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## Southern Baptists question joint witness in nation's capital

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention's 124-year-old witness in the nation's capital may be in jeopardy following charges that the District of Columbia Baptist Convention is out of step with the SBC's conservative leaders.

Unlike other autonomous state and regional conventions affiliated with the SBC, the D.C. convention is aligned not only with Southern Baptists, but with American Baptists and a predominantly African-American Baptist convention as well. Fundamentalists control the 16 million-member SBC, the largest Protestant faith group in the United States. The D.C. convention's other national supporters, the 1.5 million-member American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., and 2.5 million-member Progressive National Baptist Convention, tend to be more liberal in theology and on social issues.

Southern Baptists, emerging from their own two-decade struggle to oust moderates from control of SBC entities, say they provide 10 times the amount of financial support as Washington Baptists' other national sponsors. Despite that, NAMB officials charge, the D.C. convention has "grown increasingly distant from the SBC, its positions and priorities."

As a result, NAMB officials have requested unprecedented governance of an autonomous state or regional convention. In an Oct. 24 letter to D.C. Baptist leaders, the Alpharetta, Ga., -based agency outlined a number of conditions for continued funding of Baptist work in Washington after next year. Among them are hiring a NAMB representative to supervise DCBC employees partially or completely funded by NAMB and administer funds in consultation with the D.C. convention's executive director.

Baptist leaders in Washington responded with indignation to the NAMB proposal, saying it violates traditional Baptist forms of church government, where state conventions and the SBC cooperate with each other but are considered autonomous in their own spheres.

"This proposal . . . offends fundamental principles of Baptist polity such as autonomy, priesthood of all believers, and soul freedom," said Jeffrey Haggray, D.C. Baptists' executive director. Haggray, an African-American from a PNBC background, assumed office in August. He succeeded Jere Allen, a Southern Baptist who before coming to D.C. worked for the NAMB predecessor Home Mission Board.

Haggray's stand could be costly for D.C. Baptists. Southern Baptists provide \$475,000 of the DCBC's \$1.5 million budget in the form of salary subsidies and program dollars. Unlike larger state conventions, which contribute more money to NAMB than they receive through those partnerships, D.C. Baptists get about twice what they give to all SBC causes through the Cooperative Program unified budget.

The NAMB proposal questions the "stewardship" of providing SBC funds for the starting of churches that might choose not to affiliate with the SBC. It also demands that DCBC leaders refrain from public criticism of SBC policies. It questions theological views of other D.C. sponsors and requires that all speakers at DCBC events reflect "theological tenets" of the SBC. It also forbids the D.C. convention from participating in events sponsored by ecumenical organizations.

Opponents said the NAMB proposal would effectively gut the administrative role of Haggray, the first African-American employed to lead an SBC-affiliated state convention.

In the Dec. 6 issue of the "Capital Baptist," Haggray said the NAMB proposal would "surrender the direction and control" of state convention programs to NAMB President Robert Reccord, reducing the autonomous affiliate to "the only NAMB-run state convention in the nation."

A NAMB spokesman said Reccord and other top officials were unavailable for interview.

Haggray said the new requirements would change the unique character of the DCBC and "impugn our cherished three-way relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention, American Baptist Churches/USA and Progressive National Baptist Convention."

"It concerns me," Haggray added, "that, at a time when we have a convention that is not conflicted like many of the other Southern Baptist state conventions, that they [NAMB] would seek to superimpose conflict on our convention."

Other D.C. Baptist leaders also reacted strongly to the NAMB proposal. "This is absolutely unacceptable," said Paul Clark, a member of the executive committee from Washington's National Memorial Baptist Church. "Not only is it [the NAMB proposal] crudely written, but it's written with arrogance, and with disrespect."

Gail Lacy -- a convention employee who is paid partially by NAMB -- said the proposal is unnecessary, because NAMB already approves how its money is spent. "They approve it in advance as one lump, and they approve it individually," Lacy said. "They have approved every penny they've spent -- they can't come now and find fault with it. So, if they approve of their funds, then the rest of it is none of their business."

James Somerville, pastor of Washington's First Baptist Church, wondered about NAMB's timing in raising the concerns.

"It does seem suspicious to me that they've chosen this time to submit this proposal," Somerville said. "Why now, why at the time when the first African-American has been elected executive director-minister? Surely these concerns have been around longer than the last five months."

The introduction to the NAMB proposal acknowledged, "The concerns expressed in . this proposal are not new."

The Oct. 24 proposal requested that DCBC make a "preliminary response within two weeks." However, Haggray said the proposal was too weighty and sudden for a response to be prepared on such short notice.

NAMB issued a statement saying the agency had received no response from the DCBC from its proposal and wasn't invited to at least two meetings held to discuss the matter, one of which was attended by a reporter. "We are deeply disappointed the DCBC has chosen this course of action, which further widens the gulf between our entities and diminishes opportunities to reach a solution that would allow our partnership to continue past our current commitments of Dec. 31, 2002," the statement said.

## **SBC leaders cite differences with American Baptists in rift**

By Robert Marus and Bob Allen

Formed in 1877, the D.C. Baptist Convention has historically aligned dually with both the SBC and the Northern Baptist Convention -- later renamed American Baptist Churches, U.S.A. -- honoring the unique character of a city that belongs to all Americans rather than any region. The convention added to that symbolism in 1998, aligning additionally with the Progressive National Baptist Convention, a predominantly African-American group begun in the 1960s by followers of Martin Luther King.

All that may soon change, however, in light of questions by leaders of the SBC North American Mission Board whether to continue the denomination's historic partnership with the D.C. convention.

In addition to restructuring the D.C. convention's staff to make SBC-funded staff supervised directly by NAMB, the SBC missions agency listed the following conditions for continued funding:

-- D.C. Baptists "must agree not to promote the cultural festivals that include non-Christian religious organizations." NAMB leaders cited participation by DCBC in a cultural festival sponsored by the Inter-Faith Coalition, a local ecumenical agency.

The SBC, while traditionally suspicious of ecumenical involvement, has in recent years drawn a hard line against any relationships that might compromise a Southern Baptist witness.

Jeffrey Haggray, executive director of the DCBC, said his convention has already directed staff not to expend any convention funds on promoting Inter-Faith Coalition activities.

-- The convention's newspaper, the Capital Baptist "should not contain any future articles that will denigrate the SBC and its leadership nor any of its agencies." While most Baptist papers are given oversight by boards elected by state conventions, many allow editors freedom in selection of news and editorial opinion. The Capital Baptist's editor, Robert Maddox, has at times questioned actions of conservative leaders in the SBC.

-- "NAMB requests that speakers at DCBC sponsored meetings reflect the theological tenets of the SBC." While the SBC has grown more conservative in the last two decades, the American Baptist and Progressive Baptist conventions are generally viewed as left of center in Baptist life.

D.C. Baptists invited Molly Marshall, a former professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who is highly unpopular among SBC conservatives, to speak at their recent annual convention meeting. She canceled, however, because of illness in her family.

-- "NAMB further requests that criticism towards the SBC follow the biblical pattern of Matthew 18." The chapter, often cited by Baptists in discussions of theological differences, calls for first attempting to resolve conflicts face-to-face before resorting to intervention by a small group and finally the whole church. Should the offender refuse to listen to the church, the Bible says, "Let him be to you as a gentile and a tax collector."

Haggray said he met with NAMB President Robert Reccord and other executives at NAMB's headquarters Sept. 19. Haggray said he initiated the meeting to answer concerns that Reccord had previously expressed in side conversations in other venues.

Haggray said he left the meeting thinking that he had satisfactorily answered all of Reccord's concerns, and that he was blindsided when NAMB representatives flew to the Washington area to present him with the proposal.

Haggray also said that at the Sept. 19 meeting Reccord subjected him to "hours upon hours of interrogation based on allegations from sources that he would not name." Haggray said that, according to Reccord, some of the sources were NAMB board members, and some of the sources were Southern Baptists within the DCBC.

In their formal complaint, NAMB's representatives listed the DCBC's other denominational affiliations as the source of concerns that led them to propose such a restrictive agreement. Specifically, the NAMB proposal listed concerns with American Baptists' views on abortion, homosexuality and women pastors.

While the SBC has in recent years moved to increasingly conservative positions in its theology and social agenda, American Baptists have taken a more middle-of-the-road approach in statements on controversial issues.

Regarding abortion, the NAMB list of concerns states that, "Whereas the SBC opposes abortion as a convention, the American Baptist Convention chooses to allow its member churches [to] determine their individual position."

American Baptists opposed abortion as a primary form of birth control in a 1987 resolution but observed that members of ABC/USA churches differ about under what, if any, circumstances it might be allowed.

The SBC's "Baptist Faith and Message," however, affirms the "sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death."

While the SBC has never kicked out a church over its views on abortion, the convention has adopted a number of strongly worded anti-abortion resolutions.

The ABC/USA General Board in 1992 passed a resolution declaring the practice of homosexuality as "incompatible with Christian teaching." Another resolution, however, urged dialogue on the topic, acknowledging that "there exists a variety of understandings throughout our denomination on issues of human sexuality such as homosexuality."

While American Baptists don't have an outright ban on accepting gay-friendly churches into membership, some regional ABC affiliates have ousted congregations for adopting a "welcoming and affirming" stance toward gays.

The SBC, on the other hand, took a strong stand against homosexuality in 1992, changing its constitution to bar churches that act "to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

Regarding women as pastors, the NAMB document claims that "the ABC takes an opposing stand" to the SBC.

A 1985 ABC/USA policy statement describes men and women as "full partners" in all areas of ministry.

The Southern Baptist Convention's "Baptist Faith and Message" statement says, meanwhile, "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

Another concern with the DCBC staff listed in NAMB's proposal was "lack of confidence in the stewardship of SBC funding creating uniquely SBC churches and sponsoring unique SBC events."

Haggray responded that, because of the diversity of denominations involved in DCBC and because of the convention's respect for local-church autonomy: "We do not determine the denominational character of the congregation. Once we plant the church, the church makes that decision for itself."

## **Texas church to have woman duo as senior and associate pastor**

By John Hall

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- In what is believed to be a first, two women will lead a former Southern Baptist church as senior and associate pastors. Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, has called Dorisanne Cooper to the senior pastorate to work with Sharlande Sledge, who has served as the associate pastor for 16 years.

Though about 1,300 Southern Baptist women are ordained ministers, a Baptist Women in Ministry spokesperson said she is aware of just 24 who are senior pastors. Women's efforts to become senior pastors have been curtailed by the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," which prohibits women as senior pastors.

The church ended an eight-month search to find a replacement for Brett Younger, who is moving to Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, by calling Cooper, who has served as an associate pastor at College Park Baptist Church in Greensboro, N.C., for the past five years. The committee was looking for a talented preacher who had administrative experience and could attract younger families with children to the church, said Libby Bellinger, chairperson of the search committee.

Bellinger, who was ordained into ministry in 1975, said the church did not set out to find a woman pastor, but Cooper was the best qualified, beating out four male candidates in the final decision. She said the church, which officially severed ties with the Southern Baptist Convention last spring, was just attempting to follow the will of God.

"We didn't go out looking for a woman," she said. "We went out looking for the best person for our church according to God's lead."

Cooper, who was raised in Waco, said she felt "very connected" to the church throughout the search process and is delighted to be at Lake Shore, a church she has admired for its "love of missions and seriousness of worship."

Rather than focus on the novelty of the female leadership of the church, however, Cooper said she intends to concentrate her efforts on growing with her new congregation.

"The church allowed itself to pick who they felt was the correct person for the job and not worrying about whether it is a man or woman," she said.

Bellinger also downplayed the gender of the church's associate pastor and new senior pastor.

"[This call] means you have the opportunity to have two people who are gifted to work together to lead a congregation of the people of God," she said.

Sledge, who has been associate pastor for 16 years, echoed the thoughts of Cooper and Bellinger.

"Our primary goals are to serve the church and not for the gender issue to be the emphasis," she said.

Through work, Cooper said, she believes the model of female leadership will be shown to be not only scriptural, but effective. Though Bellinger said some older members of the church voiced some disapproval with the decision, the church, which has ordained women deacons for 25 years, is largely behind the committee's choice and excitedly awaits Cooper's arrival in February.

Although some associations across the nation have seen efforts to oust churches over women's ordination, Paul Stripling, executive director of the Waco Baptist Association, said he has not had any negative feedback and the group supports the church's decision.

"We honor the autonomy of every local church to get whoever the Lord leads them to get," Stripling said.

Not only will Cooper have Sledge as a female companion in ministry, but will also be able to consult her friend Julie Pennington-Russell, who broke the gender barrier in Texas when she was called to the senior pastorate of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco in 1998.

Pennington-Russell, who was greeted with protestors on her arrival to her church, said she does not expect the same response to Cooper's call. She said, however, she has offered some advice through email correspondence and looks forward to seeing her again.

"I anticipate us forming a bond because in some ways we are alike," Pennington-Russell said. "The position we are in may encourage a special relationship."

Though she expressed delight in Cooper's call, Pennington-Russell said she believes broad acceptance of women as senior pastors is still a ways off.

"I think it is significant, though I hardly think we are rocketing through the glass ceiling," she said. "I long to see churches welcome pastors on board whether they are a man or a woman. I want to see the best people matched with churches."

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-- John Hall is a free-lance writer and student at Baylor University.

## **Former detainees in Afghanistan welcomed home by thousands**

By John Hall

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Thousands of Baylor University students and other Waco residents welcomed home two Baylor alumnae formerly detained in Afghanistan for more than three months in a two-hour celebration Dec. 8 on the university campus.

The service included praise songs, an interpretive dance about life in Afghanistan and speeches by Baylor President Robert Sloan and the women's pastor, Jimmy Seibert of Antioch Community Church. It celebrated the homecoming of Dayna Curry, 30, and Heather Mercer, 24. They were arrested Aug. 3 with six other Shelter Now International aid workers and 16 Afghan nationals on charges of preaching Christianity and dramatically rescued Nov. 14 by U.S. special forces.

Mercer admitted to showing part of the "Jesus" video to an Afghan family and giving them books that included stories of Jesus, but said she does not think the aid workers did anything wrong. Everyone, she said, should have the right to choose his or her own religion.

Both women expressed joy in their return to Waco and thanked the community and the world for their prayers, which they believe helped set them free.

"I'm overwhelmed by the prayer and the support by the people who gave their lives that we could be free," Mercer said. "You guys who prayed, you are the heroes of this ordeal. You did the hardest work."

"We know there are churches across the nation that prayed for us. Every time we got down we remembered all the people praying for us."

The women related the often-told story of their last days in captivity. They were moved from jail to jail as the Taliban troops fled from attacking forces, only to eventually be left alone in their cell in the city of Ghazni when it was attacked.

Curry described how a "wild-west man" with messed-up hair and ammunition around his neck freed them. Curry described the experience of "incredible" freedom by Afghans as they shaved beards and danced in the streets.

After military forces escorted them to a field near the city, the women burned sticks and their head coverings to help the U.S. helicopter locate them in the darkness. Their rescuers took them to Pakistan, where they were reunited with family members who had watched the ordeal from Islamabad.

Though they faced constant uncertainty and danger in the war-torn nation, Curry said God reassured them that they would indeed survive their predicament.

"He just gave us supernatural peace," she said. "I didn't know how he was going to get us out or when, but I knew he was going to get us out. Even when it was at the worst, we would look to see God telling us we will survive and tell his story."

And tell the story they have. The women have traveled across America for interviews with broadcast news reporters, newspaper journalists and talk shows. They even told U.S. President George W. Bush about their situation when they visited the White House.

"This is really a story about Jesus: who he is, what he has done and continues doing," Mercer said. "We are just simple people who went to help the poor of Afghanistan and ended up in the world's craziest situation. God has used this story to show his love to the world."

The women, who admitted they are still slightly uncomfortable dealing with the media, said they are amazed their story has had such a powerful effect on people around the globe, renewing people's faith in God and generating conversation on religious topics.

They said they hope to continue taking advantage of this platform to share their story in a book and possibly a compact disc.

They also want to encourage American participation in rebuilding Afghanistan. In fact, they said they were disappointed that they would not be there at a time when real change may occur in the country with the implementation of a new government.

Though she expects some initial resistance from her parents, Mercer said she would eventually like to return to the nation where she was imprisoned.

"I want to go back to Afghanistan," she said. "My heart is there. My home is there. In so many ways those people are my people."

But for now, Mercer and Curry plan on taking a vacation to relax and reflect upon what they believe was their miraculous release. That feeling has made the holiday season all the more special to one of the women.

"It's going to be a great Christmas," Mercer said. "My family and I have so much to be thankful for. I think I will be able to truly celebrate the gift of Jesus because it has become so much more real to me."

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## **Pressler's book sent to SBC pastors**

By Steve DeVane

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Paul Pressler's book highlighting the conservative side of the battle for control of the Southern Baptist Convention is being sent to about 42,000 pastors.

The book, "A Hill on Which to Die," was sent to every pastor in the SBC, according to a letter accompanying the book. SBC President James Merritt and eight former SBC presidents signed the letter.

Pressler and Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and one of the signers of the letter, are widely credited as the architects of the conservative rise to power in the SBC.

Critics call their efforts a "takeover," while supporters refer to it as the "conservative resurgence" in the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

"It has become increasingly apparent that many have forgotten the conditions which necessitated the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention," the letter said. "The oncoming generation needs to know what transpired."

The letter said the presidents want every pastor, every seminary student and Southern Baptists in general to know and understand the issues.

"We feel most strongly that 'A Hill on Which to Die' is must reading for an informed Southern Baptist," the letter said. "Since each of us has served as president of the convention during the period of the conservative resurgence, we feel strongly about the issues dealt with in the book."

All but two of the SBC presidents during the conservative rise to power -- Charles Stanley and Jim Henry -- signed the letter.

Patterson, who served as SBC president in 1999-2000, said in a telephone interview that "a number of people" approached Pressler about making the book available to all the SBC pastors. Patterson said he didn't remember who the people were or how much the project cost.

Patterson said Pressler contacted him about the idea.

"I said 'I think it would be a fabulous thing,'" Patterson said.

Patterson said even Pressler's sworn enemies will "probably get a kick out of reading" the book.

"Those who love him will love him more when they read it," Patterson said. "Those who are undecided might gain some insight."

The letter said tax-deductible contributions to offset the cost of the project may be sent to First Baptist Church in Houston, where Pressler is a member. The book's paperback version, which was sent to the pastors, costs \$3.50 each, according to the letter.

Kirk Boudreaux, director of financial services for First Baptist, said the church has not put any money into the project but does receive and pass along tax-deductible contributions to LifeWay Christian Resources.

"We've just created an avenue to help with funding," he said.

He said the church has received a few checks and forwarded the equivalent amount of money to the SBC's publishing arm in Nashville, Tenn.

The book arrived to pastors in an envelope with a LifeWay return address. It was sent with a non-profit, postage-paid permit from Tallahassee, Fla.

LifeWay officials said the agency didn't spend or invest any money in the mailing. Pressler told them a group of his supporters funded the project, they said.

Pressler could not be reached for comment.

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-- Steve DeVane is managing editor of the Biblical Recorder in North Carolina. Marv Knox of the Baptist Standard in Texas contributed to this report.

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