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**Georgia Baptists oust churches
for affirming homosexuality**

By Bob Allen

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- For the first time in its 177-year history, the Georgia Baptist Convention voted Nov. 16 to withdraw fellowship from two churches that a convention leader said "honor" homosexuality.

Messengers to a two-day annual meeting in Macon voted 2,086-262 to withdraw fellowship from Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur. In a second vote minutes later, they took similar action against Virginia-Highland Baptist Church in Atlanta by a wider margin, 2,111-228.

The churches were the first to be removed under an amended article on membership added to the Georgia Baptist constitution last year. New language defining friendly cooperation with the state group excludes congregations that knowingly take action to "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

Prior to recommendations calling for the churches' ouster, Georgia Baptist Executive Director Robert White told messengers the two congregations had moved beyond ministry to homosexuals to take positions that "honor homosexuality."

"If the church declares that sin is not sin, is not the blood shed on the cross of Christ in vain?" White asked.

White said he was "discouraged and frustrated" by media reports that the churches were being removed because they minister to gays and lesbians. "The Georgia Baptist Convention encourages, indeed urges, our churches to minister to everyone, including homosexuals," he said.

"We believe the greatest act of love is to tell the truth about sin," White continued. "The Bible declares that homosexuality is a sin, but it is not the unpardonable sin."

Statements by both churches said they do not believe Bible passages in Genesis, Leviticus and Romans condemning homosexuals match the situation of gays and lesbians today. They said other Bible teachings reject distinctions based on race, gender, class or sexual orientation.

They also pointed out that Baptists traditionally have left such decisions regarding theology and mission up to the local church, not the state convention.

Both the theological and polity issues came up during a brief debate.

"This issue before us is not homosexuality," said James Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville. "The issue before us is not soul freedom. The issue before us is not local-church autonomy. The issue before us is fidelity to the truth of the word of God."

Messenger Paul Weldon accused the two churches of "blatant and pervasive" sin in allowing known gays and lesbians to hold leadership positions.

But Charles Graham, pastor of Church of the Savior in Roswell, countered that Georgia Baptists need churches like Oakhurst and Virginia-Highland, despite their unconventional views on sexuality. "A sure sign we have made God in our own image is when God doesn't like the people we don't like," he said.

Messengers overwhelmingly rejected a motion by Oakhurst Pastor Lanny Peters to delay the ouster vote to allow church members and convention leadership to seek reconciliation.

Virginia-Highland Pastor Timothy Shirley was also permitted to address the convention, though he was not a messenger. "This issue is not about sin. It is about people," he said.

Peters and Shirley later told reporters they were disappointed that the convention was unwilling to dialogue about what the Bible teaches about homosexuality.

"The idea there is only one interpretation of the word of God and that is mine" is unbaptist, Peters said. "Our congregation has studied the Bible and homosexuality 20 years."

Shirley said he does not believe sexual orientation is a choice and therefore is not a sin.

"I can appreciate where folks are" in believing the Bible condemns homosexuality, Shirley said. "I'm surprised there's not consideration of another view."

Georgia Baptist Convention President Gerald Harris said he is willing to continue conversations with the two churches. "I don't know if the convention can compromise its position on this issue," he told reporters. "We read the Bible, and we come to different sides on this particular issue."

The convention action ends longtime relationships with both churches. When Oakhurst, which now has 400 members, was founded in 1913, its first action was to send money to the Georgia Baptist Convention, Peters said. Virginia-Highland, which has active membership of about 60, was established in 1923.

Both churches support both the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists. Oakhurst is also a member of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

Oakhurst was once honored as "the outstanding church in the Southern Baptist Convention" for its leadership in race relations and various community ministries. Peters said the church has not formally left the SBC but has not participated for a number of years. Virginia-Highland voted to leave the SBC in 1992 and has not contributed to the state convention for about six years, Shirley said. Peters said Oakhurst has continued to support the Georgia convention.

Georgia is not the first group affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention to take action against homosexuality.

The SBC voted in 1992 to exclude two churches in North Carolina for condoning homosexuality and changed its constitution to exclude such churches from participating in the national body in the future. North Carolina Baptists took related action the same year, changing financial policies to refuse funds from congregations that affirm homosexuals.

More recently, the Baptist General Convention of Texas decided in 1998 to no longer accept financial contributions from University Baptist Church in Austin, which was kicked out of its association after ordaining a gay deacon in 1995.

Virginia Baptists this year altered their historic relationship with the University of Richmond after the school changed its non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation. Many viewed the action as contrary to the state Baptists' stance that homosexual behavior is sinful.

Peters suggested it was inconsistent for Georgia Baptists to single out churches over one moral issue. He said he would like to see the convention become equally concerned about ending racism.

"No church was kicked out of this convention for condoning slavery," Peters said, adding that many Georgia Baptists also supported segregation. "There are churches in the Georgia Baptist Convention that are racist," he said. "If you're going to be consistent, that should be confronted."

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NC Baptists nix shared-power plan, take steps against Wake Forest

By Steve DeVane and Jimmy Allen

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- North Carolina Baptists rejected a proposal to share leadership between conservatives and moderates Nov. 16.

Messengers to the annual Baptist State Convention of North Carolina voted down the shared-leadership plan, which would have placed conservatives and moderates in key elected positions in alternating years. The proposal drew about 55 percent approval from messengers, but a two-thirds majority was required, since it would have changed the convention's constitution.

The proposal narrowly escaped defeat earlier when an amendment that would have postponed indefinitely a vote on the plan fell 31 votes short of a simple majority -- 1,976 to 2,037.

Also during the two-day meeting in Winston-Salem, messengers voted to begin a process to sever constitutional ties with Wake Forest University in a dispute over homosexuality. They also banned any state-convention employee, including campus ministers, from performing a same-sex union.

The shared-leadership plan, which was proposed by a special bipartisan committee, drew opposition from both conservatives and moderates. However, most of the opposition during floor debate came from conservatives.

The proposed plan focused on the election of officers. The individual receiving the most votes for convention presidency would have been elected president, while the one with the second-most votes would be president-elect. That would presumably have put a conservative and moderate in each position. The president-elect would automatically have become president the next year, while the current president would stay on as past-president, effectively allowing all the officers to serve two years.

Similarly, the vice-presidential candidate receiving the most votes would have been first-vice president, with the candidate coming in second being named second-vice president, both serving a two-year period.

The four officers together would have appointed members of a key nominating committee.

The proposal also called for joint leadership on the convention's General Board. Conservatives, who have won the convention presidency in recent years, have complained they still have little influence in the General Board, which plays a major role in budgeting, hiring and programming for the convention.

Proponents said the plan would avoid deepening the division among the state's Baptists and keep them from perhaps splitting into two separate conventions.

"There isn't anything unique if we continue fighting," said conservative Greg Mathis, pastor of Mud Creek Baptist Church in Flat Rock, a co-chairman of the drafting committee. Citing other conventions that have split over leadership issues, he added, "Wouldn't it be easier if we reconcile before we split?"

Opponents said conservatives and moderates have different visions for the convention, making true cooperation impossible. Coy Privette of North Kannapolis, who proposed postponement, added the plan would permanently politicize the officer elections by forcing everyone to take one side or the other.

After the proposal lost, convention officials said they hope it will not mean the end of cooperation between conservatives and moderates.

Mike Cummings of Lumberton, who was elected president Nov. 16 without opposition, said the vote does not end his commitment to fairness and cooperation. "The vote on the proposal does not discourage me and does not dishearten me," he said. "Rather it tells me we've understood that something good is going on."

Cummings, director of missions for Burnt Swamp Association, has served as president since April, when former president Mac Brunson left the state to become pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas.

General Board president Larry Harper noted that a majority of voting messengers favored the plan. "Further, the assumption cannot be made that all those who voted against the plan are against fairness, balance and cooperation," he said.

Harper said the vote should not be seen as a "collapse of cooperation" among North Carolina Baptists. "Therefore, my commitment is to continue to work even more intently with Mike Cummings, the other convention officers and anyone else who desires to depoliticize our convention, balance leadership and do what will optimize our Christian witness and work in North Carolina," he said.

"The vote results are in, but the total outcome may not be known for several years," said David Crocker, the other co-chairman of the Commission on Cooperation, which developed the plan. "This may be a major step among many steps that get us where we want to be."

Crocker, moderate pastor of Snyder Memorial Baptist Church in Fayetteville, was elected first-vice president. Conservative Teresa Brown of Hickory Grove Baptist Church, Charlotte, was elected second-vice president.

Wake Forest University came under fire recently when the school said it would not prevent Wake Forest Baptist Church from holding a same-sex union in Wait Chapel on the university's campus. The school also has drawn criticism in recent years for selling alcohol on campus.

Messengers voted by a margin of about 10-1 to authorize the executive committee of the General Board to dissolve the convention's fraternal relationship with Wake Forest. The move would not affect the convention's support for the Wake Forest-related Baptist Hospital, Center for Congregational Health or Poteat Scholarships. Severing ties would require an amendment to the constitution, which will be brought to next year's convention.

"We must send a clear message to the world there are still some absolutes and we are hearers and believers of the Word," said Ray Davis, pastor of Green Meadows Baptist Church in Mocksville. Davis made a motion last year to cut the ties with the university and had announced plans to propose the same this year.

The convention couldn't actually sever the fraternal relationship at this year's meeting, because the required constitutional change must be publicized ahead of time. Instead the recommendation came from the executive committee of the General Board, which will propose the revision next year.

"Personally, I think it's a sad day when we have to come and take these kinds of actions," said Larry Harper, president of the General Board. "We pray God will be redemptive in all matters."

Later, messengers overwhelmingly adopted a resolution asking Wake Forest to withdraw its permission for the church to hold the same-sex ceremony. The resolution states the permission "violates not only the spirit but also the letter" of the school's fraternal relationship with the convention.

Oklahoma Baptists endorse 'Baptist Faith and Message'

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- Despite being criticized recently at Baptist state conventions in Texas and Virginia, the new "Baptist Faith and Message" article on the family is OK with Oklahoma.

Messengers to the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma passed a resolution affirming last year's amendment to the Southern Baptist Convention's official faith statement, adopted in 1963.

The SBC added a marriage and family amendment last year in Salt Lake City that included a call to Christian wives "to submit graciously to the servant leadership" of their husbands.

Anthony Jordan, executive director of Oklahoma Baptists, was chairman of the committee that proposed the family amendment. Oklahoma Baptists also passed a resolution affirming the statement last fall.

The new resolution endorsed the document as amended and urged Oklahoma Baptists to pray for another SBC committee that is considering other possible changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message."

That group is expected to report at next year's SBC meeting, scheduled June 13-14 in Orlando, Fla.

A week earlier, both the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Baptist General Association of Virginia endorsed the 1963 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message," tacitly criticizing the family article.

In other business at a Nov. 15-16 meeting in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma Baptists approved a \$34 million master plan for their Falls Creek Baptist Conference Center and passed a record \$20.2 million budget.

Another resolution affirmed a decision by the Oklahoma State Textbook Committee to require science textbooks to point out that evolution is only a theory and not a proven fact.

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-- By Dave Parker

High court to review ruling against football game prayers

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court announced Nov. 15 it will review a lower-court decision striking down a Texas school district's policy that permitted student-led prayer at football games.

The dispute over a policy at a school district in Galveston County is the first case involving school prayer the high court has agreed to decide since it struck down clergy-led prayers at commencement exercises in 1992.

In 1995, the Santa Fe School District adopted policies permitting students selected by their colleagues to deliver invocations and benedictions at commencement exercises and to deliver a "brief invocation and/or message" during pre-game ceremonies at home varsity football games.

A panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with a district court that graduation prayers must be "nonsectarian" and "nonproselytizing" in order to be constitutional. Even with those safeguards, however, the appeals court said prayers at football games should not be allowed.

The appeals court said in a 2-1 decision that football games differ from a graduation ceremony in that they are "hardly the sober type of annual event that can be appropriately solemnized with prayer."

The high court's review of the case is limited to the question of whether the Santa Fe district's policy on prayers at football games violates the separation of church and state.

School attorneys asking the high court to review the case argued that "permitting students to deliver religious speech in a forum where non-religious speech is allowed" does not violate church-state separation. Excluding religious speech from such forums, meanwhile, violates the free speech rights of students, they said.

Attorneys for the students and parents challenging the policies said the 5th Circuit "correctly rejected the school district's position that the Constitution permits overtly sectarian prayers at school-sponsored functions."

A ruling from the high court is expected before the end of the current term this summer.

A Baptist church-state attorney said justices should use this case to further clarify the law on school prayer.

"The Supreme Court should use this opportunity to say that when the school turns over the public-address system in a school stadium during a school event for an invocation, the prayer is sponsored by the school and thus violates the Constitution," said Melissa Rogers, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee.

Rogers also noted that the school's policy calls for school involvement in directing an election to determine whether the school will include an invocation or other message in pre-game ceremonies.

"A school-organized vote on prayer doesn't produce student-initiated religious expression," she said. "It also flies in the face of the Bill of Rights, which protects the minority from the will of the majority."

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, encouraged school districts to implement policies that take advantage of forms of voluntary prayer that have already been found constitutional.

"Students and student athletes may gather for prayer voluntarily before or after the game as long as the school does not sponsor it," he said.

"Also, a moment of silence may be observed before the event," Walker said. "This is probably the best solution. A truly neutral moment of silence is constitutional and, equally important, sensitive to the rights of conscience."

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House approves measure with 'charitable choice'

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. House of Representatives has approved a new grant initiative that would allow federal tax dollars to flow directly to thoroughly religious organizations, such as churches, synagogues and other houses of worship.

On a 328 to 93 vote, House lawmakers approved the Fathers Count Act Nov. 10. The measure would in part make religious groups eligible to receive tax dollars to provide secular social services to fathers and families.

Lawmakers rejected an amendment that would have required houses of worship to set up a separate organization for secular social services in order to qualify for federal funds.

"There is nothing wrong, given some basic safeguards, with faith-based organizations such as the Salvation Army or Catholic Charities receiving federal money to run social programs," said Chet Edwards, D-Texas. "There is something terribly wrong about federal tax dollars going directly to churches, synagogues and houses of worship."

Edwards offered the amendment to add restrictions to what type of religious organizations could receive funds. The amendment failed 184 to 238.

Since houses of worship are allowed to hire people from their own religion, the law would allow federal dollars to be used to discriminate against citizens in job hiring and firing based on their religious faith, Edwards said.

"Signs in one church using federal dollars may say, 'no Jews need apply here.' and another church say, 'no Christians' or 'no Protestants need apply here.' I find that offensive," said Edwards.

But Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., said: "We can get into all kinds of legal technicalities here about whether we should have types of separate organizations and how it should be structured. But the plain fact of the matter is that at the grass-roots level, in urban American and African-American and Hispanic communities, the organizations that are by far the most effective are faith-based."

Souder said churches receiving money "still have to make a proposal to whatever entity ... and then the government audits that."

Edwards responded that Souder's statement pointed to another problem he has with the plan. When federal money goes to houses of worship, regulations will follow. "When money goes directly to the church, the federal government, to provide accountability to the taxpayers, is going to have to audit every dime raised and spent by that church," he said.

A leading proponent of "charitable choice" during the House floor debate acknowledged that churches receiving federal aid would be subject to government regulations.

"Yes, there will be red tape," said Rep. Nancy Johnson, R-Conn. "The churches who choose to receive federal money will be regulated. If they don't like it, I can't help it. If it's federal dollars, you are accountable."

Johnson said faith-based agencies have been so effective in providing social services because "they believe that their goal is not just to help temporarily but to change lives."

The 1996 welfare-reform package included a provision for charitable choice, but lawmakers say not many houses of worship have applied for funds because they fear strings would follow. Both houses of Congress have passed charitable-choice language in a bill on juvenile justice, but it is stalled, awaiting a Senate-House conference. Leading presidential candidates, including Texas Gov. George Bush and Vice President Al Gore, have voiced support for such initiatives.

But advocates for the separation of church and state contend that charitable-choice plans are unconstitutional.

"Congress should have recognized that religious liberty and church-state separation count, too," said Melissa Rogers, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee.

Rogers described charitable choice as "the wrong way to do right." Such funding "will inevitably lead to government control and oversight of religion," she added. "Religious freedom cannot prosper when church and state are excessively entangled or when religion is enmeshed in the appropriations process."

"How is the government going to define 'sectarian worship' or 'proselytization,' much less ensure a church isn't going to use public funds to do it?" Rogers asked in a written statement.

The Fathers Count Act awaits action by the Senate. If passed it would then go to the president, who could sign it into law.

END
