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**'Baptist Faith and Message' revisions
take center stage at state conventions**

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Baptist state conventions in Alabama and Tennessee are the latest to give qualified support to more conservative theology expressed in recent revisions to the Southern Baptist Convention's official faith statement.

The last time Southern Baptists reviewed the "Baptist Faith and Message," in 1963, the presidents of the various state conventions affiliated with the denomination formed the drafting committee in an effort to honor regional diversity.

Following a 20-year movement aimed at returning the nation's largest Protestant faith group to its "conservative roots," however, the SBC president handpicked a committee for revisions approved this summer. The group sought to eliminate loopholes that allegedly allowed liberals to infiltrate seminaries and agencies during the 1960s and 1970s.

Changes in the faith statement included limiting the office of pastor to men, calling for wives to submit to their husbands and eliminating references to Jesus as the criterion for interpreting the Bible. Not surprisingly, they became in effect a referendum in several state conventions this fall on what has been coined the "conservative resurgence" that gained control of the national body in the 1980s.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas, the SBC's largest affiliate, cited changes in the faith statement in reducing support to six SBC seminaries and two other agencies by more than \$5 million.

Another moderate stronghold, the Baptist General Association of Virginia, voted to create a committee to determine whether its national mission partners are consistent with its own approach, without specifically naming the SBC.

In contrast, Louisiana Baptists, who in recent years have sought reconciliation between conservative and moderate factions, voted to make the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" the state convention's official statement of belief. It marked the first time that Louisiana Baptists have approved a confession of faith.

Georgia Baptists approved by about a two-thirds margin a resolution affirming "approval and appreciation" for the new faith statement.

Colorado Baptists also voted to make the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" their official faith statement, defeating an amendment that would have broadened constitutional language to include any of the three SBC statements.

Oklahoma Baptists overwhelmingly adopted a resolution affirming the 2000 statement, defeating two amendments proposed from the floor.

Several state conventions, meanwhile, sought a middle road, affirming ties with the SBC by recognizing the revised faith statement while carefully avoiding language that might exclude churches that disagree.

The Alabama Baptist Convention approved a resolution affirming the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," but also earlier versions in 1963 and 1925, as non-binding "guides for better understanding doctrinal practices of faith." The resolution urged the state's Baptists to "utilize the 'Baptist Faith and Message' as a resource" and affirmed commitment to the Bible as the "sole authority for faith and practice."

The Tennessee Baptist Convention passed a resolution acknowledging the "Baptist Faith and Message" as "a source of information in assisting believers to express their faith" while affirming the Bible as "the final authority for faith and practice."

Florida Baptists updated their constitution to make the 2000 version of the faith statement, rather than the 1963 edition, their official statement of faith, declaring solidarity with the SBC. They declined, however, to make the new statement a litmus test for leadership, allowing a nominating committee to consider trustees from churches that embrace any similar statement of historic Baptist principles.

New Mexico Baptists approved a recommendation making fidelity to the Bible and support for the Cooperative Program criteria for convention leaders. In New Mexico, gifts to the unified budget are divided between New Mexico and Southern Baptist causes, unless a church designates otherwise.

Mississippi Baptists affirmed the Bible as their "final authority for faith and practice," noting that it is up to churches to choose what faith statement they use.

Kentucky Baptists voted Nov. 14 to appoint a committee to study changes to the document and report back next year.

In other states, a majority of messengers approved adding the 2000 statement to their constitution and bylaws but were thwarted because votes fell short of a required two-thirds majority.

Arkansas Baptists voted just short of a two-thirds majority to make the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" their doctrinal guideline. As a result, the 1963 statement will remain the convention's faith statement. Later, they passed resolutions supporting the Southern Baptist Convention and against the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group based in Atlanta.

Illinois Baptists didn't get a two-thirds vote to add a 1998 family amendment, which is retained in the most recent "Baptist Faith and Message" revision, to their constitution. They later adopted a non-binding resolution, however, affirming the family statement.

While the "Baptist Faith and Message" drew the most attention in state meetings this year, some conventions featured hotly contested elections for president and other officers, pitting candidates backed by conservatives and moderates vying for control of state organizations.

North Carolina moderates, after losing key elections for several years, elected two vice presidents this year. President Mike Cummings, who won a second term unopposed, is a conservative but is well-liked by both sides.

Kentucky Baptists elected former missionary Jim McKinney as president. Backed by moderates, he defeated conservative candidate Kevin Ezell, pastor of Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, 1,091-978.

Louisiana Baptists re-elected Tommy French, a conservative, to a second term as president.

South Carolina Baptists elected a conservative president, Wendell Estep, pastor of First Baptist Church in Columbia, by acclamation.

Conservatives swept elected offices in Missouri for the third straight year, buoyed by a record attendance credited to get-out-the-vote efforts by competing conservative and moderate organizations.

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Virginia Baptists increase funding for new and revitalized congregations

By Robert Dilday

ROANOKE, Va. (ABP) -- Virginia Baptists approved a \$15 million budget Nov. 15 that dramatically increases funding to start congregations and reinvigorate existing ones in the state.

The action, taken during the Baptist General Association of Virginia's Nov. 14-15 annual meeting in Roanoke, creates a new program of "church planting and revitalization" called Acts 17. It is based on strategies of the Apostle Paul described in the 17th chapter of the New Testament book of Acts. Almost \$1.3 million is allocated for the initiative in the 2001 budget, which begins Dec. 1.

BGAV leaders said the move is needed to respond to Virginia's population growth, especially among ethnic and international groups along the state's "urban corridor," which stretches from the Washington suburbs, through Richmond, to the Norfolk-Virginia Beach metropolitan area.

But some of the 1,560 messengers at the meeting opposed the project's means of funding, which will require a 2 percent decrease in allocations for national and worldwide ministries, although efforts to amend the budget were decisively defeated.

During its meeting, the BGAV also authorized a committee to study its relationship with a variety of national ministry partners, including the Southern Baptist Convention, whose shift to the theological right in the past two decades is at odds with the more moderate stance of the Virginia association.

The tension between the two organizations was highlighted at the outset of the meeting by outgoing president Thomas McCann, who said the BGAV and the SBC are "on divergent paths."

"Remember, Virginia Baptists helped create the Southern Baptist Convention," McCann said. "It is our child, not our parent. Clearly, it has grown away from us and no longer needs us. It is time to create something new."

Messengers elected without opposition a retired Virginia Beach attorney as president. Darrell Foster, a member of Thalia Lynn Baptist Church in Virginia Beach, will serve with three other officers, who also were elected unopposed. First vice president Reginald Warren is pastor of Sycamore Baptist Church in Franklin. Second vice president Donna Hopkins-Britt is pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Roanoke. Clerk Fred Anderson is executive director of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society.

Hopkins-Britt is the first female pastor to be elected to a BGAV office, although four women have served as BGAV presidents and at least one ordained woman has been a vice president. Hopkins-Britt also preached the thematic interpretation during this year's annual meeting.

The BGAV's \$15 million budget for 2001 is the same amount as this year's. Also unchanged are the giving tracks available to churches for national and international ministries. World Mission 1 supports causes of the Southern Baptist Convention, World Mission 3 funds ministries of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and World Mission 2 supports a variety of SBC, CBF and other national and international causes. Churches also may craft their own giving plans.

However, the amount of money in the 2001 budget allocated for national and international ministries is decreased, primarily to fund the Acts 17 projects. In both the WM 2 and WM 3 tracks, Virginia ministries

receive 70 percent of the funds, world mission causes 28 percent and Virginia partnership missions, 2 percent. In the WM 1 track, Virginia receives 64 percent, world mission causes 34 percent and partnership missions 2 percent.

The committee studying BGAV relations with national ministry partners will be named by newly elected president Darrell Foster. Although no deadline for the committee's conclusions is specified in the motion by former BGAV president Walter Harrow of Deltaville, the committee is charged with recommending the "best possible uses in 2002 and beyond of BGAV resources" with a report to be made "to the appropriate session of the BGAV and to the appropriate budget committee."

While the BGAV now works closely with a variety of national ministry partners -- including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Baptist World Alliance -- observers said the study is likely to focus on the SBC. Disagreements, especially over biblical interpretation and the role of women in ministry, between the SBC and the BGAV have flared for 20 years. Beginning in 1979, SBC presidents used their appointive power to pull the convention's seminaries and mission boards to the right. By the early 1990s, the BGAV had altered its budgeting process to permit affiliated churches wide latitude to withhold contributions to the SBC. Four years ago conservatives in Virginia started a new state convention, which now claims about 300 churches.

Last month, Baptists in Texas distanced themselves from the SBC by substantially reducing funding to its seminaries, social issues agency and Executive Committee.

In his opening statements at last week's BGAV meeting, outgoing president Thomas McCann said the Texas action has drawn national attention. "What Texans have done, added to what Virginia Baptists have already done, demonstrates that we are in the midst of denominational upheaval," he said. "A revolution began in the '70s. It was based on the appointive power of the [SBC] president. A counter-revolution began in the '90s. It was based on the budget power of the state associations and local churches.

"It is clear to me that historic Virginia Baptists and the Southern Baptist Convention are on divergent paths. Virginia Baptists are one thing. The Southern Baptist Convention is something else. While we used to walk side by side, it is clear that the distance between us is growing. ... The Southern Baptist Convention holds title to vast amounts of property, but it cannot hold title to our hearts."

The Southern Baptist Convention no longer needs the BGAV, McCann said, and it is "time to create something new."

"This year's proposed budget through the new initiative of Acts 17 is a step in that direction," he said. "It earmarks \$300,000 that would have left the state for the purpose of starting new churches and revitalizing others. It is a worthy start but only a modest beginning. It is time for authentic Baptists everywhere to reclaim their birthright."

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Southern Baptist leaders dispute 'racism' charge

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists are countering charges in news reports that a poster promoting an annual offering for missions is racist.

Materials promoting this year's Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, which provides almost half the funding for the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board, features a photo of a shirtless

African man. He is wearing beads, sitting in a dark room, illuminated only by a thin beam of light, with a pen and pad in hand and what appears to be an open Bible. A caption reads, "Dispel the Darkness."

In an e-mail newsletter called "BCE Bytes," Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., described the poster as "grossly insensitive."

The Southern Baptist Convention formed in 1845 because a northern-controlled mission board refused to appoint slaveholders as missionaries. Southern Baptists also defended Jim Crow laws in the South and were slow to integrate their congregations. In 1995 the convention issued an apology for past racism.

Given that context, Parham, a former employee of the SBC Christian Life Commission and the son of white missionary parents -- and a frequent SBC critic -- said picturing a black man in a theme opposing "darkness" raises questions about cultural sensitivity by denominational leaders.

A Baptist Press story in response carried a headline labeling the racism charge as "ludicrous," quoting an African-American constituent who reportedly phoned the Richmond, Va.,-based International Mission Board to show support.

IMB officials said the term "darkness" refers not to the man's skin color but to the spiritual condition of those without Christ. They said the man in the photo is a Christian wearing the traditional dress of the Samburu tribe of East Africa and is pictured translating the Bible into his own language.

Teresa Dickens, a spokeswoman for Woman's Missionary Union, an SBC auxiliary that helps promote missions in Southern Baptist churches, said leaders regret that some people viewed the poster as insensitive. "We don't want to offend anyone," she said.

She said the Birmingham, Ala.,-based WMU had received several inquiries from reporters since the Washington Post ran a story on the controversy Nov. 8 but few, if any, complaints from churches. She said there were no plans to withdraw the poster, which has been mailed to 200,000 churches, adding there wouldn't be enough time to produce a replacement.

Parham, however, said he learned about the poster when a WMU director at a local church told him she wouldn't use it for fear of offending her black friends.

The Washington Post story quoted Emmanuel McCall, an African-American who for many years worked for the Southern Baptist Home [now called North American] Mission Board. McCall, who is now pastor of a predominantly black church in suburban Atlanta, said he didn't plan to use the poster because of what he perceived as unflattering stereotypes.

"After so many years you would expect some sensitivity to have developed," he said. "We've talked about this for years and years."

The goal for this year's Lottie Moon offering, which is named after a female missionary to China in the 19th century, is \$115 million.

The International Mission Board has also been recently criticized in the media for "targeting" evangelistic messages to Jews, Hindus and Muslims in emphases timed to coincide with the holiest days of the respective faiths, which leaders of those groups decried as insensitive.

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News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Historic Atlanta church cuts denominational ties

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Atlanta's oldest Southern Baptist church, Peachtree Baptist Church, voted Nov. 15 to end ties both with the Southern Baptist Convention and the affiliated Georgia Baptist Convention.

The church, founded in 1847, cited differences with the denomination over recent changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message," the SBC's official doctrinal statement.

Honeycutt calls for "freedom" in theological education

CAMPBELLSVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Former Southern Seminary President Roy Honeycutt was keynote speaker at the recent dedication of Campbellsville University's School of Theology.

Honeycutt said the theology school should focus on excellence, including academic freedom. "In the School of Theology faculty and students must be provided with enough freedom to be functional," he said. "With real, authentic, Christian freedom, it makes us free to create and free to change. If there is no freedom, creativity is stifled. A school can do little more than echo voices of the past and serve as an indoctrination center rather than a center of Christian freedom and learning."

Honeycutt, currently chancellor of the Southern Baptist Convention seminary in Louisville, Ky., is a trustee and honorary alumnus of Campbellsville, a Kentucky Baptist Convention institution.

Baptist college receives \$1 million gift

MARION, Ala. (ABP) -- Judson College, a Baptist-affiliated school in Marion, Ala., has received a \$1 million gift from the Harrison Family Foundation of Tuscaloosa.

The money will be used to establish the Harrison Center for Academic Excellence and include extensive remodeling of the 162-year-old women's college to add state-of-the art laboratory and communication technologies.

The gift, given by Jim Harrison, former chairman of the board for Harco Drug, Inc., honors his father, James I. Harrison, who was born and raised in Marion.

Korean crusade reported success

ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- More than 2,700 professions of faith were reported by 120 Southern Baptist volunteers from 19 states who took part in a Nov. 1-14 crusade in South Korea.

The trip was coordinated by "Dub" Jackson, an evangelist from Abilene, Texas, who is planning a similar trip to Hong Kong next July.

Six in 10 read the Bible, Gallup says

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- Bible readership has dropped since the 1980s, but about six in 10 Americans say they read the Scriptures at least occasionally, according to a Gallup poll.

The percentage of those who read the Bible at least once a week is 37 percent, down 3 percent from 10 years ago. Sixteen percent said they read the Bible every day, 21 percent weekly, 12 percent monthly, 10 percent less than monthly and 41 percent never or rarely.

Nearly two in three believe the holy book "answers all or most of the questions of life," according to the poll.

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