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October 18, 2000

(00-94)

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**Founding SBC church
severs denominational ties**

By Bob Allen

SAVANNAH, Ga. (ABP) -- A founding church of the Southern Baptist Convention voted Oct. 15 to sever ties with the denomination, citing doctrinal differences.

First Baptist Church of Savannah, Ga., voted by a 93-percent margin to end its 155-year relationship with Southern Baptists. A resolution cited differences over pastoral authority, autonomy of the local church, the priesthood of all believers and "orthodoxy" as a requirement for full participation in denominational life.

The church was established in 1800. Its second pastor, William Bullein Johnson, is often described as the "father of the Southern Baptist Convention."

While some historians say that is an overstatement, all acknowledge that he was a major architect of the convention, which organized in 1845. He wrote the first constitution and was its first president and most important spokesman.

"In recent years, it has become increasingly clear that the directions and goals of the Southern Baptist Convention have diverged from those envisioned by its founding fathers and from those of the members of First Baptist Church," according to the church resolution.

During its 200-year history, the resolution says, the Savannah church "has strongly fostered religious education, congregational leadership, ecumenism, freedom of the individual, priesthood of all believers and soul competency."

"An exhaustive study by church committees, affirmed by the diaconate, has demonstrated that the effectiveness of First Baptist Church for the foreseeable future is best served by dissolving the formal ties that bind it to the Southern Baptist Convention," the resolution states.

While "informal relationships may continue," it closes, the church "formally dissolves its institutional ties with the Southern Baptist Convention."

The congregation plans to retain its historic affiliations with Savannah Baptist Association and the Georgia Baptist Convention, as well as ongoing relationships with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists.

Senior Minister John Finley said in an interview that the vote was not prompted by any single event but "culminates a 21-year process of coming to terms with all the changes in the SBC."

"It's taken the church two decades to come to this point," Finley said. "I think that's a credit to the congregation that we don't make decisions like this on a whim."

Finley said the vote was "doubly painful" because of the church's role in founding the SBC. "There was a sense we were sacrificing a large portion of our own history to do this," he said. "There was a lot of sadness in the room." After the vote, he said, the congregation prayed for the Southern Baptist Convention.

He described the vote as "kind of a painful recognition -- as many of our people put it -- we have not left Southern Baptists, Southern Baptists have left us."

While the 600-member church has not contributed financially or sent messengers to the SBC for 10 years, it has continued to identify itself as a Southern Baptist church "even if in name only," Finley said. But eventually it became an issue of "integrity and honesty."

"To continue to call ourselves Southern Baptists, when the convention had moved so far from where we stood and had changed its opinions about so many crucial matters concerning our historic Baptist principles; it became an issue of our own personal integrity to say this is not where we are," he said.

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Texas congressman labels BJC an 'extremist' group

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Texas congressman is standing by written statements that referred to the Baptist Joint Committee as one of many "extremist" groups with a "faith-hostile agenda."

Rep. Tom DeLay, R-Texas, made the statement months ago, but it came to light only recently.

In an interview Oct. 16 with Associated Baptist Press, DeLay's press secretary, Emily Miller, said DeLay stands by the comments because he believes the BJC "is trying to remove all religion" from the public square.

BJC officials have sent a letter of concern to DeLay requesting a meeting. The 64-year-old religious-liberty organization refused ABP's request for a copy of the letter.

"Out of respect for Mr. DeLay, we are not releasing the letter until he has had a chance to respond," said Brent Walker, BJC executive director. "But to claim that the Baptist Joint Committee is hostile to religion simply doesn't square with the record."

Walker said that three times since 1984, the BJC "led the fight to pass legislation protecting the free-exercise rights of Americans." He pointed to the Equal Access Act of 1984, which gives students the right to have religious clubs and religious meetings. Also, the BJC chaired coalitions of religious and civil liberties groups to help pass the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, which was recently signed into law.

"The BJC has never sought the removal of faith from the public square," Walker said. "What we oppose is government sponsorship of religion. After all, what is more damaging and hostile to religion -- leaving faith free to flourish on its own or saddling it with government's regulation?"

DeLay made the comments in November 1999, but BJC officials and others did not notice the statements until later. The comments were not made from the House of Representatives floor but inserted into the record several days after a floor debate on "charitable choice."

House members are able to "revise and extend" their remarks from a floor debate. DeLay took the opportunity to criticize Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, for opposing the legislative initiative, which allows tax dollars to fund the social services of houses of worship.

DeLay said the meaning of the First Amendment has begun to change at the hands of "activists" like Edwards. "In fact, Mr. Edwards' approbation of the many extremist groups supporting his position simply confirms the religion-hostile position he is advocating." He specifically cited the American Civil Liberties Union, the Baptist Joint Committee and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

DeLay went on to say that the "faith-hostile agenda of ... groups supporting Mr. Edwards is clearly documented through the legal action they take in courts and in legislatures."

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Franklin Graham following in famous father's footsteps

By By Ken Walker

LEXINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- Evangelist Billy Graham's crusades have through the years brought churches together for massive soul-winning efforts. Like father, like son. Such was the case with Franklin Graham's recent meetings in Kentucky's second-largest city.

After more than 2,750 persons accepted Christ at a series of events Oct. 13-15, participants said Greater Lexington Festival 2000 signals a new era of cooperation for churches.

"It's pulled the Christian community of Lexington together," said Jim McGee of Porter Memorial Baptist Church, who helped spearhead the drive to bring Graham to Rupp Arena.

Regardless of denomination, churches focused on winning others to Christ, said the Southern Baptist minister of education.

They weren't concerned with doctrinal differences or labels like liberal or conservative, either: "As we come together, people will see that Christ will make a difference."

With a total turnout of 49,200, the nightly crowds averaged nearly 3,000 less than a 1971 crusade led by Billy Graham on the University of Kentucky campus. But the number of conversions outpaced the 2,100 reported 29 years ago.

Many who responded to the younger Graham's invitations wore T-shirts and blue jeans -- young people attracted by such contemporary musical performers as Kirk Franklin, Michael W. Smith and the band "Third Day."

While the latter performed during "Youth Night," each evening was tailored to young people, said senior festival director Steve Nelson.

Franklin wants to reach a younger generation that doesn't know his father and probably doesn't know him, said Nelson, director of festival development and training for the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

"But they love music and will come out because some of their friends know who these artists are," he said. "I think the term 'festival' lends itself to thinking maybe this is going to be a little different than what his father has done in the past."

More than 8,000 volunteers from 440 churches, including 1,800 counselors and a choir of 1,600, helped stage the festival. It drew progressively larger crowds each night to Rupp Arena, home of the UK basketball team.

The well-known center took on the feel of a rock concert, with the stage backlit by blue, red, violet and yellow spotlights. Young fans regularly jumped to their feet to clap along with their favorite performers.

On the final night, hip-hop singer Kirk Franklin delighted many by jumping off the stage and circulating around the floor. He danced with several people, including a deaf interpreter at the rear of the hall.

Graham added to the youth-oriented flavor the second evening, preaching in a black leather jacket and a black baseball cap with "Harley Davidson" in orange letters.

But his evangelistic messages sounded much like his famous father's as he preached during the weekend from such passages as Matthew 19:16-22 and Mark 8:31-38.

On the opening and closing nights, he posed the question, "If your life came to an end tonight, would you be ready?"

On the final night, the question followed comments about Cassie Bernall, one of the victims of last year's shootings at Columbine High School.

Smith led into the sermon by performing his top hit, "This is Your Time." He wrote the song as a tribute to Bernall after performing at a memorial service for the victims in Littleton, Colo.

"Are you ready?" Graham said. "Are you prepared to stand before God? Cassie was ready. In a few minutes I'm going to ask you to come into the aisles and come forward and I'll say a prayer with you."

But first, he reviewed how each person has a soul, which will live for eternity.

"Because you can't take a CAT scan of your soul doesn't mean it doesn't exist," Graham said. Then, paraphrasing from Mark, he asked, "What should it profit if you gain the whole world and lose your soul?"

While the soul will outlive humankind's average life expectancy of 85 years, he said, without Christ people will be lost to the effects of sin. Breaking God's law is sin and the wages of sin is death, he warned.

To explain sin, he listed a number of examples. Telling lies, murder -- "abortion is murder ... but God will forgive you of murder" -- dishonoring parents, worshipping idols and taking God's name in vain are all sins, he said.

"Each one of us here is guilty, but God wants to forgive us," the evangelist said. "You can leave here set free. But you have to be willing to confess your sins."

He concluded by discussing the reality of hell. While many envision hell as a big party where the beer flows and people enjoy good food, the Bible calls it a place of sorrow, depression and darkness, Graham said.

Believing in Christ is the only way to avoid hell, he said; people can't work their way to heaven or rely on their church attendance or denominational affiliation.

Posing a question about other religions, such as Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists all serving the same God, he said: "It's not the same God. There's one God and he has a son, Jesus Christ. Friends, there's no other way."

Afterwards, many discussed their view that Franklin is the natural successor to the elder statesman. Both will be traveling to Jacksonville, Fla., in early November for the elder Graham's next crusade. Though not scheduled to speak, Franklin is ready in the event his father's health falters.

"It's almost like he's inherited abilities from Billy," commented volunteer counselor Mona Abbott. "I noticed he throws in the same techniques. His message is very similar to his father's. He talks about sin and the consequences of sin."

"I think an anointing that was on his father has passed to (him), similar to that passed from Abraham to his son," said Lexington attorney Jeff Smith. "It may well be God's will for Franklin to continue the work set out for his father."

McGee said he was impressed with the speaker's straightforward, down-to-earth message about sin. "But when he talks about that he says, 'God loves you anyway and desires to take that away,'" he said. "I hear a message of love from (him) and I think people responded to it."

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Minister/activist learned lessons from Philadelphia gang member

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Eugene Rivers learned an unforgettable lesson about Christian ministry from a gang member in Boston.

The gang member came to see Rivers, pastor of Azusa Christian Community in an inner-city neighborhood, with some questions and some unsolicited advice.

There's not that much difference between a gang and a church, the visitor said. "You guys are just as divided as we are, but you claim to have the love of God."

That got Rivers' attention, and as a result, he pulled together a coalition of clergy who met with gang members for dialogue over a four-year period.

At one of those meetings, held in a crack house, the gang member offered to explain to the pastors why gangs were more successful than churches in reaching children.

"When Miss Beulah sends Johnny to school in the morning, I'm there; you're not," the gang member said. "When Johnny comes home from school, I'm there; you're not."

In fact, he concluded, virtually any place Johnny goes, "I'm there and you're not."

Through messages such as these, "God really convicted some preachers," Rivers said during the Faith in Action conference Oct. 2 in Houston. He was a keynote speaker for the event, designed to encourage churches and faith-based organizations to do more in social ministry.

Over the succeeding years, Rivers became co-founder of the Boston Ten Point Coalition and a national authority on reducing crime through church involvement in community life. He is the author of two books and has been featured in major national newsmagazines and newspapers.

"The church wants to build malls and confuses quantity with quality," he said. Instead, "God is calling us to make our faith effective and wise." That means getting out "in the streets, among the poor, where Jesus traveled."

Rivers said the church must recover Jesus' agenda and be inspired by a "logic of love."

"If we will move out into the community to help those in need, ... God will pour out a new vision," Rivers said. "God is calling on his people to labor in a vision that combines clarity, justice and mercy."

Effective community ministry must move beyond giving charity to working for justice, he asserted. "We think charity is a substitute for justice."

In short, he said, a Christian's "hips ought to follow his lips."

Rivers' opening message set the tone for what was part social work training and part revival meeting.

The event was cosponsored by Leadership Network and the Texas governor's office. The stated mission of the conference was to "marry the passion and vision of the faith-based groups working among Texans in need with the practical tools they need to flourish and be proficient."

On one hand, the conference encouraged faith-based organizations to use charitable-choice dollars made available through welfare reform. Texas is considered a trendsetter in implementing charitable-choice funding in areas such as childcare, substance-abuse treatment, food distribution and welfare-to-work training.

On the other hand, the conference offered examples of faith-based organizations providing the same services without any government funding. One of the programs highlighted was Christian Women's Job Corps, a welfare-to-work training program created by Woman's Missionary Union.

Diane Garcia, executive director of Christian Women's Job Corps in San Antonio, told the conference how Baptists have created three training centers in San Antonio. She was joined by Ann Cook of Houston, who told about the Christian Women's Job Corps of First Baptist Church there.

"The key to this program is mentoring," Cook said. "They need someone who is a friend. That is a problem for many of these women. They have never had someone who likes them for no reason."

Through Christian Women's Job Corps, women on welfare learn skills necessary to get jobs, how to handle family finances and to attend to their basic spiritual needs, Garcia added. "The success of Christian Women's Job Corps is God changes the lives of these women."

That theme was echoed by representatives of the governor's office and the governor himself, who addressed the conference via videotape.

People of faith are more likely to serve as volunteers anyway, added John DiIluio, professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania.

"If you are a self-identified member of a church or synagogue, you are 20 percent more likely to give food or clothing or money to a charity ... and 50 percent more likely to volunteer," he said. "The extent to which communities of faith are out there helping the poor ... is much greater than even the most faith-friendly researcher would say."

DiIluio cited new research finding that 90 percent of U.S. congregations offer at least one social-service program, most commonly benefiting neighborhood children.

A follow-up survey of 2,000 congregations in Philadelphia currently is finding similar results, he reported. To date, 91 percent of congregations where surveyors have conducted on-site interviews were found to offer at least one community-service program, and the average number of programs offered by churches is 2.5.

If the volunteer hours contributed by church members were paid at minimum wage, that would account for \$200 million worth of labor, DiIluio said.

When people ask "Why are things so bad in society?" they are asking the wrong question, he suggested. Instead, the proper question is, "How much worse would things be" if churches weren't involved in community service?

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Speaker calls for personal involvement with the poor

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- "The Good Samaritan didn't just toss a bunch of canned goods and religious tracts at the wounded person on the side of the road."

Yet that's all many Christians today want to do to help the poor, wounded and needy, said Amy Sherman, urban-ministries adviser at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville, Va.

Sherman, who has led her congregation to create a holistic, whole-family ministry in a neighborhood of low-income, single-parent families, was a keynote speaker at the Faith in Action conference in Houston Oct. 2-3.

"We're busy doing many good things, but we may not be changing many things," she warned. The church needs to "go further" in its efforts to minister to the community and meet social needs, she charged.

"We must move from commodities to relationships."

She quoted 19th century housing reformer Octavia Hill to say: "We've been too willing to help the poor but not willing to know them."

In America today, it is easy for most well-to-do people to avoid the poor, to keep them out of sight and out of mind, Sherman asserted. "We are guilty of a rocking-chair kind of kindness ... , never getting up out of the rocking chair to do something about it."

Yet the church has an important message for people who think they have no value, she said. That message is that all people are made in the image of God and therefore have great value.

God's pattern is to bring himself into the lives of hurting people and then use those changed people to transform others, Sherman said. She encouraged participants to see the needy people in their communities as potential "oaks of righteousness," even though they "sometimes don't even look like a seedling of righteousness."

Bringing spiritual transformation to needy people will require investing in places as well as in people, she declared, quoting the example of the prophet Jeremiah, who was told by God to buy property in Anathoth, an area under siege by Babylon at the time.

"Who buys property behind enemy lines?" she asked. "God does."

"The church today needs to make Anathoth investments, because there are no God-forsaken places. ... If we don't do it, who's going to do it?"

God has given Christians the hope to make foolish investments, she said, because of the knowledge of Christ's ultimate victory and the promise of eternal life.

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Panel discusses pros, cons of 'charitable choice' funds

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Taking government funding through charitable-choice provisions may be the right thing for some faith-based organizations, but it is not for everyone, a panel of speakers said during the Faith in Action conference.

The group of charitable-choice experts was assembled for a standing-room-only workshop during the Oct. 2-3 conference in Houston, sponsored by the Texas governor's office and Leadership Network.

Just because charitable-choice funding is now available in Texas "does not mean every church should go hunting for funds," said Stanley Carlson-Thies, regarded as one of the nation's leading experts on government funding of faith-based organizations. "It also does not mean only services funded by government are worthwhile."

Charitable choice is a general description applied to funding made available to faith-based organizations through welfare-reform legislation passed beginning in 1996. It is "a new set of rules that apply when a state or local government uses certain federal funds to buy services for poor families," explained Carlson-Thies, director of social policy studies at the Center for Public Justice.

"Past rules often required services to be secularized and excluded many faith-based organizations from contracting," he continued. "Charitable choice ensures that faith-based providers have a chance to compete to provide the services, and it protects their religious character if they accept government funds."

Put another way, "When you stand before us, we're going to treat you just like everybody else. We're going to try to ignore the fact that God is standing behind you," explained Debby Kratky, welfare-to-work manager for the Tarrant County Workforce Board.

Charitable-choice dollars currently are available for welfare services, welfare-to-work programs and community-services block grants.

Although the U.S. Congress has mandated the charitable-choice provisions, Texas is among only a handful of states to have implemented the requirements, Carlson-Thies said.

Almost 40 states have not changed policies that limit or prevent faith-based groups from providing welfare services to the poor, according to a recent report from the Center for Public Justice.

The center has commended Texas, Indiana, Ohio and Wisconsin as the only states to fully implement charitable-choice guidelines.

Although charitable-choice legislation prohibits government from discriminating against religious organizations in awarding social service funding, it likewise prohibits religious organizations receiving those funds from discrimination in determining whom to serve.

Religious organizations receiving government funding may display religious symbols, may use faith-based concepts and language and may use certain religious criteria in hiring, Carlson-Thies said. However, they may not discriminate against recipients of aid, may not require recipients to participate in religious activities in order to receive aid and must be willing to provide an alternative source of aid if a recipient objects to working with the religious provider.

Further, the government funds may only be used for assisting needy families, not to support inherently religious activities such as worship.

For example, these restrictions would prevent a church from using charitable-choice funds to build or remodel a chapel. Faith-based organizations drawing on public funds also could not require recipients of a meal to participate in a religious service first -- a common practice in many Christian ministries to the homeless.

Churches must be accountable for their use of charitable-choice dollars, both Kratky and Carlson-Thies emphasized.

And recipients of government funding must be flexible to meet the current needs of government agencies, Kratky said. "If you cannot be flexible, find another funding source."

Faith-based organizations seeking government funding must find out what service government needs and then determine if they are willing to provide that service, she said. "Do your homework."

Even then, no church or faith-based service agency should become totally dependent upon government funding for its services, Carlson-Thies advised. "Plan ahead what you will do if government funding dries up or an unacceptable condition becomes the price of continued funding."

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