

Associated Baptist Press

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Alliance to meet in 2000 at church ousted in Texas

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Directors of the Alliance of Baptists have voted to hold their 2000 convocation at University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, a congregation recently kicked out of the Baptist General Convention of Texas for accepting homosexuals.

Alliance Executive Director Stan Hastey announced the board of directors had accepted an invitation to meet at the Austin church at this year's convocation, held March 12-14 at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington.

In his annual "state of the Alliance" address, Hastey decried "punitive actions" being taken against local congregations "for determining their mission and ministry include gay and lesbian Christians."

Hastey said Texas Baptists abandoned ideals of dialogue and dissent and caved in to fundamentalist pressure in a February vote censuring University Baptist Church for ordaining a gay deacon.

"Today's hot-button issue is homosexuality," Hastey said. "In the 19th century it was slavery. Back then, our Baptist ancestors in the South cited what they considered irrefutable evidence from scriptures that God approved of slavery. They believed it so strongly they were willing to divide Baptists along racial and regional lines, historic chasms that still separate us and diminish our witness. So I can only concur with Bill Moyers' observation of us Baptists that our real problem is that 'they can't remember what they have forgotten.'"

Later in a March 13 business session, Alliance members paused to pray for a Methodist minister who that day was undergoing a church trial for performing a ceremony uniting two lesbians. The minister, Jimmy Creech, 53, was found not guilty of violating church law by a United Methodist panel in Nebraska.

"I don't presume to believe that everyone in this room comes to the same place or same thinking on the appropriateness of blessing same-sex unions. After all, we're Baptists, right?" said Brooks Wicker, an Alliance member from North Carolina. She asked the convocation to join in intercessory prayer for Creech, his wife and congregation, the "larger Methodist Church" and "the thousands of gay men and lesbians who have suffered centuries of abuse, discrimination and torment, yet even today stand at the door of the church and knock."

A 1992 Alliance task force on human sexuality called on churches "to recognize and develop gifts for ministry in all persons, without regard to sexual orientation."

Hastey also called on the 118-church Alliance to respond to a trend by the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board to defund theological seminaries overseas.

Without modest support from the Alliance, the Baptist Theological Seminary of Zimbabwe could not survive, Hastey said. Hastey also said he learned in conversations with Liberian Baptist leader Emile Sam-Peal that the Baptist seminary in that nation is also being abandoned.

"In one instance after another, it is becoming crystal clear that the new leaders of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention are doing elsewhere what has already happened in Zimbabwe," Hastey said. "One after another, schools of theology are being abandoned in favor of another philosophy of training leaders. Just as honest theological inquiry is no longer tolerated on the campuses of Southern Baptist seminaries in this country, so it is being obliterated abroad."

"Allow me to say this," Hastey continued. "I know we've come a long way in the Alliance from the days of intense anger and intensive grief over losing the battle for the convention. Alliance people on the whole long since have given up bashing the convention, and rightly so, for our own spiritual health if nothing else. Yet we do not serve well the causes we say we believe in by ignoring the continuing devastation of fundamentalism running rampant."

The Washington-based Alliance was formed in 1987 to protest a conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. It is regarded as more liberal than a larger SBC splinter group, the Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which organized in 1991.

Hastey said the needs of overseas seminaries "indicate but the tip of the iceberg" and "represent what I believe to be but the first signs of a significant new trend in traditional mission fields where indigenous leaders will not submit to the autocratic, neo-colonialist demands of a mission board hopelessly out of touch with today's world."

In addition to offering direct assistance, Hastey suggested the Alliance could become a "brokering agent" for missions partnerships between Baptists in the United States and other nations.

"A long-held dream of mine is that the Alliance help facilitate ongoing discussions on overseas mission strategies that might include the Alliance, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., Progressive National Baptist Convention and Lott Carey Missionary Baptist Convention, among others."

For the Alliance to "play an appropriate role in such an endeavor," additional staff will be needed, Hastey said.

At a meeting just prior to the convocation, the Alliance's board of directors authorized its staff to initiate discussions concerning membership with the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

The convocation also adopted a resolution calling on Congress and President Clinton to end the United States' 37-year-old trade embargo against Cuba.

Also at the Friday business session, a revival-type atmosphere broke out as Alliance members rose to a challenge to make up a shortfall in the organization's annual missions offering.

"It breaks my heart that we claim to be so concerned -- and I think we are -- about many good things, but every year there is the struggle to get \$75,000 from all of us," said Anne Thomas Neil, a former Alliance president.

"That seems so little, but it means so much when it gets into the hands of those persons who have touched the heartstrings of people in pain and who really need the encouragement of folks like us."

Morris Vickers, an Alliance member from Maryland, offered to write a check for \$1,000 if others at the meeting would pledge the additional \$10,000 needed to make up the shortfall in the missions-offering goal. In the next several moments, individuals and groups filed to microphones to make \$500 and \$1,000 pledges, and a collection box was set up for smaller gifts. By the end of the session, pledges totaled \$14,500.

The convocation elected Welton Gaddy, pastor of Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La., as the next Alliance president. He succeeds Nancy Hastings Sehested, pastor of Sweet Fellowship Baptist Church in Clyde, N.C., who held the office two years.

The convocation also honored Sehested's husband, Ken, by inviting the executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America to give the Alliance's annual "covenant address." The invitation is extended to individuals whose service embodies Alliance principles.

In other business, Alliance members approved a nine-point mission statement developed in a two-year process by a "visioning" committee. The statement will augment a seven-point "covenant" statement articulated when the Alliance formed in 1987.

"The covenant will continue to guide us, but a mission statement is a bit different," said Alliance president Nancy Hastings Sehested. "It focuses us more clearly on the tasks at hand. What is God calling us to do now?"

To "keep faith" with the founding covenant, the new mission statement pledges to:

- "Make the worship of God primary in all our gatherings.
- "Foster relationships within the Alliance and with other people of faith.
- "Create places of refuge and renewal for those who are wounded or ignored by the church.
- "Side with those who are poor.
- "Pursue justice with and for those who are oppressed.
- "Care for the earth.
- "Work for peace.
- "Honor wisdom and lifelong learning.
- "Hold ourselves accountable for equity, collegiality and diversity."

Next year's convocation is scheduled March 12-14 at Northminster Baptist Church in Richmond, Va. The meeting will commemorate the founding of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, established by a vote of the Alliance in 1989.

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Most Southern Baptists aren't boycotting Disney, poll says

ATLANTA (ABP) -- About 30 percent of Southern Baptists said they are likely to observe their denomination's boycott of the Walt Disney Co., according to a poll conducted by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the University of North Carolina.

The poll showed widespread knowledge of the boycott. Nearly two-thirds of non-Southerners and three-fourths of Southerners said they had heard of some religious groups' dissatisfaction with Disney. Of those, however, 66 percent said it is unlikely they will participate in a boycott of Disney products, including movies and recordings.

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said he was satisfied with those numbers. "The boycott is growing and continues to grow as more and more Baptists understand what's involved," he told the Atlanta newspaper.

"We're going to continue this," Land continued. "It's not one hydrogen bomb. It's a steady month-by-month artillery barrage."

Disney spokesperson John Dreyer told the Journal-Constitution the boycott has had little effect. "We just posted another record quarter," he said. "We had a record year last year. Our parks had record attendance for the holidays, and the Disney Channel has posted a gain of 5 million households."

The boycott, adopted at last summer's Southern Baptist Convention, asked 16 million Southern Baptists to "refrain from patronizing" Disney products, films, theme parks and more than 200 subsidiaries.

The boycott protests several company policies, including providing domestic-partner benefits for gay employees, allowing homosexual groups to hold "Gay Day" at theme parks, the "outing" of "Ellen" character in a sitcom on Disney-owned ABC, and allegations of unwholesome content in Disney movies.

Disney officials say the company does not discriminate against homosexuals and deny any anti-family agenda.

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-- By ABP staff and Gayle White.

Cultural establishment diminishes religious liberty, Adams, Marshall say

By Larry Chesser

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (ABP) -- Both religious liberty and theology are undermined when Christianity or any other faith becomes legally established or culturally dominant, a Baptist theologian and a prominent Baptist pastor told participants at a recent workshop at Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

Charles Adams, pastor of Hartford Memorial Baptist Church in Detroit and past president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, said some Baptists are no longer committed to "a non-coercive practice of religion."

"We want to enforce our beliefs on others, whether they want to hear it or not, whether they want to pray or not, or whether they believe in the Ten Commandments or not," Adams said.

He decried the trend as "Christian triumphalism," in which: "We're told to trust God and keep on winning. Pray and grow rich. Get bigger and better in every day and every way. Let business expand, let fortunes grow, let profits increase, let the church get bigger, let the good times roll."

Molly Marshall, professor of theology at Central Seminary in Kansas City, Kan., said the principle of religious freedom plays a crucial role in the United States, where legal establishment of Christianity ended in the 18th century and where Christianity's cultural domination wanes near the end of the 20th century.

In parts of the nation, she said, Christianity's cultural domination "is alive and well, perhaps even flourishing."

But when the church is culturally dominant, Marshall said, it becomes a medium for "perpetuating the optimistic ideology of the society," rather than carrying out its "vocation as a cross-marked people."

She said the informal cultural establishment of Christianity is based on a "theology of glory," which "leads persons to stand before God and attempt to justify their church, their government, their economy on the basis of ethical or intellectual achievement."

In contrast, she said, a theology of the cross "recognizes God precisely where God has chosen to hide, in suffering and in all that the wisdom of the world considers to be weakness and folly."

It is not accidental, Marshall said, "that the most successful churches and denominations in the United States are institutions that proclaim simple, positive messages in which there is neither room for dialogue nor doubt. And it is not accidental, either, that these same bodies occupy the favored place among the present-day conservative political leadership in the nation, even though, in order to do so, these bodies, in many cases, had to relinquish their sectarian past and their cherished sense of being holy remnants in a lost and wicked age."

The rise to prominence of the religious right in the United States should be no surprise to anyone who understands the relationship between a theology of glory and culturally established Christianity, she said.

Seminaries, Marshall said, should be concerned about religious liberty because it is necessary for the prophetic witness of the church and because theological education "is an exercise in forming persons in voluntary faith."

Seminaries should also be concerned about religious liberty to "preserve the opportunity to teach in freedom," she said. "Having to get it right according to the standards of a self-appointed ecclesial body threatens the integrity of the professor-student covenant."

Adams called religious liberty a "proud and distinguishing characteristic of our American constitutional heritage" and a "basic, inalienable human right."

Adams urged participants to beware of "crafty politicians" who make prayer a political issue.

"It is not a political issue," he said. "It is a spiritual issue. It is for the faith communities. We learned how to pray at home and in church and in church schools. We do not need to go to public school to learn how to pray. Who will teach us how to pray in public school?"

The Detroit pastor said he did not understand those who want to slash support for public education and at the same time call for prayer in public schools.

Noting that private schools are free to reject any students they choose, Adams said public funds "must be reserved for those institutions that must educate every child."

Too often, Adams said, religion gets co-opted for purposes opposite of God's agenda.

"Too much religion and spiritual energy has been co-opted to tighten the bonds of injustice, to harden the yoke of poverty, to lock up and contain the oppressed and to reinforce every prearrangement of unequal opportunity."

Christians should be able to participate in politics without being controlled by political considerations, Adams said.

Adams said Martin Luther King Jr. "put his life on the line by opposing Lyndon Johnson's war in Vietnam." Johnson was "the best friend the civil-rights movement ever had," Adams said, noting that King's stand against the war was questioned by many.

"But today we praise God, not only that Martin King was politically involved, but because he was godly enough to maintain his theological integrity, his Christian focus, his Holy-Ghost freedom and his political independence," he said.

Adams also told participants that the Bible must be interpreted by the love and truth of Christ.

"Otherwise, it's really not God's word that we are proclaiming," he said. "It is our use of Scriptures as Satan used it in the wilderness, taking a phrase here and there to create an ideology of our own."

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Lawyers discuss church lawsuits, tax-exempt status, risk management

By Kenny Byrd

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (ABP) -- "It is no longer socially unacceptable for churches to be sued," said a member of a legal panel addressing a recent church-state conference at Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

"Churches have to acknowledge that they no longer enjoy a privileged position in society," said Rick Bloom, general counsel for the Baptist General Conference, based in Arlington Heights, Ill.

Bloom and two other church lawyers addressed the "Pitfalls to Avoid as Seen from the Pulpit" conference sponsored March 2-3 by the seminary in Kansas City, Kan.; the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington-based religious-liberty group; and the Religious Liberty Council, a membership auxiliary of the BJC.

For many years, Bloom said, churches were protected from lawsuits because of a legal doctrine known as "charitable immunity," as well as the First Amendment and the fact that it was not socially acceptable to sue a church.

But now, he warned, churches are "on an equal playing field with other organizations and therefore it's very important for churches to practice good risk management."

Bloom said lawsuits involving issues such as sexual misconduct, personal injury, employment discrimination and harassment and wrongful termination have accelerated in recent decades. In some cases, particularly those involving sexual misconduct by a church staffer or volunteer, a lawsuit can leave a church bankrupt, he added.

Also, counseling-malpractice suits may surface for pastors who "hold themselves out as professional counselors," he said. "And in those instances, they can be held to the same standards as other professional counselors. And if they don't meet those standards they can be held liable for failing to meet those standards."

Bloom outlined three steps that church officials should take:

-- Recognize there are risks and take a look at what has been happening at other churches performing similar ministries with similar risks.

-- Eliminate or lower the risk. Risk-prone ministries may be eliminated, but in a lot of cases that will be impossible, he said. Bloom said a church may not want to eliminate its ministries to children, but there will always be risks associated with children. He said churches should screen workers before letting them work with children and should have policies that require two adults to always be present with children.

-- Know what kind of insurance the church has and should have. He said church insurance policies should match ministries that the church performs.

One member of the legal panel addressed the thorny issue of political involvement and church tax status.

"Contrary to the position that I hear sometimes presented by various individuals who claim that there is a bias against evangelical Christians in our political process, the political process is open to all individuals of all religious faiths or of no religious faith in our system," said Bart Tichenor, hearing officer for the State Tax Commission of Missouri.

"However, church members and church staff may bring their local church's tax-exempt status into question if they attempt to use their membership position or staff position as a basis for political activity or lobbying which somehow represents that such activities are being done on behalf of the local church," he cautioned.

Tichenor said churches should consider "what in fact is permissible or lawful so that the tax-exempt status of the church is not put in jeopardy and ... what in fact is profitable or beneficial to the church in its ministry."

Tichenor said it is lawful for a church or religious organization associated with a church to be involved in lobbying for or against the passage of individual legislative and ballot initiatives as long as its activities were less than 5 percent to 15 percent of the total activities or funds of the church.

"Campaigning for or against a candidate for public office by a church is prohibited," he added. "Political activities such as educating voters, educating candidates, sharing of voting records, sharing of candidate questionnaires, the conducting of nonpartisan voter registration, the conducting of get-out-the-vote drives and candidate debates and forums are permissible activities when conducted within the guidelines that have been established by the IRS."

Tichenor said churches are prohibited from:

- issuing statements of endorsement or opposition on candidates;
- providing financial or in-kind support in election campaigns;
- giving away mailing lists for political purposes;
- sponsoring political-action committees; and
- distributing partisan campaign literature.

Tichenor warned that even if an activity may be permissible, it may not be an appropriate activity from the church's perspective.

"The first love of the church was not and should not be political activity," he said. "If we turn to the power of government to share our faith, then are we not attempting to place the burden of carrying out the Great Commission on the shoulders of the government instead of the church?"

The final member of the legal panel told the pastors, students and others at the conference that the charitable-choice provision in new welfare laws may threaten the separation of church and state.

Earl Trent, house counsel for the National Ministries of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., said that church-state separation could be compromised by "churches' acceptance of government funds to provide social services."

Trent said before the welfare reform, the question of churches accepting government funds was an easy one. "I just had to advise churches not to accept money from the government ... unless the church had set up a separate nonprofit entity to carry out those services and to receive funds. Now we have the new concept of charitable choice."

If this approach is upheld, Trent added "We will have to confront new challenges to religious freedom."

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Maintain integrity, avoid politics from pulpit, Kentucky pastor says

By Kenny Byrd

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (ABP) -- Pastors should seek to maintain integrity, avoid politics from the pulpit and know the issues, Kentucky pastor Bill Crosby told participants at a recent church-state conference.

Crosby, pastor of Erlanger Baptist Church in Erlanger, Ky., spoke to a conference sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty group based in Washington D.C.; the Religious Liberty Council, a membership group of the BJC; and Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kan.

The conference, titled "Pitfalls to Avoid as Seen from the Pulpit," was designed to provide practical advice to clergy and others in the church handling church-state issues.

Crosby addressed the gathering at various times to discuss specific "pitfalls" to avoid.

"One of the pitfalls that we have in the pulpit," Crosby suggested, "is knowing just enough to be dangerous ... to talk about things that we don't know anything about."

He said pastors need to be informed about "what's going on around us."

"What happened to me in terms of my journey with religious liberty is that as long as I was in the majority, it really didn't matter to me," Crosby confessed. "We just did it our way. And then I moved to northern Kentucky where Catholics are in charge of everything."

He said another pitfall can happen at schools and other places in the community where churches may try to get involved. "Even though there is the opportunity that we see to have positive influence, we must constantly be held in the tension of not violating the freedom of others."

Crosby also urged the crowd to be watchful of what gets distributed in the church. He said that because of all the literature that the church gets from various groups from the Christian Coalition to the Baptist Joint Committee, he rarely distributes anything that is not from a group supported by the church in its budget.

Crosby also warned against being persuaded by political powers. "I would advise any of us who have the opportunity to have the influence of those who are entering ministry to try their very best to be above the politics. And to not fall into the pit of being persuaded by the powers who come and court us." It "does become somewhat intoxicating when we receive a call from the senator or the congressman and we begin to think of ourselves more highly than we should," he warned.

He added that pastors should speak to issues from a biblical context in the pulpit but should never align the church with partisan causes.

Finally, Crosby said clergy should never fall into the pit of forgetting what it means to be in the minority.

"In a day in which we often glorify power and prestige -- so often we want to really be a part of the majority -- and forget that Christianity in and of itself is radical and runs counter to culture. And therefore minority status can never be forgotten," he said.

"Always remember minority status and our roots from whence we have come," he advised. "I remember when Baptists were laughed at."

"We used to be the holy rollers, the uneducated in the back woods, and filled with the Spirit, sang loud, no air conditioning," he said. "But in affluence and in our quest for power, we may have trampled on the least of these. ... Let's avoid the pitfall of using the majority to impose our position -- our orthodoxy -- and remember that at one time we looked just like those that we're now seeking to thumb out."

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