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**SBC leaders poised to appeal
to Texas churches for funds**

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- If Texas Baptists follow through with a proposal to reduce funding to Southern Baptist Convention seminaries and selected other agencies, the SBC is prepared to appeal directly to the state's churches in an effort to recoup lost funds.

The SBC Executive Committee adopted a resolution Sept. 19 urging messengers at the Baptist General Convention of Texas this fall to reject a plan that would reallocate about \$4.3 million that now goes to the SBC seminaries to three schools in Texas. The remaining \$1 million Texas now gives for theological education would be divided among the SBC seminaries based on the number of Texas students they enroll.

The Executive Committee resolution labels the Texas proposal "a unilateral breach of a 75-year partnership agreement" as the SBC's collecting agent and says it would "effectively destroy the Cooperative Program process" between the two conventions.

During its first 80 years, the SBC collected funds through what is commonly described as the "society" method, where various societies for missions, church planting, Bible and tract publishing, children's aid and other denominational interests solicited funds separately in Baptist churches across the South.

In 1925, in the interest of greater efficiency, Southern Baptists launched a unified giving plan called the Cooperative Program, in which state conventions collect funds for both their own ministries and the SBC. The state determines the percentage of funds that it keeps and how much it sends on to fund national and worldwide ministries of the SBC.

That unified approach has eroded in recent years, as some states slow to embrace the conservative movement that swept the national body in the 1980s have created multiple giving plans to allow churches to pick and choose what SBC entities they wish to support or to bypass the SBC entirely.

The Texas Baptist proposal, however, would represent the most dramatic realignment of the denomination to date. Coming from the largest SBC-affiliate group, it would virtually cut off Texas funding of five of the six SBC seminaries, eliminate all funds for the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and include only token funding for the Executive Committee.

The proposal, however, does not affect funding for the International and North American mission boards, which together receive about 70 cents of every dollar received by the national Cooperative Program.

A statement adopted by the SBC in 1928 defined the relationship between the national and the various state conventions, affirming that despite unified funding both remained autonomous in their own sphere.

The statement described the unified funding plan "as a matter of convenience and economy" that could be changed at any time.

It called for "careful discrimination and mutual trust" between state and national bodies and pledged that neither would allocate or divert funds from any object in the other's budget.

In the 1928 document, the SBC retained "as inalienable and inherent the right to direct appeal to the churches."

Morris Chapman, president and chief executive officer of the Executive Committee, said if the outcome of the current BGCT proposal is that Texas no longer promotes Southern Baptist missions and ministries, "the Southern Baptist Convention will be compelled" to appeal directly to churches in the state.

"The BGCT is systematically attempting to influence Southern Baptist churches in Texas to forsake their loyalty to the SBC," Chapman said.

"God has blessed mightily the system of cooperative literature, cooperative program, cooperative missions and a cooperative spirit among all Southern Baptists," Chapman said. "Now, after all these years of cooperation, the Baptist General Convention of Texas leaders seem to be saying Texas literature, Texas program, Texas missions, Texas spirit. I trust the churches will not be led to that conclusion."

Chapman, a former Texas pastor, called the state-convention proposal a "travesty and miscarriage of cooperation" that would "force local churches in Texas to decide" between support of the state and national convention. He called it "a strategy that would create chaos."

The Executive Committee resolution states that the SBC "is fully supportive" of all its seminaries and agencies and encourages churches in Texas to "continue to give generously" to the SBC Cooperative Program "through the state conventions." Along with the 2.7 million-member BGCT, the SBC also recognizes a second state convention in Texas. With just under 400 churches, the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention is the 15th-largest state convention in the SBC, said Stan Coffey, president of the SBT.

The resolution further states that the Executive Committee, "while strenuously objecting to this new budget process, is eager to discuss these matters with the BGCT."

Chapman said the Executive Committee resolution is not intended to affect the SBC's relationship with any other state convention. "This is Texas-specific," he said.

"The SBC resolution is responding (to Texas Baptists)," Chapman said. "We are not initiating. We need to be very careful to understand that."

"We want to do nothing that would take any initiative to impair the relationship with any state convention," Chapman said.

"There is no reason to despair over dollars," Chapman said. "God is on his throne, and he will pour out his blessings on his people if we are faithful."

A separate resolution approved by the Executive Committee affirms the six SBC seminaries for "faithful ministry and promises to take all appropriate steps to ensure continued financial support for their staffs, faculties and students."

The seminary resolution commends the seminaries to churches of the SBC and "encourages the Baptist General Convention of Texas to reject the unwarranted and unfair attacks upon the seminaries and to defeat the proposal that seeks to remove their funding."

Merritt outlines priorities for SBC presidency

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Convention president James Merritt issued a challenge to denominational leaders Sept. 18 to lead out in volunteering for missions and in personal evangelism.

Merritt, a past chairman of the SBC Executive Committee, gave his first formal remarks as president to the convention's central planning group during a two-day meeting in Nashville, Tenn. Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga., was elected SBC president in June.

Urging Southern Baptists to "lengthen our cords and strengthen our stakes," Merritt affirmed the conservative direction the nation's largest Protestant denomination has taken the last 20 years.

"We strengthen our stakes by conviction," Merritt said, adding that, "The stakes of the Southern Baptist Convention are strong."

"There are those who say our tent is too narrow," Merritt said, referring to critics of the narrowing of the denomination's stances on biblical inerrancy, women preachers and other issues.

"Our tent is very broad," Merritt responded. "It is as broad as the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is sufficient to save anybody but the only way that anybody is saved."

"Our tent will never be broadened by compromising one jot or one tittle in this sacred book," Merritt said, referring to the Bible. "Our tent is broad, but not so broad as to tolerate heresy."

Merritt said the SBC would not return to the days when he said seminary professors taught views advocating abortion and homosexuality and questioned the literal truth of the Bible.

"If you believe this book has God for its author, salvation for its end and truth without any mixture of error for its matter," he said, the Southern Baptist "tent" is broad enough for you.

Merritt outlined four priorities for his two-year presidency:

-- Missions involvement. "I have a feeling we have more pastors in the SBC that have been to Israel than have ever been on a mission trip," Merritt said. "I want to challenge every member of the Executive Committee, every agency head, every seminary president, within the next two years to take at least one mission trip" outside of the United States.

"How can we ask the people in the pew to do it if the leaders don't do it?" he asked. He also challenged all SBC pastors to schedule at least one mission trip in their church in the next two years.

"Giving to missions is no substitute for living missions," Merritt said.

-- Evangelism. Merritt also challenged SBC leaders, by the next Executive Committee meeting in February, to be ready to testify to sharing his or her faith with a lost person. "Dead orthodoxy is just as dangerous as live liberalism," he warned.

-- Reaching the next generation. Merritt said that most young people don't attend any church. One survey found that 50 percent of high-school students stop going to church when they begin college and half of those never return. He encouraged Southern Baptists to develop ways to reach younger generations with the gospel.

-- Reach out to young pastors. Merritt said the denomination should motivate young pastors and church leaders to take an interest in the SBC.

"I do not expect everyone to dot every 'I' that I dot and I do not expect everyone to cross every 't' that I cross," Merritt said. "I do say to all my fellow Southern Baptists, surely we can get together on the word of God. Surely we can get together on the gospel of Jesus Christ. Surely we can get together on the love of a savior for a lost world."

"Let us lengthen our cords and strengthen our stakes until everyone has the opportunity to enter into the tent of the grace of God."

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Executive Committee declines study of 'ecumenical' involvement

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee has declined to study the use of Cooperative Program funds in joint efforts with groups whose beliefs "conflict with the witness of Southern Baptists."

Responding to a motion referred by the convention last summer, the Executive Committee reported Sept. 18 that trustees and staffs of the various denominational entities "assure the Southern Baptist Convention that they are maintaining the historic position of Southern Baptists as they cooperate with various other groups in appropriate evangelistic enterprises or moral-advocacy initiatives."

The proposal for a study at last summer's annual meeting was a second attempt by a Louisiana pastor critical of alignments for missions and on social issues with groups that he says preach a "different gospel" from Southern Baptists.

Jerry Moser, pastor of Bayou DuLarge Baptist Church in Theriot, La., first criticized Southern Baptist leaders several years ago for signing on to an "Evangelical and Catholics Together" document that, among other things, defined Christians as either those who are born again or receive grace through sacraments.

More recently, he has questioned involvement with umbrella evangelistic groups like Mission America and AD2000 that he says include organizations with radically different views than Southern Baptists. Working alongside those groups, he said, raises questions about what Southern Baptists believe.

In a self-study requested by the Executive Committee last year, however, leaders of SBC entities reported they "are not committing Southern Baptist resources, personnel or ministries to relationships which would compromise the historic distinctives or the unique witness of Southern Baptists to the world," the Executive Committee said.

In an interview, Moser said the self-study did not satisfy his concerns, which he said "have been misconstrued over the years."

He said he plans to continue to press the issue, but after bringing it to the convention floor twice he doesn't know by what avenue. "I don't know what recourse I have left," he said. "I am going to continue to appeal to the convention on this issue of ecumenism."

In other business at the Sept. 18-19 meeting at the SBC headquarters building in downtown Nashville, Tenn., the Executive Committee:

-- Approved changes to a bylaw giving the Executive Committee president more authority in hiring and firing of staff. Under the new language, the Executive Committee could have avoided the spectacle of a called meeting a decade ago to fire two Baptist Press editors. Supporters crowded a hallway outside an executive session guarded by off-duty police officers, who told reporters that -- in keeping with department policy -- they were armed.

-- Declined to act on a motion referred by the SBC recommending that 60 percent of those serving on committees and trustee boards be from churches with 300 members or less.

-- Voted to adopt the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" as the accepted confessional statement governing the Executive Committee's work and acknowledged "the responsibility of each Southern Baptist Convention entity to utilize" the statement "consistent with its ministry assignment."

-- Agreed to study the feasibility of Cleveland as host city of the convention in 2005.

-- Declined to study the feasibility of establishing satellite centers for participation in the SBC annual meeting, citing "complexity of implementation and negative impact on the group dynamic."

-- Agreed to include a "layperson" category on the SBC messenger-survey card.

-- Declined to place Pentecost and Ascension Day on the SBC calendar, while commending churches for observing the Christian calendar.

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