



Nashville, Tennessee
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Baptist Press**

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May 17, 2001

(01-40)

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**SBC leaders criticize Texas report,
but don't address cited concerns**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Two Southern Baptist Convention leaders criticized the report of the Baptist General Convention of Texas' Missions-sending Agencies Study Committee without responding to specific concerns cited by the Texas committee.

Comments were released through Baptist Press May 16 from Bob Reccord, president of the North American Mission Board, and David Hankins, vice president for Cooperative Program at the SBC Executive Committee.

Two weeks after the report was made public May 3, the SBC's International Mission Board had not publicly acknowledged its release or responded to the six concerns cited by the BGCT report.

The Texas committee is recommending no change in relationship or funding with the IMB but is proposing that the BGCT reduce funding for NAMB by about \$1.28 million -- the amount the SBC agency now spends for missions work in Texas.

The report labels six concerns about work of the Richmond, Va.,-based IMB, including several related to the agency's new strategy, called New Directions. The strategy focuses almost exclusively on church starting while moving away from institutional ministries such as seminaries and hospitals.

The report also lists six concerns related to the Alpharetta, Ga.,-based NAMB, including dissatisfaction with how the national agency currently relates to state Baptist conventions.

Chief among those concerns is that there is no current "cooperative agreement" between NAMB and the BGCT. The report also accuses NAMB of violating the BGCT's 1991 cooperative agreement with NAMB's forerunner, the Home Mission Board, by funding work in Texas that competes with the BGCT and by unilaterally changing qualifications for missionaries that are paid by both organizations.

Cooperative agreements are formal documents spelling out areas of cooperation and joint funding between the SBC and state Baptist conventions.

Reccord released a statement saying that "NAMB and all state conventions and fellowships have continued to work under the pre-existing agreements" and that a process already has begun to "restructure" those agreements.

He didn't respond to the Texas committee's assertion that NAMB violated the 1991 cooperative agreement by funding work with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention and by requiring missionary candidates to affirm the 2000 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message."

However, he criticized the Texas proposal to retain an amount of funding equal to what NAMB has been sending back to Texas as "a misinterpretation of the nature of our partnership." Reccord said the funds that NAMB sends to the state represent not only Texas dollars but gifts sent to NAMB from all over the United States.

Hankins, of the SBC Executive Committee in Nashville, Tenn., described the Texas proposal as "very seriously flawed" with "potentially devastating consequences" for the convention's unified budgeting plan, the Cooperative Program."

Hankins said retaining \$1.28 million in funding for NAMB would negatively impact all SBC agencies and institutions. It would mean a loss of \$600,000 to the IMB, he said.

Hankins' interpretation, however, differs from the precise wording of the BGCT committee's recommendation. The committee report states the change in NAMB funding "has no relationship to remaining Cooperative Program or designated funds."

As envisioned by the BGCT committee, the \$1.28 million would be deducted from the amount of Cooperative Program money given through the SBC to NAMB. All other SBC agencies would be funded at current levels.

BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade did not respond to Hankins, but he characterized Reccord's statement as "inaccurate and misleading."

"The truth is, Texas Baptists give more than other states for missions efforts and church starts," Wade said. "Texas also provides 47 percent of all Mission Service Corps personnel in the SBC."

Further, "the proposal to retain funds that are coming back to the BGCT is patterned after a similar plan used by the Mississippi Baptist Convention," he said. "The approach apparently has worked well for Mississippi Baptists and NAMB for several years."

In related news, NAMB trustees during a May 9 meeting in Las Vegas, unanimously approved a motion affirming Reccord's leadership in all relationships between NAMB and Baptist state conventions as well as his response to the Texas funding situation.

"We fully support the firm stand he has taken regarding the recent Missions-sending Agency Study Committee report that will soon be presented to the Executive Board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas," read the motion introduced by trustee Bill Streich.

Streich, a layman from Wichita Falls, Texas, has been a frequent critic of Wade and other BGCT leaders.

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Missouri executive questions nominating committee process

By Mark Wingfield

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- An effort by the Missouri Baptist Convention's nominating committee to impose new guidelines for selecting trustees of the state convention's agencies and institutions has been questioned by the convention's top executive.

The chairman of the nominating committee says his goal is to end the "good-old-boys network" he believes has controlled the convention in the past.

In April, the nominating committee announced adoption of three new guidelines to be used in selecting individuals for service on convention boards and committees. According to the new rules:

-- No individual may serve on more than one board or committee at the same time.

-- No church may have more than two members serving on Missouri Baptist Convention boards or committees at the same time.

-- All nominees for election or re-election must be fully supportive of the state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention.

The guidelines have never been approved by convention messengers in annual session. And that concerns Jim Hill, executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention. A front-page article in the May 3 Word and Way newspaper quoted Hill as questioning whether the new guidelines are appropriate.

By imposing its own guidelines without convention approval, Hill said the nominating committee had given itself the authority to remove trustees from agency boards who were elected to those posts by the full convention.

Hill said the committee is preparing to remove duly elected trustees who are eligible to serve second terms according to convention bylaws.

"I do not believe it is appropriate for the nominating committee to utilize rules that have not been approved by the convention, and I believe their decision to do so will widen the division in our convention," Hill said.

"My conviction is that the rules are an effort to accelerate a political process at work within our convention," he continued. "By their decision not to renominate individuals eligible for a second term of service, the nominating committee is able to create additional vacancies for new trustees."

The nominating committee chairman, however, defended the committee's work in a separate article in the same issue of Word and Way. He denied the guidelines are politically motivated.

Chairman Jack Purvis acknowledged that recent successes by an effort called Project 1000 have given fundamentalists control of the nominating committee.

"A lot of folks have been fearful of us being in control of the nominating committee," he said. Purvis said his goal, however, is "to make sure in the future that we will not be accused of being guilty of what has been done in the past 30 years -- a good-old-boys network that kept rotating the same people" from board to board.

The nominating committee will "flat out ask" nominees for election or re-election if they support "the direction the Missouri Baptist Convention and Southern Baptist Convention are going," Purvis said.

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Appeals court reinstates graduation-prayer policy

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Allowing student-led prayer at graduation ceremonies does not violate the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state, the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled May 11.

That means seniors in Jacksonville, Fla., high schools may elect a representative to deliver a brief graduation "message" that can include a prayer.

The legal status of the Duval County Public School District's 1993 policy had been in limbo since October. That's when the United States Supreme Court ordered the Atlanta-based 11th Circuit to review an earlier opinion upholding the prayers in light of a high court ruling last June banning prayers before school football games in Texas.

In that case, the Supreme Court found unconstitutional a policy of the Santa Fe Independent School District in Galveston County, Texas, that allowed a student elected by a majority of classmates to deliver an invocation over the public-address system prior to home varsity football games.

The Santa Fe policy amounted to state sponsorship of prayer, which violates the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, the high court decided.

The 11th Circuit Court, however, said differences between the Texas and Florida cases were "substantial and material," and that there is no reason to reverse a March 2000 opinion that the Duval County policy is constitutional.

The Duval County policy allows graduating seniors the option of electing a classmate to deliver a two-minute "message" at graduation. The speech is composed entirely by the student and may include a prayer, a poem or other statement.

Opponents suing over the policy said it was designed as an "end run" around a 1992 Supreme Court ruling that put a halt to the district's long tradition of graduation prayers. A memo describing the policy carried the title "Graduation Prayers," according to court documents.

Since the policy itself does not call for an "invocation," however, and students vote up or down for a "message" rather than a "prayer," it isn't a state-sponsored prayer, the appeals court decided 8-4.

"The issue before us today is extremely narrow," the court ruled, "whether in light of Santa Fe we should alter our prior en banc decision in this case. We conclude that the answer is no."

The majority said the Supreme Court had "every opportunity" to declare that the Constitution forbids all religious expression at graduation ceremonies and chose not to do so. "We could not invalidate Duval County's policy, on its face, without taking the very step the court declined to take," the judges said.

Four judges signed a dissenting opinion arguing that the intent of the Duval policy is to endorse prayer. Setting up a scheme to allow a student majority to decide whether to include a prayer "does not cure the problem of the policy's impermissible, religious purpose," the dissenting judges opined, and "thus facially violates the Establishment Clause."

Critics of the policy plan to appeal to the Supreme Court.

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Bush addresses Christian leaders on National Day of Prayer

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President George W. Bush addressed about 200 Christian leaders in the White House -- including several Southern Baptist officials -- to commemorate the National Day of Prayer May 3.

"This is a day when our nation recognizes a power above our power, and influence beyond our influence, a guiding wisdom far greater than our own," the president said. "Throughout our history, in danger and division, we have always turned to prayer. And our country has been delivered from many serious evils and wrongs because of that prayer."

Also speaking at the event was former Southern Baptist Convention President Adrian Rogers. Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in suburban Memphis, Tenn., led the group in prayer and read another prayer written by evangelist Billy Graham in honor of the 50th year of celebrating the national prayer day.

Other SBC officials attending the event included James Merritt, president of the convention; Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee; Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission; Robert Reccord, president of the North American Mission Board; O.S. Hawkins, president of the Annuity Board; Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; and Phil Roberts, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Also attending were Jerry Falwell, a longtime independent Baptist pastor in Lynchburg, Va., who will be addressing the 2001 annual SBC meeting, and Paul Pressler, retired Houston judge who was a leader in the SBC's conservative takeover.

An organizer of the event said that while the National Day of Prayer "is for everyone," the reception at the White House "was just for Christians."

Americans United for Separation of Church and State criticized Bush's participation in the event, saying it was designed "to help promote the Religious Right agenda and further cement his ties with religious conservatives."

"George W. Bush is president of all the people," said Americans United's Barry Lynn. "He should not use his office to promote a narrow religious agenda. He holds the office of president, not national pastor."

Congress passed a federal law in 1952 requiring annual observance of a national day of prayer. Congress in 1988 established an official date for the observance as the first Thursday in May.

The National Day of Prayer Task Force, a nonprofit private group headed by Shirley Dobson, wife of religious broadcaster James Dobson, coordinates the events in Washington and around the country.

At the White House event, Bush said: "We cannot presume to know every design of our Creator, or to assert a special claim on his favor. Yet, it is important to pause and recognize our help in ages past and our hope for years to come."

Observers said Bush got teary-eyed when showing appreciation for Americans who "lift me up in prayer."

"We discover that the most sincere of all prayers can be the simple words, 'Thy will be done.' And that is a comfort more powerful than all our plans," Bush concluded.

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House panel strips vouchers from key education legislation

By Jeff Huett

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bipartisan panel of House lawmakers has approved an education bill minus provisions that would have allowed the use of federal tax money for private school tuition.

The House Education and the Work-force Committee voted 27-20 to remove the voucher provisions from the House Elementary and Secondary Education Act and then overwhelmingly approved the measure. The Senate has also omitted private school vouchers from its education bill.

Like its Senate counterpart, the House legislation calls for increased education spending, more student testing and greater spending flexibility for local school districts. Left out was the proposal that would have provided \$1,500 vouchers to parents of students attending schools deemed "persistently failing."

Under both bills, students in grades three through eight would be required to be tested annually on reading and math skills. Also included is the provision allowing school districts to direct funds to where they believe it is most needed.

Holly Hollman, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said that excluding vouchers from education legislation makes a statement in favor of public education and church-state separation.

"Any voucher scheme that would divert public education funds to private, religious schools is an affront to the constitutional prohibition against government aid to religion," Hollman said. "Congress should turn its attention toward ways of helping public education. And above all, anything Congress does to help the public schools should do just that, help the public schools."

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Debt-relief supporters seeking cooperation

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- While supporters of debt relief for poor countries made gains in the last year, they still haven't found what they're looking for, according to none other than pop star Bono, lead singer of the group U2.

The key supporter of Jubilee 2000, an international effort to eliminate debt for poor countries, told reporters that movement leaders "feel let down" by recent setbacks and -- in language unintentionally reminiscent of a line from one of the group's biggest hits -- "have still not received all they came looking for."

In a conference call with members of the media, Bono and other Jubilee 2000 leaders criticized the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for holding up progress.

Just 22 out of the roughly 40 countries targeted for the relief have received any money, they said. One country that has had debts forgiven, meanwhile, is now able to send three times as many children to schools as it could previously afford.

"We have to get the World Bank and the IMF on board," said Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Ala. "The United States has to lead the effort." Bachus became a leading sponsor of the debt-relief package last year and led the effort to enlist support among GOP lawmakers.

Last year, Congress approved all the funds necessary to fund the first year's portion of a three-year agreement between the leading industrialized countries to begin canceling the debt facing poor countries. It earmarked \$435 million toward debt relief for countries where many people live on less than \$1 a day. The Bush administration must continue to fund the initiative for debt relief to become a reality.

But while the leading industrialized countries are canceling the money owed to them by poor countries, the World Bank and IMF are not. And most of the debt facing these countries is owed to these two world organizations.

Bachus called the effort "the greatest moral and social issue of our time."

He said that even if the two monetary organizations did not do their part, the G7 countries could pay for the effort "for one dollar per person, per year."

Bachus said the two world organizations are reluctant to cooperate, because as poor countries' reliance on loans diminishes, the IMF and World Bank believe they "would see their role reduced."

Bono disagreed. The World Bank and IMF mean well, he said, but they argue that by giving the money away, they will hurt their reserves.

"This argument will just go round and round," Bono said. "These people need to be told what to do by their shareholders," he added, pointing to America as the leading shareholder. -

Bono said he is encouraged by the new Bush administration and feels confident the president is committed to debt relief. "President Bush has a real chance to put a flag in the sand on this issue," Bono said.

"I grew up with an America that put a man on the moon," he added. "People followed because they led."

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Seminary graduate hopes to take gospel to Ukraine

By Irma Duke

BUIES CREEK, N.C. (ABP) -- Alex Goncharov was the only Christian in his Ukrainian high school of 800 students. A 2001 graduate of Campbell University Divinity School, he will soon be returning to Ukraine to start churches and train pastors so that high school students and their families will come to know Christ.

Goncharov says high school was a place where he felt much pressure. "During those years, I had to find out how to cope with the fact that, as a Christian, I was accepted by some teachers and students and rejected by others." He also felt pressure to excel, "to prove to my peers and teachers that Christians are not boring and stupid as the communist media suggested." He says freedom of religion was only words on paper, not a reality in Ukraine, which was at the time one of 15 republics in the Soviet Union.

Goncharov grew up in a Christian home; his father is a pastor and his mother, a choir director. His grandfather, who was imprisoned three times for preaching the gospel, had a profound impact on his life.

"Even at 93 years old, he could recite the whole Bible," Goncharov recalls. "He was a great teacher, inspiration, and example."

Goncharov accepted Christ as his personal savior when he was 17. After high school, he was drafted into the Soviet Army for two years.

It was during that tour of duty that he sensed God was calling him to be a minister. But how would he be able to study and obtain the proper training when there were no Bible schools in his country at that time?

His question and many prayers were answered when a church in Louisiana invited him to come to the United States and study. He, his wife and their newborn moved to Bossier City where he enrolled in East Texas Baptist University. "It was extremely difficult to be a parent, be a student, and be 10,000 miles away from our family," he says.

A short time later, he and his family moved to Hendersonville, N.C., where he enrolled in Fruitland Baptist Bible Institute. After earning an associate's degree, he moved to Buies Creek, N.C., where he earned a bachelor's in religion and Christian ministries from Campbell University.

While in North Carolina, he has been involved in the partnership between North Carolina Baptists and Ukrainian Baptists. As a result, the Kiev Theological Seminary was built, and Goncharov hopes to teach there when he returns.

It was through this partnership that Goncharov says he experienced both his worst nightmare and one of his greatest blessings. After his first semester at Campbell University Divinity School, he and his family returned to Ukraine to be a part of a mission trip. On their return to the U.S., their visas were denied. They had no furniture, no theological books and only three bags of clothing.

"I felt lost in my journey," Goncharov remembers.

After six months of waiting and praying, their visas were granted. "When I next walked into a class at Campbell Divinity School, everybody applauded. It touched my heart in a way I will never forget." Just thinking about it brings tears to Goncharov's eyes.

Goncharov says at Campbell he "experienced God in a way I never knew him before."

"I had placed limitations on God," he explains. "I thought I had figured God out. I used to have God in a box, limited and confined to my understanding. I wanted God to fit me and my theology."

He views his expanded understanding and appreciation for other Christian faiths as spiritual growth. He says he came to the United States believing that "if you are not a Baptist, you are not right." Now he sees things differently.

"My life has been enriched by my brothers and sisters in the Lord from other denominations," he says.

In addition to teaching at Kiev Theological Seminary, Goncharov hopes to start a church. "I see my ministry with Slavic people in the Ukraine. I am excited to see what God is going to do next in my life."

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