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Texas Baptist leaders respond to proposal of new convention

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- Leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Texas responded cautiously to a proposal that the state's Baptists could become the hub for a new Baptist Convention of the Americas.

Baylor University Chancellor Herbert Reynolds described his vision for a new organization linking like-minded Baptists throughout the Western Hemisphere Nov. 10 at an annual breakfast meeting of the moderate group Texas Baptists Committed. Among resources Texas Baptists could bring to the venture, he said, is the \$43 million in annual budget and missions contributions that now goes as "tribute" to the conservative-dominated Southern Baptist Convention.

The Baptist General Convention's president and top executive officer both responded to Reynolds' comments in a news story in the Nov. 25 Baptist Standard newspaper. While not discounting Reynolds' plan, the leaders said the state convention will likely consider many changes as it enters the new millennium, but for now its emphasis should be on assisting and equipping Texas churches.

Russell Dilday, president of the 2.5 million-member state convention, said Reynolds' plan is "visionary" but is just one model for Baptists to consider in deciding how to shape a denominational expression that will be effective in the 21st century. Dilday predicted there will be other proposals.

"Baptists in Texas should welcome designs from across the state suggesting new ways we can work together to accomplish the Lord's work in our state," Dilday said.

As the state convention's president, Dilday said, he believes the convention's immediate focus should be on Texas. "It is important to quickly and effectively respond to the new challenges our Lord puts before us in the 21st century," Dilday said. "Then together we can discover creative ways to cooperate and partner with other Baptist entities in the broader challenge of world missions."

William Pinson, BGCT executive director, said questions have been raised about Reynolds' remarks. Pinson noted that Reynolds spoke to a group of Baptists at a breakfast which was not part of the convention program, and that the views he presented were his own, and not an official position of the BGCT.

Pinson said it is local churches which set the course for the state convention and other Baptist bodies and "not the other way around."

Pinson said a strong "church-first" emphasis is behind the state convention's policy of allowing churches flexibility in how their contributions to the convention are disbursed. Texas offers churches four options for passing funds on to various world-mission causes beyond the state convention.

Pinson also said he expects other proposed realignments of the state's Baptists. He said while such talk "can be disconcerting, it is encouraging to see strong interest in the life of our denomination."

Baptist Standard Editor Toby Druin wrote in an editorial that he does not expect to see Reynolds' vision take place in the near future.

"In spite of the fact that Texans for the most part have continued to reject the rightward swing of the SBC, loyalty to the SBC, especially to its missions programs, has never wavered for most Texas Baptists and is not likely to do so," Druin wrote in an editorial in the paper's Nov. 25 issue.

Druin noted that Texas Baptists in 1997 contributed more than \$14 million to Southern Baptist international missions through the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and nearly \$6 million to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for the SBC's North American Mission Board.

"Reynolds' proposal is worth looking at, however," Druin continued, in light of new trends in missiology, technology and changes in Baptist life that have already taken place in recent decades.

Druin said he was "very skeptical" when he heard Reynolds lay out his plan for the Baptist Convention of the Americas. "But I can't help wondering if the next 35 years will bring about as many changes as the last 35."

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January 2000 date reaffirmed for worldwide Baptist meeting

McLEAN, Va. (ABP) -- Planners have decided to keep the dates of Jan. 5-9, 2000, for the 18th Baptist World Congress, despite concerns about the potential Y2K computer problem.

Leaders planning the worldwide gathering in Melbourne, Australia, met Nov. 19 to discuss options in light of recent speculation about disruptions that might occur in public life if computer systems are unable to recognize the year 2000 and malfunction. According to a news release, planners voted unanimously to reaffirm the Jan. 5-9 dates.

"We prayed and had a firm conviction that the Lord was leading us to keep that date," said BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz, who led the talks.

Leon Norsworthy, chairman of the Australian local-arrangements committee planning the meeting, said the group has checked with hotels, travel agents and Qantas, the official airline for the meeting, regarding Y2K concerns.

The Baptist World Alliance, an international fellowship of Baptist organizations with offices in McLean, Va., holds a congress every five years in a different part of the world. The first was in 1905 in London. The 1995 congress was in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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-- By ABP staff

Dutch Baptists debate women pastors

HOOGEZAND, Netherlands (ABP) -- Baptists in the Netherlands debated whether or not to accept women pastors before deciding to leave the matter up to individual churches.

Traditionally, only men have been pastors of Dutch Baptist churches. Recently, however, two congregations affiliated with the Union of Baptist Churches in the Netherlands have inducted female pastors.

At the union's 1998 annual meeting in Hoogezand, delegates discussed the issue at length before approving a recommendation to allow individual churches to decide for themselves, according to a report in European Baptist Press Service.

Also at the meeting, Dutch Baptists welcomed two new churches, both the result of a recent church-planting effort. Ninety churches with a combined membership of 12,300 now belong to the Netherlands Baptist union. Another 40 independent Baptist churches with 5,000 members operate in the country but are not affiliated with the organization.

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-- By ABP staff

European Baptist groups speak out on Pinochet

LONDON (ABP) -- Baptist unions in Sweden and Germany have issued public demands that former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet stand trial on charges of human-rights abuses.

Britain's highest court ruled Nov. 25 that a lengthy extradition process can begin against Pinochet, who was arrested Oct. 16 in London on a Spanish warrant. By a 3-2 majority, the British House of Lords overturned a lower court's decision that Pinochet's status as a former head of state gives him sovereign immunity.

In the days leading up to the decision, the Baptist Union of Sweden sent a letter asking the British court to honor Spain's extradition request. Leaders said the letter was based on "the request for a trial from many refugees from Chile in our country," according to European Baptist Press Service.

The leader of the Union of Evangelical Free Church Congregations in Germany (Baptist) wrote a similar letter urging that the truth be brought out concerning alleged human-rights abuses during Pinochet's 17-year dictatorship.

The official, Eckhard Schaefer, said German Baptists were concerned by reports that Pinochet worked closely with "Colonia Dignidad," a facility in Chile founded by former German Baptists. Schaefer said reconciliation cannot begin until the whole truth is told.

The Spanish warrant charges the 83-year-old Pinochet with genocide, torture and terrorism in connection with the deaths of Spanish nationals in Chile. Pinochet seized power in Chile in a military coup in 1973 and stepped down in 1990. He came to Great Britain with a diplomatic passport for medical treatment.

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-- By ABP staff

CORRECTION: In the Nov. 20 ABP story "Former Southwestern Journal editor takes post at Texas Christian University," please replace the third paragraph with the following. Also, please replace the headline with "Former Southwestern Seminary professor takes post at Texas Christian University."

Pool is a former assistant professor of systematic theology at Southwestern Seminary who was removed from the classroom after accusing the seminary's administration of "academic censorship." Pool had edited an issue of the Southwestern Journal of Theology which administrators refused to publish, because it included writers identified as "moderates" in Southern Baptist controversy.

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