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Texas Baptists ratify reduced SBC funding

By Greg Warner and Bob Allen

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas (ABP) -- Texas Baptists agreed Oct. 30 to cut \$4.3 million from six Southern Baptist seminaries they say have abandoned some traditional Baptist beliefs and forced doctrinal conformity on their faculties and trustees.

Instead the money will be spent on three theological schools in Texas.

The report of a special study committee was "overwhelmingly" approved, said convention officers who observed the show-of-hands vote from the platform. Other observers said the vote margin was 4-to-1 or greater.

The report had been the source of contentious debate, in Texas and beyond, for months. Supporters said the change was necessary because of a restrictive theological direction taken by the national Southern Baptist Convention. Opponents said the plan destroys the relationship of trust and cooperation that has existed between the national SBC and the Baptist General Convention of Texas since 1925.

The BGCT is still studying its relationship to the SBC mission agencies, with a report due next year, which some believe will further distance Texas Baptists from those who control the national convention.

Before approving the report, messengers easily defeated an amendment that would have phased in the funding cuts over three years.

Other messengers, who numbered 6,475 at the time of the vote, said they were attempting to make motions when debate was called off.

A separate vote further reduced money the state will send to the SBC next year by another \$1.1 million, slashing funds to the SBC Executive Committee to a token \$10,000 and completely defunding the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

Two decades of infighting between conservative and moderate SBC factions have led to previous denominational realignments. Two states, for example -- Texas and Virginia -- have separate state conventions for conservatives.

Several moderate churches nationwide, meanwhile, have voted to sever ties with the SBC over its recent conservative stands. And former President Jimmy Carter, one of the most identifiable Southern Baptists, recently announced that he no longer wants to be associated with the denomination.

About 1,800 SBC churches that are dissatisfied with the denomination's rightward shift already work together at the national level through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a group which supports its own missionaries and offers churches alternative programs to the SBC.

While the Atlanta-based Fellowship has voted not to declare itself a convention or denomination, it is currently developing a strategic plan that leaders hope will more clearly identify it as an organization that is separate from the SBC.

With one of every six Southern Baptists living in Texas, however, and 13 percent of the SBC's funding coming from the state, Texas Baptists' decision to redefine their relationship to the 41,000-church national body could be the most far-reaching to date.

The Texas funding cuts culminate several years of disagreement between conservative leaders of the SBC and the moderate-led BGCT, the largest SBC affiliate with some 2.7 million members.

The dispute came to a head this summer when the SBC approved a rewrite of its "Baptist Faith and Message." Texas Baptist leaders have been critical of the rewrite and say it is un-Baptist to use it as a creed.

Among disputed changes in the faith statement are a ban on women preachers, a family article that says wives should submit to their husbands and the deletion of a phrase in the earlier edition that said Jesus Christ is the criterion for interpreting Scripture.

A special committee conducted a six-month study of SBC seminaries before recommending the funding cut in September. The BGCT's 200-member Executive Board voted overwhelmingly Sept. 26 to pass the committee's report on to the state convention.

In recommending the seminary plan to the convention, study committee chairman Bob Campbell said the new faith statement is called "an instrument of doctrinal accountability" and is being used to "demand creedal adherence" from those who teach in SBC seminaries.

He said it is inaccurate to say Texas Baptists are breaking off a 92-year relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention abruptly. "It has been decided over 21 years," he said, referring to the two-decade dominance of conservatives and fundamentalists in the SBC.

"Let us leave behind the constant battle with other Baptists," Campbell said. "We can no longer be embroiled with those who want to teach rigid creedalism."

Bubba Stahl of Boerne made the motion to phase in the defunding. "The change should be made gradually rather than suddenly, which is always the better way," he said.

But Rick Davis of Midlothian, a study committee member, said students at Texas seminaries already are suffering by having to pay higher tuition than at SBC seminaries. And, he added, funding available to the SBC means "there is no reason for anyone to suffer if they use the money correctly."

Bob Dixon of Dallas, former head of Texas Baptist Men, argued against the defunding, saying, "It sounds to me like God's hand is on the graduates of the Southern Baptist seminaries."

Judy Battles of Arlington said the defunding was necessary so the BGCT can support schools that do not require teachers to sign "an un-Baptistic statement."

Before the discussion, Charles Wade, executive director of the Texas convention, said it was necessary to approve the plan to get the attention of Southern Baptist leaders.

"[W]e need to do this because Southern Baptist leaders have shown greater willingness to talk with Texas Baptists in the last six weeks than ever before," Wade said. "If we vote to do this today and the

churches heartily follow the recommendations adopted, then I believe we may have some influence with Southern Baptist leaders."

Wade said he hoped the Southern Baptist Convention would be persuaded to consider changes to the newly adopted "Baptist Faith and Message" statement to allow more differences of opinion and freedom of interpretation.

Albert Mohler, president of one of the defunded schools, said there is no provision in the plan for further discussion. "They didn't say 'We want a hearing.' They said, 'This is how we will fund the seminaries,'" said Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

"Only time will tell whether any fruitful discussion between the SBC and BGCT leaders can take place," he continued. "The right conversation needs to take place with the right people. It would be wrong to try to close the door. But I don't see any openness."

Mohler said he is "profoundly disappointed" in the vote but not surprised, given the direction of the BGCT. He said Southern Seminary "will continue serving Southern Baptist churches" despite the defunding. "We're talking about a significant amount of money. It will take time to assess the impact ... but I am convinced Southern Baptists will generously support the six SBC seminaries."

William Crews, president of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif., said the action meant "not only a significant loss of money -- and some will be more affected than others -- but it is also a loss of partnership."

Ken Hemphill, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, said he wished there had been an opportunity to respond to some of the charges by the BGCT committee. "Many of the points we made [to the study committee] were ignored" in the final report, he said.

Hemphill said the revised "Baptist Faith and Message" is "an excellent document" and that Southwestern Seminary gladly "stands accountable to the Southern Baptist Convention."

Three schools in Texas stand to benefit from the funding change. Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco and Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology in Abilene, which both opened in 1996, will each receive a share of the \$4.3 funding cut from SBC schools, along with Hispanic Baptist Theological School in San Antonio.

In weeks prior to the BGCT annual meeting, SBC leaders launched an unprecedented effort to urge Texas Baptists to attend their state convention and defeat the proposal. The SBC Executive Committee started a special Web site and mass mailed material to Texas Baptist churches countering criticism leveled by Texas Baptist leaders.

A companion recommendation also approved Oct. 30 eliminates \$345,000 in funding for the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and reduces an allocation to the SBC Executive Committee from \$746,000 to \$10,000.

Texas leaders say they have been routinely criticized and "slandered" by the Executive Committee and its news service, Baptist Press, and that the SBC's social-concerns agency has turned into a partisan political organization instead of educating churches about moral and ethical issues.

The BGCT also gave final approval to constitutional changes that allow churches from outside Texas as members of the state group. Some say the change opens the door for the Texas convention to become a regional body rivaling the SBC. Other observers, however, say it is unlikely that large numbers of churches from other states will join the BGCT. The stated intent for the change is to allow moderate churches in overwhelmingly conservative states, such as Oklahoma, to participate in a state convention where they feel more at home.

Messengers adopted a \$52 million budget for 2001, which puts in place the new reduced funding levels for Southern Baptist agencies. The budget still includes more than \$17.8 million in funding for SBC mission boards and other ministries.

The budget was approved by 74 percent of messengers, with 26 percent opposed. Earlier a motion to cut all funding to causes outside Texas was defeated. A motion to restore funding of SBC agencies to original levels was ruled out of order.

Messengers referred to the BGCT Executive Board two motions seeking reconciliation between the Texas and national conventions. One calls for three days of prayer and fasting involving the presidents and executive bodies of both conventions prior to the June SBC meeting. A second would create a mediation task force employing a professional counselor "to seek reconciliation between the parties."

Another motion referred for study would allow the BGCT to supplement the annuities of Texas Baptist ministers who participate in the new benefits board of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Texas and other state conventions currently supplement minister annuities through the SBC Annuity Board.

Six resolutions were adopted, including one that declares that confessions of faith "are only guides in interpretation, having no authority over conscience." The resolution, in response to the SBC's new "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, says confessions "should not be used as instruments of doctrinal accountability or to hamper freedom of thought."

The resolution adds: "[T]he sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ, revealed to us in the Old and New Testaments under the leadership of the Holy Spirit."

Other resolutions encouraged voting in the upcoming general elections, called prayer for the Middle East, affirmed ministers families, and expressed appreciation for the convention city and BGCT officers and staff.

Clyde Glazener, pastor of Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth, was re-elected convention president without opposition. In his presidential address, Glazener denounced the efforts of "thought police" who want to limit Baptist freedom.

And he added: "Any who say Texas Baptists believe the Bible is just another book like any other book knows he's lying even as he speaks," Glazener said. "We do love the Bible as the Word of God. But we adore and worship Jesus who is the expression of God."

Mark Newton, pastor of Baptist Temple in San Antonio, was elected first vice president unopposed. Joy Fenner of Dallas, outgoing executive director of Woman's Missionary Union of Texas, was elected second vice president over Carol Newton of Sherman in the only contested election.

Wade cites SBC's 'rigid limitations' as cause for rift with Texas Baptists

By Scott Collins and Mark Wingfield

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas (ABP) -- The crisis that prompted Texas Baptists to eliminate more than \$5 million in funding for the Southern Baptist Convention was caused by "rigid limitations" imposed by SBC leaders, Charles Wade told messengers to the Baptist General Convention of Texas annual session Oct. 30.

In his first convention report as BGCT executive director, Wade addressed head-on what he labeled "a controversy that threatens the Baptist vision."

Wade criticized SBC leaders for creating a "non-Baptist confession of faith" in the revised version of the "Baptist Faith and Message" adopted by the SBC in June. "And they have proceeded to use it in a non-Baptist fashion -- as a creed rather than as a confession of faith," he added.

"I know there are those who question my judgment in this matter," Wade told messengers, "but I simply point out that never before have Baptists adopted a statement of faith that claims to be an 'instrument of doctrinal accountability.'"

Previously, Baptist confessions of faith have been a witness to the community and a guide for instructing new members, Wade said. "Never before have we called a confession of faith an instrument of doctrinal accountability. Accountable to whom? Some religious authority? Some ecclesiastical committee?"

This is the next progression in a pattern that Baptists have witnessed over the last 21 years, Wade said, a period in which "there has been a rigid limitation on who can serve Southern Baptists."

"Unless a professor or a prospective trustee or committee member was prepared to use certain language concerning the Bible, they could not be considered for service. People who believe the Bible were not eligible because they would not frame their convictions regarding the Bible using the special code word," he said.

Wade then held up a letter he received within the last month from SBC president James Merritt, who was asking state-convention executive directors to nominate individuals for service on SBC boards and committees.

"One of the qualifications he listed was that they 'be fully supportive of our 2000 edition of the "Baptist Faith and Message",'" Wade said. "That means it is not only those who are employed by Southern Baptists, but also any pastor or layperson who might be asked to serve in a position of shaping policy or making important decisions on behalf of the rest of us, who will have to sign on to the new confession of faith."

"That makes it either a creed or a loyalty oath or both," Wade said to loud applause from the audience.

He also criticized the SBC's removal from the "Baptist Faith and Message" of a sentence that declared: "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ."

"This is not a neo-orthodox idea as some have claimed," Wade said. "It is a New Testament truth and the consistent view of Baptists since there have been Baptists. And now it has been removed from our confession of faith. ... I am sure they did not intend to nudge the Bible into a place of idolatry, but that is exactly the effect of deleting that sentence."

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Wade predicts few churches will leave Texas convention

By Greg Warner

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas (ABP) -- The vast majority of Texas Baptist churches will remain loyal to the state convention even after the Oct. 30 decision to cut Texas funding of Southern Baptist seminaries and two other entities, predicted Charles Wade.

Wade, executive director of the moderate-dominated Baptist General Convention of Texas, would not speculate how many Texas Baptists churches might leave the BGCT as a result of the vote. "How can you know?" he asked.

A new conservative convention, Southern Baptists of Texas, has been formed and has so far attracted 419 churches from the BGCT.

Although a fourth of the BGCT messengers voted against the budget that defunded the SBC agencies, Wade said he could not conceive of a fourth of the convention's 6,000 churches pulling out. The vast majority will remain loyal to the BGCT, he said.

"A lot of churches haven't had to deal with this, because their pastors have not made this a high priority," he noted.

He said it would be hard for any Texas Baptist "to walk away from" supporting the BGCT's agencies and ministries.

Wade suggested his decision to push the budget changes, even at the risk of losing churches, was based not on a calculation of how many congregations might be lost but on principle.

"As important as it is to hold churches together, when it got to this Baptist principle ... I knew I had to make a statement," Wade said.

"When Baptist people find out what this issue is about, they will support Baptist freedom."

Neither would Wade speculate on whether other state conventions would follow Texas' lead.

"One thing I've learned since taking this job is that there are a lot of state executives who are very stressed with the high-handedness of Southern Baptist leaders. Texas Baptists aren't the only people who are upset. We're just the only ones that have been working on this for awhile."

In his earlier address to messengers, Wade said he hoped the defunding vote would convince Southern Baptist leaders to consider changes in the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Later Wade said he "probably" will call SBC executive Morris Chapman to talk about the future. Chapman earlier criticized Wade when a proposed meeting between SBC and BGCT leaders could not be arranged in the days leading up to the convention.

Any future discussion, Wade said, would have to involve the issues of inclusion of Texas Baptists in national leadership and revisions to the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Wade said the recent revision of the faith statement resulted in the "systematic exclusion of a major section" of Baptists. He has complained about statements deleted from an earlier version that allowed for more diversity of views and that established Jesus as the "criterion" for interpreting the Bible.

While he said he would not speculate on the motives of the committee that drafted the revisions, Wade said Baptist pastor and theologian Herschel Hobbs, primary author of the previous statement in 1963, "would not have written a statement that was intended to divide rather than unite us."

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Conservative wins Missouri presidency

OSAGE BEACH, Mo. (ABP) -- Conservative pastor Bob Collins was elected president of the Missouri Baptist Convention Oct. 31 by a vote of 1,984-1,253 over Harlan Spurgeon.

Messengers cast 3,264 ballots in the presidential election. A total of 27 ballots were voided.

It marked the third consecutive year a candidate supported by the fundamental-conservative Project 1000 was victorious in the presidential race.

Following the election, Collins, pastor of Plaza Heights Church in Blue Springs, Mo., who is completing a term as the state convention's first-vice president, said he expects no major changes in how the convention will be run.

"We're going to stay the course," he said. "I believe the last two years and especially the last two presidents have set the course. They've worked extremely well with the present administration, and my intent is to do that, and so I see no major changes. I believe the convention has spoken and they have spoken in a resounding way."

Collins predicted the majority of Missouri Baptists would continue to work together despite some disagreements.

"In its best sense, Missouri Baptists are a diverse group of people," he said. "We will never agree on all things, but we do agree, and I think this convention shows it."

Spurgeon, a retired missionary and administrator at the Southern Baptist Convention International Mission Board, was backed by the moderate organization Mainstream Missouri Baptists.

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-- By Word and Way

SBC leaders' concern over Texas 'situation dates back at least five years, minutes say

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Differences between conservative leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention and the moderate-led Baptist General Convention of Texas have broken into public debate only recently, but SBC leaders were quietly discussing the "situation in Texas" at least five years ago, according to minutes of a 1995 meeting obtained by the Baptist Standard.

The four-paragraph document, titled "Atlanta Minutes, May 26, 1995, 12:00 Noon," is signed by Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C. Patterson identifies himself below his signature as "unofficial secretary for an unofficial, uncalled meeting in a historically significant room in the Marriott Hotel Airport, Atlanta."

An ad hoc group of conservatives has met privately for two decades to orchestrate the direction of the SBC. Out of this group, the so-called "conservative resurgence" gained control of the denominational structure and brought sweeping changes to the nation's largest Protestant faith group.

Whether the Atlanta meeting was one of those meetings is not clear in the minutes, and a number of participants contacted for comment would not elaborate. The meeting was held less than one month prior to the SBC annual meeting, also held that year in Atlanta.

That year's annual meeting was the first one in 15 years the inner circle of conservative leadership did not control from the platform, because their presidential candidate, Fred Wolfe, had been defeated by another conservative, Jim Henry, in 1994.

Henry was neither present nor invited to the meeting, according to the minutes. Wolfe, however, was among the 16 men present.

Those attending the Atlanta meeting, according to the minutes, were James Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga., and this year's SBC president; Johnny Hunt, pastor of First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Ga.; Paul Pressler, the Houston appeals court judge who devised the strategy for gaining control of the denomination; Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in suburban Memphis, Tenn., and three-time SBC president; Bailey Smith, an evangelist and former SBC president; Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee; Jerry Vines, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., and a former SBC president; O.S. Hawkins, then pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas and now president of the SBC Annuity Board; Jimmy Draper, president of LifeWay Christian Resources; Ronnie Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church of Springdale, Ark.; Jim Richards, then a director of associational missions in Arkansas and now executive director of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention; Bob Sorrell, a staff member at Rogers' church; Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Wolfe, pastor of Cottage

Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala.; Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas; and Patterson.

Two men were "invited but unable to attend," the minutes record -- former SBC presidents Ed Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston, and Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta.

Among the "concerns" discussed at the meeting, the minutes state that Graham and Hawkins led a discussion "about the situation in Texas." Exactly what that situation was and what was said about it are not reported.

Hawkins, when contacted Oct. 25, said he did not recall the meeting. Graham was unavailable for comment, his secretary said.

Likewise, Chapman said he could not recall any details of the meeting, although he did confirm that it occurred and that he was present.

Richards also confirmed his attendance at the meeting but said he, too, couldn't recall what transpired.

Draper also confirmed attending this meeting and others like it through the years.

In 1995, Texas and other state conventions were discussed only generally, Draper said. "In those meetings, I don't remember the BGCT being the object of concern. It has come to focus only recently."

The minutes say Rogers presided and began the meeting by asking Patterson to give "a brief update of the general situation of the convention."

Mohler was asked to give a "brief update on the situation at Southern Seminary," an apparent reference to the crisis over the Carver School of Church Social Work at Southern. Two months earlier, Mohler had fired Diana Garland as dean of the Carver School after she told students the school was likely to lose its accreditation due to Mohler placing new restrictions on the faculty hiring process.

Pressler was asked to give his assessment of the appointments made by Henry to SBC committees. Those appointments, the mechanism by which the conservative group gained control of SBC agencies and institutions, had been made by Henry just days before.

Pressler's report "was partially positive," the minutes state. "He indicated that 27 of the 70 seemed to be strong conservatives and there seemed to be 16 that were unfortunate appointments. Particularly problematic states were California, Mississippi, New York, Georgia and Virginia."

The group also discussed SBC presidential candidates for 1995 and 1996. "Assignments were also made regarding contacts about possible first and second vice presidential candidates for this coming year," the minutes add.

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-- Toby Druin contributed to this story.

'Laymen's Network' forms in Kentucky

By David Winfrey

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Members of a group called the Kentucky Baptist Laymen's Network say they are contacting people throughout the commonwealth, hoping to encourage enough messengers to attend the Kentucky Baptist Convention in Bowling Green to elect a conservative KBC president.

"The goal of the Network is to promote a conservative agenda, and the conservative agenda is basically aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention," said Ray Moncrief, a member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Corbin and one of four board members for the Network.

He called the group "very, very informal" and said members are talking to Kentucky Baptists in their area, encouraging them to attend the annual meeting, Nov. 14-15 at First Baptist Church of Bowling Green, and vote their convictions.

"Quite frankly, our convention's never been particularly well attended," said Moncrief, a venture capitalist. "And consequently what we're trying to do is motivate people to get up and drive to Bowling Green and participate in this convention. And, essentially, that is the agenda."

Two people have been named thus far as candidates for Kentucky Baptist Convention president: Kevin Ezell, pastor of Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, and Jim McKinley, a retired Southern Baptist missionary to Bangladesh.

The Network has published two newsletters this year. Both criticize the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as "a liberal splinter group" that the newsletters say is competing with conservative, evangelical Southern Baptists for leadership in many state conventions.

"Make no mistake, the CBF's goal is to take over leadership of the Kentucky Baptist Convention, through the funding and influence of their sister organization in our state, the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship," the September newsletter states.

John Lepper, coordinator of the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, said his organization is not involved in KBC politics but is instead focusing on such goals as missions, resources and networking for CBF-friendly churches in Kentucky.

"We're not trying to influence the KBC elections, and we haven't for some time," he said.

Lepper said approximately 100 of the KBC's 2,400 member churches contribute money to the CBF.

In a Network newsletter story titled "CBF embarrassed by reporting on homosexuality," the newsletter also states, "Many CBF leaders support a shockingly radical pro-gay rights agenda."

Daniel Vestal, national coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said campaigns that connect the group with homosexuality are misleading but nothing new.

"CBF does not endorse or promote or support the gay-lesbian agenda," he said, noting that CBF's Coordinating Council recently passed a "statement on values" that says "the foundation of a Christian sexual ethic is faithfulness in marriage between a man and a woman and celibacy in singleness."

Vestal said assertions by groups such as the Network are part of "a concerted effort organized from the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Vestal noted that Roger Moran, who led a similar layman's organization in Missouri, is now a member of the SBC Executive Committee. "Their accusations are just not true, they are seeking to discredit, demean some very good Baptist folk, and that's sad."

John Michael, president of the Kentucky Baptist Laymen's Network, said the group's effort "has nothing to do with the (SBC) Executive Committee. This is laypeople who know what the CBF stands for and want to stand against it in their state convention."

Michael, 44, declined requests for an extended interview. "I would say that the newsletter speaks for itself and speaks for the organization," said Michael, a certified financial planner in Louisville.

But in a press release he stated that the group is seeking to motivate the "people in the pews" to get involved in the work of the Kentucky Baptist Convention and to "help defend our convention from outside influences which would tend to undermine our work and witness for Christ."

Asked if the Network had endorsed any candidates for the KBC elections in Bowling Green, Michael said, "We haven't yet, but we probably will."

He said a third newsletter before the Bowling Green convention will likely support candidates for KBC offices.

A Network member in West Kentucky, however, said the group already is working on behalf of one candidate.

"We're supporting Kevin Ezell," said Tom Butler, chairman of deacons at East Baptist Church in Paducah.

Butler stressed that the group was not campaigning against Jim McKinley, who has described himself as a "middle of the roader."

"We don't have anything against Jim McKinley. We had agreed among ourselves to support Kevin Ezell long before it was ever official that Jim was going to be running for this particular office," said Butler, a retired news anchor for WPSD-TV in Paducah. "He (McKinley) is a good man, and we treasure his ministry that he's had over the years."

Butler said his goal has been to enlist about 30 messengers in six West Kentucky associations to go to Bowling Green. "I've secured commitments probably from 100-150 people to go to the convention and to vote for Kevin Ezell."

Ezell said he had heard of the group and had heard that they were supporting him, but he added that the Network did not recruit him to run for president.

"That's nothing like what happened," he said. "If these guys are wanting to support me, I'd be thrilled to have their support."

Dan Ferguson, KBC first vice president and pastor of Second Baptist Church of Hopkinsville, said he attended one meeting of the group, but hasn't been heavily involved.

"I have my particular view of things, and I just have gotten to where I've grown weary with all the politicking, to be honest with you."

He said Network organizers divided the commonwealth into districts, assigning workers in each area to try to get as many "conservative messengers out to the convention as possible."

Likewise, a director of missions who asked not to be identified said two pastors from that association were campaigning throughout the area on behalf of Ezell.

An insert in the Network's most recent newsletter said the group's strategy is to "maintain a broad leadership structure, which organizes the state by regions, then by associations, then by churches, then by individuals."

Laverne Butler, former president of Mid-Continent College in Mayfield and former pastor of Ninth and O Baptist Church in Louisville, said he has been a consultant to about a dozen laymen who are leading the effort. He added that his work with the group has been limited because he is recovering from radiation treatment for throat cancer.

"All I've done is just sit with them a time or two. It's been all their initiative," said Butler, now special assistant to the pastor at Ashland Avenue Baptist Church in Lexington.

Butler added that this group is not connected to the one he led in previous years. That group dissolved when Bill Mackey was named executive director for the Kentucky Baptist Convention, he said. "We're totally behind Dr. Mackey."

Butler called the Network organizers "men who have some deep conviction. The primary goal for me is to expose the CBF."

"Day by day, week by week, they're trying to get another [church] and another and another to work with CBF, and if that's not undermining I don't know what is," he said. "I can get real adamant about that, because that's not the way Baptists have worked."

Michael said that in addition to himself and Moncrief the two other board members are Michael Harris, a former trustee of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville and a member of Ashland Avenue Baptist Church in Lexington, and Jack Amis, a member of Porter Memorial Baptist Church in Lexington.

Laverne Butler said Jerry Johnson, a member of the institutional development staff at Southern Seminary, has served as an adviser and resource person for the group.

Johnson declined to comment on his involvement with the group.

Butler said the group also has ministerial advisers, including Bill Henard, pastor of Porter Memorial Baptist Church in Lexington, and Mike Rouff, pastor of Rose Hill Baptist Church in Ashland.

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Texas pastor issues call for defense of freedom

By Scott Collins

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas (ABP) -- Warning about a "deadness in conformity," a Texas pastor called on Baptists to guard against "fundamentalist creedalists" who would seek to take away their freedom.

Phil Lineberger spoke Oct. 31 to nearly 1,100 people attending the annual breakfast of Texas Baptist Committed, a moderate organization formed several years ago to defend the Baptist General Convention of Texas against a fundamentalist takeover. Lineberger, pastor of Williams Trace Baptist Church in Sugar Land, Texas, called on the group to protect freedoms that Baptists have traditionally held dear.

"Our responsibility is to protect our spiritual freedoms," Lineberger said. "Baptists did not invent the idea of spiritual freedom, but it is Baptists who have protected it. We have been on the forefront of protecting spiritual freedom."

Lineberger said such freedom is under threat from the "21st century trap of creedalism."

"We must say no to fundamentalist creedalists and yes to Jesus Christ," he said.

Baptists "should not surrender to man what should be kept sacred to God," Lineberger said, referring to the right of individuals to interpret the Bible for themselves, with God's help.

"We have come to a time in which telling the truth, acting honestly and treating people decently has been sacrificed in the name of the bottom-line religious control and conformity through a creedalistic loyalty oath," he said.

The key to avoiding the trap of creedalism, Lineberger said, is for Baptists to think critically, live creatively and choose freely.

Thinking critically is a threat to some religious leaders, he said. "For our fundamentalist creedalist leaders, thinking is dangerous. For us, not thinking is even more dangerous. Jesus gave us minds and he expects us to use our minds to ask questions."

"When a self-appointed ecclesiastical hierarchy tells you that a Sanhedrin will determine if you believe the right things about the Bible based upon their creed, remind them that Romans 14:12 says that each one of us will give an account of himself to God," Lineberger said.

Along with thinking critically, Lineberger encouraged the TBC audience to also "live creatively."

"There is a deadness in conformity," Lineberger warned. "The most deadening effect on theological education in this century is the conformity that is coerced on professors and students."

That conformity includes excluding people from ministry because of gender, he said. "The gifting of the Spirit is not limited by gender. If you've been gifted, you have a moral responsibility to use that gift."

Finally, Lineberger said, the third key to protecting spiritual freedom is to choose freely.

"The most controlling thing our fundamentalist creedalist leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention can do is to make us believe that we have only one choice. But that is not God's way," he said. "God has created us as free moral agents, giving us the free will to love and follow him or to reject him and go our own way."

The pain of denominational controversy has lasted for Texas Baptists for 21 years, Lineberger said. But now, he said, it is time for Texans to move forward. Quoting from William Borden, a millionaire who chose to spend his life in foreign-mission service, Lineberger urged Texas Baptists to "fight for spiritual freedom. There must be no reserve, no retreat, no regret."

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END
