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**Kentucky churches sever ties
to Southern Baptist Convention**

By Trennis Henderson

FRANKFORT, Ky. (ABP) -- Citing recent changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message," three Kentucky Baptist churches are taking action to distance themselves from the Southern Baptist Convention.

Members of First Baptist Church of Frankfort voted Sept. 24 to sever ties to the nation's largest Protestant denomination. The 211-2 vote followed a three-month study.

One week later, members of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville voted overwhelmingly to cease funding SBC causes through the church budget and to no longer send messengers to the SBC annual meeting.

Central Baptist Church in Lexington is scheduled to address the same issue Oct. 8. Taking their concerns one step further, members there will vote on a proposal to end relationships with both the SBC and the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

Pastors of all three churches said revision of the denomination's faith statement approved in June by SBC messengers was a determining factor in their churches' actions. There have been reports of churches in Missouri, North Carolina and Virginia taking similar action since the SBC annual meeting.

The revised faith statement narrows a statement on Scripture and dictates that only men may serve as senior pastors. Supporters say the revision was needed to ensure doctrinal integrity.

Critics of the changes say they elevate the Bible to an object of worship and that the statement is now used as a creed, a departure from Baptist tradition.

David Hinson, pastor of the Frankfort congregation, said his church's decision "is a reaction to the changes in the 'Baptist Faith and Message' that we think are less than Baptist."

"The straw that broke the camel's back was that 'the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ' was removed from the statement," Hinson said. "We're a Jesus-centered church. We want to take a stand on traditional Baptist principles and encourage others to join us."

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, was among the authors of the 'Baptist Faith and Message' revisions.

"A Baptist church has the sovereign right to choose with whom they will cooperate," Mohler said. "But I am concerned that these churches have moved away from the SBC rather than the SBC moving away from them."

In addition to withdrawing from the SBC, the Frankfort church voted to "declare our support to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which promotes our historic Baptist principles."

"We are moving back to where we should have been all along," Hinson said. "Our Baptistness is important to us. Our people decided to take a stand and I'm proud of them."

Hinson said the church would continue to support both the Kentucky Baptist Convention and Franklin County Baptist Association. "We are very strongly committed to Kentucky Baptists," he said. "We intend to be very proactive with whatever voice Kentucky Baptists allow us to have."

In Louisville, members of Crescent Hill Church voted Oct. 1 to reaffirm a 1963 edition of the "Baptist Faith and Message" as well as women's call to the gospel ministry. While cutting SBC causes from the church budget, the action pledged to "honor the wishes of individual members by forwarding contributions designated to the SBC."

Crescent Hill Pastor Ron Sisk said a two-year study by church leaders "reached a critical juncture with the passage of the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message.'" He noted that "many in the church found that document to be both theologically and ethically objectionable."

Sisk said the church's deacon council unanimously recommended the proposal "as a place where we can stand with integrity."

"Essentially, we're trying to be Baptist in the true sense of the word," he added. "Do we support the SBC? No. Do we give our people the freedom to support the SBC? Yes."

Gerard Howell, pastor of Central Church in Lexington, said his congregation is scheduled to vote on the issue next week.

"Every time the SBC meets, our folks keep asking why we're still in it," Howell said. "What you really have is fundamentalism having its final say in the SBC and defining who we are."

In response, Central Church will vote on cutting ties to both the SBC and KBC and explore the options of strengthening their support of CBF or possibly aligning with the American Baptist Convention.

"My problem is not really with the KBC," Howell said, "but I think in terms of integrity, a statement has to be made." Since the KBC channels funds to the national convention, he added, "to stay in the KBC would contradict our SBC statement."

KBC Executive Director Bill Mackey voiced concern about churches withdrawing from denominational involvement. "My desire would be that all our churches would stay in fellowship at all levels and work within the system to bring about desired changes," he said. "Cooperation always has been a part of the Baptist way to do missions and ministry."

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South Carolina Baptist paper bans ads, 'promotion' of CBF

By Bob Allen

GREENVILLE, S.C. (ABP) -- South Carolina's Baptist newspaper will no longer accept advertisements or run advance stories about the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship under a policy adopted by Baptist Courier trustees Aug. 25.

The new policy allows the bimonthly denominational paper to promote only organizations "who work in friendly cooperation" with the state and Southern Baptist conventions.

The policy allows the paper to accept only advertisements that "support in spirit and in fact the ministries of the South Carolina Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention funded through the Cooperative Program."

The policy goes on to state: "Since advance reporting may sometimes be interpreted as promotion, it is recommended that The Baptist Courier generally limit reporting of CBF-related events and activities to brief, after-the-fact articles that provide general information on the CBF, similar to reports of general interest concerning other Christian denominations."

A study committee recommending the change said the Atlanta-based CBF, a moderate organization that offers alternative missions and programs to the conservative-run SBC, competes with the Cooperative Program, a unified budget that funds Baptist work in the state and SBC simultaneously.

"The policy is reasonable as the Cooperative Program supplies 43 percent of our budget," said trustee chairman Jim Goodroe, pastor of First Baptist Church in Sumter, according to a report in the paper's Sept. 14 issue.

The report said the CBF has increased efforts to gain support from churches in South Carolina and has publicly criticized SBC leaders.

Fred Stone, chairman of the study committee, said: "It is the position of the study committee that the CBF, by choosing to work in opposition to the SBC, will have the effect of undermining the Cooperative Program and missions of the SBC. In addition, such action will put the CBF in opposition to the overwhelming majority of [South Carolina Baptist Convention] churches, who are also cooperating SBC churches."

Don Kirkland, the paper's editor, said the policy's intent is not "to weaken our magazine's mission of serving all South Carolina Baptist churches" but "to strengthen our commitment to the Cooperative Program and the ministries it funds."

Marion Aldridge, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina, called the policy "a surprising position for an organization to take whose motto for the past 10 years has been 'empowering kingdom growth.' The CBF is about doing the work of the kingdom among Baptists."

Aldridge said the Fellowship relates to between 100 and 300 Baptist churches in South Carolina. "It's surprising they would take a position where they treat us as adversarial," he said.

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Maryland/Delaware paper drops subscription fees

COLUMBIA, Md. (ABP) -- Maryland/Delaware's Baptist news journal will move to a non-subscription basis effective Jan. 1 and reduce its frequency from 22 to 11 times a year.

Baptist Life will be sent free to anyone who wants to receive it, Editor Bob Simpson told the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware General Mission Board, according to a report in the paper's Sept. 21 issue. Sending the paper to every address in the convention's database would double its circulation, the story said.

"Our goal is to tell the story of what God is doing in our churches and associations in Maryland/Delaware," Simpson said. He said the paper's two-part focus would be on "promoting the partnership" among the two-state convention, associations and churches and "creating enthusiasm and synergies for accomplishing our Great Commission mandate."

Churches will be invited to share their membership lists if they desire for families to receive the paper. Baptist Life, long known as the Maryland Baptist and for a time as the Baptist True Union, has been published for more than 80 years. Subscriptions currently cost \$4 a year when purchased for members as part of a church budget.

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-- By ABP staff

Moderate church-starting group announces plans to dissolve

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A church-starting network of about 100 congregations friendly to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has "fulfilled" its purpose and will dissolve effective Dec. 31, according to a press release.

Friends of New Churches started in 1995 to support moderate Baptists in birthing and nurturing "free and faithful," or non-fundamentalist, churches.

In less than five years, the network grew from 19 original congregations to more than 100 new churches in 28 states. Two years ago, the organization's board of directors split over leadership, and four directors resigned in protest.

A majority of the board affirmed leader Will Carter, however, and last year the organization announced that it would kick off a fund-raising campaign.

With the Atlanta-based CBF beginning its own church-starting initiative, however, Friends of New Churches now "feels that its mission can be carried out best through the stronger and larger ministry," according to the statement. "In order to meet all the procedures involved in a not-for-profit organization, FNC has set Dec. 31, 2000, as its closing date."

This year's CBF budget includes \$76,000 for Friends of New Churches, described in an internal document this spring as a "final phase-out grant."

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-- By ABP staff

State convention to monitor charges of clergy sex abuse

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Baptist General Convention of Texas will monitor confirmed or likely complaints of sexual abuse by clergy and share information about specific individuals with churches on request.

The 6,000-church state convention's Executive Board adopted a policy recommendation by a task force on clergy sexual abuse Sept. 26. The committee, formed two years ago by Texas Baptists' Christian Life

Commission, "immediately became aware that clergy sexual abuse is indeed a problem in many faith groups," according to its report. "Nor are Baptists immune from the problem," the committee concluded.

According to the newly adopted policy, employees of the BGCT Executive Board are instructed to direct any reports of clergy sexual abuse to the office of Minister/Church Relations. The office will maintain a file on certain reported cases of clergy sexual abuse.

"A case will be put into the file only when a minister confesses to the abuse, there is a legal conviction, or there is substantial evidence that the abuse took place," according to the adopted policy statement. Convention attorneys will review cases to determine if there is substantial evidence.

Information regarding clergy sexual abuse will be available only to officers of an inquiring church, such as the chairman of deacons or search committee or a church's legal trustees.

Accompanying any information released will be a legal disclaimer that it is only a record of allegations of sexual improprieties and that the convention has not conducted an investigation to verify the accuracy of the information. "Churches are advised to investigate the background of potential employees or members of the clergy independent of the convention and not to rely exclusively on any information provided by the convention," the disclaimer says.

Phil Strickland, director of the CLC who chaired the study committee, said the group weighed potential legal liability against a moral imperative.

"If you keep a list, you are subject to liability," Strickland said. "If you do not keep a list, you are subject to liability."

"But after that discussion, then we directed the focus to our moral obligation," he said. "That was a very, very short discussion."

In addition to the new policy, the board also approved a separate recommendation calling on the BGCT to develop and distribute educational materials on the problem of sexual abuse by clergy, provide counseling both for victims and perpetrators and mobilize trained professionals to help churches affected by the problem.

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Counselor launches on-line service to help locate compatible spouses

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- While not every marriage is a match made in heaven, a Christian counselor and author is hoping matches made in cyberspace can be the next best thing.

Longtime counselor Neil Clark Warren has launched a new Internet service aimed at helping men and women better analyze if they're meant for each other.

His premise is simple: Most failed marriages were doomed from the start because of incompatibility. If prospective spouses were better able to assess compatibility before marriage, fewer would eventually divorce.

Some of these concepts were outlined in Warren's best-selling books "Finding the Love of Your Life" and "How to Know if Someone is Worth Pursuing in Two Dates or Less."

A major component of Warren's "eharmony.com" Web site is helping single adults identify their own list of "must have" and "can't stand" traits in a potential mate. Warren offers 50 possibilities in each category, and participants are required to narrow the list down to 10 of each.

Men and women usually begin the exercise thinking they won't be able to come up with that many positive or negative traits, Warren said, but they end up finding it hard to narrow the list from 50 to 10.

Taking a hard look at those kinds of questions is what's missing from most dating experiences that lead to marriage, Warren said. As a result, overlooked areas of incompatibility grow more serious as time goes by.

"Over the years, I've come to the conclusion that most marriages that get into deep trouble were in deep trouble the day they began," said Warren, who has been a counselor 33 years. "More technically, the selection factor is undoubtedly the most critical factor in producing this horrible national dilemma we have going on."

That dilemma has produced a society in which 70 percent of all people have experienced a divorce within their immediate families, he said.

"There is no other problem in America that is coming close to the devastation that this marital breakdown is causing," Warren said.

Warren believes the trend toward divorce could be slowed by facilitating better marriage matches, but making good matches is more difficult today than perhaps ever before.

Americans are more demanding in their relationships than ever before, he said. "Fundamentally, we have become so differentiated as persons that finding somebody who matches us is a tremendous challenge."

Left on their own, the average American male or female faces an uphill struggle to find the right mate, Warren said. "Most people have a pool of candidates that is quite small. For example, if a given person has a true pool of candidates of 100 persons, that's a lot."

From that pool of 100 potential mates, the field gets reduced quickly by applying just a few filters, he explained.

"Most Southern Baptists are going to want a very evangelically oriented person, somebody who really takes God seriously and personally, somebody who recognizes the importance of Jesus in their lives, somebody who prays, somebody who cares about the souls of others," he said. "By the time you have narrowed down your candidates to someone who meets those criteria, you've probably lost 50 of the 100. Then you need a match in intelligence. You were down to 50, now you eliminate another 25. Then you take any other issue, like ambition. What we know is that those whose ambition levels are different are not going to be happy. Now you've eliminated another half of the 25."

Through his years of research, Warren has identified 250 traits and values on which he believes couples need some level of agreement. These relate to personality, personal interests, values and beliefs and communication style.

What's happening in society today, Warren said, is that out of all these critical areas of compatibility, people are getting matched on only four or five dimensions. And those tend to be dimensions that don't offer much glue for a long-term relationship, like appearance and social status.

Only after the wedding do the other areas of incompatibility surface, "and they don't know what to do with that," he said.

Through eharmony.com, Warren hopes to offer a high-tech way for singles to avoid this trap.

"Our goal is to build a database of about 3 million people in the next 30 months," he said. "And then for instance, if you were single we would try to find you 10 to 25 compatible persons within your geographical range."

The number of actual matches found for each person will vary, depending on their personality profile and restrictions placed on how large a geographic area they are willing to draw from.

Once the matches are made online, a participant may find out more about a select group of those. From that group, the participant chooses three to six individuals to begin communicating with anonymously.

Each step of the process includes support from Warren and other professionals, such as advice on how to talk with a potential date, what questions to ask and what to look for in the other person's answers.

Only after five stages of electronic communication have been completed will either participant know the name or see a photo of the other person.

If both parties desire to have further contact with each other after that point, information is provided on how to do so. While the first five electronic encounters are guided by eharmony.com, those beyond that threshold are not.

Warren acknowledged there is some risk in connecting people who may ultimately meet face to face. But eharmony.com has built in several security precautions, he said, including a mechanism to screen out emotionally unhealthy individuals and those who appear to be fabricating answers to the questionnaire.

"We eliminate 20 percent of all persons who apply to us," he said. "We catch liars. And we try to eliminate the persons who suffer from emotional health deficiencies."

Although it's only been in operation a month, eharmony.com has been well received by the Christian community, said Warren, who is affiliated with a Congregational church in California. It also has been endorsed by Focus on the Family and other evangelical groups.

"The reason we want the Baptists behind us is their values are like ours," he said. "We are totally biblically based. We stress premarital sexual abstinence and the value of long-term commitment."

While helping people find a date or a mate is nice, the big goal is much larger, Warren said. "We want to get the divorce rate lowered by 10 percent in the next five years. That would affect 8 million people in one generation.

"The greatest goal of all would be to try to reduce the divorce rate to single digits in the next 20 years," he added.

"If we could get the divorce rate down to single digits, it would be the greatest single social revolution in the human race. It would change America fundamentally."

Both he and his wife, Marilyn, are so passionate about this cause that they quit their jobs in California to devote full time to starting eharmony.com. A former psychology professor at Fuller Seminary, Warren had run a clinic of 15 full-time counselors. She was an administrator with the Huntington Public Library.

He closed his practice in May, and the couple relocated temporarily to Dallas. From this Texas base, they have been speaking in churches across the state about their vision.

Their immediate goal is to get 20,000 people using eharmony.com. Then they hope to take the project nationwide in December.

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