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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Missouri layman defends 'research' that others criticize as propaganda
- Lawyer advises caution in distributing material
- Advocate for conservative causes hailed by friends, criticized by foes
- Critical booklet has basis in fact, but tells only part of story, target claims

**Missouri layman defends 'research'
that others criticize as propaganda**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Should Baptist leaders be judged by the company they keep or by what they say they believe?

From Roger Moran's perspective, Baptists who serve on the boards of interfaith agencies alongside others who advocate more liberal positions on issues such as homosexuality and abortion are guilty themselves of advancing those positions.

But a variety of Baptist leaders who have been targeted by Moran's Missouri-based advocacy group believe he unfairly paints them as liberals simply because they have some professional affiliation with others who are more liberal than the typical Southern Baptist.

Is it guilt by association, as they contend? Or is it just the facts, as Moran contends?

A growing number of Baptist churches are being forced to make a judgment for themselves, as literature and videos produced by Moran's Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association circulate across the nation. The literature -- which is especially critical of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs -- is being distributed by individuals who want state Baptist conventions and churches to remain closely aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Here's an example of how Moran's approach works:

Moran believes Texas Baptists ought to be alarmed because David Currie, executive director of the moderate group Texas Baptists Committed, sits on the board of the Interfaith Alliance, a non-partisan organization committed to fostering dialogue between religious perspectives.

"If you know much about the Interfaith Alliance, you know it is one of the leading pro-homosexual-left groups around," Moran charged in a recent interview. "Meg Riley serves on there with him, and she's a lesbian, openly a lesbian. She's co-chair of a group called Equal Partners in Faith (which advocates homosexual rights). ... The Interfaith Alliance is one of the members of it. Are you saying none of that stuff was ever mentioned in an Interfaith Alliance board meeting?"

Currie says this criticism of him is unfounded and is representative of the kind of "guilt by association" he believes Moran publishes. Currie firmly denies any personal support for homosexual activity or homosexual marriage.

"It's taking a little-bitty coincidence and saying this is all of reality," Currie charged.

He doesn't know the specifics of what other Interfaith Alliance board members believe on every issue, he said, and it's not his concern in working with them on the issues they can agree on, such as the need to encourage civility in religious discourse.

Linking him to support for homosexuality because someone who supports homosexuality serves on a board with him is like reporting on a baseball game by saying only that Juan Gonzales hit a home run when the score of the game was 14-5, Currie charged. "That's not the whole story of the ballgame. There's more to it than the fact that one individual did something."

Despite Moran's impressions, Currie said, "I've been to Interfaith Alliance board meetings for four years, and homosexuality and abortion have never been mentioned."

As for Moran's charge that the Interfaith Alliance is a member of Equal Partners in Faith, that organization's leader laughed out loud when asked by a reporter if this were true.

"We have no organizational members," said Steven Baines, executive coordinator of Equal Partners in Faith. Further, there is no formal link between the two organizations, he added.

And Currie argued that if he is guilty of supporting homosexuality just by participating with the Interfaith Alliance, then Moran ought also to indict Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

"Last year, Richard Land appeared at an Interfaith Alliance board meeting, because we worked together on a particular issue," Currie said. "Does that mean he supports all these things?"

"That's the way these people operate, to try to find one little piece of reality and say it describes all of reality."

Yet Moran defends his research methods and publications as accurate and valid.

"It's not guilt by association," he said. "These are the organizations that these guys relate to. If you consistently align yourself with organizations that advocate for the acceptance of homosexual rights, ... it tells you something."

On that count, Moran takes heavy aim at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Baptist Joint Committee, citing dozens of links between individuals somehow associated with the Baptist organizations and representatives of pro-homosexual causes. Many of the accusations circle back around to affiliation with Americans United for Separation of Church and State, an independent, interfaith religious-liberty watchdog in Washington, D.C.

Moran cites the fact James Dunn, recently retired executive director of the BJC, and Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, have served on the board of Americans United.

The lightning rod in that organization is its executive director, Barry Lynn, whom Moran identifies as an advocate of all manner of liberal causes.

But Strickland said that even if everything Moran implies about Lynn were true, that doesn't mean he and Dunn share all his beliefs.

"I have frequently served on boards where there was a common cause, but I would not agree with many of the positions others on the board might take," Strickland said. "The fact that one works with many groups on gambling doesn't mean you agree with everything those people may believe. If you are a part of a group of people fighting child abuse, that doesn't mean you believe everything every person in the group believes. If you are with the Southern Baptist Convention and having joint efforts with the Catholics, that doesn't imply that you believe everything Catholics believe."

One of Moran's most notorious pieces, which was published in the October 1998 newsletter of Southern Baptists of Texas, is called "A Look in Contrasts." In it, Moran attempts to describe in broad terms what the SBC "stands for" and what the Fellowship "stands for."

In the left-hand column he writes, "The SBC has no leaders calling for the ordination of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered persons." And then in the right-hand column, he writes, "But CBF does."

This list goes on to include 15 accusations of liberal ideology shunned by the SBC but allegedly embraced by CBF.

It was material such as this that last year prompted CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal publicly to call for Moran to stop distributing "relentless and unwarranted attacks." As other CBF leaders have done before and after, Vestal strongly denied any accusation that the moderate missions organization advocates homosexuality or abortion.

Vestal published a lengthy response to Moran's charges, including this appeal: "The repeated insinuation and insult contained in your materials is that the real mission of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is to promote the gay-lesbian lifestyle, abortion on demand and even child pornography. You constantly suggest that CBF has ulterior motives and hidden agendas of all kinds, rather than the one we boldly declare in our mission statement. These tactics are misguided, harmful and wrong."

Vestal admonished Moran "to put an end to these attacks, to publicly apologize for the harm you have done and to seek reconciliation with these Christian brothers and sisters."

For his part, Moran believes Vestal made no attempt to reconcile with him but sought only to "shut me up." He complains that CBF and others who charge him with slander never have come forward with documentation to refute his claims.

Some rebuttals have been published, however. The Baptist Joint Committee has published several articles refuting Moran's accusations against the BJC and its leadership. Likewise, the Fellowship has published literature and a video rebutting Moran's charges.

Yet Moran's literature continues to be distributed farther and wider, and with greater effect.

Moran contends that's because he has truth on his side. Critics say it's because he has the upper hand as an aggressive accuser.

"The problem is that a lot of people are just mentally lazy. They're not interested in point-for-point reaction," said Doyle Sager, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo., and chairman of Mainstream Missouri Baptists, a group working to oppose Moran on the state level. "Moran or his troops are great at oversimplifying. It's the impression left, ... then you're put in the defensive position."

Such a use of communication technique as a political weapon isn't unique to Baptist battles, said Robert Heath, professor of communication at the University of Houston.

"A fact is often a fact only as it is interpreted," he said. "The classic example is that you and I can look at a glass, and that glass can have a certain amount of water in it. One of us can say the water glass is two-thirds full, and the other will say it is one-third empty."

What you see "sometimes translates into issues of expectation," he added. "One can argue that in any set of facts, the issue is the interpretation of those facts."

An example he gives in classes comes from the Cold War era in Russia. A Russian newspaper reported that its athletes had come in second in a certain competition while the U.S. athletes had come in next to last. What the newspaper didn't report was that there were only two teams competing.

Readers and listeners always must be on the alert to ascertain facts that might lead to false conclusions, Heath said. "Are we trying to better understand ourselves and bring our wise judgment to bear, or are we using the manipulation of facts in some more narrow way?"

Moran vehemently denies he is guilty of any such misrepresentation.

"Slander is a very serious thing," he said, noting the Bible's exhortation to "expel that wicked man from among you" as one penalty. "Sowing discord among the brethren is one of the things God detests.

"If I have done that, I need to be held accountable. I also believe everything I have written is absolutely accurate."

-30-

Lawyer advises caution in distributing material

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Could your church be sued for defamation or libel if it distributes the accusatory literature produced by Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association and Texas Baptist Laymen's Association?

The answer is mixed and difficult to give, according to Paul Watler, an attorney with the Dallas firm of Jenkins and Gilchrest who specializes in defending publishers and broadcasters against charges of defamation.

"This is not something so clear-cut that it leaps off the page," Watler said after reviewing some of the literature in question. "It's a subtler issue."

The bottom line, however, should be one of caution, the attorney advised.

"As someone who has practiced defamation law for almost 20 years now, I've seen libel and defamation cases brought over a lot less," Watler said of the material circulated among Baptist churches. "The expense and distraction and burden of defending litigation is very real."

No one has yet filed any legal claim against the Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association, Texas Baptist Laymen's Association or the groups' researchers, Roger Moran and Bill Streich. But various Baptist leaders upset by the accusations Moran and Streich make have labeled their work "slander," "innuendo" and "untruths."

The Baptist General Convention of Texas Committee on Baptist Integrity has called the literature and other pieces like it "malicious gossip" and urged churches not to distribute it.

The pieces produced by Moran and Streich, which they defend as completely accurate, draw a series of links between individual leaders of the BGCT, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist Joint Committee to far-left causes such as support for homosexual rights and abortion rights. The links generally involve at least two or three degrees of separation, such as a Baptist leader serving on the board of an interfaith agency alongside another non-Baptist board member who supports homosexuality.

On one level, the question of whether such literature is defamatory might be easy to answer, Watler advised. "The classical definition of what is defamatory is a false statement that injures someone's reputation. So if you falsely state that someone associates with crusaders for homosexuality or that someone supports homosexuality and you can prove that is false, potentially there might be a defamation claim."

Where things get sticky, he added, is the intrusion of religious belief into the equation. If a charge were framed strictly within the definition of religious belief, there would be no case.

"When you're dealing with the tenets of a religious belief, the civil courts won't get involved in whether something is false or defamatory," he explained. "Whether it's against the tenets of the Baptist church to accept homosexuality, courts would not adjudicate that."

However, fear of potential litigation prompted the Missouri Baptist Convention's newspaper, Word and Way, in 1997 to reject a two-page advertisement that consisted almost entirely of Moran's research that purported to draw links between certain Baptist leaders and liberal causes.

Acting on the advice of legal counsel, Editor Bill Webb rejected the ad, citing concerns about potential exposure to libel. Newspapers generally are held accountable for libelous information they publish, even in the form of paid advertisements they did not write or endorse.

The rejection of that ad angered Moran and other Missouri Baptist conservatives, who charged the paper with merely attempting to squelch their voice.

"My response was, for crying out loud, this is public information," Moran said. "We just took public information and repeated it in an organized fashion."

Moran insists that he does not draw any conclusions but merely reports factual information that should be instructive to other Baptists in making their own decisions. He bristles at those who say his research reports isolated facts but misrepresents the full truth.

"To say we have fact but not truth is a rather ridiculous defense, because I don't think we have drawn all these bizarre conclusions. ... Would somebody please tell me exactly what I did say that was erroneous or out of context?"

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Advocate for conservative causes hailed by friends, criticized by foes

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Roger Moran insists he did not set out to influence anybody in Texas about anything.

Although he is the author of a series of pamphlets and central figure in a video that have circulated through Texas Baptist churches over the last year -- as part of a larger campaign to raise concerns about the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist General Convention of Texas -- Texas never was on his mind, said the 43-year-old businessman.

"I certainly didn't intend for all our stuff to go to Texas," Moran said in an interview. But if advocates of the conservative cause in Texas or elsewhere find his research helpful, he's happy for them to use it wherever they deem appropriate, he added.

His focus always has been and remains on keeping the Missouri Baptist Convention closely aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention and completely free of association with the Fellowship, he said. In addition to serving as research director for a group called Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association, he leads a political effort called Project 1000. The latter is credited with giving conservatives the upper hand in presidential elections at Missouri Baptist Convention annual meetings the last two years.

Those who agree with his cause view him as a grassroots hero. Those who disagree with his cause view him as a stirrer of dissent and a less-than-truthful historian.

Moran thrives on "guilt by association," charged Doyle Sager, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo., and chairman of Mainstream Missouri Baptists, a group formed to counter Moran and Project 1000.

"There's an appeal to fear in Missouri," Sager said. "There's a lumping, a very irresponsible, very unbiblical lumping together that if you don't agree with the laymen's group on certain issues, then you must by definition be their enemy on every other issue."

"Roger Moran's material lacks any semblance of integrity," echoed Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and one of Moran's targets. "It is classic guilt by association."

Kerry Messer, president of Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association, defends Moran's work and the mission of the association. He thinks the close-knit community of Baptist pastors has created an environment where people judge accusations on their opinions of individuals rather than on the facts.

"People need to quit taking sides before they know the issues," he said.

Moran's work through Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association has spread nationwide because of his forceful attacks on national entities such as CBF, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

But the door into Texas has been widened by formation of a new state Baptist convention for conservatives disenchanted with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Moran's literature frequently has been distributed statewide by pastors and other individuals encouraging churches to align with the new state convention.

Bill Streich, a layman from First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, subsequently formed a group called Texas Baptist Laymen's Association, which distributes Moran's research documents along with additional Texas-specific information.

"Nobody knew who I was until recently, and nobody cared," Moran said. But now the welder from Winfield, Mo., is becoming a significant influence in churches where his literature is distributed or where he speaks in person -- churches in Texas that many times hang in the balance between remaining with the BGCT or jumping to the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

Who is Roger Moran?

Moran is a layman who talks in humble tones about his dislike for the limelight. He's not the kind who wants to rub elbows with people of power or position, he said; he's just a common layman with some serious concerns about moral issues.

He is a father to six children, including a set of 18-month-old twins, and he and his wife are hoping to adopt three more children soon. He owns a steel-manufacturing company that does business under the name Brooks Brothers Trailers.

His introduction to Baptist politics began in 1989, he said, when he became concerned that the Missouri Baptist Convention was listing a Holiday Inn as an alternative housing site for its annual meeting, which was being held at a hotel across the street. Some Baptists were participating in a boycott of Holiday Inn at the time because the hotel chain made available adult cable programming in its guestrooms.

At the convention, he sat in on various committee meetings and listened to the floor debate. He soon found additional concerns about the state convention, particularly its relationship with Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a Washington-based religious-liberty agency.

Moran objected to the Baptist convention having any relation to Americans United because he perceives its view of church-state separation to be counter to what the most conservative Baptists desire -- and because he believes the agency's executive director holds liberal positions on issues such as homosexuality and abortion.

At the 1990 state convention, Moran made a motion to defund Americans United from the state mission offering, where it was slated to get \$3,000. "Big, well-respected guys in the Missouri Baptist Convention stood up and spoke against it, and my motion failed," he recalled.

What actually happened, according to convention minutes, was Moran attempted to amend the budget after it already had been considered, and his motion asking messengers to reconsider failed.

He went home and began to do extensive research on Americans United and other affiliations and individuals, he said. Realizing he never would have the time to make his detailed case on the convention floor, he published a pamphlet outlining his concerns. That pamphlet was distributed to convention messengers the next year.

The plan worked. That year, when he made a similar motion to defund Americans United, he prevailed.

Laymen's Association formed

That same year, he and fellow conservative activist Messer formed Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association. Messer is a lobbyist and moral-concerns educator who spends most of his time speaking in churches or campaigning against issues such as alcohol, gambling and pornography.

He describes himself as a former blue-collar worker who felt called to full-time ministry after getting fired from his secular job. He formed a "faith-based" ministry called Missouri Family Network.

He soon met Moran, who was crusading against the adult-video business in his county. "We developed a great personal relationship," Messer said.

In addition to Moran and Messer, three others serve on the board of directors for the laymen's association, Moran said. They are Richard Stone, a layman also from Winfield who works for Moran; Cindy Province, a laywoman from the St. Louis area; and Ronald Turnbull, a layman from northern Missouri.

Bouyed by their success with the Americans United vote, they began tackling other issues, most notably what they perceived as infiltration into the state convention by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and a lessening of relations with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Moran continued to research and document what he believed to be curious associations between individuals affiliated with the Fellowship and the Baptist Joint Committee to far-left causes. He published these findings, without any rebuttal, in fliers. And then the laymen's association produced its first video of Moran making an extensive presentation of his findings to a local church.

Initially, a church in Missouri duplicated the videos. But as demand grew, a production company was employed to make larger quantities, he said.

Funding for all these projects comes from a few Missouri churches, himself and another board member, Moran said. "We spend very little. ... I kick in whatever's necessary myself. One of our board members kicks in. We give people permission to duplicate whatever they want."

Moderate Baptists in Missouri say they suspect Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association is getting funding and support from some out-of-state source, perhaps even indirectly from an SBC agency. Moran denies this is true, saying the only out-of-state money the association receives is payment for literature and videos ordered.

Messer likewise denies any out-of-state or SBC-related funding.

The funding has been "our own," Messer said, explaining that each board member has contributed. "The vast majority of it over the last nine, 10 years has come out of our own pockets."

Personal life criticized

As Moran's work gained influence, criticism of his research and reporting methods mounted. And so did criticism of his standing to accuse anyone else of immoral behavior.

Critics pointed out Moran is twice divorced and currently married to his third wife, that he has been party to at least 11 civil lawsuits, including several for failure to pay employment taxes.

His critics also have pointed out Moran appears to have been a member of either four or five Baptist churches over the last nine years, even though he has lived and worked in the same rural region the whole time.

At the 1991 Missouri Baptist Convention, he was listed as a messenger from New Salem Baptist Church in Winfield, Mo. At the 1993 convention, he was a messenger from Sulphur Lick Baptist Church in Troy, Mo. At the 1996 convention, he was a messenger from First Baptist Church of O'Fallon, Mo. And at the

1999 convention, he was a messenger from First Baptist Church of Troy, Mo., although his membership apparently was at one of First Baptist's missions, Ridge Road Baptist Mission. Missouri Baptist Convention bylaws do not allow a mission church to send messengers to the annual meeting.

When asked about his personal life last summer by Word and Way, the weekly newspaper of the Missouri Baptist Convention, Moran acknowledged his record is not stellar. He reiterated that explanation in a recent interview with the Baptist Standard.

"I certainly understand people who believe a guy who's been married three times is pathetic, and it is," he said. "I don't have a problem with people who find me repulsive."

But most of the personal issues his critics cite happened before the day in May 1982 when he fully committed his life to Jesus Christ, he said. "I think I was saved when I was 12 or 13 years old, but I didn't live like it. ... I was a heathen."

At the point he reached personal bottom, he already was divorced once, and his second marriage was on the skids, he said. "I did my best to make that second marriage work, but it was too late. The damage I had done before was too much."

Ten years after his second divorce, he married again and has remained married to the same woman the last seven years. He is a different person today than he was before 1982, he said.

"From that point forward in my life, I repented. I don't think I've missed maybe one or two Sundays since then. I don't miss church. I love it."

The impression that he has been a church-hopper also is misleading, Moran said.

After having been a longtime member at New Salem Baptist Church in Winfield, he and others left that congregation through a series of splits, he said. "We left and went to another church for two years to help a dead church. We taught Sunday school and helped get that church going. Then we went to First Baptist Church of O'Fallon."

He recently left the O'Fallon congregation, he said, because he and his family have bought a farm 30 miles away from his previous residence and an hour's drive away from O'Fallon.

Leading Missouri moderates privately dispute that explanation, claiming Moran had a falling out with O'Fallon Pastor Gary Taylor because Taylor, a conservative, was too conciliatory in his appointments as president of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

Any attempt to portray a rift between him and Taylor is uninformed, Moran said. "There is no rift whatsoever between him and me."

Guilt by association?

Critics of Moran's research often claim he peddles guilt by association, that the concerns he raises are based on little more than Person A serving on a board with Person B, who happens to support homosexual rights, and therefore Person A must support homosexual rights.

Using the same logic, these critics contend, one could accuse the SBC of endorsing divorce and frequent lawsuits because Moran now serves on the SBC Executive Committee.

While he understands why people would make such a comparison, Moran said, he believes there is a difference.

"The difference is on May 1, 1982, I repented of what I was and what I had done," he said. "I have never as a Christian advocated divorce, never have advocated any of the things I have done. But CBF and the groups we have been raising concerns about have gone around and said things like 'we don't choose our sexual orientation, we awaken to it.'"

Further, Moran said, he has been forced to account for "everything I've done in the last 20 years," while "CBF has never yet given account for anything."

"Moran's defense of his behavior speaks for itself," Fellowship Coordinator Daniel Vestal said. "He knows full well that CBF is not a convention that issues resolutions or proclamations about moral issues. Yet he would label our participating churches, our missionaries, our partner organizations and tens of thousands of Baptist Christians with a single, unattributed, inflammatory statement about sexual orientation.

"That's like taking something a Sunday-school teacher said at a PTA meeting on an emotionally charged, politicized issue and then launching a campaign implying that a single comment from one individual in an unrelated context somehow represents the official view of that member's church," Vestal added. "This kind of modus operandi would be reprehensible even in the world of hardball secular politics."

And turning the tables to indict the SBC by its implicit affirmation of Moran is a valid criticism, Vestal said.

"Moran is an elected leader of the Southern Baptist Convention. Can you imagine the headlines if an SBC leader were to launch these kinds of vitriolic attacks against Methodist Christians or Presbyterian Christians?" Vestal asked. "I think there would be a proverbial stampede as convention leaders tried to distance themselves from this kind of behavior. Yet the reckless assault by Moran and others on the people and churches of the Fellowship continues unabated."

Who's running things?

By his own account, Moran has no formal theological training and until he recommitted his life to Christ in 1982 could barely read.

"When the Lord finally beat me down, I spent the next three years doing nothing but learning to read on the King James Version" of the Bible, he said.

Soon after, he was asked to become chairman of the moral-concerns committee for the Baptist association in his area. "At that time, I didn't even know what abortion was," he said. "I was a welder. But I accepted that position and started studying."

He went to a national meeting of communists and took notes, and he went to a national meeting of humanists and took notes, he said. "I don't like to take somebody else's word for what something is."

As his interest in religious, moral and political affairs grew, he started building files, he said. "We get little tidbits of information from people. A lot of times you just kind of follow the leads. ... When you put all those things together, you begin to get a picture."

He laughs at the sometimes unspoken question of some of his critics that perhaps he is not the author of the research bearing his name but is merely a conduit for someone else's work. When people ask, "Who's behind what you're doing?" he said, it makes him wonder if they're really thinking, "We've got this dumb old layman over there, and there's no way he could know this."

A new alliance

Moran, who off the top of his head recalls quotes made by moderate Baptist leaders 15 years ago, said he can't recall who introduced him to Bill Streich. It was some mutual friend who said the two ought to get together because they shared a lot in common and had a similar mission, he said.

Streich said he contacted Moran directly after learning about his research.

Streich is no newcomer to Baptist political fights. As a trustee of the SBC Home Mission Board (and now a trustee of the North American Mission Board), he led a protracted and successful fight against SBC participation in an ecumenical conference on reconciliation in England in 1997.

He runs a retail and wholesale mass-merchandising business in Wichita Falls, Texas, and has been a deacon at First Baptist Church since 1981. A graduate of Baylor University, he is married and the father of four children.

Influential figures in his spiritual life, he said, have been former Wichita Falls pastors James Landes, Landrum Leavell, Bill Pinson and Morris Chapman. Both Landes and Pinson later became executive directors of the BGCT. Chapman, a leader in the SBC's conservative movement, now is president of the SBC Executive Committee in Nashville, Tenn.

Streich said he became concerned about denominational issues in March 1980, the year after Chapman came to First Baptist Church as pastor and a year after the conservative movement began its quest to control the SBC presidency.

In the current Texas context, Streich said he affirms the work of the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

According to multiple sources with firsthand knowledge of the Wichita Falls church, not everyone there has been enthusiastic about Streich's outspoken role in Texas Baptist and Southern Baptist politics.

Pastor Robert Jeffress confirmed that some in the church applaud Streich's efforts, while others do not.

"It's not an issue," Jeffress said. "We have determined our church is big enough to include members who may have differing opinions about what is happening in the BGCT. Bill has been very forthright in saying his actions do not represent the church."

Streich vs. Strickland

Streich took aim at Strickland and the Texas Christian Life Commission in 1998 when First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls and Jeffress came under fire from Americans United. AU Executive Director Barry Lynn roundly criticized Jeffress for leading a campaign to have two pro-homosexual books removed from the public library, even making comments about the campaign from the pulpit.

Streich claimed Strickland and the Texas CLC failed to defend Jeffress and First Baptist Church, thereby putting the BGCT office in league with homosexual-rights supporters.

Strickland said Streich's accusations on this count are dead wrong.

"I supported the pastor," Strickland said. "I indicated that what the pastor had done was appropriate and wrote him to that effect. The only thing I did not agree to was driving to Wichita Falls to have a press conference."

The spillover from this dispute was in part behind the controversy when Strickland spoke to five classes at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary last fall. In at least one of the classes, where Strickland spoke on the topic of how to keep your church out of court, a question was raised about First Baptist of Wichita Falls and the book incident.

By the account of Strickland and the professors in whose classes he spoke, Strickland said nothing negative about First Baptist Church or Jeffress. In fact, Strickland said, he took the opportunity to commend Jeffress for taking a stand for his beliefs in a proper and legal manner.

Yet soon after Strickland's lectures, three seminary professors were told to distribute to students a response from Streich. That response consisted of anti-BGCT and anti-CBF literature from Texas Baptist Laymen's Association and Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association.

Like Moran, Streich remains diligent despite generating controversy.

Criticism of his views, tactics and literature won't stop him from proceeding, Streich intimated when asked what lies ahead.

"Stay tuned," he said. "There is more to come."

Critical booklet has basis in fact, but tells only part of story, target claims

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- This is a story of a Wiccan priestess, a Baptist preacher and various interpretations of what happened when the two showed up on the same program.

As part of a 12-page booklet written for the Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association to report on alleged dalliances with liberalism by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Roger Moran says former BJC Executive Director James Dunn is "biased toward the left" because he spoke on a program in Colorado in 1993 alongside a Wiccan priestess.

"BJCPA Executive Director Speaks with Wicca Priestess in Colorado," says a headline in the pamphlet. The headline is followed by a two-paragraph description of the event and other speakers there who Moran intimates ought to be objectionable to Baptists.

Moran's report gives no information about what any of the speakers said at the event but simply identifies who some of the speakers were and their associations to various causes.

Dunn wrote a specific response to this accusation in a flier put out to counter Moran's literature.

"It is true ... that I was on a panel discussion one Saturday afternoon with a self-styled witch at an interfaith gathering in the First Baptist Church of Colorado Springs," Dunn wrote.

But that's not all the story, he added. "The next morning, as the invitation was given after my morning sermon there, a young woman, Debbie, who had been present the previous afternoon, came forward and accepted Jesus Christ as her Savior. She told the pastor, Tony Evans, that she had heard the clear witness, even to a witch, the day before, had been moved and resolved to delay no longer in following Jesus.

"I did speak in such a pluralistic setting, and I would do it again," Dunn replied. "You would too."

-30-

-- By Mark Wingfield

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