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Missouri Baptists oust church for severing ties with SBC

By Bob Allen

CAPE GIRARDEAU, Mo. (ABP) -- The Missouri Baptist Convention voted to unseat messengers from a church that cut ties with the Southern Baptist Convention, saying the state convention's constitution recognizes only Southern Baptist congregations.

The vote represents a turning point in a long-running power struggle separating conservatives and moderates in the nation's largest Protestant denomination. While some moderate-led state conventions have said that churches may affiliate with them without relating to the national body, Missouri is the first major state group to officially require loyalty to the conservative-led SBC.

About 2,100 messengers at the state convention's annual meeting, this year held Oct. 29-31 in Cape Girardeau, voted overwhelmingly to uphold a credentials committee ruling that Second Baptist Church of Liberty, Mo., no longer qualifies to elect messengers to the annual meeting. Ten duly elected messengers from the church were unseated and asked to turn in their ballots.

Credentials committee chairman David Tolliver said the committee reviewed the church's membership status in response to a challenge issued from the floor at the start of the convention's second day.

An article in the state convention's constitution defines an affiliated church as one "in sympathy with the objects of the convention and desiring to cooperate with the convention in her program of single alignment with the Southern Baptist Convention."

Tolliver said the credentials committee interpreted that to mean, "You have to be an SBC church to be an MBC church."

Steve Graham, pastor of the church in suburban Kansas City, appealed the credentials committee's ruling. "We ask you to extend to us the freedom that is every congregation's," he pleaded with messengers.

Tolliver responded by acknowledging the church's long ties with Missouri Baptists but said the congregation's members had forfeited their right to be represented at the annual meeting. "They chose as an autonomous body of Christ to leave the Southern Baptist Convention," he said. "In our opinion, that violates the constitution."

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In traditional Southern Baptist polity, local churches decide whether to seek denominational affiliation with local associations, state conventions and the SBC, with each entity cooperating in missions while autonomous in its own sphere.

Graham acknowledged in an interview after the vote that the constitutional language is unclear. The credentials committee interpreted the membership article to mean that to be an MBC church, a congregation must also belong to the SBC, but his congregation disagreed with that reading. "We feel if the constitution intended that, it would say that," he said.

Don Wideman, a former executive director of the state convention, said in an interview that the credentials committee got its interpretation of the constitution "absolutely wrong."

He said the article, which has been in the constitution for many years, originated because as a border state, the Missouri convention early on had churches from both the Southern Baptist and American Baptist conventions. When the convention determined to affiliate solely with the SBC, it changed its constitution to grandfather in already-affiliated ABC churches while stating its intent that the convention would in the future be exclusively Southern Baptist.

Before now, according to Wideman, the membership article has never been viewed as binding a local church to affiliate with the SBC. "I think we have just seen the demise of the convention as we have known it," he said. "It's very distressing to me, as a former executive director," to see a church that has long supported and worked with the convention now excluded.

Graham said the Liberty church voted in April to sever ties with the SBC. "We were a member of the Missouri Baptist Convention before the Southern Baptist Convention began," he said, and desired to continue to relate to the state organization despite differences with the national body.

While Liberty is not the only Missouri Baptist congregation to sever SBC ties, it was the only one whose messengers were included in the specific challenge, Tolliver said.

Messengers from other moderate churches, however, said they were voluntarily turning in their credentials to show solidarity with Liberty Second.

The action fueled talk among moderates, disenfranchised by the Project 1000 campaign that has in recent years delivered control of the state convention to conservatives, of splitting off into a separate state convention.

Conservatives already have taken that step in moderate-stronghold states of Texas and Virginia, but Missouri would be the first instance of a state's moderate Baptists striking out on their own.

Nationwide, however, moderates have organized to distance themselves from the conservative leaders of the SBC. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, organized in 1991, has about 1,800 contributing churches but has stopped short of declaring itself a separate convention. Most churches that support the CBF also give money to the SBC.

In other business, Missouri Baptists voted overwhelmingly to amend a \$19.2 million budget recommended by leaders to hold in escrow funding for agencies moving to self-perpetuating boards of trustees.

The amendment freezes \$400,000 earmarked for Missouri's Baptist Home, \$200,000 for the Missouri Baptist Foundation, \$150,000 for Windemere conference center, \$450,000 for the newspaper Word and Way, money for four campuses of Missouri Baptist College and any other funding for agencies that in the future might become self-perpetuating.

The funds are to be held in escrow until trustees of the affected institutions "rescind their actions and reinstate their former charters" that gave power for electing trustees to the Missouri Baptist Convention.

"The thief has come, and its time for us to wake up and get out of bed," messenger Tom Willoughby said in supporting the amendment.

Gerald Davidson, a conservative pastor, said in removing their agencies from convention control: "We have a handful of trustees, who have taken it on themselves to say, 'These institutions are ours. Missouri

Baptists, you send us your money and we'll run your institutions for you. ... You'll have absolutely nothing to say about them.' This is absolutely repulsive."

Representatives of some of the agencies responded that they took the action on advice of legal counsel out of concern about ascending liability.

In other business, conservatives extended a streak of electing presidents of the state convention. Conservative-backed candidate Bob Curtis, pastor of Ballwin Baptist Church, defeated Marvin Barker for the post by a vote of 1,486 to 518.

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Missouri Baptists freeze funding for, seek legal opinion about, agencies

By Bob Allen

CAPE GIRARDEAU, Mo. (ABP) -- Missouri Baptist Convention messengers approved motions to escrow \$2 million in funding and perhaps sue five convention agencies that recently moved to self-perpetuating trustee boards.

Meeting Oct. 29-31 in Cape Girardeau, about 2,100 messengers voted overwhelmingly to amend a \$19.2 million budget recommended by leaders to hold in escrow funding for agencies moving to self-perpetuating boards of trustees.

The amendment freezes \$400,000 earmarked for Missouri's Baptist Home, \$200,000 for the Missouri Baptist Foundation, \$150,000 for Windemere conference center, \$450,000 for the newspaper Word and Way, money for four campuses of Missouri Baptist College and any other funding for agencies that in the future might become self-perpetuating.

The funds are to be held in escrow until trustees of the affected institutions "rescind their actions and reinstate their former charters" that gave power for electing trustees to the Missouri Baptist Convention.

On the final day of the convention, messengers approved a separate motion by Monte Shinkle, a messenger from Concord Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Mo. The motion instructs convention leaders to seek a legal opinion on actions taken by the five agencies and "take any and all steps necessary to restore them to their former relationship with the Missouri Baptist Convention."

Messengers defeated an amendment providing that the executive board not "violate the clear, inerrant, scriptural injunction that Christians not sue one another in secular courts to settle their disputes."

"The thief has come, and its time for us to wake up and get out of bed," messenger Tom Willoughby said in supporting the escrowing of funds.

Gerald Davidson, a conservative pastor, said in removing their agencies from convention control: "We have a handful of trustees, who have taken it on themselves to say, 'These institutions are ours. Missouri Baptists, you send us your money and we'll run your institutions for you. ... You'll have absolutely nothing to say about them.' This is absolutely repulsive."

Representatives of some of the agencies responded that they took the action on advice of legal counsel out of concern about ascending liability.

In debate over Shinkle's motion to seek recovery of the agencies by legal means, Randy Fullerton, pastor of Fee Fee Baptist Church in St. Louis and trustee chairman at Missouri Baptist College, said the convention has three times investigated the ownership of agencies. Each time, he said, the conclusion was the trustees own the agencies.

"I am sure that we can get many legal opinions," Fullerton said. "I am sure there are many unemployed lawyers around who would like to take our money. I would urge our convention to seek reconciliation rather than lawsuits."

"We're not the first to hire the lawyers," Shinkle responded. "These institutions belong to the Missouri Baptist Convention, in my opinion."

"I believe it's an issue of legal standing," he said. "I don't want punitive damages. I don't want vengeance, I just want our institutions back."

The convention referred to the executive board a motion by Rodney Albert of Hallsville Baptist Church to appoint a committee to "investigate the feasibility and procedures of publishing a periodic news journal that is directly accountable to the Missouri Baptist Convention."

The motion also would authorize convention leaders to secure funding to begin immediate publication and distribution "until such time as the Word and Way restore its previous relationship" to the state convention.

Later, the convention passed a resolution expressing "disapproval" of actions taken by the five agencies to remove themselves from convention control. "We regard such conduct as inconsistent with the spirit of cooperative missions and as a serious betrayal of trust," the resolution said.

The resolution called on trustees "to rescind their actions and to take any necessary steps of reconciliation to rebuild broken trust."

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Controversial Falwell remark used in fund-raising appeal

By Robert Marus

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- Critics say Jerry Falwell is attempting to cash in on the controversy surrounding him in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, while a spokesman for Falwell accuses members of the media and liberal groups of refusing to "take their foot off [Falwell's] neck."

In a fund-raising letter dated Oct. 4, Falwell's son, Jonathan, appeals to would-be donors by casting his father as a victim of "liberal lies." The letter, sent out by Jerry Falwell Ministries, also contends that "liberals of all stripes, especially in the media, have seized on this opportunity to trash dad's deeply held Christian beliefs and to literally attack him day and night."

The letter comes after public apologies by the elder Falwell for remarks he made on Pat Robertson's "700 Club" program Sept. 14. In the appearance, the televangelist said that feminists, pagans, gays, lesbians, abortion-rights supporters, supporters of church-state separation and civil liberties groups have contributed to an atmosphere of sinfulness that caused God to "lift the curtain" of protection around the U.S.

The comments drew controversy even among Falwell's conservative allies. Radio host Rush Limbaugh, Fox News personality Bill O'Reilly and President George W. Bush all criticized the remarks.

Robertson said on the air he agreed with Falwell but later claimed he had misunderstood Falwell's on-air comments. Falwell first claimed the media had taken his remarks out of context. He later said his comments had simply been misunderstood by a secular media untrained in the nuances of theology. Finally, in a Sept. 20 appearance on "Good Morning America," Falwell apologized and called his earlier statement "indefensible."

The Oct. 4 fund-raising letter, however, describes Falwell as being "roundly vilified in the news media" and claims that "liberals, and especially gay activists, have launched a vicious smear campaign to discredit him."

Americans United for Separation of Church and State brought the fund-raising letter to the media's

attention. Barry Lynn, the group's director and a frequent Falwell critic, said the Oct. 4 letter doesn't square with Falwell's Sept. 20 apology.

"I don't see how one can say that one has apologized and then the next moment turn the former apology into a fund-raising letter that attacks some of the very people that he attacked initially," Lynn said. "Clearly, he has not apologized or he wouldn't have sent out this fund-raising letter. He thinks that he has been wronged. And he has not been wronged -- he has not been wronged by the media, which has given him an abundance of opportunities to apologize, and then to clarify the apology."

Falwell's assistant, Ron Godwin, said the Oct. 4 letter was justified in portraying Falwell as a victim of the media.

"Dr. Falwell misspoke, he apologized, and a number of people in and out of the dominant national media will not take their foot off of his neck," Godwin said.

Godwin contended that Falwell "continues to experience a smear campaign" and that the preacher "has continued to be at the brunt of an attempt to discredit him." He refused to point to any concrete examples of the alleged smear campaign, however, suggesting that the reporter look up such examples himself.

Lynn questioned Godwin's and Falwell's logic. "That letter is an attack letter on the media, who did nothing but report [Falwell's] own words," he noted. "How is that a smear campaign?"

Godwin accused Lynn and Americans United especially of trying to stir up this controversy "because he can't get enough attention for himself."

Godwin also said the Oct. 4 letter "in no wise is intended or was intended to alter Dr. Falwell's original statements or his original apology."

Falwell was for many years an independent Baptist who criticized leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention for being too liberal. However, in 1998 Falwell led his church to affiliate with the SBC, and he has been a featured speaker at many gatherings of SBC conservatives. SBC leaders have been silent regarding Falwell's controversial Sept. 14 statements in news stories reported by Baptist Press.

Richard Land, head of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and a frequent political ally of Falwell's, declined to comment on the situation.

Jim Baucom, moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and a fellow pastor with Falwell in Lynchburg, Va., also declined to comment further on the fund-raising letter. Baucom had earlier published a strong critique of Falwell's initial statements and the theology that prompted them.

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Governor, evangelist convene 'International Day of Prayer

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Southern Baptist governor, an internationally known evangelist and other prominent religious figures are calling on faith communities and leaders around the world to fast and pray for peace and justice on Nov. 3.

Indian evangelist K.A. Paul and Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee held an Oct. 25 press conference at the National Press Club in Washington to announce the "International Day of Prayer and Fasting."

Paul said that the idea came to him after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Paul said he had been on a transatlantic flight that was grounded in Newfoundland when all U.S. flights were grounded in the wake of the attacks. Noting the outpouring of support that he and other passengers received from the residents in the small Canadian town where they were stranded, Paul spent time in a local church

praying, fasting and "asking God Almighty, 'What is this? Why has this happened? And how do we turn this around?'"

Huckabee and Paul said they had requested that President Bush issue a proclamation declaring the day of prayer. As of Oct. 30, there was no word from the White House on whether Bush would issue the proclamation.

Huckabee also said he had invited governors of all 50 states to issue similar proclamations, and 45 had agreed as of the press conference.

However, Huckabee noted that he didn't want government to prescribe prayer. "This is a day that we don't instruct people how to pray, or when to pray," he said. "And that's what's so great about America." Huckabee is a member of The Church at Rock Creek, a Baptist-affiliated congregation in Little Rock, Ark.

Though the main co-sponsors of the event were all evangelical Christians, a widely ecumenical group appeared at the press conference to endorse the day of prayer, including Muslim, Jewish and Hindu leaders.

Besides Huckabee and Paul, other Christian leaders sponsoring the event included prominent African-American Baptist leader E.V. Hill, pastor of Mount Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles; entertainers John Tesh and Ricky Skaggs; and popular family issues author and speaker Gary Smalley.

Paul's Washington-based Global Peace Initiative is the organization sponsoring the event. Press materials indicate the event is to begin at 6 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 2, with fasting and end at 6 p.m. the next day.

More information on the event is available on the Internet at www.globalpeacenow.org.

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Court declines challenge to 'moment of silence' law

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has declined to hear a case challenging a mandatory "moment of silence" in public schools.

By refusing the case, without comment, the high court left standing a ruling by the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals that the Virginia law does not violate the separation of church and state.

The year-old law requires teachers and students at public schools to observe a moment of silence at the beginning of each school day. The law specifically lists prayer as one activity in which students may engage during the mandatory time of silence.

The Supreme Court has ruled for decades that the First Amendment forbids state-sponsored prayer in public schools. In this case, lawyers for the American Civil Liberties Union argued the Virginia law is similar to an Alabama statute struck down by the high court in 1985.

However, attorneys for the state of Virginia and several religious organizations said the law does not require students to pray.

Holly Hollman, general counsel for the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, expressed cautious agreement with the court's decision.

"Unlike the Alabama statute...the Virginia moment of silence law has a stated secular purpose -- to encourage introspection and discourage a perceived increase in violence in schools," Hollman said. "Moreover, Virginia teachers were instructed that the statute not be used to coerce students to engage in prayer or any other permitted activity."

However, Hollman noted that in the delicate task of passing and implementing moment-of-silence laws, the government must remain neutral toward religion. "Neutrality does not allow prayer to be treated as a favored activity," she said.

Groups on the Religious Right that support school prayer also endorsed the court's decision.

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for the American Center for Law and Justice, called the decision "proper and sound."

Ken Connor, president of the Family Research Council, said the moment of silence could benefit students in both secular and religious ways. "Whether it's a minute kids spend in meditation, prayer, or any other silent activity, it should be helpful in setting the right tone for the school day," Connor said.

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