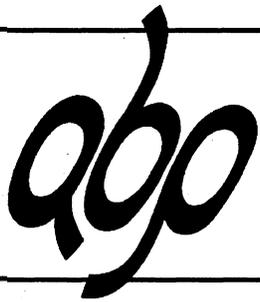


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North Carolina group offers plan to depoliticize Baptist state convention

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- A bipartisan group has offered a plan to depoliticize the 1.2 million-member Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

A 36-member "Summit on Balanced Leadership" proposed the plan, which is intended to alternate the convention's presidency between moderates and conservatives each year.

The plan, which must be approved on several levels and would require a constitutional change, is aimed at preventing a split like ones that caused conservative Southern Baptists in Texas and Virginia to form separate state conventions, leaders said.

The proposal, sounded out March 4 at a meeting at North Carolina's Caraway Conference Center, calls for the top two vote-getters in the state-convention's presidential election to share the office. The person receiving the most votes would serve the first year as president. The second-place finisher would be named "president-elect" and hold the office the following year. Both leaders would serve two years, with the winner assuming the title "past president" during the second year.

If recent voting patterns hold true, one of the winners would likely be a conservative and the other a moderate.

Two vice presidents would also be elected in one vote, with the first and second finisher serving two-year terms as first- and second-vice presidents.

The four leaders would serve as a committee to appoint the 15-member Committee on Committees, which in turn appoints the powerful Committee on Nominations. That group nominates individuals for election as trustees and directors of state convention agencies and institutions, as well as the General Board, the convention's top policy-making body.

The proposal also calls for a change in the way General Board officers are elected. Every two years, convention messengers would elect a General Board president, president-elect and two vice presidents. Currently the General Board elects its own officers.

The four convention officers and the four General Board officers would all serve on the General Board's executive committee, which hires employees and appoints subcommittees for budget development and other strategic assignments.

According to a statement released by the group, the plan would “preserve the integrity of one state convention, celebrating unity in diversity.”

“A lot of folks are tired of the division and concerned that each year a significant number of people have left the convention meetings feeling like losers,” moderate leader David Crocker told the Associated Press.

The proposed reconciliation plan is the result of a process which began about three years ago with a “Committee of 20,” which met with an open agenda to try to build relationships among leaders within the two factions.

A “Committee of 100” expanded the dialogue and helped pave the way to appointment of a “Commission on Cooperation” by the convention in 1997. The 14-member commission, with a moderate and conservative co-chair, recommended an equal number of moderates and conservatives to comprise the “Summit on Balanced Leadership.”

Most participants were male ministers, but lay people and women were also represented.

To take effect, the reconciliation plan would have to be approved by the executive committee, which is scheduled to meet March 23, and then passed on to the General Board and eventually the state convention. Changes to the constitution require a two-thirds vote at the annual meeting, making passage harder.

“I really don’t know what the future might hold,” Marse Grant, editor emeritus of the Biblical Recorder newspaper, told the AP. “A two-thirds majority is very difficult to achieve.”

But participants in the dialogue process said it has been successful whether or not the reconciliation plan is adopted.

“The plan is secondary,” said J.D. Grant, a conservative. “Our hearts are what is important.”

Moderates and conservatives agreed that taking a stand for reconciliation would be risky.

Mac Brunson, the convention’s current president, said one fellow conservative called him a liberal because of his reconciliation stand.

David Horton, a conservative and president of the Baptist state convention’s pastors’ conference, said he was accused of “selling out” to moderates. “I’m sold out,” he admitted, “but it happened in 1973 when I sold out to Jesus,” his comment prompting a chorus of “Amen” as others related to his experience.

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-- By Tony Cartledge and Bob Allen

ERLC votes to drop annual national seminar

By Dave Parker and Bob Allen

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission has voted to drop its annual national seminar, citing low attendance.

This year’s seminar, held March 1-3 at Great Hills Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, was well received but not well attended, Barrett Duke, director of denominational relations, told agency trustees meeting on the heels of the 33rd annual conference March 4.

“It was a good meeting, but the attendance was not good,” Duke said. “We did more to promote this seminar than we had done in the past.”

In its heyday, the annual seminar was a rallying point for moderate Baptists attuned to its progressive "social-gospel" agenda during the 1970s and early 1980s. As the SBC came under control of conservatives during the latter 1980s, the program's tone turned decidedly conservative, and attendance gradually declined.

More than 1,100 people attended the 1982 meeting in Atlanta, according to a press report. In contrast, the 1988 seminar in Washington, offering views from a variety of theological and political spectrums, drew about 250. The 1995 conference, held on the campus of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, featured big-name conservative speakers including Charles Colson. That year's attendance, bolstered by a large number of seminary students, reached 848, the second-largest crowd on record.

This year's meeting had good attendance at evening sessions, Duke said, but small crowds during the day. He said the annual seminar is no longer an effective way to provide Southern Baptists information on moral and social issues.

"We did everything we could do to increase attendance at seminars," Duke said, but he added there are so many other sources of information about ethics and religious liberty that seminars are no longer popular.

Trustees unanimously voted to cancel future seminars and also the spring semi-annual meeting they hold in conjunction with the annual gathering. Cutting back to one trustee meeting a year will save the agency \$18,000-\$20,000, reported ERLC President Richard Land. Land said trustees could call a special meeting if needed, and a contingency fund would be set aside in the budget to pay for such a called meeting.

Trustee Karen Cruikshank of Maryland thanked the ERLC staff "for the enormous amount of work that went into this seminar" and encouraged fellow trustees to promote the agency on the state level.

Highlights of this year's conference featured remarks by Texas Gov. George W. Bush, addresses by Land and SBC president Paige Patterson and speeches on topics including "covenant marriage" laws, persecution of Christians, pornography and evangelism.

Despite pulling the plug on the annual event, the ERLC is experiencing unprecedented success on other fronts, staff members reported at the trustee meeting.

Land said the ERLC is "in the midst of our best year in terms of sales of products" and of staff being able to do what God called them to do.

World hunger funds climbed to \$10.4 million from the previous year's \$7.9 million; prompting the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board to reverse earlier decisions to stop contributing about \$50,000 for fund-raising efforts for hunger relief.

"They are so pleased with the enormous increases of hunger gifts to the Southern Baptist World Hunger Fund, they are going to restore full funding," Land said. "They have come to the conclusion that we have had an extraordinary success in encouraging giving to the World Hunger Fund."

"All of us are really encouraged about the ministry of the ERLC and Southern Baptists," Land added. "I believe that we are on the eve of the greatest decade of the Southern Baptist Convention for the cause of Christ."

Financially, Land reported that the ERLC revenues are \$67,000 over budget and expenses are \$128,036 under budget after the first four months of the fiscal year.

Director of government relations and legal counsel Will Dodson spoke on the ERLC's success in getting the International Religious Freedom Act passed by the 105th Congress and signed into law by President Bill Clinton, whom he said fought the bill every step of the way.

"Christianity Today listed its passage as the top story of 1998," Dodson said. He said he expects a "very contentious session," as politicians look to the year 2000 elections.

Broadcasting director Harold Harper reported that the ERLC's "For Faith and Family" call-in program is now carried on 247 radio stations, and Land's one-minute "Insight" segment is also carried on stations across the country. The ERLC is buying time on smaller stations while also broadcasting on the Internet at www.broadcast.com.

Trustees also heard about plans to erect a "True Love Waits" memorial in the ERLC's John Leland House in Washington, D.C. The memorial will commemorate Youth Link 2000, a simultaneous gathering of 200,000-250,000 youth in seven stadiums across the nation scheduled Dec. 31, 1999.

In other business, ERLC trustees unanimously voted to present Land with the agency's "religious-liberty award."

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Appeals court bans public prayers at high-school football games

By Mark Wingfield

GALVESTON, Texas (ABP) -- Student-led public prayers may be appropriate at high-school graduation ceremonies but not at football games, the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled on a 2-1 split March 1.

The case, which stemmed from complaints by two parents in Galveston, Texas, could alter a longstanding tradition of pre-game prayers at high schools in the Bible Belt. In Texas, for example, many schools routinely broadcast invocations over the public-address system at football games.

While the ruling of the New Orleans-based 5th Circuit affects only Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi, it is consistent with an earlier ruling by the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Georgia.

The U.S. Supreme Court never has ruled on whether school-endorsed prayer at football games is constitutional. The high court has said that schools may not invite clergy to deliver prayers at commencement ceremonies, but prayers written by students may be allowed.

In this particular case, Galveston's Santa Fe Independent School District allowed students to read Christian prayers from the stage at graduation ceremonies and over the public-address system at football games. School officials monitored the ceremonial prayers, to the point of screening the content of graduation prayers in advance.

In 1994, the district adopted a policy allowing "student-selected, student-given, non-sectarian, non-proselytizing" prayers at graduations. In 1995, the district adopted a similar policy on prayers at football games.

The football policy allowed a "brief invocation and/or message to be delivered during the pre-game ceremonies of home varsity football games to solemnize the event, to promote good sportsmanship and student safety, and to establish the appropriate environment for the competition."

The March 1 ruling by the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals struck down both policies. The court majority wrote that extending the graduation-prayer policy to football games "violates the Constitution, even if such a policy includes the non-sectarian, non-proselytizing restrictions."

The appeals court said the school district's commencement-prayer policy is not strict enough to pass constitutional muster. However, the court reaffirmed its earlier ruling that commencement prayers may be acceptable if they meet the guidelines of being student-initiated, student-led, non-sectarian and non-proselytizing.

Writing for majority, judges Jacques Weiner and Carl Stewart said commencement ceremonies are significantly different from football games. A legitimate need to "solemnize" commencements does not exist at athletic events, they said.

Football games, the judges wrote, are "hardly the type of annual event that can be appropriately solemnized with prayer."

In a lengthy dissenting opinion, Judge Grady Jolly charged that the court for the first time “exerts control over the content of its citizens’ prayers” and “transgresses the most fundamental First-Amendment rights.”

By demanding non-sectarian and non-proselytizing prayers, the court imposes undue restrictions on religious speech in a public forum, Jolly said. “When the government restricts sectarian and proselytizing speech, while embracing ecumenical religious speech, the government has engaged in illegitimate viewpoint discrimination.”

Kelly Shackleford, general counsel for the Plano, Texas, -based Liberty Legal Institute, echoed Jolly's dissent.

“This is one of the most disturbing things we’ve ever read,” Shackleford said. “The government has no right to monitor the content of children’s prayers. But for the first time, the court now is mandating the monitoring of prayers, telling which ones are approved and which are not.”

“There have been cases saying government cannot prescribe prayer, but there never have been cases saying government can monitor private citizens’ prayers. This should send chills down people's spines,” Shackleford said.

Other church-state experts, however, were less alarmed by the ruling.

Phil Strickland, director of the Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, predicted the 5th Circuit Court ruling would draw much comment in Texas.

“Many Texans hold church to be sacred and football to be really sacred,” Strickland quipped.

While many Texas Baptists would disagree with the court’s ruling, the issue isn’t completely settled, Strickland said. “This case almost certainly will be appealed, and the outcome will clearly be of major significance to those interested in church-state separation.”

Strickland also said Baptists who oppose government-sponsored prayer at school events must be consistent. “The fact is, it’s hard for Baptists who object to government-sponsored prayer to support government-sponsored prayer in football games,” he said.

Another Baptist church-state expert said he believes the 5th Circuit Court ruled correctly on the issue. Devout Christians should oppose state-sanctioned prayers at school events, argued Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington.

“I’m not saying this because I’m anti-prayer,” Walker said. “It’s precisely because I have such a high view of prayer that I think the state ought not be intruding in these matters.”

Walker said students, parents, ministers and school officials can easily avoid constitutional problems with prayer at both football games and commencement ceremonies.

“The way to avoid hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal bills ... is to do this: Have your graduation ceremony without a formal prayer from the podium. Have a moment or minute of silence. Then the next day have a voluntarily attended baccalaureate service sponsored by a church or group of churches. Have a full-fledged worship service without any intrusion.

“This is the best of all worlds and what I encourage school districts to do,” Walker said.

Concerning football games, Walker emphasized that the court ruling applies only to formal prayers that engage everyone in attendance. “It is perfectly permissible for students or players on their own to get a pre-game huddle and pray on their own,” he said.

'Texas-focused' study literature set to debut in March 2000

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Baptist General Convention of Texas will produce its own "biblically based, Texas-focused" Bible-study material, beginning next March.

Texas Baptists authorized publication of the material in 1997, when the state convention approved a slate of recommendations by an Effectiveness/Efficiency Committee, revamping the 2.5 million-member organization's programs and operations.

One recommendation directed "that literature and other resources for Sunday school, discipleship training, missions organizations and other Bible study groups be developed as either a supplement to existing materials or a substitute for existing materials for those who so choose."

The materials should "provide information on Baptist missions, with a special emphasis on Texas Baptist missions; Baptist distinctives; stewardship; ethics; and other subjects," the recommendation said.

The BGCT Sunday school/discipleship division has developed the literature project. Two committees recently authorized spending up to \$250,000 for the development, production and distribution of literature, which will be released for use beginning in March 2000, administrative committee chairman Mateo Rendon, told the BGCT Executive Board Feb. 23.

"In keeping with (its) commitment to the churches and the Great Commission, the BGCT is preparing distinctive Bible-study materials for Baptist churches in Texas who have expressed a desire for additional resources and who choose to utilize them," said Rendon, pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista in Corpus Christi.

Critics of the 1997 recommendations said they signaled a distancing from the Southern Baptist Convention by the moderate-led BGCT and that by publishing literature the state convention would compete with the denomination's official publishing arm.

But Rendon said the materials would fill a niche not currently being met by another publisher.

"The materials will be different from any currently available in that they will be undated, deal with Bible books and provide information on the challenge of the Texas, national and worldwide mission fields and on the resources of the BGCT to help meet that challenge," Rendon said. "The materials will be written by persons from Texas Baptist churches and will focus on Baptist principles, polity and beliefs."

Rendon said publication of the materials does not signal that the Texas convention is forming a "publishing house," as critics have claimed.

He cited several "safeguards," which he said protect the convention from moving deeper into the publishing business:

-- Cooperative Program unified-budget funds will not be used to print and distribute the materials, he said.

-- After the market for the literature develops, it is to be produced on a "cost-recovery" basis -- with subscription fees paying for publication. This is to be done "as soon as possible," probably within three years, he said.

-- Rather than expanding the state staff to accommodate publishing business, the convention is working with Ross West, a veteran Bible-study curriculum developer. West will design and edit the materials on a contract basis and will not join the convention staff.

West is president of Positive Difference Communications and coordinator for Christian Education Resources, both of Rome, Ga. He also is part-time associate pastor for education and outreach at Garden Lakes Baptist Church in Rome. He is a former editor of Bible-study materials for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board and has a doctorate from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

-- Writers will be well-known and trusted Texas Baptists -- people in whom Texas Baptist churches have confidence, Rendon said.

-- Materials will be printed in non-dated quarterlies. Teachers and pupils will study from the same materials, although teachers also will have access to other materials that suggest teaching procedures.

-- The literature primarily will be designed for adult Sunday school, but it will be applicable for study at other times.

Texas Baptist churches will determine the extent of the use of the new literature, said Bernie Spooner, director of the BGCT Sunday school/discipleship division.

"In Baptist life, churches are free to use whatever resources they choose," Spooner said. "Hopefully, those churches who are not using Southern Baptist Convention curriculum, as well as those currently using non-Baptist curriculum, will consider using these materials, prepared especially for use by Texas Baptists for Texas Baptists."

These announced plans for producing new literature represent a good "beginning place" to accomplish what the Effectiveness/Efficiency Committee intended, said Ferris Akins of Ballinger, Texas, who was chairman of a subcommittee that dealt with the literature issue.

"We envisioned literature written by Texas Baptists, for Texas Baptists and accountable to Texas Baptists," he said.

He said the literature should uphold cherished doctrines including the priesthood of believers, the separation of church and state and an emphasis on missions. "It was our thinking and still is that many churches will get little missions teaching unless it is included in the Bible-study material on Sunday morning."

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Singer Amy Grant files for divorce

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Contemporary Christian recording artist Amy Grant has "regretfully" filed for divorce from her husband of 16 years, her record company announced March 5.

The announcement cited irreconcilable differences between Grant, who records with Myrrh Records, and Gary Chapman, an artist who records with Reunion Records and is host of the "Prime Time Country" program on the Nashville Network.

The couple announced in December they were separating. Both Grant and Chapman have "requested prayers and privacy during this difficult time," the statement said.

Grant and Chapman have three children: Matthew, 11, Millie, 9, and Sarah, 6.

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-- By ABP staff

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