internal tension between advocates of the board's "open" and "closed" tracks in China.

In the "open" track, established in 1985, Southern Baptist missionaries worked primarily as English teachers in Chinese universities under auspices of the CCC, China's official Protestant organization. They openly represented the IMB, attended registered churches and obeyed laws against proselytizing and other missionary activity by foreigners, while sharing the gospel one-on-one in friendships built through social contact.

Later, the IMB began testing new strategies aimed at reaching "unreached" areas that are closed to traditional missionaries. By the late 1980s, those strategies were being used in parts of China, without knowledge of the CCC or permission of the government.

Last November, CCC President Wenzao Han issued an open letter accusing the IMB of "clandestine" missionary work in China. "We cannot have partnership with any organization holding a 'two-track' approach and give legitimacy to secret infiltration," Han wrote. "This is in violation of our principles and of Christian teachings."

IMB officials say all personnel in China are there through legal means and are encouraged to operate within the letter of laws governing religious involvement by foreigners. "Because these personnel are sent by the International Mission Board, and not reported to the CCC, it is falsely assumed they are doing clandestine 'missionary' work," IMB President Jerry Rankin said in a statement issued Feb. 27.

Rankin said the IMB values its relationship with the CCC but that the urgency of reaching more than a billion Chinese who do not profess Christianity supersedes fraternal concerns. He charges the CCC with wanting to "control" all religious work in China.

Several current and former missionaries, however, have joined the CCC to publicly protest the IMB's so-called "clandestine" track. Some question IMB assurances that all its work in China is legal. Some say it is patently unethical for missionaries to engage in illegal or deceptive practices. Others say there may be a place for clandestine missionary activity in countries which repress Christianity but not in China, with its relative religious freedom and a Christian presence larger than the entire population of many nations.

Critics say the IMB's China policy indicates disrespect for the China Christian Council and hurts Chinese churches by raising suspicion against all Christians and reinforcing prejudices that Christianity is a "foreign" religion.

"The approach the IMB is taking is still patterned after 19th century colonialism -- the locals should only be able to govern themselves in the way we think they ought to be governed," said Britt Towery, a 30-year missionary who took early retirement in 1992 over his opposition to the IMB's "closed" China track.

IMB leaders reportedly view the CCC as government-controlled and not representing the majority of indigenous Christians.

IMB officer Avery Willis said one problem in relating to China is the narrow way the government defines religious freedom. "They provide a channel for Christianity that they can use to control it," he said through a spokesperson.

The IMB's current policy in China is "culturally shaped by a Cold War mentality," said Charlie Wilson, one of the first Southern Baptists to re-enter China, in 1982.

An "anti-communist mentality" has "colored this program in China," said Ron Winstead, a former IMB missionary in China who now works for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Even language used to describe the China Christian Council as China's "government-sanctioned" or "official" church is misleading, Winstead said, because it makes it look like the CCC is controlled by or sympathetic to the Communist Party.

"These people are not communists," Winstead said. "They are not party members."

"Too many [Christians] are spending their time fighting communism instead of spreading the gospel," Towery echoed. "The gospel can take root in any country, in any system."

Others say conservatives in control of the Southern Baptist Convention distrust the ecumenical makeup of the CCC and the fact that its churches ordain women.

CCC churches are "post-denominational." Protestants worship together and do not divide into groupings like Baptist, Methodist or Presbyterian. One fear CCC leaders have of unregulated churches is they will reintroduce denominational labels which carry baggage from China's colonial past.

IMB President Rankin, in his February statement, said most Southern Baptists "don't understand the CCC is the Protestant Council of Churches, somewhat similar to the National Council of Churches in America." Since Southern Baptists choose not to affiliate with the NCC at home, Rankin said it would be "grossly inconsistent" for the IMB to "bring our free and autonomous work of the denomination and local churches under the authority" of the CCC.

Though the NCC and World Council of Churches are usually associated with the liberal mainline churches in the United States, China's open churches are biblically conservative, defenders say.

But Rankin and other IMB leaders say their paramount concern is "the issue of lostness."

"In spite of the miraculous Christian growth in China, most of these people have not heard the gospel and will not have an opportunity in their lifetime to hear of God's love, because of the restrictive policies of the Chinese government," Rankin said.

Willis, the IMB's senior vice president for overseas operations, pointed out the CCC claims to represent 10 million-14 million Christians out of a Chinese population of 1.2 billion. "If we related only to them, we would limit our opportunities to touch the vast majority of Chinese," he said.

But critics say it is arrogant for Westerners to suppose they know better than the Chinese how to reach their own people.

"Church planting in China today is the responsibility of the Chinese," Towery said. "They do not need the replanting of Western denominationalism."

"It's so hard for the Westerner to take a back seat," Towery said. "We want to go faster. We've got the money to spend. We've got passports. We can travel. They can't."

Winstead said the original "open" track in China gradually came to be viewed as "inefficient" by IMB administrators because the nature of the program did not permit missionaries to take credit for large numbers of baptisms or new-church starts.

"The present board strategy toward China may be good for the promotion of missions, but it is, in my opinion, harmful to the practice of missions and is definitely having a limited, if not negative, effect on the church in China," Winstead said.

The IMB will not say how many missionaries currently work in China. One source estimated between 150 and 200.

But Rankin has targeted China and India, an area which combined represents 35 percent of the world's population, for at least 1,000 missionaries over the next five years.

"They want a blitzkrieg," said Ann Wilson of Midland, Mich., a volunteer English teacher in China through the IMB six of the last seven summers. "Doing that in China is going to create difficulties for Chinese Christians, because that is not within the framework of the law."

Willis said all IMB personnel in China are there legally, "through channels made available to the general public."

"I believe that's true. I do not question that," responded a current missionary who asked not to be identified. "My question is after you are in the country legally, do you participate in illegal activities?" the missionary said.

"My observation is China does not care if you're Christian. China cares if you're legal or not."

One practice reportedly being used is to get missions personnel into China on a visa saying they are there to start a new business, when their main purpose is to develop strategies to start churches.

In an interview with the Alabama Baptist newspaper, Rankin denied the IMB created any "sham" businesses to serve as covers for missionaries. "If we send someone to China as a shoe salesman, that person sell shoes," Rankin said. "He may not sell the most shoes ever sold or make the biggest profit, but he sells shoes."

But Winstead said the issue is more complicated than that. "There may be a shoe salesman who sells shoes, but what the board is not telling you is that the shoe salesman lets his offices and facilities in China be used for religious purposes, which is illegal."

Chinese regulations permit foreigners to participate in Chinese religious activities, but do not allow them to "establish religious organizations, liaison offices and venues for religious activities or run religious schools and institutes within China."

Winstead, who worked 25 years as an IMB missionary, including six years in China, before retiring in protest of the board's China policy, described a meeting he attended one winter in a Guangzhou hotel.

Arriving late, Winstead and his wife registered at the hotel and informed a clerk they were part of the "CSI" conference. (CSI stands for Cooperative Services International, a since-discontinued department originally formed to facilitate IMB work in China.) Told the hotel had no record of a CSI conference, the Winsteads scanned a list of companies holding meetings and recognized names listed under the company "Watson and Associates." Checking the list further, they found their names there and checked into the hotel.

"When we questioned some in our group about 'Watson and Associates,' we were told that it was a consulting firm established by one of the strategic coordinators," Winstead recalled. "We were quite upset that our name was associated with one of these business fronts, which made it appear that we were participating in their deception."

Such lack of communication was not uncommon between personnel in the two China tracks, said Charlie Wilson, a former IMB liaison to the CCC.

"The left hand didn't know what the right hand was doing over there," said Wilson, a 12-year missionary now on leave of absence in North Carolina.

As the IMB began to focus on "unreached peoples" in China, the agency began placing personnel in "places that they would consider very strategic," but which were also "politically strategic and sensitive from a geopolitical perspective," Wilson said, such as hot spots in ethnic border disputes.

"I understand some of the secrecy in those areas," Wilson said. "When that kind of secrecy reigned supreme, the blanket of secrecy engulfed us, too."

In casual meetings, non-resident personnel passed on that when questioned about who sent them, they sometimes used the name CSI, even though the two departments were technically separate.

Later, CSI showed up on a blacklist issued by China's education department of agencies that Chinese schools "were not supposed to deal with," Wilson said.

Pressing the issue with a local school official, Wilson was told the problem likely occurred over activities in "western China," where CSI had no personnel but work with unreached peoples was well established.

Those activities were "not evil, not immoral, not bad," Wilson said, but personnel using CSI's name were "doing some things that were questionable in the eyes of the Chinese authorities," he said.

After that, the board could no longer use the term CSI in China, and began calling the program "Starhouse," after the Hong Kong office complex where the China liaison's office was located.

Winstead and others close to the CCC say such practices are unethical, unnecessary and harm Christians in China by reinforcing anti-Western stereotypes. An old Chinese saying goes, "One more Christian, one less Chinese."

A common perception among typical, non-Christian, communist citizens is that Christianity was used by Westerners to "get into China," Towery said. As a result, Christianity "has always been suspect as a foreign religion," he said.

"This is the biggest job Chinese Christians have had to do, break with that foreign label," Towery said.

The China Christian Council has fought that perception by strict adherence to principles of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, which require that Christianity in China be self-supporting, self-perpetuating and self-governing.

By encouraging illegal religious work in China, Towery said, Southern Baptists have "gone into competition with the China Christian Council."

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Even IMB critics disagree over use of covert missions

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- Even critics of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board's "two-track" China policy disagree in theory over the use of "covert" missions practices. Some say it is patently unethical for missionaries to use deception or break laws. Others argue there is a place for using non-traditional -- even covert -- methods in countries which do not allow Christians any religious freedom.

"Something has to be done. Those people can't be left without the gospel," said Harlan Spurgeon, who recently retired as a missions administrator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

But Spurgeon, who was an IMB administrator when it began using a two-track approach in China in the 1980s, said it is a wrong approach for China today.

"This is really against missiology," said Spurgeon, who now serves as the CBF's China consultant. "We have misinterpreted who China is."

Unlike other largely unreached nations, he said, China "has a vital and growing Christian minority," making a two-track approach unnecessary.

"Christianity has grown more rapidly in China than in any other nation on earth in the last 25 years," Spurgeon said. "Chinese Christians should be respected in decisions related to evangelizing their own nation."

When Baptists renewed involvement in China in the 1980s, Spurgeon said, many people in the West doubted new freedoms would last. But China has continued to open to the world and to change. "Mission-sending groups can no longer justify a two-track approach on the basis of an uncertain future," he said.

Britt Towery, the first China liaison of Cooperative Services International, a now defunct department formed primarily to facilitate IMB work in China, claims Southern Baptists originally promised to work exclusively in China with the CCC.

In November 1986, leaders of the agency (then called the Foreign Mission Board) traveled to China to meet with leaders of the CCC. First contacts were "cordial, cooperative and with mutual respect," Towery said.

Towery cited an article in the June-July 1985 issue of Commission magazine quoting FMB vice president Charles Bryan as saying, "We will not be sending missionaries, we will not be initiating anything" in China.

But Keith Parks, global missions coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship who at the time was president of the FMB, said Southern Baptists from the beginning expressed interest in unreached people groups in China.

In the early to mid-1980s, he said, China's Christian leadership "was testing its own new freedom" and "was so overwhelmed with its own needs and the needs of the Han Chinese that they could not focus energy with what they called the minorities -- we would call people groups -- there."

"We backed away from pressuring them, although we chose to continue to work with them in whatever way we could," Parks said.

Later, the IMB developed a new missions strategy employing "non-resident" missionaries to infiltrate people groups traditionally closed to the gospel. "When we began implementing the NRM program, some of the people groups were in China," Parks said. "We already knew there was no reason to ask the CCC if this was something they would agree with."

Now, a decade later, Parks said Wenzao Han and other CCC leaders have indicated they are interested in establishing work with minorities.

One current missionary who asked not to be identified said any missions philosophy in China ought to be concerned both with reaching "up" to government leaders as well as "out" to minorities.

"When we use covert methods," the missionary said, "what we are saying to the government leaders and policy makers in China, is ... 'The God we speak of thinks its OK to disobey the laws of the land, show disrespect for government and leadership. It is a God who approves and sanctions coverup and deceit.'"

"Why would anyone want to believe in that kind of God? I wouldn't."

"I think the bottom line for a lot of people is the end justifies the means. We have a high and noble end -- the Great Commission. So, whatever the means," said Charlie Wilson, a 12-year China missionary now on leave of absence in North Carolina. He disagrees. "I think our methods should reflect the personality and nature of our Savior," he said.

"We are using cultural models and management models to interpret Scripture rather than letting the Spirit of God lead us," he said. Some view the IMB's "open" track as "the weakest and most ineffective way" to reach China, Wilson acknowledged. "But then again, who would have recommended the Incarnation?"

The main focus of the CBF's global missions program is on unreached people groups, Parks said. Most CBF missionaries are in foreign countries on other than a missionary visa, he said. "We don't use false passports. We don't bribe officials. We don't sneak across borders. Our visas are legitimate," he explained.

A missionary's visa may be to teach English or be a technical adviser, Parks said. "The person getting that visa will do something in that area to justify getting that visa."

Asked if a CBF missionary would break a law against proselytizing, Parks responded: "My definition is we keep the letter of the law and violate the spirit of a nation's law at times in order that we carry out the spirit of the Christian law."

Parks said one reason that one fourth of the world has little or no Christian presence is because in many places it is illegal for persons to convert to Christianity. "Then you have to ask the question, 'Is that block of 25 million people, or whoever it is, off limits to Christians?' If the government says you can't witness there, you can't go?"

"I had to come down on the side that the Lord's command to go to all people doesn't have any caveats," Parks said.

"I feel like there is a spiritual law that supersedes civil law on some occasions," Parks said. "And there are times we have to follow the command of the Lord and scriptural teaching, or otherwise we automatically allow governments to determine that a large portion of people will never hear the gospel."

However, Parks said, the CBF will not use a "two-track" approach in China. "From a CBF standpoint, 10 years later, we're working differently, because we can," Parks said.

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Southern Baptist missions leader responds to critics of China policy

By Bob Allen

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The head of the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board issued a lengthy statement Feb. 27 countering criticism of the agency's work in China.

In November, China's official Protestant organization cut off relations with the IMB over Southern Baptists' "two-track" missions approach in China.

Since 1985, the IMB had placed a few career missionaries and hundreds of short-term volunteers as English teachers in Chinese universities through channels established by the China Christian Council, a government-sanctioned organization which claims to represent 10 million Protestants.

Meanwhile, other Southern Baptists began to enter China through other avenues and perform religious work without clearing it through the China Christian Council. In a November letter, CCC President Wenzao Han charged the IMB with conducting "clandestine" missions work and announced the CCC would "not have partnership with any organization holding to a 'two-track' approach" in China.

In a statement issued Feb. 27 through Baptist Press, International Mission Board President Jerry Rankin claimed news stories seeking to interpret the rift between the two groups "fail to represent a realistic and factual report" on IMB policies. He cited unnamed "publications," which he charged had "distorted" issues and "misrepresented" IMB policies.

While Rankin's statement did not specify a particular publication, he sent similar comments in response to a series of articles published in the Feb. 19 Alabama Baptist newspaper. The paper quoted critics including Wenzao Han, who accused the IMB of "illegal" work in China, and a former missionary who claimed the agency broke a promise to work exclusively in China with the CCC.

"The International Mission Board has always worked with integrity and respect with the leaders of the China Christian Council," Rankin's statement said. He said the board's strategy has always been to appoint missionaries through "every legal means possible."

Rankin disputed reports that the IMB ever pledged to work exclusively the CCC and said the agency has never hidden the fact that personnel were being sponsored to work with other government entities. He repeated an earlier statement that the CCC wants to "control" all religious work in China.

"The IMB has not allowed the CCC to control personnel and assignments not under CCC sponsorship," Rankin stated. "Because these personnel are sent by the International Mission Board, and not reported to the CCC, it is falsely assumed they are doing clandestine 'missionary' work."

Rankin blamed the dispute in part on disgruntled former missionaries who have joined the China Christian Council in public criticism of the IMB's China policy.

"We regret that five or six valued and effective missionary personnel have chosen to resign in disagreement with the policy and strategy of the IMB," Rankin said.

"It is unfortunate that some of these, who developed very close relationships with CCC leaders, lost their objectivity and ability to respect the calling and conviction of colleagues who were led of God to serve through other channels. Their willingness to reveal and betray those who had no accountability to the CCC and distort their role as illegal contributed to an internal crisis that had to be resolved in order for us to fulfill our mission with unity and integrity."

Rankin also suggested that a meeting between leaders of the CCC and a delegation from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship may have prompted Han's November letter. While Rankin said the Atlanta-based Fellowship denies any role in the stance taken by the CCC, "nothing had changed in terms of IMB policy and strategy" to prompt the letter, he said.

Ron Winstead, a former IMB missionary who now is the Fellowship's China liaison, called Rankin's statement "neither realistic nor factual." He termed Rankin's suggestion that the Fellowship was somehow responsible for the CCC's action "totally inaccurate."

Winstead admitted that he and another CBF representative, Harlan Spurgeon, visited CCC leaders one month prior to Han's letter but said Han was not present at the meeting. "To suggest that Dr. Spurgeon or I have that kind of influence with Dr. Han is to reveal a lack of understanding of CCC leaders, who do not kowtow to foreigners, and we respect them for that," Winstead said.

Winstead said he observed "deception" by IMB officials in dealing with the CCC "on several occasions" during 25 years as a missionary, including six years in China.

While IMB officials did confirm to CCC leaders that they had personnel working with other government agencies, they consistently refused to answer questions providing details, Winstead charged. At one meeting, when asked by Han how many people the IMB had working in relation to China, an IMB official responded, "I do not know," Winstead said. He alleged the information was readily available but was not disclosed to Han because of "security matters."

"What I advocated then and now is that we show proper respect to the CCC by sharing our ideas with them and getting their input and response to our plans, rather than unilaterally deciding what is best for China," Winstead said.

Winstead said he and other longtime missionaries left the IMB over the China policy not because they "lost objectivity," as Rankin alleged, but because they were ignored in policy decisions regarding their work.

"In recent years, the IMB has consistently refused to consider the experience and insights of those with extensive Chinese experience and continues to rely on those who have little or no Chinese experience -- non-resident people -- to direct the work in China," Winstead said.

"Those of us with China experience had to leave, because the board did not respect our views," he said.

Foreign missionaries are illegal in China, and Rankin charged critics of the IMB policy with using a double standard by regarding persons serving under the CCC as non-missionary personnel while detracting others doing exactly the same work as unwanted "missionaries."

He also suggested that not all Christians in China support the CCC or agree with its opposition to foreign missionaries.

"There have been accusations that the IMB does not respect and work with Chinese Christians since it does not submit to the exclusive policy and control of the CCC," Rankin said. "This inaccurately portrays the CCC as representing indigenous Chinese leadership. In reality, the CCC is not the church; it relates to a relatively small portion of Christians in China. The 10 million church members reported by the open 'Three-Self Patriotic Movement' churches which have submitted to government restrictions represent only 10-15 percent of the Christians in China, according to many reports."

By official count, there are 10 million to 14 million Protestants in 12,000 registered churches and 25,000 "meeting points" such as private homes. But others argue those figures vastly underestimate the number of Christians who meet in unregistered "house churches." By some unofficial estimates, there are as many as 65 million, or perhaps even 100 million, Christians in China.

The CCC admits the official estimates are conservative but says they are based on the firmest figures available. The higher counts are at best educated guesses, leaders say, noting that inflated figures best serve those arguing a case that China needs missionaries.

Rankin stated: "The IMB is not arrogantly pursuing its own agenda, refusing to respect and submit to indigenous leadership, as reported, but the question is 'which leadership?' All over the world our personnel work in partnership and in a servant relationship with Baptist conventions and unions and other evangelical bodies. So it is in China.

"We are not maintaining a patronizing, neo-colonial posture, dictating policy, starting churches and engaging in illegal activity while ignoring Chinese leadership. To the contrary, wherever we are able to place Christians from America in China, they simply seek to live out their faith in a visible incarnational witness as Christians would be expected to do wherever they are."

Rankin complained that "the issue of lostness" has been "entirely overlooked" in the controversy over the IMB's relationship with the CCC.

With more than 1.2 billion people, China represents 20 percent of the world's population. Beijing, China's largest city, has a population of 12 million and only five registered churches, he noted. Among Chinese citizens are 56 minorities and more than 355 "unreached people groups," Rankin said.

"In spite of the miraculous Christian growth in China, most of these people have not heard the gospel and will not have an opportunity in their lifetime to hear of God's love, because of the restrictive policies of the Chinese government," Rankin said.

One of the IMB's seven core values is the "basic belief that Jesus Christ is God's only provision for salvation and that people without personal faith in him are lost and will spend eternity in hell," Rankin said.

"Too many Southern Baptists have lost that sense of urgency and conviction regarding the consequences of those who are lost without Christ," Rankin said. "Failing to comprehend the multitudes in places such as China who will enter a Christless eternity, lost forever, they advocate a limited role and responsibility in our missions and evangelistic task. Giving priority to tolerance for pluralism and submission to atheistic government policies, they forget that we have been called to be bold and faithful witnesses."

Rankin said the IMB is generally committed to respecting government policies and cooperating with Christian leaders in countries around the world, "but not if it contradicts our calling or compromises our commitment to make the gospel known that all would have an opportunity to know our precious Savior."

Rankin also said "most Southern Baptists don't understand" the CCC is a Protestant council of churches, similar to the National Council of Churches in the United States. The SBC has refused to affiliate with the NCC. Rankin said it would be "grossly inconsistent" to place Southern Baptist efforts "under the authority" of a similar ecumenical body overseas.

Rankin also said Southern Baptists, who insist on the separation of church and state in America, should also stand up for religious freedom abroad. "How shameful that we would not stand beside millions of believers ... in China, being jailed and deprived of basic liberties because of their conviction and struggle for simply the freedom to worship according to the dictates of their conscience."

Rankin said reports and documentation indicate that religious persecution in China is at its highest level since the Cultural Revolution. Despite that, "many have been influenced to endorse a Constantinian, state-controlled church which is a contradiction to all we proclaim to stand for as Baptists."

Winstead responded that Rankin's description of limits on religious freedom in China are overstated.

"The government wishes that Dr. Rankin's allegations regarding restrictions and limitations were true, but in fact they are not," he said. Chinese churches are growing rapidly, Winstead said. "Actually, these so-called 'restrictive' measures have merely caused the church to find other ways to accomplish its task," he said.

"The IMB could learn many valuable lessons in evangelism if it would only listen and seek to learn," Winstead said.

Rather than being a "Constantinian" church, like Rankin suggested, Winstead compared Chinese churches to congregations that existed in the New Testament era. "The church in China is no more limited by government rules than the early church in Jerusalem was limited by Roman rules and the Jewish leaders' admonition to Peter and John regarding speaking the name of Jesus," he said.

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Rankin blames CBF delegation for flap with Chinese group

By Bob Allen

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The China Christian Council's decision to break ties with the Southern Baptist Convention may have been prompted by a meeting with a delegation from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an SBC leader has suggested.

Officials at the Fellowship, a moderate group which offers Southern Baptist churches an alternative missions program to the SBC's conservative-led International Mission Board, denied the charge. They say leadership changes at both the CCC and IMB are a more likely cause.

In a statement released Feb. 27 through Baptist Press, International Mission Board President Jerry Rankin claimed "nothing had changed in terms of IMB policy and strategy" to prompt a November letter from China Christian Council President Wenzao Han indicting the IMB's "two-track" missions approach in China.

However, Rankin said, representatives of the Atlanta-based Fellowship met with CCC leaders two weeks before Han's letter was released.

Han's letter, which announced the CCC would no longer work with the IMB or other organizations using a "two-track" approach, left the door open for the CCC "to work in partnership with Southern Baptist individuals, organizations and churches who are prepared to work openly and above board." Rankin called the statement "an obvious reference to CBF."

"There was an immediate campaign initiated among some IMB personnel in China to resign and seek sponsorship of CBF," Rankin said. "The CBF global missions office has publicly sought to enlist volunteer teachers as the 'legal channel for Southern Baptists to serve in China' in spite of the fact that the International Mission Board is continuing to receive requests and send volunteer teachers to China legally and openly."

Fellowship leaders denied the allegation.

Ron Winstead, a former IMB missionary who now is the Fellowship's China liaison, termed Rankin's suggestion that the Fellowship was somehow responsible for the CCC's action "totally inaccurate."

Winstead admitted that he and another CBF representative, Harlan Spurgeon, visited CCC leaders one month prior to Han's letter but said Han was not present at the meeting. "To suggest that Dr. Spurgeon or I have that kind of influence with Dr. Han is to reveal a lack of understanding of CCC leaders, who do not kowtow to foreigners, and we respect them for that," Winstead said.

Winstead also denied that the CBF initiated a campaign to lure China missionaries to leave the IMB. As early as June 1997, IMB teachers in China began contacting the Fellowship's Hong Kong office to inquire about switching to the CBF, Winstead said. They were told the CBF had no funds to support them. After Han's letter, he said, "all but two" of the teachers contacted his office a second time.

"All resignations were purely individual decisions without pressure or promise from CBF, as the teachers will tell you," Winstead said. Winstead said he continues to "counsel" with teachers who remain with the IMB because "we are their friend."

Other observers say the strained relationship between the CCC and IMB likely has more to do with personnel changes in both organizations.

Bishop K.H. Ting, longtime leader of the China Christian Council, disapproved of some IMB activities in China but did not force the issue, according to former missionaries interviewed by Associated Baptist Press. Ting retired and was replaced last year as CCC president by Han Wenzao, who has a more confrontational style and is supported by several other Chinese leaders strongly opposed to foreign agencies working unilaterally in China.

At the IMB, meanwhile, a series of retirements, resignations and transfers over several years has replaced a core group of China missionaries committed to cooperation with the China Christian Council with personnel "more or less opposed" to the CCC, said Britt Towery, a 30-year missionary who took early retirement from the IMB in 1992.

Towery described Bill Fudge, a former missionary to South Korea who in a reorganization last summer was named director of the IMB's East Asia region, which includes China, as "a died-in-the-wool Bible smuggler and undercover agent."

A CBF administrator concurred with Towery's assessment.

"I would have to say the [IMB] administrative changes had a much greater impact on the CCC making a decision than a casual and informal encounter with a small group from CBF," said Keith Parks, the Fellowship's global-missions coordinator.

Parks took the Fellowship post after retiring under pressure as IMB president in 1992. While at the IMB, he presided over China's reopening to Southern Baptists in 1985 and the later development of the "non-residential missionary" approach, which focused on people groups in countries closed to missionaries.

The IMB's "two-track" approach in China evolved as non-resident missionaries began work with ethnic minorities inside China's borders. While the "NRM" designation is no longer used, tensions that existed between missionaries in the IMB's "open" and "closed" China tracks continue to color Southern Baptists' relations with Chinese leaders, observers say.

"The truth is Bill Fudge has been in the non-residential mode in North Korea and has been publicly critical of the China Christian Council," Parks said. "Relationships are everything, and he does not have cordial relationships with the CCC."

Fudge could not be reached for comment. An associate responded to an electronic-mail message to Fudge requesting an interview, directing all inquiries about the IMB's China policy to the agency's headquarters in Richmond, Va.

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Critics of IMB's China policy dispute reports of persecution

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- Southern Baptists, who insist on the separation of church and state in America, should also stand up for religious freedom abroad, claims Jerry Rankin, president of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board.

"How shameful that we would not stand beside millions of believers ... in China, being jailed and deprived of basic liberties because of their conviction and struggle for simply the freedom to worship according to the dictates of their conscience," Rankin said in a statement defending the agency's "two-track" approach in China.

In a lengthy response to critics of the board's strategy of working in cooperation with the China Christian Council while also placing personnel through other avenues, Rankin cited religious persecution as one rationale for the approach.

Rankin said reports and documentation indicate that religious persecution in China is at its highest level since the Cultural Revolution. Despite that, "many have been influenced to endorse a Constantinian, state-controlled church which is a contradiction to all we proclaim to stand for as Baptists."

Critics of the IMB policy say reports of widespread religious persecution in China are misleading. While persecution of Christians does exist, it usually is the result of misapplication of religion laws by local officials, and not systematic repression, sources say.

"The Chinese have never tried to kill Christianity or any other religion," said Britt Towery, a retired missionary who was the first China liaison of the IMB's now-defunct Cooperative Services International service arm. "They just don't see [religion] as necessary."

Critics say widespread reports of religious persecution have inflamed anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States.

The U.S. State Department reported last year that Chinese officials raided several hundred "house churches" in a crackdown on unregistered religious groups and social organizations.

Nina Shea, director of Freedom House's Puebla program on religious freedom, said China is holding more Christian prisoners than any other country in the world. "Freedom House has consistently rated the Chinese regime as among the world's very worst violators of human rights," Shea told a congressional panel in June.

But Kim Dickey, an English teacher in China who recently resigned as a missionary over the IMB policy, said reports of persecution are "highly exaggerated."

"Christians in China enjoy a far higher degree of religious freedom than the American public is led to believe," Dickey said. And in highly publicized cases where religious persecution does take place, it is "the result of failure to properly implement religious policy at the local level, not intent to eliminate religion on the national level," she said.

Ron Winstead, a former IMB missionary who now works for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said Rankin's description of limits on religious freedom in China is overstated.

"The government wishes that Dr. Rankin's allegations regarding restrictions and limitations were true, but in fact they are not," he said. Chinese churches are growing rapidly, Winstead said. "Actually, these so-called 'restrictive' measures have merely caused the church to find other ways to accomplish its task," he said.

"The IMB could learn many valuable lessons in evangelism if it would only listen and seek to learn," Winstead said.

Rather than being a "Constantinian" church, like Rankin suggested, Winstead compared Chinese churches to congregations that existed in the New Testament era. "The church in China is no more limited by government rules than the early church in Jerusalem was limited by Roman rules and the Jewish leaders' admonition to Peter and John regarding speaking the name of Jesus," he said.

Contrary to popular belief, Winstead said, the CCC and Three-Self Patriotic Movement were started not by people supportive of the Communist Party but by Christians who saw it as a threat. If Christianity were going to be tolerated in communist China, they reasoned, churches would have to operate totally above board.

While not controlled by communists, the CCC is unapologetically Chinese, Winstead continued. "They are proud of their citizenship, their country, so they are patriotic."

As good citizens, he said, the CCC "believes they ought to obey the law, even though they don't agree with all the laws."

"They have decided they will try to work together within the system, to change the system, rather than to go outside the system."

Towery said some right-wing groups believe that Christianity cannot have a fair chance in China until the nation is rid of communism. But he disagrees.

"Too many are spending their time fighting communism instead of spreading the gospel," he said. "The gospel can take root in any country, in any system."

Towery said reports of widespread religious persecution also falsely "leave the impression that they [the CCC] are not doing anything about it."

IMB official Avery Willis noted that some Christians in China choose to relate to the China Christian Council and obey a 1994 law requiring churches to register with a government bureau of religious affairs, he noted. Others do not.

Relating only to the registered CCC churches, which claim to represent 10 million of China's 1.2 billion citizens, would "limit our opportunities to touch the vast majority of Chinese," Willis said through a spokesperson.

Ann Wilson of Midland, Mich., a volunteer English teacher in China through the IMB six of the last seven summers, said Christians in registered churches have little to fear from persecution.

"Ninety-nine percent" of persecution is committed against unregistered churches by ill-informed local officials attempting to ingratiate themselves to superiors, she said. They feel justified in cracking down on unregistered churches because they are illegal.

Wilson said the IMB's policy is causing division between the so-called "open" and "underground" churches in China.

"We are causing in China what we have already done to ourselves, and that is to split us down the middle," she said. While missionaries do not typically attend unregistered churches -- that would draw too much attention -- they do direct Chinese Christians to them and thus "lend credence to the underground church," she said.

"In China, you have Christians who are fighting among themselves," Wilson said. People in the "open" church look down on those who refuse to register, saying, "You don't really want to be a witness."

The unregistered churches reply, "You're just puppets of the government," she said.

Chinese Christians who resist registration do so for many reasons, sources say.

Some are fearful. Remembering the crackdown on churches during Mao Tse Tung's 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution, they are suspicious of any involvement with the government.

Others refuse to register because they don't meet government standards for religious meeting places. Rules say that churches must have a seminary-trained pastor, and there aren't enough to go around. They also require churches to disclose financial records. Churches which accept foreign contributions would be embarrassed by that.

Some do so for doctrinal reasons. They prefer autonomy or not to be lumped with other Protestants who have differing views on church practices.

A few are anti-government. Unfortunately, IMB critics say, because of an ingrained fear of insurrection, the government tends to view any group which meets in secret as potentially subversive.

"Secretiveness gives them no choice but to be afraid of you," said a current missionary who asked not to be identified.

The IMB insists its concerns are spiritual, not political.

"We will not interfere in any way in any political activity," Willis said. "Our interest is in the spiritual life and destiny of 1.2 billion Chinese in China as well as the rest of the people on the planet who have not had an opportunity to hear, understand and respond to the gospel."

Even critics stop short of saying the IMB's "closed" track is intentionally subversive. But they do charge that anti-China prejudice and fear of communism have created a cloud of suspicion and mistrust between the CCC and Southern Baptists that is unnecessary and counterproductive.

The IMB does not disclose the names or number of missionaries working in China. (One source estimated there are between 150 and 200.) Mail to IMB personnel is not sent directly to China, but to Thailand, from where it is hand delivered, Towery said.

The IMB's focus on minority groups raises even more suspicion because of border issues and ethnic tensions -- particularly those involving Islamic groups -- which Chinese officials view as destabilizing.

"Some areas in China are much more sensitive politically," said Charlie Wilson, a 12-year China missionary now on leave of absence in North Carolina. "A lot of unreached people groups are in sensitive areas."

"Targeting these minority groups is what upsets the government and makes them think you must be up to something, politically," Towery said.