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## **SBC leaders open discussion about possible name change**

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention have opened discussion on possibly changing the name of the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

The SBC Executive Committee, meeting Sept. 21-22 in Nashville, Tenn., postponed consideration on two motions related to renaming the convention, giving staff time to research whether there is sufficient interest to warrant a full-blown feasibility study on the matter.

One motion at last summer's SBC annual meeting in Salt Lake City calls for a feasibility study on changing the name of the convention, with a recommendation to come at next year's meeting. Another pending motion asks directly that the convention change to a specific name, the Baptist Convention of North America.

Both motions were referred to the Executive Committee. A subcommittee discussed the issue at length before recommending in a plenary session that no action be taken on either motion, affirming a 1974 study which found that most Southern Baptists were against changing the convention's name.

But Blaine Barber, a pastor in Michigan, noted the seven persons conducting the 1974 study were Southerners and that the convention's demographics have changed in 24 years. He substituted a motion asking the Executive Committee to postpone consideration of the matter until February.

"I am against the motion, because this language is not really something we can support as an Executive Committee without further information," said Barber, pastor of Agape Baptist Church in Petoskey, Mich. "I would also like to see us go further with a study, because we are going back to a 1974 study which I believe is not accurate of who we are as Southern Baptists today."

The Executive Committee approved Barber's motion to postpone action until its February meeting. In the meantime, Executive Committee staff will gather information "to see if there is the foundation for a feasibility study," said Augie Boto, vice president for convention policy.

Among issues that will be considered in the staff study is what impact the Southern Baptist name has on the convention's work, particularly in areas outside the Bible Belt. During discussion in the administrative subcommittee, Executive Committee members from the North and West said the regional designation is a hindrance to them.

Others said the Southern Baptist name is a plus, citing recent publicity about convention stances including the Disney boycott and a declaration that wives ought to submit to their husbands. Background information provided to Executive Committee members observed that the term Southern Baptist has become "a virtual icon of moral conservatism, belief in the historicity of the entire Bible and missionary zeal," particularly since the "conservative resurgence" leadership changes during the 1980s.

Some members suggested that negative attitudes toward Southern Baptists probably stem more from opposition to the convention's beliefs than to the name. They suggested a name change would be expensive and would have minimal impact on the SBC's image.

Others said they were concerned that if the SBC were renamed, another group might co-opt the "Southern Baptist" designation. One member mentioned the prospect of confusion that would occur should the rival moderate group Cooperative Baptist Fellowship change its name to Southern Baptist Convention.

The Executive Committee's legal counsel said changing the convention's name would be more complicated than the relatively simple process of renaming several convention entities two years ago. Chartered in Georgia, the SBC is exempt from regulations governing other corporations because its charter predates the state's current non-profit act. Should the SBC change its charter, however, it would be required to meet current regulations, including requirements that it have a board of directors and members, the attorney said.

Currently the convention has no central board of directors; entities are governed by separate boards of trustees. The Executive Committee functions for the convention between annual sessions, but its powers are limited. The convention proper is composed of the "messengers," elected by local churches, who attend the annual meeting.

Founded in 1845 in a split with Northern Baptists over slavery, the original name proposed for SBC was the "Southern and Southwestern Baptist Convention." While still strongest in the Deep South, the convention has since World War II expanded aggressively into "pioneer" or new-work areas including all 50 states, Canada and U.S. territories.

Baptists in the North long ago removed the regional reference from their convention name, renaming themselves the American Baptist Convention in 1950 and changing the name again in 1972 to American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

Southern Baptists have considered similar action several times. SBC motions on the subject were referred to the Executive Committee in 1974, 1983, 1989 and 1990. In 1974, the convention established a "Committee of Seven" to explore the issue.

The committee issued a report at the 1975 annual meeting recommending that the convention's name not be changed, citing factors including opinion polls which found that "the vast majority of Southern Baptists are strongly against any name change."

But Barber said he reviewed surveys used by the 1974 committee and concluded they were biased toward Southerners. The committee relied mainly on a mail survey sent to 959 persons, Barber said. Of the 487 people who returned the survey, 93.5 percent were from the South. The seven members of the committee were from Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Texas, he added.

Much of Southern Baptists' growth during the last quarter century has occurred outside the Bible Belt, he observed, diluting the convention's regional character. He said a scientific study done today might yield different results.

In other action at the September meeting, the Executive Committee:

-- Declined to recommend a name change for the Cooperative Program, the convention's unified budget. A motion at last June's convention proposed renaming the unified budget the "Cooperative Missions of the Southern

Baptist Convention." The Executive Committee voted against the change, citing "widespread acceptance and recognition" of the current name among Southern Baptist churches.

-- Asked a council of seminary presidents to study a motion at last summer's convention requesting an amendment to a statement in the "Baptist Faith and Message" which describes Scripture as "truth without any mixture of error." The motion, by Rick Henson of Louisiana, proposes adding the words "in every area of which it speaks" immediately after that phrase.

The Executive Committee instead adopted a recommendation requesting the SBC's six seminary presidents to consider the motion's "intended and potential effect" on the confessional statement and report their findings in February.

-- Declined to recommend a change in the way resolutions are handled at the SBC annual meeting. Gustave Elowitz of Houston made a motion at the Salt Lake City convention asking that all resolutions submitted to the SBC resolutions committee but not included in the committee's report be brought to the floor for a vote. A subcommittee recommending against the change said such a process would "unduly encumber" the convention.

-- Recommended that SBC entities refrain from using Internet servers that make pornography readily available. A motion at last summer's convention had asked the Executive Committee to "direct" all convention entities to refrain from using Internet providers which offer ready access to pornography, naming two large companies by name, and to appoint a committee to research Internet services operated by Christians.

-- Declined to take action on a request for a feasibility study on mass-media advertising for SBC churches, noting the matter is closer to the program assignment of the North American Mission Board.

-- Altered the Executive Committee's process for developing the annual Cooperative Program budget, which is recommended to messengers at the SBC annual meeting. Instead of reviewing budget allocations each year, the committee will move to 2-year budgeting, creating anticipated surpluses to be used for new missions projects.

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## **Alliance of Baptists to endorse chaplains**

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Alliance of Baptists has become an endorsing entity for all chaplains except those in the military.

That was among the many actions taken during the group's board of directors meeting Sept. 17-19 at First Baptist Church in Washington. Alliance leaders also adopted an \$80,000 missions-offering goal and a \$235,630 budget for 1999, while exploring multiple opportunities for making formal connections with other Christian groups. Due to limited time on the agenda, the board also rejected a motion from the floor that the Alliance send a letter expressing forgiveness to President Clinton.

The board approved a motion to make the Alliance an endorsing body for chaplains, authorizing a four-member endorsement committee to oversee implementation. To be endorsed, a candidate must be an individual member of the Alliance and provide all the materials requested in the application to the satisfaction of the committee.

This action does not cover military chaplains, because Pentagon requirements involve different procedures. The board discussed, but took no action on, whether to proceed with military endorsement of chaplains.

The board also considered, under new business, a motion to send a letter addressing the issue of forgiveness to President Clinton in light of his admission of an inappropriate relationship with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Alliance president Welton Gaddy said he did not oppose the idea but with an already full agenda,

he didn't know how a letter could be drafted and dealt with at the meeting. The motion was defeated.

The board also endorsed the preamble and purpose of the constitution and bylaws of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America -- a step toward membership in that organization. The NCC is "a community of Christian communions, which, in response to the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures, confess Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, as Savior and Lord," according to the preamble. "These communions covenant with one another to manifest ever more fully the unity of the Church."

In other partnership discussions, directors received a report on conversations between the Alliance and the United Church of Christ that recommended a two-year dialogue to explore a possible ecumenical relationship. The board agreed to recommend to Alliance members gathered in annual meeting next March that president Gaddy be authorized to name Alliance members to a formal dialogue team.

The Alliance board also discussed the possibility of a formal link with two American Baptist regions -- the Rochester/Genessee Region and ABC of Connecticut. Three American Baptist regional representatives met with the Alliance ecumenical-development committee and then the full board. These conversations yielded an informal give and take but no action. In fact, ABC representatives and Alliance members indicated things would move slowly as they proceed with this potential partnership.

Cathy Tamsberg of Alexandria, Va., also reported to the board about the development of a social-justice curriculum. Tamsberg, working this summer as an Alliance intern, wrote the first draft of the 150-page curriculum. The curriculum covers 10 broad topics, with the first seven having a U.S. emphasis: poverty, sexism, workers' rights, classism and consumerism, racism, heterosexism and homophobia, criminal justice, global poverty, peace and the environment. The curriculum is under revision and may be available at the convocation scheduled March 12-14 in Richmond, Va.

The Alliance executive committee also was charged with studying and bringing back a recommendation about the group becoming an ordaining body. Gaddy said the executive committee would need to address some polity issues but would handle the task with care, haste and responsibility.

In other business, the board approved:

-- A motion for the ecumenical-development committee to study and bring a recommendation to the board about applying for membership in the Baptist World Alliance.

-- A proposal that the Alliance formally support a legislative campaign to increase the minimum wage.

-- Technical amendments to the Alliance constitution and bylaws.

-- A nominating committee to be chaired by Joann Davis of Severna Park, Md.

The board also accepted invitations for future convocations at Oakhurst Baptist Church in Atlanta in 2001 and Wake Forest Baptist Church in Winston Salem, N.C., in 2002.

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## **Pastors, laity view churches differently, Barna contends**

By Marv Knox

VENTURA, Calif. (ABP) -- The idealistic portrait American pastors paint of their churches blurs when colored by reality, according to two new surveys conducted by the Barna Research Group.

Most pastors of the nation's 324,000 Protestant churches say their congregations are "evangelistic," "theologically conservative," "evangelical," "seeker-sensitive" and "consistently engaged in serving the needy," a survey showed.

But a poll of church members revealed the majority to be theologically moderate, non-evangelical, believer-sensitive and isolated from the needy.

"Protestant pastors showed a surprising degree of similarity in their characterizations of their churches," said George Barna, a religion researcher and president of the survey company.

For example, about four out of five pastors said their churches were evangelistic (84 percent), theologically conservative (79 percent), evangelical (79 percent) and consistently involved in serving the needy (84 percent).

Fifty-eight percent claimed their churches were seeker-sensitive. Far fewer claimed to be fundamentalist (36 percent), liturgical (35 percent), Pentecostal (20 percent), charismatic (19 percent) and liberal (13 percent).

Most pastors (54 percent) said worship service attendance had increased, by an estimated 12 percent, in the past year. Only 6 percent said attendance had declined.

However, the reported average weekly adult attendance actually declined by 9 percent, Barna said. Average U.S. church attendance fell from 100 to 91. The average church operating budget dropped 15 percent, from \$123,000 to \$105,000.

Pastoral perspectives on revival also are at odds with lay views, he added. Fifty-four percent of clergy said America is experiencing revival. But only 12 percent of adults "provided a definition ... of revival that can be considered accurate," he said.

Four factors could explain the discrepancy between church attendance and pastors' estimates, Barna said.

They include widespread discussion of revival and the pastors' desire to participate; poor tracking of attendance; sporadic attendance, which causes pastors to overestimate how often individuals actually attend; and discrepancy between church membership and attendance.

The distinction between the pastors' descriptions of church theology and members' beliefs is easy to explain, Barna noted.

"Ask a pastor about the theological perspective of [the] church, and you'll get their personal theological leaning," he said. "They assume the views they preach are the views their people accept. However, we find that adults often are quite skeptical of teachings and ideologies and often treat the views of their pastor as just one more view to consider."

Pastors overestimate their church's ministry to the poor, Barna reported. That's primarily because they "may accurately claim that their church is engaged in community service ministry" when only a few church members actually do the ministry, he said.

Clergy and laity need to discuss church identity, theology and ministry, Barna urged.

"The more we can all deal from a basis of common vision, shared expectations and accurate knowledge about what the church is and is not doing, the more likely it is that we will be effective in seeing people's lives touched and transformed," he said.

"The longer we operate on the basis of myth and misinformation, the harder it will be to influence our culture."

Barna's information was gleaned from surveys conducted this summer, polling 610 Protestant pastors and 1,015 U.S. adults age 18 or older. The maximum sampling error of the pastors' survey is 5 percentage points, and the maximum sampling error of the poll of adults is 3 percentage points.

## Groups ask high court to settle voucher issue

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- After consistently avoiding church-state cases during its past term, the United States Supreme Court faces a major voucher dispute when it returns to the bench the first Monday in October.

Taxpayers and parents in Milwaukee, backed by civil-liberties groups, have asked the high court to review and reverse a Wisconsin Supreme Court decision upholding the extension of the city's voucher program to religious schools.

Under the program, up to 15,000 lower-income students may use vouchers to attend more than 100 private schools, most of them sectarian. The program would permit the shifting of up to \$70 million from public to private schools during the current school term, voucher foes say.

It is uncertain whether the high court will hear the case, but activists on both sides of the voucher debate are looking for the Supreme Court to settle the issue of whether vouchers for religious elementary and secondary schools are constitutional.

Pointing to the Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Committee for Public Education vs. Nyquist*, voucher foes say taxpayer funding of religious elementary and secondary schools unconstitutionally advances religion.

But voucher supporters suggest the court has moved away from the view it expressed in *Nyquist*. They cite a string of more recent cases in which the high court has upheld programs that benefit students attending religious schools.

In those cases, voucher supporters say, tax support of religious education is permissible if the aid is distributed neutrally among private, public and religious schools and as long as the tax support reaches religious schools only because of the decisions of parents.

But groups such as People for the American Way, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and the American Civil Liberties Union say the dual test espoused by voucher supporters disregards the high court's long-stated view that government programs that have "primary effect" of advancing religion violate the separation of church and state.

In their petition to the high court, voucher opponents say the Milwaukee program closely mirrors the plan invalidated in *Nyquist* and that the Wisconsin Supreme Court's approval of the plan is at odds with decisions against vouchers by the top courts of other states.

The voucher foes also argue that the high court should review the case to "answer the constitutional question that shrouds the national policy debate over voucher programs."

Noting that efforts to enact similar programs have been undertaken in at least 20 other states, the petition for review argues that all parties in the national debate over vouchers want the constitutional issues resolved.

"If, as we believe, the Establishment Clause prohibits the use of public funds to pay for children to attend sectarian private schools, this court should reaffirm *Nyquist* now, so that those genuinely concerned with improving the quality of education in the United States will be able to re-focus their energies on measures that pass constitutional muster, and a needless, divisive debate between supporters of sectarian education and supporters of public education can be avoided," the petition urges.

## Tide may be turning on 'boats in moats'

By Rob Marus

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- A recent poll by two St. Louis media outlets suggests likely Missouri voters are evenly divided on the question of whether gambling in man-made waterways adjacent to the Mississippi and Missouri rivers should be made legal. Gambling opponents view the news as both a victory and a challenge.

On Sept. 8, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch released results of a poll it co-commissioned with KMOV-TV (Channel 4). Pollster John Zogby found that 46.7 percent of respondents were opposed to the following question: "Should the Missouri Constitution be amended to allow casino gambling in basins within 1,000 feet of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers -- the so-called 'boats in moats?'"

The poll found that 42.5 percent of respondents answered "yes" to the question. Another 10.8 percent were unsure. The margin of error was plus-or-minus 4 percent, thus making the results a virtual tie.

"I am very pleased with the results," said Jim Hill, executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention. "It is my conviction that more Missourians are opposed to this issue than we are sometimes led to believe, and I think that as more Missourians are educated about the negative impact of the gambling industry in this state, even more will be led to oppose the issue." The question will appear on ballots in the statewide general election on Nov. 3 as Constitutional Amendment No. 9. If passed, it would effectively negate a 1997 Missouri Supreme Court decision that declared casinos in man-made waterways adjacent to the Missouri and Mississippi rivers unconstitutional.

Soon after the poll results appeared, Missourians for Fairness and Jobs, the gambling-industry-supported group seeking passage of Amendment No. 9, began airing advertisements in all of Missouri's major television markets in an effort to build support for the measure. The advertisements said Missouri's legislature, community voters and the state Gaming Commission already had given approval to boats in moats. But Steve Taylor, director of Missouri gambling industry watchdog group Casino Watch, said those contentions are at best misleading and at worst untrue.

"They're making false claims -- that the communities approved boats in moats," Taylor said. He contended the ads' support for those statements came from voters' initial 1994 approval of riverboat casino gambling, which allowed games of chance on excursionary boats. At the time, such boats would dock temporarily in basins that could be up to 1,000 feet away from the main channel of the river -- a far cry from today's boats in moats, according to Taylor.

The 'boats in moats' are stationary -- they no longer cruise -- and many of the newer ones actually don't even float. Instead, they are built on land, with what amounts to ditches dug around their foundations and filled with water from the river.

"The legislature never looked at one of those facilities and said, 'that's what we're approving,'" Taylor said. "I'm sure they [the gambling industry] are going to have to spend a lot, because they're going to have to rewrite what happened. They're being very unfair to Missourians, but I don't think people are going to buy it."

Don Poston, spokesman for Missourians for Fairness and Jobs, did not return repeated phone calls.

## Anti-gambling forces rally in shadow of St. Louis casinos

By Rob Marus

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Big-name Democrats, Republicans, Baptists, Methodists and Catholics came together Sept. 18-20 in St. Louis with one common goal in mind: opposition to gambling and its impact on society. The National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling (NCALG) and the National Coalition Against Gambling Expansion (NCAGE) held their joint annual meeting at the Sheraton-West Port Inn in suburban Maryland Heights, Mo.

The hotel sits within a mile of several large casino complexes that operate illegally in man-made basins adjacent to the Missouri River. Such so-called "boats in moats" were a topic speakers referred to again and again during the course of the meeting.

"Let me tell you where I think we've got them," said Tom Grey, a United Methodist minister and director of NCALG. He was referring to the gambling industry and their current political fortunes nationwide. "We've flushed 'em, and now it's time to fix 'em."

Grey said he had to inquire no further than the stock pages in his newspaper for evidence in support of his position. "I look at those pages, and we're hurting them. We're winning the game.

"I guarantee you that, when victory comes on November 3, you better check your gambling stock!"

Grey's sentiment was shared by other speakers, including two influential politicians. U.S. Sen. John Ashcroft (R-Mo.) and former U.S. Sen. Paul Simon (D-Ill.) shared their thoughts on the nationwide struggle against gambling and the current battle in Missouri.

One of the last bills Simon sponsored prior to retiring from the Senate was legislation in the 104th Congress that created the National Gambling Impact Study Commission. He now heads the Institute for Public Policy at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.

Simon, who began his public career as a small-town newspaper editor crusading against an illegal gambling ring involving local officials in Troy, Ill., said the times haven't changed much when it comes to gambling and government. "Corruption was a part of the picture then, and it is part of the picture now," he contended.

Simon said something is wrong when, despite the fact that the economy is doing well, bankruptcies in the U.S. continue to increase. He said economic injustice has a lot to do with the current flirtation with legalized gambling in many states.

"The fastest-growing legal business in our country is gambling," Simon said. "That should tell us something."

"This is the only addiction that government promotes," he said. "If we saw a billboard that said, 'Drink more whiskey, have a great time,' and the state of Illinois was paying for it, we would be shocked. Yet we see lottery advertisements all the time."

Simon faulted government leaders for looking to gambling as an easy fix for difficult economic problems, but he understood their predicaments. "Go to the poorest sections of Chicago or St. Louis, and you will see thousands of people buying lottery tickets."

"I hear that gambling money helps good causes. Well, I must confess, there are areas where I understand that that answer might look tempting -- areas like East St. Louis, or the Indian reservations," Simon said. "But the answer, my friends, is for people who care to pay attention to the problems of East St. Louis and the problems of Indian reservations.

"Don't force them to reach out in desperation to gambling."

When asked about the current situation in Missouri -- voters are being asked to amend the Missouri Constitution to legalize land-based casinos that sit in basins near the Missouri and Mississippi rivers -- Simon said he would fight it tooth and nail if he were a Missourian.

"Any state that permits an expansion of gambling is making a clear mistake," he said. "If I were a resident of Missouri, I would definitely vote against it [Amendment No. 9]."

Ashcroft echoed Simon's sentiment. "Gambling preys on the same weaknesses in communities that it does in individuals -- easy solutions to difficult problems," he said. Then he suggested the solutions may not be solutions after all. Ashcroft cited studies by John Warren Kindt, an economics and law professor at the University of Illinois.

These studies suggest that for every \$1 of revenue collected from casinos, \$3 to \$7 is lost to the public in the form of prison costs, bankruptcies, legal fees, law enforcement costs and health-care expenses.

"If we want to succeed in the future, it will not be because we take from the poor and give to the rich," Ashcroft said. "States may be able to make gambling legal, but they cannot make it right."

Ashcroft criticized the gambling industry for building the land-based "boats in moats," even though voters never approved them explicitly and the Missouri Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional. Appealing to the "Ozark wisdom" of his Southwest Missouri heritage, he said, "I thought that the controlling legal argument was, 'If it don't float, it ain't a boat!'"

Ann B. Sherer, the United Methodist bishop for Missouri and the Christian leader who first initiated cooperative efforts among various religious groups to oppose the boats in moats amendment, encouraged the Missourians present not to lose heart in their current battle against the measure. "Many people have said to me, 'This is such a small issue -- this is not going to end gambling in Missouri,'" she said. "But this is a necessary stop along the way. Any time we give the exorbitant resources of the gambling industry an inch, they take 10,000 miles."

"I don't think we as Missourians want the gambling industry to own the state government," she said. "That's why I think it's important to draw a line in the sand, get out the vote and win in November."

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