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**SBC establishes council  
to strengthen U.S. families**

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- America's largest Protestant denomination wants to become a major force for family values, Southern Baptist Convention leaders say.

The SBC Executive Committee voted unanimously Feb. 19 to establish a blue-ribbon council to marshal denominational resources in a "cohesive and concerted strategy" for strengthening families in churches and society.

The initiative builds on a historic 1998 amendment to the SBC's official doctrinal statement defending traditional families, including a controversial tenet that wives must "graciously submit" to their husbands.

Morris Chapman, the Executive Committee's president and chief executive officer, will appoint members to the new Council on Family Life. The council will work under auspices of the Executive Committee for two years, in cooperation with other SBC entities with ministry assignments related to the family, and report any recommendations to the SBC as a whole.

Chapman said the council would work to "elevate the sense of family life" among Southern Baptists.

"We're not trying to establish programs, but we are trying to say maybe God will help us establish a movement for family life in the Southern Baptist Convention and in our world," Chapman said.

The council will develop strategies that "identify Southern Baptist churches as 'great for the community because they are great for the family,'" according to a report and recommendation by an ad hoc SBC committee on family life appointed by Chapman last year.

"America's families are in trouble," said former SBC president Tom Elliff, chairman of the ad hoc committee, in a report to Executive Committee members meeting in Nashville, Tenn.

"The very fabric of our society, the family, is being eaten away," continued Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church of Del City, Okla. He cited statistics of record divorce rates, increasing numbers of children born out of wedlock and changing attitudes that undermine traditional views of family.

Americans know their families are in trouble, Elliff said, but "they don't know where Southern Baptists stand" on the issue. One reason for that, he said, is "our own families are in trouble," noting that divorce rates among Southern Baptists are not much different from the public at large.

While the SBC, through various denominational entities, offers a number of successful ministries to families, many people don't perceive it to be one of the convention's top priorities, he said.

"Why shouldn't we be known as the people who are friends of the family?" Elliff asked.

While programs such as LifeWay Christian Resources "True Love Waits" teenage abstinence campaign have received acclaim, Elliff said, "Southern Baptists as a whole have never declared war" on problems affecting the family.

Southern Baptists have also not created a perception across the nation that they have anything to say about families, Elliff said. He described witnessing to a woman who told him if she ever were interested in going to a church she would become a Mormon because of that church's family-friendly image.

"With all due respect," Elliff said, "we've got the right message for the family. We ought to be the ones [perceived as] big on the family."

Elliff said embracing family concerns would be a boon for evangelism in Southern Baptist churches.

"It will be one of the greatest tools for evangelism and church growth we can ever have," Elliff said. "There are a lot of things related to Southern Baptists that people don't care about, but they do care about their families."

The report by Elliff's committee, titled "Pursuing God's Plan for the Family," lauds a 1998 family amendment to the "Baptist Faith and Message" for establishing "the biblical foundation for our understanding of the family and the roles God has ordained for each family member."

Following adoption of the family amendment, "Southern Baptists served notice that we were taking seriously the responsibility of our churches to minister to the family, providing strength and encouragement through every possible means." Chapman amplified that concern at the 2000 SBC, the report said, when he urged Southern Baptists to "save the family" and created the SBC committee on family life by executive appointment.

Members of Chapman's committee will become part of the new Council on Family Life. One of the group's goals is "promotion of a wholesome family life based on traditional Judeo-Christian values."

The report touches on the problem of sexual abuse by ministers, saying: "We believe God would be pleased by a renewed call for servants whose lives are characterized by fidelity in the home. We applaud every effort of our seminaries and other entities to underscore this emphasis by providing the necessary standards and theological foundations commensurate with such a call."

It also advocates compassion for those affected by divorce, calling for "authentic ministry to those whose lives and families have been fractured and ravaged by the adversary, seeking to provide the kind of compassionate restoration and encouragement so typified by our Savior and made available through the grace of God."

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## **Board considers expanding Texas Baptist Men membership**

By Ken Camp

DENTON, Texas (ABP) -- Texas Baptist Men will continue to honor its 33-year-old "gentleman's agreement" with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and not establish a formal relationship with any group but will serve men from all Baptist churches in Texas, according to the group's board of directors.

Meeting Feb. 15-17 at the North Texas Baptist Conference Center, the Texas Baptist Men board showed no desire to enter into a formal fraternal relationship with any convention.

At the same time, the board recommended a bylaw change that potentially could open the missions organization's membership to men in churches not affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

But members of the board's policy committee indicated that those changes to the bylaws will be revisited, and a revised document will be presented to the board at its October meeting before any action is considered at the Texas Baptist Men Convention.

In recent months, Southern Baptists of Texas Convention Executive Director Jim Richards invited Texas Baptist Men -- along with BGCT-affiliated educational and benevolent institutions -- to establish a formal "fraternal relationship" with the rival state convention.

The breakaway convention, formed as an alternative to the BGCT, offered a proposed fraternal relationship agreement that stated: "Funding from churches, special offerings and even the budget of the SBTC is possible for entities in a fraternal relationship. After Jan. 1, 2002, no funds will be forwarded through the SBTC to entities that do not have a fraternal relationship or affiliation."

In his opening remarks to the board, TBM Executive Director-Treasurer Jim Furgerson emphasized the mission of Texas Baptist Men and addressed the issue of relationships with Baptist conventions.

"We choose to be affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas," Furgerson said. "Since 1968, we have operated on a handshake agreement with the BGCT...a gentleman's agreement that says we will serve all the men of Texas, period. I want to keep it that way."

The board's policy committee did not bring any recommendation regarding a fraternal relationship, and the board did not raise the issue.

Instead, the policy committee recommended a series of amendments to the organization's bylaws designed to make Texas Baptist Men "more inclusive," according to committee chairman George Crews of North Richland Hills.

"We want to be all-inclusive of every Baptist man in Texas who wants to find a way to use his spiritual gifts in ministry," Crews said.

The board gave initial approval to a series of committee-recommended changes to the Texas Baptist Men bylaws, including:

- Opening membership to men from non-BGCT affiliated churches.
- Reducing the size of the governing board from up to 400 members to about 160.
- Dropping the provision allowing the chairman of the BGCT Administrative Committee and director of the State Missions Commission to serve as ex-officio members of the board.

However, after discussing concerns with board members, several members of the policy committee said they would offer significant revisions at the board's Oct. 29 meeting in Dallas. Amendments to the bylaws require approval by the Texas Baptist Men Convention in annual session.

"It's not going to the convention like this," said Andy Andreason of McGregor, immediate past president of Texas Baptist Men and a member of the policy committee. "We're going to make changes."

One matter of concern was the revised article on membership. As approved by the board, it states: "Members of Baptist Men's groups in churches in Texas affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Southern Baptist Convention, and/or the Baptist Associations in Texas shall comprise the membership of Texas Baptist Men."

Previously, the article restricted membership to Baptist men in churches affiliated with the BGCT.

The purpose, Crews said, was to retain Texas Baptist Men who are members of Southern Baptist churches that have pulled out of the BGCT. However, in discussion during the board meeting, several individuals raised concerns that the article as revised also would open TBM to members of Baptist Missionary Association churches, Independent Fundamental Baptist churches in Texas, and National Baptist churches.

Others expressed concern that Texas Baptist Men officers and board members could come from churches that give nothing to support TBM ministries.

But before those issues could be resolved, a member of the board called for the question, ending debate on the matter. The board approved the recommended changes with only a few dissenting votes.

After the vote, members of the policy committee acknowledged that eliminating the chairman of the BGCT Administrative Committee as an ex officio board member was an oversight.

The committee's desire was to strike the director of the State Missions Commission to bring the bylaws in line with restructuring in the BGCT Executive Board staff. In the process, they deleted the entire article on BGCT board representation, said Texas Baptist Men President Bob Dixon.

Dixon, Andreason and Crews all said the committee needed to revisit that issue, to make sure the bylaws provided direct representation of the BGCT on the board.

"We have had a nearly perfect relationship with the BGCT for 33 years, and nearly all of the funding for Texas Baptist Men comes through the BGCT Cooperative Program," Crews said. "Our allegiances are still to the BGCT."

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## **Panelists debate freedom before religious broadcasters**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Alan Sears believes the federal government wants to give free reign to every imaginable form of obscenity on the nation's broadcast airwaves while restricting the right of religious broadcasters to get their message across.

Elliott Minberg, on the other hand, believes religious broadcasters are inconsistent in their appeal for liberty, wanting privileges for themselves they are unwilling to give to others.

The two men took opposing sides during a panel discussion on the First Amendment at the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, held in Dallas Feb. 10-13.

Sears, president and general counsel for the Alliance Defense Fund, joined radio talk-show host Janet Parshall in representing the conservative side of the debate. Minberg, vice president and general counsel for People for the American Way, joined former Clinton attorney Lanny Davis on the liberal side.

The 45-minute forum focused mainly on religious broadcasters' fears that the government might reimpose the so-called Fairness Doctrine that was eliminated in 1987 and the fallout over an FCC ruling last year that temporarily decreed religious programming could not be considered educational programming.

The Fairness Doctrine, which was a staple of American broadcasting for decades until its repeal, required broadcasters to present both sides of political issues. It did not apply specifically to religious issues but had some overlap if religious broadcasts got into political issues.

The purpose of the Fairness Doctrine was to ensure that different points of view were heard over the limited number of broadcast outlets available, Minberg said. "The Fairness Doctrine does not target religion."

Sears called "fairness" a "code word for control."

Parshall strongly denounced the fairness requirements as an impediment to free religious expression. For example, during the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the Fairness Doctrine would have required her to give airtime on her talk show to defenders of President Clinton.

"The Fairness Doctrine is a club used by government to bludgeon religious broadcasters into submission," she declared. And its return is a real threat because such a goal was included in the Democratic Party's platform during the 2000 elections, she added.

Davis responded that he wasn't so sure the Fairness Doctrine was headed for a comeback. And even if it were reinstated, it wouldn't affect most religious broadcasters, he added.

Meanwhile, he accused Parshall and Sears of being inconsistent in calling for unfettered use of the airwaves by religious broadcasters while demanding restrictions on other broadcasters they deem to be indecent.

Sears immediately turned that statement into a discourse against obscenity, asserting that "the First Amendment never was intended to protect obscene material" and that "areas that are not protected by the First Amendment should not try to come under the umbrella of the First Amendment."

On the question of religious broadcasts qualifying as educational programming -- an issue that affects government mandates to broadcasters and the ability of broadcasters to obtain FCC licenses -- Sears insisted the FCC has established a system that works against religious broadcasters getting licenses.

Parshall argued that the government shouldn't be in the business of restricting anything about the content of religious broadcasts.

"Licenses come from the government," she reasoned. "I get my drivers' license from the government as well, and the government doesn't tell me where I may drive."

Mincberg found fault with Parshall's analogy.

"An infinite number of drivers' licenses can be granted," he said. "But what if only 300 could be granted? Government might put some restriction on them, such as saying you have to give rides to the poor."

Since only a limited number of broadcast frequencies are available, the government must regulate their usage, he argued.

Parshall disagreed, claiming that "broadcast spectrum scarcity is a fallacious and moot argument" in the modern era.

Sears charged again that government discriminates against religious broadcasters in granting licenses. The government's goal, he asserted, is to create a "gospel-free zone."

Mincberg responded that religious broadcasters should be able to compete equally with other broadcasters for frequencies but should not be given preferential treatment. "Treating religious broadcasters the same as other broadcasters is not unfair," he said.

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## **Perceptions of culture divide Baptists on church-state separation, scholar says**

By Mark Wingfield

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- Differences between Southern Baptist conservatives and moderates on church-state issue stem largely from different perceptions of culture, according to a Baylor University historian.

"The differences between SBC moderates and conservatives on church-state issues are even more intractable than one might think precisely because the deepest areas of disagreement rest at the level of perception," said Barry Hankins, assistant professor of history and church-state studies at Baylor.

Hankins offered the assessment during the annual conference of the Baptist General Convention of Texas Christian Life Commission, held at Tarrytown Baptist Church in Austin Feb. 12-13.

His presentation was based on face-to-face interviews with a number of leaders of the SBC's conservative movement, interviews intended to help identify what SBC conservatives really believe about church-state issues. While admitting he does not share the viewpoint of these conservative leaders, Hankins said he believes many moderate Baptist leaders have misrepresented what conservatives actually do believe.

When questioned closely, both moderate and conservative Southern Baptist leaders claim adherence to the same set of historic Baptist beliefs on church-state separation, Hankins reported.

However, the conservatives are driven by a perception of culture that changes the entire landscape, he said. This is the perception that the United States today is hostile toward any expression of religion or faith.

Hunkered down in what they call a "culture war," conservatives today are willing to downplay concerns about the possible government establishment of religion in order to achieve the greater good of ensuring free exercise of religion, Hankins asserted.

"Far from believing there was any danger of the establishment of religion in America, conservatives became convinced that a decadent culture was being stripped clean of religious influences with the help of a secularizing state that was hostile to religion," he explained. "Conservatives, therefore, low rate the danger of establishment and instead turn all church-state issues into matters of religious liberty."

An example is found in the debate over school prayer, Hankins said. "Because of their perception of a hostile and discriminatory American culture and state, conservatives have turned what we all consider an establishment violation into a free-exercise right."

On the other hand, Southern Baptist conservatives as a group are not advocates of a theocracy or Christian reconstructionist movement as some moderates have alleged, Hankins said. Such charges are "patently erroneous," he asserted.

One way the historian gained perspective on this matter was by asking conservative SBC leaders to evaluate a much-quoted 1984 statement by W.A. Criswell, then pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas. In a nationally televised interview, Criswell said, "I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel's imagination."

While it is easy to assume Criswell spoke for all Southern Baptist conservatives, that actually is not the case, Hankins said. In fact, the only SBC leader he interviewed who expressed any sympathy for Criswell's statement was Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Mohler told Hankins he is "very sympathetic" to statements like Criswell's, "but I would be very reluctant to throw them out in the public square where I wouldn't be understood. I think the phrase 'separation of church and state' is a very unfortunate statement."

While Mohler explained he does not believe government has a right to establish a state church or take on a priestly function, "on issues of morality, it is ridiculous to believe that you can disestablish Christian morality without fundamentally undoing the American experiment."

All other SBC leaders interviewed by Hankins -- including Jimmy Draper, Adrian Rogers, Richard Land and Paige Patterson -- disavowed any sympathy for Criswell's statement. One called it "bizarre," and another said it was "not one of Criswell's finer hours."

"All the SBC conservatives I've talked to argue that people of all faiths should worship freely in America and that the state should coerce no one in matters of religion," Hankins said. "Still, this leaves a puzzling question. If SBC conservatives espouse the same religious-liberty principles as moderates, why are they on the other side of moderates on so many church-state issues?"

The answer, he said, "has to do with the conservatives' perceptions of American culture. ... SBC conservatives believe American culture has turned hostile toward evangelicals. America, in their view, is now discriminatory toward nearly all positions of faith."

"This is the language of culture war, and it drives the SBC conservative movement on issues ranging from church-state to abortion, to the roles of women," Hankins asserted. "In fact, I believe perceptions of

American culture serve as the glue that holds together Calvinist theologians like Mohler with revivalist preachers like Rogers, evangelistic expositors like Patterson and public advocates like Land.

"On church-state issues, this perception of culture not only shapes their positions on religious liberty but also leads them to virtually disregard the danger of the establishment of religion," he concluded.

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