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Missouri Baptist newspaper adopts self-perpetuating board

By Bob Allen and Robert Marus

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Trustees of the Missouri Baptist Convention news journal Word and Way have voted to become a self-perpetuating board, claiming a polarized political atmosphere among the state's Southern Baptists jeopardizes the paper's mission of providing a free press.

The vote, finalized by a telephone poll Oct. 19, means that the board will no longer be elected by the state convention. Trustees will instead elect their own successors.

Word and Way is the fifth Missouri Baptist agency to move to a self-perpetuating board in just over a year to prevent takeover by conservatives now in control of the convention's leadership-nomination process.

The convention's executive director, Jim Hill, resigned Oct. 4, saying he could not work with conservatives about to gain a majority on the MBC executive board.

While several Southern Baptist institutions, primarily colleges, have over the years declared independence from sponsoring state conventions to distance themselves from political pressure, the 105-year-old Word and Way is the first denominational newspaper to take the step.

In a statement made public Oct. 23, trustee chairman Bob Johnston said the decision to amend the paper's charter followed "months of prayerful study and deliberation."

"Increasingly, the trustees came to believe that the mission of providing a free press for all Missouri Baptists was in jeopardy," Johnston's statement said.

That conclusion was supported, Johnston said, when the MBC nominating committee declined to nominate four Word and Way trustees eligible for re-election, even though three met the committee's announced criteria. Nominations for their replacements came without input from current trustees.

"As a journal for all Missouri Baptists, and not just a select group, Word and Way must stay true to its mission of providing Missouri Baptists with information that is accurate, free of distortion and helpful in decision making," the statement said. "Word and Way has a long history of carrying out this mission, and it is the intention of those serving to keep the paper on track."

Editor Bill Webb, who has been criticized by fundamentalist leaders, said editorial freedom, and not protecting current staff and trustees, was the board's main concern.

"There was a real desire to ensure that a reliable, fair Word and Way would continue to exist in the midst of a convention that has a lot of division in it right now," Webb said in an interview. "The board had a very strong conviction that Word and Way should always be able to be a publication for all Missouri Baptists, and that, too, they felt was at some risk because of division in the convention."

In an editorial in the paper's current issue, Webb said the change was neither an "anti-MBC" nor "anti-SBC" decision.

Webb said the paper desires "to remain an integral part of Missouri Baptist life." He said Word and Way would continue to support the Cooperative Program, and that trustees hoped the convention would continue to fund the paper through its unified budget.

"Our trustees understand that the newspaper could lose Cooperative Program funds as a result of their decision," Webb wrote. "That money has helped us keep Word and Way affordable for churches and their members."

"We hope we are not defunded, but even if that happens, one thing won't change. Word and Way has no plan to abandon the good work we do every week on behalf of the Cooperative Program. Traditionally, churches that have made sure their members received Word and Way have been among the strongest givers through CP and mission offerings at local, state and national levels."

Three other MBC agencies -- The Baptist Home, Windermere conference center and Missouri Baptist College -- earlier moved to self-perpetuating boards. The Missouri Baptist Foundation joined the list Oct. 10. Word and Way trustees held a special meeting Oct. 9, setting in motion a process finalized by vote 10 days later.

Project 1000, a movement that has worked for several years to elect conservatives to state convention leadership posts, is opposing a proposed "covenant agreement" redefining The Baptist Home's relationship with the state convention. It also proposes holding in escrow all funding for agencies that have adopted self-perpetuating boards and securing a legal opinion about whether the state convention can sue to regain their control.

"If conservatives were doing this, it would be called stealing," Roger Moran, Project 1000's research director, said of defections by moderate-led boards in the state, according to Baptist Press.

Moran, a layman from Winfield, Mo., and member of the SBC Executive Committee, wasn't immediately available for comment on the vote by Word and Way trustees.

But leaders of the agencies that have become self-perpetuating said cutting off funding through the Cooperative Program would have an unintended effect.

"Families, institutions and local-church ministries would experience the greatest loss with diminished CP support," said Foundation President James Smith, whose agency currently receives \$200,000 annually through the state convention's unified budget.

Baptist Home President Larry Johnson, Missouri Baptist College President Alton Lacey and Windermere President Frank Shock issued a joint statement saying, "All of the funds received by the institutions through the Cooperative Program go directly to benefit individual Baptists and their families in the form of scholarships, grants and benevolences."

Word and Way is slated to receive \$450,000 in a 2002 Cooperative Program budget being proposed at the Missouri Baptist Convention annual meeting Oct. 29-31.

A covenant relationship proposed by Word and Way trustees asks for continuing financial support from the state convention. In exchange, the paper offers "an awareness of and sensitivity to the purposes of the Missouri Baptist Convention" and "consideration of opinions, recommendations and other commentary by the convention" regarding potential members of the paper's board of trustees.

Baptist churches pondering denominational ties get advice

By Steve DeVane

CARY, N.C. (ABP) -- Churches examining their denominational relationships often start with practical matters, such as money, literature and missions. But the discussion eventually leads to emotions -- memories and feelings.

David Odom, president of the Center for Congregational Health, suggests the opposite approach -- start with emotions and work toward more practical considerations.

The controversy between conservative and moderate Baptists in the last 22 years has led many churches to consider their ties to denominational groups. Some churches have left the Southern Baptist Convention since its decidedly conservative shift.

Many more, however, have loosened ties with the SBC and affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which formed in 1991 as a missions and ministry alternative to the SBC.

Smaller numbers have aligned with the Alliance of Baptists or the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. or have become independent.

The Center for Congregational Health has worked with congregations studying denominational relationships. Odom led a seminar on the subject Oct. 11 at offices of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina in Cary. About 20 people, including two from Florida and one from Missouri, attended.

The Baptist state convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina sponsored the seminar.

Odom said churches on both sides of the Baptist controversy have responded positively to similar meetings in Texas.

Church leaders who are looking at their church's denominational relationships must first understand the level of conflict over the issue, Odom said. "I can't overemphasize figuring out your level of conflict before you get started," he said. "If you don't, you'll get creamed."

Odom said the five levels of conflict are:

-- Having a problem to solve. Churches that have a problem to solve are the only ones who can immediately deal with the practical aspects of an issue, Odom said. A decision like altering denomination ties, is more than just "a problem to be solved," he said.

-- Disagreeing. Members of churches in disagreement begin to mix personalities with issues, according to Odom. These churches should move slowly, letting people express their opinions.

-- Having a contest. Churches experiencing a contest face a "win/lose" situation where there has to be a vote. If the contest starts to escalate, churches should consider bringing in an outside consultant, he said. Church members in these situations need a third party who comes in as a "blank sheet," having no stake in the situation. "The problem with denominational relationships is there is no one with a blank sheet," Odom said.

-- Feeling a need for fight or flight. People at the fight/flight level see the need to "get rid" of people who are not on their side, according to Odom. These churches need outside help. The Baptist controversy on the national level continues to be a fight-or-flight situation when it is discussed, Odom said.

-- Reaching an intractable impasse. The highest level of conflict is intractable and unmanageable, Odom said. People become vindictive at this level. Fortunately, he added, churches don't often experience this level.

Odom said church leaders should understand that everyone in their church might not be at the same level of conflict. Leaders can lessen the conflict by responding on a lower level of conflict than those involved.

People in the South believe that everyone in churches should be happy, Odom said. They respond by not talking about conflict. "Only when they realize that everyone is not going to be happy are they willing to talk about it," he said.

Odom said in his 10 years of experience, he's seen few people who are "actually upset" about the denomination. "In many cases, people who talk about the denomination are actually talking about something else," he said.

Church leaders who are beginning to study their church's denominational relationships can gauge the emotion of church members by getting them to tell stories about the denomination. "The stories get the feelings out, but you can't argue about someone's experiences," he said. "Get people to tell their connections to the denomination."

Churches with a high level of emotion should form a leadership group to study the issue, Odom said. That group must realize that the congregation has to take the same journey. "Don't wait till the end to get the church involved," Odom said. "Demonstrate constantly that you're listening."

The least helpful strategy is holding meetings where people come to listen to other people talk, according to Odom. "If you start with the emotions, you get that on the table early," he said. "You may realize, 'Nothing is going to change. We can't go down this road yet.'"

After church members have dealt with the emotional side of the issue, the leadership group can choose several ways to continue the effort. Odom calls these "lenses" through which the church can study the issue.

The "historical" lens might include a look at how the church has been served by the denomination and how the church has served the denomination. This can be done with dramas, films, resource fairs and other ways. "Find creative ways to get people interested," Odom said.

He said the "spiritual" lens requires people to ask, "Is there a way to connect this to one's longing for God?" This might include looking at "threads of connection" between stories from Scripture, the denomination and the church and finding ways to include prayer in the process.

The "sociological" lens looks at cultural and generational differences in the church. Church leaders need to understand the differences between "builders" born before 1946, "boomers" born from 1946 to 1964 and "busters" born from 1965 to 1983. "Unless you talk positively about each generation, the conversation can fracture," he said.

Odom said churches using the "theological" lens often compare the 1963 and 2000 versions of the "Baptist Faith and Message."

"The place that gives me concern is churches aren't sure where they stand theologically," he said. "When they get around to searching for clergy, they're kind of lost."

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-- Steve DeVane is managing editor of the Biblical Recorder in Raleigh, N.C.

Texas convention still tops in total support of SBC

DALLAS (ABP) -- Despite being at odds over a number of issues, the Baptist General Convention of Texas continues to be the largest state contributor to the Southern Baptist Convention.

Last year the BGCT approved major changes to its adopted budget, reducing funding for SBC seminaries, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and Executive Committee. The BGCT's moderate leaders said those conservative-run entities had departed from traditional Baptist views.

As a result, the BGCT contributed about \$5.7 million less to the SBC in 2000-2001 than the previous fiscal year, according to a report in the Baptist Standard.

BGCT contributions to the SBC's Cooperative Program unified budget dropped by nearly half. That is due mainly, however, to the fact that funds counted as Cooperative Program in Texas, which exclude certain SBC entities, are considered "designated" funds by the denomination.

Designated giving from the BGCT, in contrast, increased 22 percent.

According to SBC records, Cooperative Program giving of \$177 million narrowly missed setting a record for the eighth straight year, declining .75 percent from last year. Designated gifts, meanwhile, climbed 4.7 percent, to \$171 million.

The bulk of designated giving came through two missions offerings sponsored by the SBC. It also includes, however, nearly \$8 million received this year from the BGCT in addition to the Lottie Moon and Annie Armstrong missions offerings.

The BGCT, the largest state convention affiliated with the SBC, dropped to fifth place in undesignated contributions to the SBC Cooperative Program. In total gifts, however, including both designated and undesignated funds, the BGCT gave more than any other state convention.

Meanwhile, reduced funding from the BGCT was nearly made up by the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. Formed by conservatives declaring loyalty to the SBC, the rival state convention gave \$5.2 million in undesignated funds to the denomination and \$2.9 million in designated giving.

In addition, funds sent directly from churches to the SBC Cooperative Program more than doubled, topping \$7 million. The SBC counts those funds as undesignated, even though they bypass a state convention.

While applauding overall receipts 5 percent over budget for the fiscal year, SBC Executive Committee Treasurer Morris Chapman expressed concern about "societal-type designations."

Not all entities benefit equally from designated giving, Chapman told Baptist Press, the SBC news service. "The seminaries received a smaller percentage of designations ... going to SBC entities than would have been received had the same dollars gone through the Cooperative Program," he said. "The Cooperative Program helps to maintain an equitable distribution of allocations to ensure that the mission boards, seminaries and Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission have operational funds to carry out the assignments given them by the Southern Baptist Convention."

Established in 1925, the Cooperative Program is a plan that allows churches to fund ministries of both their state convention and SBC simultaneously by writing one check. Local churches decide how much of their offerings to send to the state convention, and the state convention in turn decides how much of that money to use in state and how much to forward on to the SBC.

That pattern has evolved in recent years, however, as conservatives now controlling the SBC wrought changes not embraced by moderates. A number of state conventions began offering multiple giving options, with some supporting and others excluding SBC agencies.

The most radical adjustment came last year, when the BGCT voted to redirect about \$5 million formerly sent to SBC seminaries and other selected entities to schools in Texas and church-starting efforts in the state. A committee recommending the changes said Texas-owned schools are now better equipped to train prospective ministers than SBC seminaries, which represent only the conservatives' point of view.

While reducing funds for SBC seminaries and the Executive Committee, and defunding the SBC's moral-concerns agency, in its "adopted" budget, the BGCT honors requests by individual churches to continue to give through the traditional BGCT/SBC percentage division or to designate line-by-line where they want their money to go.

Missions no longer SBC 'core,' former missions leader contends

By John Pierce

WINDER, Ga. (ABP) -- Doctrinal conformity, not missions, was the primary agenda of fundamentalists who captured control of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and '90s, according to former SBC missions leader Keith Parks.

"The SBC no longer finds its core and cohesion around missions," Parks told members of First Baptist Church of Winder, Ga., during a Sept. 25 presentation sponsored by a "mainstream" Georgia Baptist organization.

In the presentation, Parks described in detail what he contended is a new agenda for the denomination and changes in its international missions program.

Jerry Rankin, current president of the SBC International Mission Board, said in response that he is "baffled" by Parks' accusations. Rankin denies that the IMB has adopted a radically different strategy than when Parks was president of the missions agency.

After years of service as a missionary in Indonesia, Parks became president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board in 1980. He resigned from the FMB in 1992, facing increasing pressure from newly elected conservative trustees. Eventually, he signed on as leader of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's emerging global-missions program, a post from which he is now retired.

Parks and his wife, Helen Jean, now live in Richardson, Texas.

Soon after his election to lead the FMB, Parks said, he began to realize that the emerging group of SBC leaders had a different opinion than him about what was the "glue" that held Southern Baptists together.

He cited conversations with one SBC president who argued the convention had been united historically around doctrine, not missions. Parks, in turn, argued that early SBC leaders found their unity in missions.

The argument for doctrinal agreement eventually won out over missions cooperation, Parks said. And at the FMB, that meant he increasingly had to deal with trustees who were chosen "to make sure the political takeover took place" rather than to support the missions program.

"They weren't thinking missions," he said. "They were thinking their political agenda."

While he faced pressure from trustees to support the fundamentalist political movement, trustees often denied they were trying to remove him as president, he said. "Control (rather than doctrine) is what they had in mind from the beginning."

Since his departure, the FMB, now the IMB, has created "a drastic change in the kind of missions program Southern Baptists support," Parks charged.

He said he continually hears from Southern Baptist missionaries who are deeply concerned about the changes they are witnessing.

He cited the case of one missionary couple, serving 28 years in a country hostile to Christianity, being reassigned and told by a new IMB supervisor that he would "go back to my room and pray tonight, and tomorrow I'll tell you what God's will is for your life."

This is just "one of dozens of stories" Parks said he could tell to illustrate "a tragic assumption of control" by current IMB leadership.

"Most Southern Baptists don't know that things have changed, and I will not believe you when you tell them things have changed," Parks said. "They don't want controversy."

Among other specific changes he cited:

-- A move toward emphasizing short-term personnel over career missionaries. "There are fewer (IMB) career missionaries today than there were in 1990," he said. "You read (IMB) reports, and you assume their growth (in career appointments) is phenomenal."

-- "A drastic disregard for vocational and locational calling." The IMB's New Directions strategy, implemented four years ago with an emphasis on so-called church planting movements, has diminished the role of missionaries trained for such specialties as medicine, agriculture and education, Parks charged. "Everybody's got to be a church planter now."

-- Less control by missionaries. More decision-making is handed down from administrators in Richmond, Va., or from regional offices, Parks asserted.

-- Eschatology. Parks also expressed concern that Rankin's persistent emphasis on one Scripture passage can lead to "superficial" efforts of broadly exposing all cultures to the gospel in order to hasten the return of Christ. The passage often quoted by Rankin is Matthew 24:14, which says, "The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a witness to every nation and then the end will come."

Rankin flatly denies this and other suggestions of drastic changes at the IMB.

"We really haven't changed our strategy even back to Baker James Cauthen," he said, referring to Parks' predecessor as president. "All of these (charges) just baffle me and boggle my mind."

While an increase in volunteers and short-term workers have made the percentage of career missionaries smaller, the IMB's commitment to career missionaries has not decreased, he said.

"We have not diminished our emphasis on career missions at all," Rankin said. "We have simply opened up channels for mission service for more Southern Baptists than ever before."

In contradiction to Parks' assertion that short-term missions workers are less cost-effective than career missionaries, Rankin said short-term workers are effective because they receive high-level training and are assigned to projects that "free up our career missionaries" to do ministry for which they are uniquely qualified.

The number of career missionaries is not declining, Rankin said. "We'll appoint the largest number of career missionaries ever this year."

Charges that administrators are assuming responsibilities previously done in local settings is "absolutely untrue," Rankin said. Decision making, he added, has been pushed down to a grassroots level.

And regarding the accusation that his emphasis on reaching all the nations quickly is an attempt to hasten the return of Christ with shallow missionary work, Rankin responded: "I've never said that, and I don't believe that."

"What is being distorted is my often quoting Matthew 24:14," he said. "Obviously, that prophecy is being fulfilled."

Further, to call the IMB's New Directions strategy a drastically different approach is a "distortion," Rankin said. Rather, it is "the culmination of a strategy that has been in place" for a long time, he said.

When asked if the IMB is cutting back on, or reassigning, medical, agricultural and educational missionaries in favor of church planters, Rankin replied, "Absolutely not."

"We're appointing more people in those areas than ever before," he added. However, fewer personnel are being used in traditional institutions as these institutions become "less dependent upon the IMB," he added.

"Everyone" is responding to the need for starting churches, Rankin said. "There is no dichotomy in missions work."

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-- John Pierce is executive editor of Baptists Today.

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