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**Virginia WMU approves options
for Christmas mission offering**

By Bob Allen and Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Virginia's Woman's Missionary Union has broadened its annual Christmas offering for international missions by adding a "customized" plan allowing churches to give to specific missions projects. Leaders of the auxiliary said the new plan was requested by churches to foster both hands-on involvement and financial support for missions.

The Southern Baptist Convention's top official for overseas work, however, criticized the plan, charging it would erode support for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, an annual collection that provides nearly half the budget for the SBC International Mission Board.

The dispute is the latest by-product of two decades of infighting between conservatives and moderates in the nation's largest Protestant denomination. It also indicates further erosion of a complex system of unified funding and voluntary cooperation among autonomous local, state and national bodies once described as "a rope of sand with the strength of steel."

Recently, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the largest state-SBC affiliate, shifted more than \$5 million in annual funding for six seminaries and two other national entities to in-state ministries subject to Texas Baptist control. The Texas vote didn't affect funding for SBC missions, but those ties remain under study.

Historically, the WMU, an SBC auxiliary organized in 1888 before women were allowed to vote or even speak at the annual convention, has focused primarily on education of women and children and promotion of two annual offerings for SBC home and foreign missions in local churches.

In the last 10 years, however, a moderate organization, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, has begun to sponsor its own missionaries and to promote its own Global Missions Offering, also around Christmas.

Many churches support both offerings. For that reason, Virginia's WMU chapter voted five years ago to establish a general offering goal for international missions that included both Christmas offerings. The goal for this year's Virginia Baptists' Christmas Offering is \$4.2 million. Virginia WMU, meanwhile, continues to distribute promotional offerings for the SBC's Lottie Moon Offering.

"The reason WMU of Virginia created a general Christmas offering goal was to celebrate our mission contributions together as diverse Virginia Baptist churches," said Earlene Jessee, the auxiliary's executive director.

The new customized giving plan, called the Virginia International Mission Projects and approved by the state WMU's executive board Oct. 28, will fall under that same umbrella. Jessee said leaders don't expect it to compete with either the SBC or CBF mission offerings and that it would be inaccurate to describe it as a third missions offering.

She said many churches have requested a customized option that would allow personalized funding of special projects and more direct relationships than an offering that funds the overall work of a large institution like the IMB or CBF.

In a year-long study, WMU leaders explored highlighting special projects currently funded by SBC missions offerings, Jessee said, but officials at the IMB and the North American Mission Board weren't interested in a designated-giving plan.

This year's options, which have been approved by the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, include assistance for livestock production and extension in Liberia, a hospice/nursing care project in China and training for women at a new Baptist seminary in southern India.

Jessee said the customized option would fund projects sponsored not only by SBC and CBF mission organizations but state and local efforts as well. It's part of a strategy toward using resources "glocally," a term coined to describe viewing missions as both global and local.

But Jerry Rankin, president of the SBC International Mission Board, predicted the plan would demoralize international missionaries, who will view it as "diverting" support from the Lottie Moon Offering.

Rankin said Lottie Moon, a missionary in China and Virginia native who prompted women in the state to raise a first general offering for missions support in 1888, would be "disappointed and brokenhearted" by the action.

Rankin said the IMB already offers a list of strategic needs for churches or individuals that desire to designate special gifts, but that the Lottie Moon Offering is essential for basic missionary support, work budgets and capital needs.

"Our missionaries have always looked to the WMU as the champions of their support," Rankin said in a statement. "In spite of other issues and disagreements within the denomination, Virginia Baptists have remained faithful in that support.

"It will be a devastating blow to the morale of our missionaries to know that instead of faithful and loyal support for the Lottie Moon Christmas offering, churches are being encouraged by Virginia WMU to consider gifts to other mission organizations and designated projects unrelated to the IMB."

Wanda Lee, executive director of the national Woman's Missionary Union auxiliary said the organization recognizes the autonomy of state conventions to fund overseas missions projects. Several states participate in overseas partnerships coordinated by the IMB. Some, she noted, provide funds for those projects through local budgets or state-missions offerings.

In an effort to become more relevant to younger women, the WMU itself has moved in recent years beyond its original goals of missions education and fund raising to include hands-on ministries like a job corps for poor women and building houses with Habitat for Humanity.

The national WMU "maintains its support of the traditional Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and Annie Armstrong Easter Offering," Lee said, but also "rejoices in Southern Baptists hands-on involvement in missions, both in going and giving."

"We believe God is honored in all of these efforts as long as individuals come to know Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord," Lee said.

Virginia WMU will also promote a general Easter offering goal for North American missions to serve as an umbrella for the Annie Armstrong Offering, the Global Missions Offering and the Virginia International Mission Projects next spring.

NAMB spokesman Martin King described leaders at the agency based in Alpharetta, Ga., as "very interested in how these developments might impact next year's Annie Armstrong Easter Offering" and "anxious to discuss these developments" with Virginia WMU leaders.

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-- Adapted from reporting by the Virginia Baptist newspaper Religious Herald.

Leader highlights need for new CBF structure

By Jim Newton

PASS CHRISTIAN, Miss. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship needs a new organizational structure for the 21st century, says the group's moderator-elect.

"From an organizational perspective, CBF looks an awful lot like the SBC," observed James Baucom, speaking to the fall assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Mississippi.

Baucom, pastor of Rivermont Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., said he has even wondered if the moderate splinter group is even more traditional than the SBC.

The 10-year-old CBF was organized by former leaders of the SBC, who based its structure on Baptist principles and traditions of the 20th century, Baucom said.

"We are a very traditional organization that has inherited some old genes from the SBC," Baucom said. "Our values are deeply buried in our processes and organizations of the past."

Baucom, elected at the CBF's general assembly last summer to serve in the organization's top elected office in 2001-2002, said, however, "We will not be free to become the church of the 21st century until we are willing to give up the traditions of the 20th century."

To be effective in the future, churches must make themselves more accessible to a new generation of Baptists, Baucom said. For example, he said, many of the older hymns that are loved by traditional Baptists don't appeal to the new generation.

Baucom said Baptists need to ask two key questions when facing change: "What do we believe?" and "What do we value?"

Any future organizational structure for the Fellowship should "flow out of our values and beliefs," he said.

In a business session, CBF of Mississippi elected Jane Allison of Hattiesburg as the new moderator and Steve Street, co-pastor of Rivercrest Fellowship in Madison, as moderator-elect. Ken Redford of Clinton is the outgoing moderator.

About 100 Baptists at Gulfshore Baptist Assembly in Pass Christian, Miss., commissioned a Mississippi couple from nearby Long Beach, Michael and Lynn Hutchinson, as global missionaries to work with internationals in France. For 12 years, they were missionaries to West Africa under the SBC International Mission Board.

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Alliance of Baptists joins National Council of Churches

By Kenny Byrd

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Alliance of Baptists has been unanimously elected the 36th member communion of the National Council of the Churches of Christ.

The 60,000-member Alliance was born in 1987 in an early splintering of the Southern Baptist Convention and today represents the denomination's most progressive wing. It numbers more than 100 churches, located primarily in the Southeast.

While the SBC long opposed membership in the NCC even prior to a fundamentalist/conservative takeover in the 1980s, the Alliance has from the start committed itself to "the larger body of Jesus Christ" and "cooperation with believers everywhere in giving full expression to the gospel."

"We have looked forward to this day from the day of our founding," Alliance Executive Director Stan Hastey said in a statement thanking the NCC General Assembly for its Nov. 16 vote accepting the Baptist group. "Today we lean into and try to live up to that initial commitment."

As a member body, the Alliance will annually contribute to the NCC and will participate in the work of its commissions.

In a phone interview with Associated Baptist Press, Hastey said it marks the first time that a "predominantly Caucasian Baptist group -- that is largely in the South in its background and in its flavor -- has decided to participate in the principle ecumenical movement in this country."

Hastey said NCC membership "helps us even further secure our niche as an alternative Baptist organization."

The Alliance formed at a time when many SBC moderates believed there was still hope to retain control of the convention through political means and therefore never achieved strong support west of the Mississippi River. Since formation of the larger and more centrist Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1990, the Alliance has functioned primarily to advocate causes regarded as too risky or liberal for other groups.

The group has taken groundbreaking stances on social issues, including a welcoming-and-affirming stance toward homosexuals and opposition to U.S. policy in Cuba.

The group has also been "serious about our ecumenical commitment," Hastey said. Previous initiatives have included conversations with other Baptist groups in the United States and abroad, with non-Baptist groups like the United Church of Christ and interfaith efforts, including a statement calling for improved relations between Baptists and Jews.

"Ours has been a movement of congregations and individuals committed to historic Baptist principles and to a radical inclusiveness of all God's children among us," Hastey said. "This is where we belong, in this ecumenical body."

The Alliance joins 35 other Protestant and Orthodox member communions in the NCC. The NCC's members count 50 million adherents in the United States.

Membership in the National Council of Churches is a two-step process. In November 1999, the Council's General Assembly had completed the first step, declaring the Alliance eligible for NCC membership.

The NCC has been suffering financial hardships and leadership transitions. But during their annual meeting, Treasurer Phil Young said: "The NCC is alive, well, healthy, well-staffed and well-served, and has a future that only expands. It will not, so help us God, retract."

He expressed full confidence that the United Methodist Church will soon release the some \$500,000 it owes toward its pledge of support for the NCC's 1999 debt-reduction campaign -- which, upon receipt, will

lay to rest the deficit spending of the last several years. The NCC in 2000 balanced its budget without touching the principal in its investments and, in fact, expects to end the year with a small surplus.

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'Mainstream' group organizes in Illinois

By Michael Leathers

CARBONDALE, Ill. (ABP) -- In the wake of a state annual meeting where debate over the "Baptist Faith and Message" family amendment captured some of the limelight, a gathering of Southern Baptists has announced the formation of a group to keep Illinois a free-Baptist state, its first president said.

The newly formed group, Mainstream Illinois Baptists, is patterned after similar statewide organizations that have issued a call for a return to what they call traditional Baptist principles and are at odds with the conservative leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"We are trying to help keep Illinois free for people to be as conservative as they want to be," said Sam Foskey, president of Mainstream Illinois Baptists and pastor of University Baptist Church of Carbondale. "I want us all to have freedom to cooperate around the essentials of doctrine and around issues relating to evangelism and missions."

Although a press release said the Illinois organization was conceived as a response to the so-called fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention, Foskey said no particular incidents on the state level triggered the group's formation. "I personally have not seen a whole lot of political controversy in Illinois," Foskey said, describing the group's formation as a preventative measure.

The press release said the group's two purposes are to protect the Illinois Baptist State Association from "fundamentalist aggression," while supporting its programs and personnel, and to "educate about and preserve traditional Baptist beliefs," such as the priesthood of the believer, local-church autonomy and soul competency.

While acknowledging any group has the right to meet together, IBSA president Tim Lewis said: "My concern is that we don't have political factions and we don't become politically polarized within the state. It would be a tragedy if Illinois went down the path of other states that have turned into battlegrounds between one group calling itself moderate and another calling itself conservative."

Foskey said his goal is to work with fundamentalists to find ways to stay united around bedrock doctrines, such as the authority of Scripture and the need for people without a personal faith in Jesus to hear the gospel.

"A big issue for me is unity," he said. "I don't want to see the church divided over peripheral issues."

One example he cited is whether women can be ordained as pastors, an area where Foskey said Baptists can disagree because it's a matter of church autonomy. "One church cannot tell another church who to call as a minister," Foskey said. At the same time, he said he wants "my more conservative brothers" to have the freedom to stand in their pulpits and declare it's wrong to call women as pastors.

Lewis, pastor of Bethel Baptist Church of Troy, said Baptists in Illinois have long supported a tradition of autonomy. "I've seen nothing to threaten the autonomy of the local church or of local pastors to preach," he said. "I just hope it doesn't undermine the mission and purpose of Illinois Baptists in reaching people for Christ. We have taken pride in being unified around missions and evangelism. We're grassroots,

Bible-believing Southern Baptists committed to reaching the world for Christ. That's who we are and who we will continue to be."

While Foskey said he wants Illinois Baptists on both sides of the theological aisle to work together, he acknowledged that this year's revisions to the "Baptist Faith and Message," a nonbinding statement of faith seen as the core of what many Southern Baptists embrace, could be a difficult roadblock.

Southern Baptists approved those changes at the national SBC's annual meeting in Orlando, Fla., but not without controversy. Supporters said the alterations reflected a return to Baptist roots, which had been threatened by a drift toward liberal theology. Critics charged the revised document is increasingly becoming a creed, noting it's already used as a condition for employment at national agencies and seminaries.

Those debates have been filtering down to many state conventions, which are weighing adoption of these revisions. The IBSA's constitution-and-bylaws committee, for example, is expected to review the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" next year and make a recommendation for adoption into the association's constitution. If the committee gives a thumbs-up to the revised faith statement, a first reading would likely be held at the annual meeting in November 2001 in Peoria, and a second reading and vote could take place the following November in O'Fallon.

Such a move would meet opposition from Mainstream Illinois Baptists, according to the group's press release. Members of the group are particularly disturbed by language that drastically changes the understanding of biblical revelation and by the statement prohibiting women from serving as senior pastors.

"(Mainstream Illinois Baptists) can be sure to oppose adoption of either the family amendment or the revised 'Baptist Faith and Message' within the state of Illinois," the press release stated.

All Illinois Baptists need to give the "Baptist Faith and Message" revisions "a lot of study and a lot of prayer," Foskey said. "I'd like to see if we can find some common ground. If we have to disagree, let us at least disagree agreeably."

Foskey said members of Mainstream Illinois Baptists have no plans at this time to support a slate of candidates for the state's elected offices, an action that moderate and conservative groups in other states have pursued. "A few of us have batted around the possibility once or twice, and that's where we have left it," he wrote in an e-mail.

David Williams, a psychologist and former pastor in DeKalb, had served as interim moderator for Mainstream Illinois Baptists, which has met several times since its first meeting in May. He is one of two Illinois representatives on the Network of Mainstream Baptists, a national coalition that formed in April.

Williams said Mainstream Illinois Baptists does not have a formal affiliation with the national network. He has been the strongest tie between the two bodies as the state group's interim moderator. However, he does not know if he will continue to serve with the national network and was not even nominated to be one of the representatives for the Illinois group.

The other three Mainstream Illinois Baptists officers are laypersons. They are Tommie Calhoun, vice president, member of Pennsylvania Avenue Baptist Church of Urbana; Art McCormick, secretary-treasurer, member of First Baptist Church of O'Fallon; and Bob Ross, assistant secretary-treasurer, member of Chatham Baptist Church. Fourteen people have agreed to serve on the board of directors, but their names were not immediately available.

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