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**IMB won't require missionaries  
to affirm 'Baptist Faith and Message'**

By Bob Allen

AUGUSTA, Ga. (ABP) -- Nearly 5,000 Southern Baptist international missionaries won't be forced to sign their denomination's new faith statement but must commit to working "in accordance with and not contrary to" its teachings.

International Mission Board trustees voted Jan. 24 in Augusta, Ga., to "wholeheartedly" affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" as revised by the Southern Baptist Convention last June as the "standard for carrying out the programs and ministries" of the 155-year-old agency based in Richmond, Va.

The board declined, however, to end its tradition of requiring missionaries to carry out their responsibilities "in accordance with and not contrary to" the confessional document even if they disagree with minor points.

A new IMB policy statement puts into writing a longstanding practice in processing missionary candidates. Under the policy, missionaries and staff are asked if they have read and agree with the current "Baptist Faith and Message." If they answer "no," they must explain any area of difference.

Either way, they must sign an affirmation that reads: "In accountability to the International Mission Board and Southern Baptists, I agree to carry out my responsibilities in accordance with and not contrary to the current 'Baptist Faith and Message' as adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention."

"That is not a new policy," said Allen Carter, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Bel Air, Md., and chairman of the trustee administration committee. "That has been taking place for some number of years."

"We are simply affirming our historical practice and putting it into our policies," added trustee chairman Tim McCoy.

The Jan. 24 trustee action came in response to a motion at last year's SBC annual meeting referred to all denominational entities that employees not be required to sign the "Baptist Faith and Message." While convention boards must consider referred motions, they are not limited to voting yes or no. Other agencies

considering the referral have opted instead to require employee adherence to what has been described as an instrument of "doctrinal accountability."

IMB trustees, however, described their new policy statement as an affirmation of the "Baptist Faith and Message," board policy and current personnel, who will not be required to sign the statements.

Trustees, who meet every other month, discussed the issue at length before ultimately deciding there is no need to change the current practice, said board chairman McCoy, pastor of Ingleside Baptist Church in Macon, Ga.

"Our process has served us well in the past," McCoy said in an interview.

McCoy said that given the IMB's track record both for appointments and in dealing with theological aberrations that crop up after missionaries are on the field, trustees decided that the current practice is adequate.

During their application process, prospective missionaries write a statement of beliefs in their own words. Administrators and then a trustee subcommittee review those statements and have an opportunity to discuss areas of concern before candidates are recommended for appointment. On top of that, missionaries are asked further to affirm the 'Baptist Faith and Message' or indicate disagreements and pledge to conduct their work in accordance with it.

Employee policies also forbid missionaries from repeatedly advocating views that are contrary to those outlined in the "Baptist Faith and Message," McCoy said.

Before the unanimous vote approving the action, IMB President Jerry Rankin decried "time-consuming processes and restrictive policies" that might hinder missionary appointments.

"By what criteria should anyone be deprived of hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ?" Rankin asked. "By what justification can any people group or nation be denied the opportunity to know of God's love and Christ's saving power?"

In his report to trustees, Rankin, a former missionary in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, described "a radical increase in global harvest" reflected in baptisms and overseas church growth in recent years.

Overseas baptisms reported by IMB missionaries increased 24 percent last year, reaching 451,000, he said. The establishment of new churches on mission fields, meanwhile, grew 37 percent, to 6,525.

Rankin said that three years ago the IMB was targeting 338 people groups. Today, he said, missionaries work with 1,000 people groups.

At that rate of growth, Rankin predicted that the IMB would be reporting a million baptisms within five years and that by 2010 "there will be no more unreached people groups."

"We will be unable to identify any people group without access to the gospel in 10 years," he said, noting it now appears "practical to achieve the Great Commission," Jesus' command to preach the gospel to all peoples.

In response to Rankin's report, McCoy commented, "God is at work in an awesome way, and he is going to be at work in the days ahead."

The "Baptist Faith and Message," Southern Baptists' official faith statement first adopted in 1925, last summer underwent its first major rewrite since 1963. Some changes, including views that the Bible forbids women to serve as senior pastors and removal of a reference to Jesus Christ as the criterion for interpreting Scripture, have drawn criticism.

A small number of churches have cut SBC ties over the issue, and the denomination's largest state affiliate, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, reduced funding to the national body, citing disagreement with the faith statement.

But Rankin said in an interview that when missionary candidates in the past have indicated problems with the "Baptist Faith and Message," it commonly was over articles that most Southern Baptists would consider secondary or non-essential doctrines. For example, he said, occasionally a prospective missionary

will come from a church that has elders, but the "Baptist Faith and Message" says the biblical offices of church leaders are limited to pastors and deacons.

Rankin said that unlike other employees, senior-level administrators such as vice presidents and regional leaders would be required to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message." He said individuals currently in those posts have already said they have no problem with the current edition of the doctrinal statement.

Also during the two-day trustee meeting held in Augusta, Ga., the IMB commissioned 50 new missionaries, increasing the denomination's total international missions force to 4,924.

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## **Young CBF members object to gay statement**

By Greg Warner

SHOCCO SPRINGS, Ala. (ABP) -- A group of young members of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship sent a letter to the organization's leaders Jan. 24 objecting to "single-issue pronouncements" like the CBF's recently adopted policy on homosexuality.

The letter, addressed to the Fellowship's Advisory Council, was signed by 32 people who participated in a Jan. 18-20 spiritual retreat for CBF members under age 40. Retreat participants discussed endorsing the letter as a group but decided against any formal action. Instead the 80 participants were invited to add their names to the letter if they wished.

The group was reacting to a CBF policy, adopted by the Coordinating Council last year, which prohibits funding of organizations that "condone, advocate or affirm homosexual practice." It is expected to affect a few of the CBF-supported theological schools with open-admissions policies that include sexual orientation.

The young leaders said they "are far from being of one mind on issues regarding gay and lesbian persons."

"We do agree, however, that pronouncements and policies by CBF on particular moral issues are shortsighted and counterproductive," the letter said.

The signers noted they "speak only for ourselves." They thanked CBF leaders "for making CBF a Baptist home for us" and affirmed their commitment to CBF "now and for the future."

"We find power in CBF's forward focus, and so we feel strongly that [CBF Coordinator] Daniel Vestal was right when he challenged [last] year's General Assembly to be Baptists who "want to be known because of what we are for and not what we are against."

"Up to this point, differences within CBF have been resolved without single-issue pronouncements. We do recognize that by refusing to take a position on an issue we leave ourselves more vulnerable to those who would characterize and distort what CBF is. But still we must ask, why now would we cease to rally behind the gospel alone?"

By press time, 32 retreat participants had signed the letter. Drafter Chris Caldwell, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Daytona Beach, Fla., described it as an "internal memo" to CBF leaders and said the signers are not trying to get CBF "to revisit this issue."

There are no plans to circulate the letter further or allow others to sign it, he said. However, other members of the CBF's Young Leaders Network who heard about the letter have expressed interest through the network's e-group. The e-group has been the forum for a lively debate of the CBF policy since its adoption Oct. 13.

A discussion of the policy was scheduled for one session of the network's spiritual retreat at Shocco Springs, Ala. Participants debated for an hour and a half whether it would be appropriate or even possible for the network to issue a statement of its own. With no bylaws to guide them, participants declined to set a minimum standard of agreement to endorse the three-paragraph letter, which was read by Caldwell.

Participants did not debate the issue of homosexuality but instead objected to the CBF's decision to set a funding policy on one moral issue and not others. Such an action by the Coordinating Council contradicted the organization's practice of not issuing resolutions and deprived all CBF members from having a voice in the decision, some participants said.

Despite those strong feelings, most retreat participants were opposed to the network endorsing any statement of its own. That would repeat what they saw as the mistake of the Coordinating Council -- trying to represent an entire group with a win-or-lose vote -- some said.

David Wilkinson, communications coordinator for the Atlanta-based Fellowship, told ABP: "The letter was sent as a matter of information to the Advisory Council and I'm confident it will be received in the same spirit it is being offered. It is constructive, not mean-spirited. And we recognize there is a diversity of opinion on this issue."

Vestal and CBF moderator Donna Forrester of Greenville, S.C., were unavailable for comment.

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## **Bush denies U.S. foreign aid to groups providing abortions**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In his first major act as president, George W. Bush reversed U.S. policy by barring any foreign aid to groups that provide abortion services, counseling or referrals.

Bush -- who walked a careful line on abortion in the 2000 campaign to avoid alienating either pro-life or pro-choice voters -- also announced the new administration would review the Food and Drug Administration's approval of the RU-486 abortion pill.

In effect, the foreign-aid policy reinstates the Mexico City Policy of former Republican administrations. The Jan. 22 action was well received from participants of the annual March for Life held in Washington on the same day. The march coincides with the anniversary of the Roe vs. Wade decision that first recognized a woman's right to privacy when making abortion decisions.

"President Bush's action is a welcome indicator that he intends to stick to his pro-life campaign promises," said Family Research Council President Ken Connor. "The first step towards 'building a culture of life' is to stop exporting the culture of death. With this decision, President Bush signals that ensuring the right to life to each individual worldwide will be central in his foreign policy agenda."

Bush's wife, Laura, caused a stir on the night before the inauguration when she said Roe vs. Wade should not be overturned. "My wife is entitled to her opinion," Bush told television media outlets in response. "Whether I do or don't agree with her is irrelevant. What's relevant is, is that how I'm going to conduct my presidency?"

He went on to say that Roe vs. Wade would not be overturned by a constitutional amendment because there are not enough votes in the House or Senate. Bush added, "Secondly, I am going to put judges on the court who strictly interpret the Constitution, and that will be the litmus test."

Current law bans using U.S. funds for abortions in foreign countries. But the Mexico City Policy goes further by denying U.S. aid to international groups that use their own money to advocate abortion rights. Disputes on the issue between the Clinton administration and the GOP-controlled Congress go back several years. It was one reason that U.S. arrears to the United Nations were held back three years.

Among those criticizing the Bush move was the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, which issued a press statement saying "current law already prohibits using U.S. taxpayer funds to perform abortions or lobby for or against it."

"At the heart of the [Mexico City Policy], and what makes it so intrusive and far-reaching, is that it would control what foreign recipients of U.S. international family planning assistance do and say with their own funds," the statement continued.

Gloria Feldt, president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, went on to say, "This action threatens global progress to provide life-saving family planning and reproductive health services to millions of women and men around the world."

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## **Bush proposes vouchers in education package**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President George W. Bush has submitted to Congress an education-reform package that includes a voucher initiative even though Bush's Department of Education Secretary, Rod Paige, said at his recent confirmation hearings that vouchers would not be high on the administration's agenda.

Bush's plan would require annual state reading and math tests for students in every grade. Also, under the plan, "failing schools" would have three years to meet certain standards of student academic achievement or else federal funds would be stripped for other uses such as vouchers for children to attend private or religious schools.

"When schools do not teach and will not change, parents and students must have other meaningful options," Bush said. "If somebody's got a better idea, I hope they bring it forward."

Some news reports quote Bush advisers saying that Bush had decided to make some changes to the voucher plan to win over more lawmakers and he also told Democrats he did not want to keep vouchers in the proposal if it would undermine the measure's passage. The voucher plan would give \$1,500 vouchers to the parents of students in public schools that are deemed failures three years in a row.

Religious and civil liberties groups are split over the voucher issue. Conservative Christian organizations, including the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, are open to vouchers. Liberal and moderate advocacy groups, such as the Baptist Joint Committee, say vouchers for religious schools violate the separation of church and state.

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## **Supreme Court takes child Internet porn case**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Supreme Court justices have agreed to decide if Congress can ban "virtual child pornography" on the Internet, which depicts minors engaged in sex acts with the use of altered computer-generated photos.

The high court said Jan. 22 that it would take the case. The U.S. government argues that by banning sexual images that do not actually portray real children, the law "helps stamp out the market for child pornography involving real children."

Expanding the previous ban on child pornography, the 1996 Child Pornography Prevention Act prohibits any image that "appears to be" or "conveys the impression" of someone under 18 engaged in sexually explicit conduct.

A federal appeals court ruled that this provision of the law violated free-speech rights. The Free Speech Coalition, a group of businesses that create and distribute adult-oriented material, had challenged the measure.

In news reports, the coalition's lawyer, H. Louis Sirkin, said: "If you're not using a real minor, how can you have a crime? If it's a computer image and it's virtual reality, it's still not a real minor, it's not a child engaged in anything."

But in arguments put forward by the Janet Reno Justice Department, the government says the nation has an interest in protecting children who might be abused as a result of the images. Justice Department officials also said it is near impossible to distinguish the altered photos from those actually portraying children.

The case is Reno v. Free Speech Coalition.

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**CORRECTION:** The following news brief that ran in Tuesday's ABP contained an addition error in the first sentence. It is corrected in this version

### **Texas moderate group asks state to refuse SBC funding**

DALLAS -- The executive board of Texas Baptists Committed voted 60-3 to formally ask the Baptist General Convention of Texas to "divest" about \$1.4 million in annual funding it receives from the Southern Baptist Convention.

The group, formed to protect the state convention against takeover by fundamentalists, said Texas Baptists should give back \$1.3 million a year it gets from the SBC North American Mission Board and more than \$96,000 from LifeWay Christian Resources, the SBC's publishing arm. Proponents said the step would be for the sake of "ethics and integrity."

Funds from NAMB are typically matched with state convention monies for joint funding of projects, such as church starting. In smaller conventions, NAMB often sends more funds to the state than it receives back from the state's churches. In large states like Texas, however, the reverse is true.

Texas wouldn't be the first large state to renegotiate its arrangement with NAMB. Mississippi Baptists several years ago began withholding dollars equal to the amount it formerly received from NAMB in order to give state leadership more flexibility in how to use those funds.

Funding from LifeWay is used to supplement discipleship programs at state conventions, such as training leaders how to use SBC study materials. Since the BGCT now publishes its own Sunday school materials, Baptists Committed members reason, continuing to accept SBC funding creates a conflict of interest for convention workers who may feel pressured to promote LifeWay curriculum.

Texas Baptist officials did not comment publicly on the proposal. A BGCT committee is currently evaluating the state convention's missions partnerships, including those with NAMB and the SBC International Mission Board. (ABP)

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