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**'Mainstream' Baptists
form nationwide network**

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Southern Baptists opposed to the potential "fundamentalist domination" of churches and state Baptist conventions have formed the Network of Mainstream Baptists to strengthen their cause.

Slightly more than 100 representatives from 15 states participated in a "mainstream Baptist consultation" in Atlanta April 25-26.

They adopted the label "mainstream" to signal their affinity for what they call historic or traditional Baptist beliefs. The label also sets them apart from their adversaries, whom they call "fundamentalists," who gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1980s and consolidated national power during the '90s.

The mainstream Baptists disavowed any interest in forming either an alternative national convention to oppose the SBC or a political apparatus to recapture control of the SBC.

"We have no desire to create a massive organization," stressed John Baugh, a Houston layman and leader of the mainstream movement. "We could never clean up the SBC, so why waste our time and effort?"

Instead, consultation participants expressed a desire to prevent their churches and state conventions from following the rightward political/theological path taken by the SBC during the past two decades.

"Mainstream Baptists' central objective is to respond to the need of more than 10 million highly vulnerable fellow mainstream Baptists who are subject to being drawn into the juggernaut of fundamentalism," said Baugh, a member of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston.

The mainstream movement exists to help like-minded Baptists "achieve certain purposes," Baugh said. These include plans to:

- "Educate others regarding Baptist issues" currently confronting churches and state conventions.
- "Get votes at state conventions" to prevent "fundamentalists" from gaining control.
- "Preserve Baptist principles," such as the priesthood of all believers, the autonomy of the local church, ethical decision-making and separation of church and state.

-- "Provide leadership" to churches and state conventions to help direct the causes and objectives of mainstream Baptists.

-- "Sidestep the aims and purposes of others," such as the "political machinations" of those who now control the SBC.

Leaders of mainstream organizations in four states echoed that theme.

"We must work on establishing a link between those who have the Baptist heritage and those who need the Baptist heritage," said Tony Woodell, executive director of Arkansas Baptists Committed. "I try to tell the story of what it means to be a Baptist."

Similarly, like-minded Oklahomans seek to speak for traditional Baptist principles, even against long political odds, reported Bruce Prescott, executive director of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists. He noted he can only count on about 15 pastors in the state who will stand with the organization.

"We're not here to fight fundamentalism or get in their face, but to face them" with traditional Baptist perspectives, Prescott said.

Still, political perseverance in state conventions is part of the mainstream movement, leaders said.

"Our goal is to win the presidency of the Missouri Baptist Convention," said Rob Marus, executive director of Mainstream Missouri Baptists. "The fundamentalists have accomplished that feat two consecutive years out of their five-year plan" to gain control of the Missouri convention, but a reversal of fortunes is possible, he predicted.

In Arkansas, mainstream Baptists won one convention presidency by 15 votes and lost the next year -- in an area of the state dominated by their adversaries -- by only seven votes, Woodell reported.

Of the value of political perseverance, he said, "If it can be done in Arkansas, it can be done anywhere."

The key is focus, insisted David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, the oldest, largest and most successful of the state mainstream organizations. His organization has been given a large share of credit for preventing the so-called conservative movement that gained control of the SBC from taking root in the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"Stay focused on the big picture: this is about the kingdom of God," Currie said. "Fundamentalism is a perversion of the gospel. It's not about the kingdom of God -- about grace and freedom.

"We're not doing this out of anger. We're doing this for the future of the Baptist movement in America. ... Somebody is going to lead Baptists. The question is this: Do you want fundamentalists to lead or traditional Baptists to lead?"

Mainstream Baptists should ignore people who say politics are bad, Currie added. "They're either ignorant or not telling the truth. ... All church work is political. It's about connections and networks. Show me a pastor who's not political, and I'll show you a pastor who got fired."

The new network is not the seed of the Baptist Convention of the Americas, said Herbert Reynolds, chancellor of Baylor University in Waco, Texas, who proposed the hemispheric convention in 1998.

"I may never live to see the formation of the Baptist Convention of the Americas," Reynolds said. "We need to leave here today having created something that will leave a legacy, not a convention."

The network is needed "in order to coordinate and collaborate our efforts to a greater degree," he explained.

The network also is not a competitor to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization of so-called moderate Baptists that began providing church resources and sponsoring missionaries apart from the SBC in 1991, Reynolds added.

"They're not competitive at all," he said. "The CBF has not attempted to go into the states to help them extricate themselves from fundamentalist control or prevent fundamentalist control," tasks taken on by mainstream organizations.

CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal, who attended several sessions of the consultation, offered "a positive word about the formation of mainstream organizations" in the states. "CBF has thrived in states where there has been a presence speaking to freedom and Baptist principles," he asserted.

Mainstream causes have an opportunity to impact the future by reaching students today, said Keith Bruce, director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas' Christian Education Coordinating Board, who led a panel discussion on education.

Last year, the 48 schools affiliated with Southern Baptist state conventions enrolled 112,000 students, he said, noting many thousands more also were involved in Baptist Student Ministries on other campuses nationwide.

"There is still an opportunity through educational ministry to impact the future generation, most importantly the lay leaders of tomorrow," Bruce said. "We must boldly and unapologetically enlist our universities to partner with us to expose students to Baptist principles and vision" and to promote "not our Baptist system, but our Baptist way."

The proposal to create the mainstream network was presented by Bob Stephenson, a layman from First Baptist Church in Norman, Okla.

Stephenson's original recommendation called for creation of the "Council of Mainstream Baptists," but participants expressed concern that the notion of a council might lead to more of a convention-like organization than they desired. So, they settled on "Network of Mainstream Baptists" to indicate the loose, voluntary nature of the organization.

All participating state mainstream organizations will have two representatives on the national network.

States with mainstream representation at the consultation were Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia.

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Decade away from limelight leads minister back to his roots

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (ABP) --A lonely decade away from the limelight led Joel Gregory back to his Baptist roots, the former pastor told the Network of Mainstream Baptists at its inaugural meeting in Atlanta April 26.

As a young minister known for articulate and powerful sermons, Gregory shot meteorically through the Baptist ranks.

In 1983, as a young professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, he presented a series of theme interpretations at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. In 1985, as pastor of Travis Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, he was asked to nominate both SBC presidential candidates, Winfred Moore and Charles Stanley. In 1987, he was elected president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. In 1988, he preached one of the most famous SBC sermons ever, "The Castle and the Wall." In 1990, he became pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, then the largest Baptist church in the world.

Gregory turned out his own spotlight in 1992, when, burned out and disillusioned, he abruptly resigned the Dallas pastorate. "I had a gift to preach. That gift propelled me into positions and expectations I was not prepared to face," he said of his ascent and decline among Baptists.

After a time as "a door-to-door salesman of funerals," he now owns and operates a small publishing business in Fort Worth. And in the past two years, he has begun to preach again -- 70 percent of the time in African-American congregations and 30 percent in "small Baptist churches."

"Now I have as much perspective of a layman as an ordained minister, which I still am," Gregory told the Atlanta gathering, describing "what I found out about myself, the church and Baptists over the past decade."

-- "As someone who moved from the pulpit of a 'super church' to the other side of the pew, I saw my own ignorance about how hard it is for the people in the pew simply to get through life," he confessed.

Ministers, particularly in very large churches, "deal with people in the masses rather than individually," he said. But since his departure from the pulpit, he has "encountered the dilemmas and difficulties of life of people who sit out in the pews."

-- "Small is beautiful," he reported, noting that truth has grown out of his reacquaintance with people in the pews.

"Texas Baptists, we think bigger is better. But I recall the Lord Jesus said, 'The Kingdom of God comes without observation,'" he said. "God is not always in the large, the grandiose, the big. He also is involved with much that is never seen, known, noticed."

"Baptist triumphalism needs to be muted by knowing God is doing a lot in the world we never know about."

-- "The Kingdom is God's Kingdom with a capital 'K' and not our kingdom," he said.

Gregory compared himself to the neurotic rooster who thought the sun came up because he crowed. "A burden I found too heavy to bear was that rooster phenomenon -- that the kingdom was mine," he acknowledged.

"What God does in his kingdom is like a river flowing through time. It was there long before we arrived, and it will be there long after we are gone. We are the craft on the river. It carries us; we do not move it."

-- "The church is an institution of human beings with a divine origin," he observed, conceding he had as pastor "lived in a situation that tended to divinize the pastor and the institution around him."

"The last decade has been a good opportunity for me to get in touch with the humanity of the church," he said. "God is working in, through and around an institution that should not be treated triumphalistically."

-- His experience caused Gregory to re-evaluate "my own journey with and about the Bible, my life, times and education," he recalled.

"I grew up with simple biblicism -- a profound confidence that this is God's word for us," he said, holding up his Bible. "I fell into what a number of Baptists fell into in the '80s, an attempt to define, analyze and denominationalize Scripture."

Regarding politics that divided the denomination, he noted: "In the late '70s and early '80s, I was like a number of younger Baptist preachers in Texas. We really believed (the controversy) was about the Bible. One by one, we were disabused that was what it was about."

"It was more about style and hermeneutics," the approach to biblical interpretation, he explained. "It was about uniformity ... and a certain style or way of doing church. ... Of course, it was about power."

-- The years out of the limelight also caused Gregory to examine "the value I attached to my own roots as a Baptist," he noted. "I had the experience of being cut off from virtually every root that had been mine."

So, he had to ask himself, "Where do you come from?"

"The values in my life had to do with the Baptist heritage I received as a child growing up in Connell Baptist Church in Fort Worth," he said. They included "the priesthood of the believer, the autonomy of the church and the emphasis on a simple biblicism in which the Bible was not used as a tool or a wedge."

"My own heart is back at home, where I grew up," he claimed. "Those simple, basic Baptist truths have sustained me through a decade of challenge, loss and surprising friendships."

Gregory's articulate travelogue through the past decade was not an attempt to climb back into the limelight, to stand behind America's foremost pulpits, he insisted.

"I own a publishing company and will continue to own a publishing company," he said. "I'm not running for anything in Baptist life. I do not intend to re-enter the pastorate."

And speaking to a small moderate Baptist organization certainly was not self-serving, he vowed, noting, "Some close personal friends will be highly offended I met with you today."

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Alliance renews call for end to Cuban embargo

By Bob Allen

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- In light of the Elian Gonzales saga, a Baptist group has renewed calls for the United States to lift its 40-year-old trade embargo against Cuba.

"The Elian Gonzales affair most likely would not have occurred if the embargo did not exist," said Jim Strickland, one of 364 persons to register at the 14th annual convocation of the Alliance of Baptists April 27-29 in Austin, Texas.

Strickland, of Florala, Ala., confessed he was torn between whether the group should miss an opportunity to reiterate its opposition to the embargo or risk the appearance of exploiting the highly publicized impasse between the Cuban father and Miami relatives who took custody of the boy after his mother drowned at sea.

The Washington-based Alliance, which has sponsored several friendship tours to Cuba, has previously protested the embargo as an outdated and ineffective policy. Earlier statements have charged that the embargo, enacted by President John F. Kennedy to put pressure on Fidel Castro, has brought undue suffering to Cuban citizens since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the island nation's main trade partner.

An April 28 resolution called on Congress and President Clinton "to begin an intentional process" to end the embargo.

The Alliance maintains a relationship with the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba. Francisco Rodes, the Cuban group's president, said Christian churches "are making a bridge between our countries."

Meanwhile, he charged, "People who can't get over what happened in the past" are creating "obstacles to the normalization of Cuban-American relations."

"They are filled with hate," he said.

In his annual report, Alliance Executive Director Stan Hastey noted that another religious leader, former National Council of Churches head Joan Brown Campbell, had been criticized for intervening on behalf of Elian's Cuban relatives. "Far from being vilified, I believe she is to be praised," said Hastey.

Another resolution put the Alliance on record as opposing the death penalty. Richard Cook of Hunt Valley, Md., proposed a resolution noting that the Austin meeting took place in the "capital of the state that has executed the most people in recent years."

The convocation amended the resolution to omit the reference to Texas, while calling on legislators to abolish the death penalty, jurors to resist its use, governors to commute death sentences and "churches to actively pursue ministries that promote healing and justice for victims of crime, while opposing pseudo-solutions, such as the death penalty, which perpetuate violence, hatred and revenge."

The Alliance, formed as a haven for progressives in light of a conservative takeover of the Southern

Baptist Convention, scheduled this year's gathering at Austin's University Baptist Church to show support for the congregation, which two years ago was ousted from the Baptist General Convention of Texas for ordaining a gay deacon.

"We are so grateful for your courage in standing with us during that time," Pastor Larry Bethune told the gathering.

Another church controversy cropped up late in the meeting, when members of Baptist Women in Ministry stood in the balcony during a worship service to show solidarity with their past president, Becca Gurney, who was terminated as University Baptist's associate pastor.

The Alliance plans its meeting theme each year around one of seven principles in the group's founding covenant. This year's meeting focused on "a free church in a free state and the opposition to any effort either by church or state to use the other for its own purposes."

"I see the Alliance of Baptists as the best example of a constitutional, organized expression of the historic Baptist tradition" of church-state separation, said Alliance president Welton Gaddy.

"The Alliance of Baptists acts more like Baptists act than anyone else I see bearing that name," said Gaddy, who works as executive director of the Interfaith Alliance in Washington.

Gaddy challenged the group to "live life on the boundary" between the secular and sacred realms.

A resolution commended work of the 64-year-old Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. "Its reputation as a courageous voice for our nation's first freedom has been well-earned through careful research, trustworthy communication and diligent work," the statement read in part.

In his annual "state of the Alliance" address, Executive Director Stan Hastey, who once worked for the Washington-based BJC, said the American founders' bold experiment to separate church and state has benefited both institutions.

"We have had no religious wars in the United States," Hastey said. "Sectarian strife has been kept to a minimum."

"We should revel in it, not revile our first freedom," Hastey continued. "It is based, after all, on the first axiom of true religion, that the conscience is free."

The Alliance each year honors an individual who personifies its founding principles by inviting him or her to deliver its "covenant address." This year's invitation went to Baptist theologian James Wm. McClendon, distinguished scholar in residence at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. McClendon was unable to attend due to ill health but submitted a paper that was read to the convocation in his stead by Houston Baptist University professor Curtis Freeman.

In a business session, the group elected Paula Clayton Dempsey, campus minister at Mars Hill College in North Carolina, as its new president. She will preside at next year's convocation, to be held at Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga.

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Religious freedom panel report urges U.S. foreign policy changes

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A new religious-freedom panel is urging Congress and the Clinton administration to enact more than 40 initiatives and sanctions aimed at bolstering religious freedom in the Sudan, China and Russia.

At a May 1 press conference to unveil its first report, U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom chairman David Saperstein said that religious freedom is "under serious threat" in parts of the world. The commission was established under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act.

Saperstein, executive director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said the 10-member panel tried to outline recommendations that were "do-able." But at least two of the recommendations in the 80-page report have already come under attack.

State Department officials quickly criticized a commission proposal to deny China permanent normal trade status until "substantial improvements" are made in the area of religious freedom, saying the move would "not advance the cause of religious freedom in China."

One member of the commission included her dissent to another proposal in the text of the report. Laila Al-Marayati, past president of the Women's Muslim League, opposed a recommendation to provide "non-lethal aid" to opposition groups in Sudan unless the government improves its record in religious freedom.

She said the aid would likely go to the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, which has a history of its own human-rights abuses.

Saperstein responded that if the SPLA does not meet certain human-rights criteria, it would not receive aid under the commission's proposal.

The panel confined recommendations to three countries because of a delay in funding and in the appointment of members to the commission. President Clinton named the final members in May 1999.

Saperstein called China and the Sudan "countries in which there are systematic, egregious, ongoing manifestations of religious persecution. While Russia has made headway on religious freedom in the post-communist era, it was targeted because it is seen as a litmus test for the new independent states that have sprung up in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet empire, he added.

The report, along with a 150-page companion piece, was the culmination of work since the panel first met in June 1999. The panel has held several hearings, traveled to southern Sudan and other places, reviewed State Department Reports and met with human rights and church groups. It meets at least twice a month.

Saperstein said commission members tried to visit China, but Chinese authorities have yet to respond to their request for visas.

And the commission criticized the State Department for withholding certain documents relating to the application of economic sanctions on Sudan. The commission said the State Department has also prevented access to cables from U.S. embassies around the globe, which could help the panel confirm reports of abuses.

In an interview with Associated Baptist Press, Robert Seiple, the State Department's ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, said the cable problem is not an attempt to withhold information. "It's a problem of logistics," he said. "We'll find a way to do it because it's right."

Seiple applauded the commission's work and said that many of the recommendations should be embraced by the administration.

But statements by Seiple and Harold Koh, assistant secretary for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, also noted that "the report contains a number of recommendations with which we disagree."

Denying permanent normal-trade relations to China would not prevent Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization, they contended. "What it would do is deprive the U.S. of the full economic benefits of China's market-open commitments, and severely restrict our ability to positively influence the course of events in China."

Seiple acts as the 10th, nonvoting member of the commission. However, he said he did not attend the unveiling of the report because he knew the focus would be on a few points of disagreement instead of the hard work of the commission. "Why rain on their parade?" he asked.

Seiple said the State Department is in the process of carefully reviewing the commission's recommendations.

In the Sudan, the commission said that the 17-year civil war has taken about 2 million lives, "mostly Christian followers of traditional animist religions." While the conflict has many causes, "religious factors are key."

The panel issued roughly 20 recommendations on Sudan. They include increasing humanitarian aid and beginning a 12-month plan of incentives aimed at pressuring Sudan to improve human rights. Should that measure fail, the commission recommends that the U.S. provide non-lethal aid to appropriate opposition groups. Other proposals call for establishing a military no-fly zone over Sudan through peaceful means and prohibiting foreign corporations that participate in Sudanese oil-field development from obtaining capital in U.S. markets.

In China, the panel said that government violations of religious freedom increased markedly during the past year, including an increased repression of Roman Catholic and Protestant underground "house churches." It issued more than 10 recommendations on U.S. policy toward China.

The panel called on Congress to grant China permanent normal trade relations only if China makes substantial improvement in respect for religious freedom. One proposal calls for a multilateral campaign to seek the release of Chinese religious leaders imprisoned or under house arrest. Another urges the U.S. to use diplomatic influence to prevent China from being selected as a host for the Olympic Games until progress is made in the area of religious freedom.

In Russia, the panel said religious freedom is better than during the Soviet period, but it "took a significant step backward" in 1997. That is when a federal law was enacted to restrict smaller, newer religions through a burdensome registration process. The panel issued 10 recommendations on Russia, including a call for the United States to seek a reversal of Russian President Vladimir Putin's edict requiring liquidation of non-registered religious groups.

Steven McFarland, executive director of the religious-freedom commission, said the ball is now in Congress and President Clinton's court. Under the 1998 religious freedom law, the State Department is required to issue a Sept. 1 report listing "countries of particular concern." The president must decide what, if any, sanctions to apply within 90 days of that report.

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