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**Historic First Baptist Church of Dallas  
dually aligns with conservative group**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- First Baptist Church of Dallas voted Nov. 17 to loosen ties with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and dually align with the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

A group of Texas conservatives formed the new convention last year after being frustrated in their efforts to influence the moderate-led BGCT. The SBTC claims loyalty to the Southern Baptist Convention, which moved from moderate to conservative control in the 1980s, prompting the BGCT to make some changes in the way it relates to the national body.

Although the historic downtown Dallas congregation will retain its affiliation with the BGCT, the church has not ruled out leaving the state convention entirely, Pastor Mac Brunson said in a news release by Baptist Press.

"I think that's something the church will revisit in the next year," he said.

Brunson and Pastor Emeritus W.A. Criswell issued a joint statement saying: "It is apparent the BGCT, under the elected leadership at its own admission, is moving away from its historic relationship, commitment and cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention. ... With absolutely no malice or criticism of our brothers and sisters in the BGCT, but with sad heads, we loosen our ties, but with great anticipation that God is about to do something new."

The vote was described as nearly unanimous among the 300 people present for business meeting of the church, which claims 12,000 members. It came after Brunson presented an 18-page report prepared by a deacon committee.

The report draws numerous links between BGCT leadership and the moderate organizations Texas Baptists Committed and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. From there, it draws links to other individuals deemed to hold "liberal" positions on a variety of social and political issues.

Much of the information cited in the report has been distributed across the state by a conservative organization called Texas Baptist Laymen's Association. The critical material borrows from research by a similar group in Missouri.

A special BGCT committee on Baptist integrity has dismissed the material linking moderate leaders to support for abortion, homosexuality and other controversial issues as innuendo.

Jim Bolton, chairman of the deacon committee that presented the report, said the group's six members were "surprised" at their findings. "The average Southern Baptist in Texas has no idea of the interlocking relationships between the elected leadership of the BGCT and these other organizations," he said.

Brunson said the church also was concerned when the BGCT voted in mid-November to affirm the 1963 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message," in effect distancing Texas Baptists from a recent amendment regarding wifely submission.

People are beginning to see that the BGCT has become "more interested in trying to appease the culture than they are in being biblical," Brunson said.

According to the action taken in the business session, First Baptist Church will send \$24,000 to the BGCT's Cooperative Program unified budget next year.

For the fiscal year 1998, BGCT records show First Baptist gave the BGCT \$18,415 for Texas causes and \$252,143 for national SBC causes apart from designated gifts such as special missions offerings.

In addition to the \$24,000 to be sent to the BGCT in the next year, all other Cooperative Program gifts will be sent through SBTC, with instructions for the new convention to retain \$24,000 for its use. An additional \$24,000 previously sent through the BGCT with designations for Criswell College and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary will be sent directly to those institutions.

BGCT leaders expressed disappointment with the church vote and said they hope the congregation will invite BGCT representatives to address specific concerns they may have.

"We hope that when they revisit this, a year from now, we will have an opportunity to speak to their deacons and the church about the work and ministry of the Baptist General Convention of Texas," said Charles Wade, BGCT executive-director elect. "They have been supporters of all that's been good in Texas Baptist life in the beginning, and I am disappointed that they felt this was a necessary action, especially when it seems to me they have acted on information that is not totally accurate."

Wade said he plans to write a formal statement explaining to Texas Baptists his understanding of what transpired at the BGCT's El Paso annual session. The action on the "Baptist Faith and Message," he said, has been misrepresented by some parties as being unbiblical when it actually is a biblical position, he said.

The historic Dallas church has long been a stronghold for the conservative movement in the SBC. Its longtime pastor, Criswell, a past SBC president, is seen by many as the spiritual leader of the so-called "conservative resurgence" which brought the current ruling party to power. A number of current SBC leaders are past members.

Criswell's predecessor, George W. Truett, is regarded as one of the great denominational statesmen in Southern Baptist history. The 47-year pastor of First Baptist is remembered as a pulpiteer, champion for religious liberty and leader in Texas Baptist and Southern Baptist life.

## **Guide seeks to quell conflict over Bible in public schools**

By Larry Chesser

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Seeking to end confusion and conflict about the role of the Bible in public schools, religious, education and civil-liberties groups recently endorsed new guidelines to help educators address that issue.

"The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide" was released Nov. 11 in New York City by National Bible Association and the First Amendment Center. The publication carried endorsements from 18 organizations, including the American Federation of Teachers, the Baptist Joint Committee, the Christian Legal Society, the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., the National School Boards Association and People For the American Way.

The guide contends that conflict over the role of the Bible in public schools has been fueled both by those who want religion imposed in public schools and those who want it ignored.

"The sponsors of this guide reject both of these models and offer another approach -- one in which public schools neither inculcate nor inhibit religion but become places where religion and religious conviction are treated with fairness and respect," the guide states.

The guide notes that U.S. Supreme Court decisions banning organized prayer and Bible reading in classrooms have been misinterpreted as prohibiting students from expressing their faith in public schools.

"Actually, the Court did not eliminate prayer or the Bible from public schools; it barred state-sponsored religious practices, including devotional use of the Bible by public-school officials," the guide states.

Citing court decisions as well as U.S. Department of Education guidelines, the publication emphasizes that while public schools cannot provide religious instruction, they may teach about religion and the Bible.

"In keeping with the First Amendment's mandate of governmental neutrality toward religion, any study of religion in a public school must be educational, not devotional," the guidelines state.

Among guidelines offered public schools:

-- Bibles class must be taught in an objective, academic manner, neither promoting nor disparaging religion.

-- Teachers for a Bible class should be selected in the same manner as other teachers are selected, based on academic qualifications rather than religious beliefs or lack of beliefs.

-- The Bible may be used as a primary text but should not be the only text for a course.

-- Parents should be assured that course goals are academic and that academic teaching about the Bible is not intended to undermine or reinforce personal beliefs about the Bible.

The guide emphasized that public school teachers "must understand the important distinction between advocacy, indoctrination, proselytizing, and the practice of religion -- which is unconstitutional -- and teaching about religion that is objective, nonjudgmental, academic, neutral, balanced, and fair -- which is constitutional."

In addition to underscoring ways the Bible may be incorporated into a school's curriculum, the guide underscores students' rights of religious expression and to form student-led, student-initiated religious clubs on the same basis as other extracurricular clubs.

Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Melissa Rogers said the guide should help educators see that ignoring the importance of the Bible and other religious books to the development of world cultures is a disservice to students.

"This guide finds common ground by keeping the study academic in the classroom while at the same time allowing students the right to express their religious convictions in all places, including the public schools," Rogers said.

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## **High court declines to review \$1 damage award to atheist**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has declined to disturb a symbolic \$1 damage award to an atheist who claimed he was forced to participate in religious exercises at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings as part of his probation sentence.

Orange County, N.Y., officials recommended probation for Robert Warner, charged with his third alcohol-related driving offense in one year, on the condition that Warner attend AA meetings.

Warner, who had begun attending AA meetings voluntarily before his sentence, later filed suit against probation officials alleging that his First Amendment rights were violated by being forced to attend the meetings.

A federal district judge said Warner was not exposed to the "deeply religious nature" of the AA program until well after he began serving his sentence and that his failure to immediately appeal his sentence did not prevent him from making his First Amendment claim.

The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed and called the symbolic \$1 damage award levied by the district court "just about right."

The appeals court agreed that Warner should not have been required to participate in religious exercises at AA meetings. The court said it is "far less clear," however, that he was entitled to damages from county officials who "were seeking not to impose obligatory religion but to require an alcoholic to deal with his addiction."

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## **Supreme Court won't review decision granting lesbian visitation rights**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has declined to intervene in a dispute over child-visitation rights between former lesbian partners.

By declining to review the case, the court left standing a ruling by a Massachusetts court temporarily allowing a woman to visit a 4-year-old child born to her former lover, pending a trial.

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court said the plaintiff, who is not mentioned by name in court documents, is a "de facto" parent of the child, who was conceived by artificial insemination and born during the couple's 13-year monogamous relationship. The women separated in 1998.

That June, the plaintiff filed a complaint seeking action on the adoption and visitation rights. A probate court judge ordered temporary visitation rights, pending trial.

Massachusetts' top court said in a 4-2 decision: "The recognition of de facto parents is in accord with notions of the modern family. An increasing number of same-gender couples, like the plaintiff and the defendant, are deciding to have children."

"It is to be expected that children of nontraditional families, like other children, form parent relationships with both parents, whether those parents are legal or de facto," the court said. The court added that the "best interests calculus" must include an examination of the child's relationship to both.

A dissenting opinion signed by two judges decried the majority's decision as "a remarkable example of judicial lawmaking."

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