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**Breakaway Texas convention
seeking 'fraternal' ties with agencies**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- A breakaway Southern Baptist state convention is seeking "fraternal" relationships with agencies and institutions of the Baptist General Convention of Texas to allow churches to pass funds to those entities through the alternative state group.

Jim Richards, executive director of the 600-church Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, has invited presidents of BGCT-affiliated schools, child-care agencies and Texas Baptist Men to a March 7 meeting to discuss the proposal.

"By networking, the SBTC avoids a bureaucracy," Richards wrote in an invitation letter to agency heads. "The SBTC does not wish to create new schools and ministries when it is possible to partner with Baptist entities of like faith and practice."

Richards said in an interview that the conservative state group has two categories of funding partners. "Affiliates" of the SBTC agree with the group's doctrinal statement and qualify to receive convention funding. The convention may also establish "formal fraternal relationships" with entities that are not in the budget but may receive pass-through funds designated by a local church.

Texas Baptist leaders reacted with suspicion to the proposal.

"It is somewhat perplexing at the very least that this group would criticize who we are in the Baptist General Convention of Texas and yet want to have a formal relationship with our ministry institutions that are so much who we are," said Keith Bruce, BGCT coordinator of institutional ministries.

Bruce called the proposal an attempt to drag BGCT agencies into denominational politics.

Texas Baptist Men Executive Director Jim Furgerson said his group would likely remain solely with the BGCT.

"I can see no reason why (we) would do anything to damage a relationship that has served us all well for more than three decades," he said. "I would not anticipate Texas Baptist Men establishing any fraternal or formal relationship with any other organization."

Baylor University President Robert Sloan sent Richards a firm response that Baylor's "historic connection with the BGCT is the strongest partnership relationship for us as a Baptist institution."

"We are deeply committed to the work of the BGCT and thus neither seek nor desire relationships with other Baptist entities within Texas which would either compete for or dilute the resources and efforts of the BGCT," Sloan stated.

Other agency heads emphasized their organizations' commitment to work with local churches across the theological spectrum.

"We will work with any individual, church or group, regardless of denominational politics, that is seeking to minister to the hurting as Jesus did," said Ken Hall, president of Buckner Benevolences. "If a church aligned with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention is seeking to minister in the name of Jesus as Buckner does, we would be more than happy to work with that church, and we welcome its financial support."

Richards said there is nothing sinister in his request to meet with representatives of the BGCT institutions. "We've just simply invited the representatives to come sit down and dialogue with us and see if there is common ground," he explained.

"Many of the churches that are affiliated with the SBTC have contributed through the years" to BGCT institutions and "would like to continue a relationship through a state convention with these entities," Richards said.

He rebuffed criticism that SBTC is attempting to "steal" BGCT ministries. "We're not asking for governance," he said. "We're asking for the possibility of partnering with other Great Commission entities."

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Hobbs not 'duped' successor claims

By Mark Wingfield

SHAWNEE, Okla. (ABP) -- The primary author of the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" was neither "naïve" nor "duped" by liberals as critics of the document have charged, claims a successor to his Oklahoma pulpit.

Jeffry Zurheide, pastor of First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, defended Herschel Hobbs for strong language affirming soul competency and the priesthood of believers in the Southern Baptist Convention faith statement during an annual lecture series bearing Hobbs' name at Oklahoma Baptist University.

If Hobbs were alive today and asked what counsel he has for Baptists, he would cry out, "Freedom," Zurheide said.

"I think if Herschel were with us this morning, he would indeed tell us: 'Protect these key Baptist freedoms -- the freedom of the individual competent soul and the freedom of the local Baptist competent church community. The Spirit is at work in you, individually and collectively.'

"This is the bedrock of Dr. Hobbs' faith and message. If we miss him here or minimize his thinking on this point, we misrepresent him."

Revisions adopted last summer to the "Baptist Faith and Message" de-emphasized those beliefs, while elevating biblical authority. Advocates of the changes suggested that Hobbs, a legendary denominational statesman who chaired the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" study group, was personally conservative but was misled by those wanting a broad enough statement to accommodate "neo-orthodox" theology.

Neo-orthodoxy arose in the 20th century in reaction to liberal theology, which rejected the miraculous and raised questions about the Bible's historicity. Neo-orthodoxy re-established the centrality of biblical revelation but is objectionable to fundamentalists because it relies on scientific methods of Bible study.

One critic suggested Hobbs was "duped" by neo-orthodox scholars into including broad language describing biblical authority in the 1963 statement and for strong words defending individual freedom in interpreting the Bible in its preamble.

But Zurheide claimed Baptist freedom in Christ was a recurring theme of Hobbs' writing, teaching and preaching.

"He reinforced these beliefs; he articulated and rearticulated these priorities," Zurheide said. "At times, he almost seemed to breathe them."

Hobbs wrote extensively about what he believed was Baptists' greatest contribution to Christianity, Zurheide said. "Baptists' most unique contribution to Jesus' church universal, Herschel Hobbs believed, was and is soul competency."

That doctrine is the building block upon which the priesthood of the believer stands, he added. Soul competency is a belief that every soul is competent to deal directly with God. Priesthood of the believer is a Baptist teaching that all believers in Christ have direct access to God, both to hear God's voice and to do God's work.

Soul competency has to do with one's being, while priesthood of the believer relates to what one does, Zurheide explained.

Zurheide said Hobbs also would sound a word of warning today about threats to religious freedom.

"Why not legislate the gospel and the dynamics of the kingdom of God? Because if we resort to anything but 'spiritual means,' as the 1963 'Baptist Faith and Message' puts it, we essentially label as ineffective the power and work of the Holy Spirit," he said.

Zurheide said he would love to ask Hobbs if he believes the SBC today is backing away from these three Baptist freedoms.

An answer might be found in Hobbs' own words, from a lecture he gave at OBU in 1980. Hobbs said: "We must exercise constant vigilance in warding off the threats to religious freedom, both within our denomination and outside it, including the current drift toward creedalism. The storm clouds of creedalism hover over our denomination.

"Well-intentioned people in contending for faith in the Scriptures may discover that the good for which they strive may become the enemy of the best, namely, the competency of the soul in religion."

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Sex more common on TV, study reveals

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Sex is more prevalent on TV today than just a couple of years ago, according to a recently released study.

"Sex on TV: Content and Context" was the second biennial study conducted by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, an independent national health-care philanthropy based in Menlo Park, Calif. The foundation released its report Feb. 5.

The study revealed that the number of programs containing sexual content rose from 56 percent of all shows in the 1997-98 season to 68 percent in the 1999-2000 season. At least one show in four (27 percent) included sexual behavior, with the remainder featuring conversation about sex.

Television's preoccupation with sex offers a skewed view of reality, says Bill Tillman, T.B. Maston professor of Christian ethics at the Logsdon School of Theology in Abilene, Texas.

"Sexuality is a major part of life, one of the major shapers of each of our personalities," he said. "Still, we are more than sexual beings. Thus, TV media content proclaims life in an out-of-balanced kind of way."

The research confirmed what Tillman said he already perceived. Television programs he previously had enjoyed have become "more and more bothersome to my sensibilities," he said. "Sexual content is being used increasingly to draw an audience ... and at an increasingly lowest-common denominator."

Sex is particularly common in primetime network programs, the study demonstrated. In 1997-98, 67 percent included sexual content, while 75 percent did in 1999-2000.

These results are not surprising, because they just confirm the truism that "sex sells," said Joe Haag, special moral-concerns associate with the Christian Life Commission at the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"Sex is front and center in television programming and cinematic production because sex attracts viewers, and viewers attract advertisers and investors," Haag said. "What is alarming and discouraging is the overwhelming power of this economic reality."

Researchers in southern California examined 1,114 programs that aired between October 1999 to March 2000 on 10 network, syndicated, public television and cable channels. The study examined movies, dramas, sitcoms, soap operas, newsmagazines, and talk or "reality" programs. Only scenes in which sexual behavior was a substantial emphasis were counted in the research.

The study revealed:

- Movies were the most likely type of programming to contain sexual content, at 89 percent. But they were followed closely by situation comedies (84 percent) and soap operas (80 percent).

- The increase in sexual content was greatest in situation comedies, rising from 56 percent in 1997-98 to 84 percent of all episodes in 1999-2000.

- No category of programming showed a decrease in sexual content.

- Sexual intercourse is depicted or strongly implied in 10 percent of all TV shows.

- Portrayals of teenagers involved in sexual intercourse increased three-fold. In the first study, 3 percent of all TV characters involved in sexual intercourse were teens. In the most recent study, that figure jumped to 9 percent.

- Nine out of 10 TV shows with sexual content included no reference to the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity. References to the risks and responsibility of sexual activity were most likely to be included in dramas (15 percent) and least likely in situation comedies (5 percent). Programs depicting teen characters in sexual situations were most likely to include such references.

While the findings are disturbing, Haag emphasized that Christians are "not powerless" to respond to objectionable programming.

"We can compliment and support the television programs and movies which rise above exploitation to give a more truthful account of life. We can express our views to advertisers and producers," he said.

Parents can monitor and influence their children's television viewing and use available technology to lock out some harmful programming, Haag added.

"And we can use the bad programming which does get through as teaching moments for our children," he said.

News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Becky Bridges to lead Texas Baptist Communications Center

DALLAS -- A 34-year-old woman has been tapped as top communications official for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Becky Bridges of Dallas has been named director of the BGCT's Communications Center, effective Feb. 26. She comes to the post from a job at the Annuity Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. She previously worked with the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., and International Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland.

She succeeds Tom Brannon, who retired in December 1999.

"I am excited to present Becky Bridges to the churches and people of Texas," said Charles Wade, BGCT executive director. "She is exactly the right person for the task of communicating to the general public about who Texas Baptists are and what they are doing to minister to the people and churches of our state."

Chris Liebrum, director of human resources, said Bridges was chosen from about 25 candidates during a six-month nationwide search. Along with experience and qualifications, Liebrum said Bridges "brings to the leadership of Texas Baptists a generational perspective that is greatly needed."

Bridges said she looks forward to "a great opportunity to serve Texas Baptists."

"The ministries and churches of the BGCT witness the changing of many lives," she said. "I look forward to celebrating their success." (ABP)

Smith named Florida editor

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. -- A communications official at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has been named editor of the Florida Baptist Witness.

James Smith, 37, was elected unanimously by the weekly paper's board of commissioners Jan. 23. He succeeds Michael Chute, who resigned Feb. 5 to teach journalism at William Carey College.

Smith has been director of public relations at the seminary in Louisville, Ky., since 1998. He previously worked as the seminary's director of news and information. Smith also formerly worked at the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and as director of communications at the Republican Study Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives. (ABP)

Virginia Intermont president stepping down

BRISTOL, Va. -- Gary Poulton is stepping down after 17 years as president of Virginia Intermont College to become president emeritus of the Baptist-affiliated school in Bristol, Va. His new title takes effect July 1.

"I will complete my 20th year -- the last 17 as president -- at Virginia Intermont this summer," he said. "This seemed an appropriate time to step down as the college's president."

Mary VanDyke, president of the school's board of trustees, said a national search for a new president would begin immediately. (ABP)

Texas Baptists partner for social ministry in Brazil

DALLAS -- The Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission has established a three-year partnership with the largest evangelical social ministry in Latin America.

Texas Baptists will provide volunteers, prayer support and financial help for the Brazilian Baptist Reencontro Educational and Social Ministries in Rio de Janeiro.

Six ministry centers serving 40 low-income areas operate two clinics, a day-care center, an elementary school, a vocational/technical school, a shelter for street children, drug-rehabilitation programs and food distribution.

Texas Baptists will respond to specific ministry requests. (ABP)

College receives Lilly grant

GEORGETOWN, Ky. -- Georgetown College in Kentucky has been awarded a \$50,000 grant by the Lilly Endowment to plan a study of the theological exploration of vocation.

The study, which would involve additional grant fund over three to five years, would examine how faith relates to vocational choices. (ABP)

Church honors retiring pastor with seminary post

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Broadway Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., has honored retiring pastor Ronald Higdon with a visiting professorship at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.

The church will fund the Broadway Baptist Church Visiting Professorship, said seminary spokesman Bob Spinks. Higdon will fill the position for a semester next year, teaching pastoral leadership and preaching. (ABP)

Professor named associate dean at Truett

WACO, Texas -- New Testament scholar David Garland has been named associate dean for academic affairs at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

Garland joined the Truett faculty in 1997 as professor of Christian scriptures after teaching 21 years at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Garland's appointment is effective Feb. 26, the same day that former SBC Annuity Board President Paul Powell takes over as the seminary's dean. (ABP)

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