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NAMB leader says dispute with D.C. Baptists 'unique'

By ABP staff

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. (ABP) -- The president of the North American Mission Board says a polity dispute with the District of Columbia Baptist Convention is an isolated incident but didn't rule out future discussions over areas of disagreement between the Southern Baptist Convention agency and other state bodies.

"This is a unique situation," NAMB President Robert Reccord said of the board's relationship with the D.C. convention in an interview with the North Carolina newspaper Biblical Recorder.

NAMB leaders in Alpharetta, Ga., wrote a letter in October citing concerns over the D.C. convention's triple alignment with the SBC, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and Progressive National Baptist Convention. The SBC, which provides a majority of outside funding for the D.C. convention, is conservative, while the other two national groups are considered more to the left of Baptist life.

Reccord said he knows of no similar theological concerns with other state conventions.

While the DCBC is the only Southern Baptist affiliate with more than one denominational identity, at least three state conventions allow churches to designate funds for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a breakaway group formed by SBC moderates who disagree with the denomination's leaders.

Asked about state conventions with ties to CBF, Reccord said: "You know, the only way we would be responding to anything from any other [state convention] is if it arises. Anywhere along the journey if things arise that we feel need to be addressed we'll address them, but only at that time."

Reccord said, however, that the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, one of the conventions offering giving plans that include the Atlanta-based CBF, has nothing to fear, citing his high regard for the state's chief executive.

"I praise God for [Executive Director] Jim Royston," Reccord said. "I've known him for a number of years to be a man of incredible ethics and tremendous integrity."

Reccord, in North Carolina to speak at the state convention's annual evangelism conference, said NAMB is in "open communication" with the D.C. convention over concerns outlined in a letter dated Oct. 24.

NAMB annually provides DCBC with \$475,000, about a third of DCBC's budget and twice the amount that Washington churches give to the SBC yearly through the Cooperative Program unified budget.

Among concerns cited in the letter were differences between the SBC and American Baptists in stated positions on abortion, homosexuality and the ordination of women.

Specifically, NAMB said it wants direct supervision of D.C. employees funded wholly or partially by Southern Baptists. The proposal also said the DCBC should not promote cultural festivals that include non-Christian religious groups, should not print articles in its newspaper that "denigrate the SBC and its leadership nor any of its agencies," should have speakers at its meetings that "reflect the theological tenets of the SBC," and should follow the biblical pattern of Matthew 18 when criticizing the SBC.

D.C. Baptist leaders reacted strongly to the proposal. Executive Director Jeffrey Haggray, an African-American from a PNBC background, called it an ultimatum that "offends fundamental principles of Baptist polity" and would turn the DCBC into "the only NAMB-run state convention in the nation."

In his interview with the Biblical Recorder, Reccord responded to those comments.

He denied the letter was an ultimatum. "In fact, we started out the proposal saying we are seeking to find a win-win method of strengthening the partnership," he said. "That's kind of hard to get to an ultimatum from that kind of wording."

He also said the proposal doesn't threaten the DCBC's autonomy.

"The [DCBC] has the full autonomy to decide what they will do, how they will do it and when they are going to do it," he said. "That's totally in their autonomy."

Reccord called the respective autonomy of state and national conventions "a real key part of Southern Baptist life."

"In the same way we wouldn't want anybody infringing on the North American Mission Board's autonomy," he said.

Reccord declined to say, however, what might happen should the D.C. convention refuse the NAMB proposal.

"We'll just have to walk through the process and see where each step takes us," he said.

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-- Adapted from reporting by Steve DeVane, managing editor of the Biblical Recorder.

Georgia Baptist leaders defund college over governance dispute

By ABP staff

ROME, Ga. (ABP) -- Leaders of the Georgia Baptist Convention said Jan. 10 they would withhold \$9.6 million earmarked for Shorter College in response to a governance change removing the convention from direct control of the 128-year-old liberal-arts school.

College President Edward Schrader wrote a letter Jan. 8 to alumni and supporters announcing an agreement that shifts both assets for the college in Rome, Ga., and responsibility for decision-making to the Shorter College Foundation.

Previously, the Georgia Baptist Convention had sole authority for electing or dismissing the college's

board of trustees. Schrader said that arrangement raised concerns related to accreditation, because the college had no provision for dismissing trustees for cause.

He said the foundation board would be expanded to include the 30 current members of the board of trustees.

Georgia Baptist leaders, however, said the move caught them by surprise and conflicts with language in the GBC constitution defining institutions in terms of allowing the convention to elect their leadership boards.

The GBC administration committee immediately voted to withdraw all funding for operations, capital improvement and endowment for Shorter College, a total of about \$9.6 million.

"I am deeply saddened by the actions of the college," Georgia Baptist Executive Director Robert White said in a statement released Jan. 10. "When Shorter College trustees voted for this change, it raised legal and institutional issues relating to the relationship between Shorter and the GBC."

White said convention leaders have an "obligation to be certain" that funds are disbursed according to legal requirements.

The maneuver shifts the college's assets and decision-making through a long-term lease. Convention leaders said it changes the role of convention-elected trustees from a governing body to a "landlord."

Schrader told the independent newspaper Baptists Today the move isn't intended to separate from Georgia Baptists but that the school wants to discuss a "new relationship" allowing it more self-regulation.

"The college doesn't seek to be independent in selecting trustees," said Schrader, who was elected president in 2000.

Schrader declined to comment on recent trustee selections but said the move wasn't motivated by politics. He said he hopes "a new process" for electing trustees can be developed that involves both the convention and trustees to assure "that the board is always comprised of independent thinking persons."

Executive Committee chairman Tony Dickerson told Baptists Today that the college's decision "came as a complete surprise" to him and he assumed to other GBC leaders as well. However, Dickerson said that "discussion is always good and healthy," and that he would personally be open to future dialogue.

Schrader said administrators and trustees considered the risk of losing GBC funding. Currently the state convention provides \$1.3 million dollars -- just less than 5 percent of the college's annual funding -- through its Cooperative Program unified budget.

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-- Adapted from a report by John Pierce for Baptists Today

Student uses music to reach Taiwanese

By Anthony Wade

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- For Sarah Roberts, a classical pianist used to performing complicated pieces by Bach, Beethoven, Mozart and Vivaldi, teaching English to children in Taiwan might have seemed a stretch.

"I'm trained as a classical pianist. That's where I get most of my performance opportunities," said Roberts, a native of Mobile, Ala., majoring in piano performance at Samford University in Birmingham.

When Roberts volunteered for service with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board last summer, however, she wasn't interested in a "music teacher" position. Rather, she sought an opportunity where music could be incorporated in spontaneous and creative ways.

She wound up in Taiwan, working alongside career missionaries in vacation Bible school and teaching English as a second language.

Working with children whose only knowledge of English was the alphabet, the challenge was not only to teach the language in a way interesting to 6- and 7-year olds, but also to weave in the basics of the gospel message.

"I had no training. I've never even taken an education course," Roberts said. "So the first couple of lessons were pretty frightening."

"We somehow had to communicate from the creation of the world to Jesus' death and resurrection, and we had no shortage of difficulty in doing that," Roberts said.

She persevered, however. Not surprisingly, she eventually drew the children in through music.

"Music is more universal than anything else," she said.

"Every day we could bring music into this," she related. "The children's faces would light up. In coming up with the next day's curriculum, I would think about ways to put the gospel into the English lesson. One day we told the story of children coming to Jesus and the disciples telling them to go away. But Jesus said to let the children come to him."

Improvising, Roberts -- who also is a trained vocalist -- came up with a simple melody using the words, "Jesus loves the little children," and added some simple motions. Through this, the children learned not only English words but also motor skills.

"Best of all, they equated it with the love of God," Roberts said. "We tried to apply at least one song to every lesson."

In doing so, she was living her dream on this two-month assignment. "It was by far the best summer of my life," she said.

Back in Birmingham, her work with children continues. After her courses each day, she teaches piano to 16 elementary-age students, who come on campus through a university education program.

Roberts has been studying and playing piano for 14 years. She anticipates graduating from Samford in May and hopes to earn her master's degree in piano.

Roberts recognizes her talent for music as a gift and is considering where God might be leading her next.

"It's vague right now but I know I'll continue in music and I'm pretty positive that I'll go back to Taiwan," she said.

She is prayerfully considering various avenues of service with the IMB, including a journeyman assignment lasting two years or a shorter-term missions trip.

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-- Anthony Wade is a correspondent for The Alabama Baptist

'Watchman' group offers education about cults

By Brian Blackwell

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- It began 22 years ago with a Southern Baptist layman and a former Mormon. Today, Watchman Fellowship has grown to more than eight states offering education, counseling and "noncoercive intervention" related to religious cults.

The interdenominational organization offers resources not only on non-Christian religions like New Age and Wicca, but also warns about unorthodox teachings of groups that many people might not ordinarily recognize as a cult.

David Henke, a Southern Baptist layperson, began by witnessing to Jehovah's Witnesses and speaking to churches. Eventually, he met a Mormon who was soon converted to Christianity. Together, the pair launched Watchman Fellowship in 1979.

Today there are offices in Alabama, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Texas, Illinois, Mississippi, Tennessee and California, along with a national Web site, [www. watchmanfellowship.org](http://www.watchmanfellowship.org).

The Alabama office is the second largest. State director Bob Waldrep said his office, located in Birmingham, fields between 100 and 150 requests for information each month and has 1,800 files on various people and groups, ranging from the authors of "Chicken Soup for the Soul" to yoga.

While it is an interdenominational ministry, Waldrep said the Alabama office employs seven Southern Baptists, which is more than half the staff. Most are ordained Southern Baptist ministers.

One of them is Steve Godwin, who has worked with Watchman Fellowship since the summer of 2000. Godwin teaches churches about Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, New Age and Wicca.

He said Watchman Fellowship is a ministry comprised of dedicated men and women who serve Christ by helping others understand the true teachings of groups that teach "another gospel," borrowing from a phrase used by the apostle Paul in Galatians 1:6-9.

"It is a very important ministry as evidenced by many of the letters we receive from people whose lives have been changed because we were able to counsel them," said Godwin.

"Watchman Fellowship is also an evangelistic ministry in that we are actually witnessing to people who do not know the real Christ."

Watchman Fellowship's goal is threefold: to educate the community, to equip the church and to evangelize the cults.

"We go to churches and give presentations on Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and other cults as we are inoculating the body of Christ," said Waldrep, who is in his ninth year as state director

"Statistics say that 80 percent of those who join a cult or false Christian group come off the pews of mainline denominational churches," he said.

He also said Mormons have been claiming since 1988 they're reaching more than 270 Southern Baptists weekly. Waldrep said he believes the claim is true. That's one reason his organization makes presentations to Baptist and other denominational churches on a regular basis.

Waldrep said his office focuses on educating churches, in which members have access to reach cult members. As individual cult members are reached, they in turn can witness to other cult members.

"A large part of our time is given in Christian counseling through a family member or friend of a cult member who then shares with that cult member," Waldrep said.

The local church is also critical to the group's success, Waldrep said, because many cults warn their members not to talk with Watchman Fellowship.

The approach Watchman Fellowship takes on intervention with cult members is to undermine the credibility of the group in the member's eyes. By showing the person that the group isn't credible through the cult's material he may have never seen before, that member may then question if he can trust that cult.

Waldrep said the most frustrating part of his job is when a person believes the information provided by Watchman Fellowship is authentic but still refuses to leave the cult.

Watchman Fellowship is not only a resource to churches and religious media, but many secular media also use it. "Our perspective is from a Christian viewpoint, but the secular media know we're credible and have learned they can trust us," said Waldrep.

Waldrep has appeared on "ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings," ABC's "Night Line," "MSNBC with Brian Williams," CNN and has been quoted in USA Today, The New York Times, Time and Newsweek.

A Japanese television program similar to "60 Minutes" spent a week with his office to enlighten the Japanese on what a cult is.

Watchman Fellowship rarely charges for its services, with the exception of certain magazines and tape sets.

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-- Brian Blackwell is a correspondent for The Alabama Baptist.

Family, friends of Zula Jones celebrate a century of faith

By Anthony Wade

JACKSON, Ala. (ABP) -- She was born Aug. 18, 1894. Homes didn't have electricity, Henry Ford hadn't invented the Model-T, America's Great Depression was still 36 years away, the country hadn't been in either of its two world wars and television was not invented.

Last year she celebrated her 107th birthday with family and friends at the Jackson Nutrition Center in Jackson, Ala.

Zula Jones didn't mind giving up driving in her later years because she never drove much earlier in life. Today she enjoys TV shows such as "The Gaither Homecoming Series," "The Lawrence Welk Show," "The Price Is Right" and the news. She also likes singing and listening to hymns. Her favorite is "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

She lived in her own home in Jackson, a town of 5,800 in southwest Alabama, until last year when she moved to a nursing home after being hospitalized following a fall.

"She's about the same, still sweet, easygoing and never loses her temper -- just a really good woman," said Carolyn Howell, one of Jones' daughters.

Approaching what most people would consider middle age, Jones joined Mount Gilead Baptist Church in nearby Walker Springs about 70 years ago and has been a member ever since. She attended church regularly until she was 102, when she worked with other members of the WMU to prepare Thanksgiving baskets for shut-ins.

"Church occupies a good bit of my time," Jones stated for a newspaper article when she was 96. "I don't miss a service on Wednesdays and Sundays. I used to teach Sunday school in the old building. Now we have that nice new building."

"I love the fellowship with folks at church," she said. "We have real good music and good singing and I always like the preacher."

When Jones was 100, she fell on the steps of the church one Sunday morning hard enough to break her glasses, but she was back in church that evening, according to her niece, Joline Jones Dean.

Jack Wright, director of missions for Clarke Baptist Association, said in addition to serving her local church she has attended associational missions meetings and been active in Baptist life in the county.

Jones grew up in Magnolia, Ala., as Zula Lee Ford before marrying Curtis N. "Jack" Jones when she was 29. The two met on a visit to Walker Springs. They dated and saw each other at the old Mount Gilead Baptist Church. Jones' husband died in 1980 after 56 years of marriage.

Their children are Carolyn Howell of Jackson, Ala.; Voncille McCrary of San Bernadino, Calif., Jimmy Jones of Hattiesburg, Miss., and Nell Mouchette of Florence, S.C.

Howell said Jones remains in relatively good health and seems to have a sharp mind.

"She has always loved to do things for other people. She used to make pies, just beautifully, and she is known for caramel cakes," Howell said.

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-- Anthony Wade is a correspondent for The Alabama Baptist

Rise in church vans brings safety concerns

By June Mathews

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (ABP) -- Relatively rare until about 20 years ago, church vans today are a popular and practical alternative for groups that aren't bus-sized, but are too big for more than a car or two.

That rise in popularity has brought new safety concerns, however, with an accompanying rise in the number of traffic accidents, injuries and fatalities involving church vans.

Last year, a 13-year old girl was killed when a church van flipped on a North Carolina highway. Ten other children were hurt in that accident. In May 2001 a church van in Texas transporting a group of women on a shopping trip blew a tire and overturned. Four people died and eight were injured.

But experts say churches can take certain precautions to reduce the risk of such tragedies.

Jim Swedenburg of the Alabama Baptist State Convention recommends taking care of the basics:

-- Seat belts. "Every person on the van should be wearing a seat belt," he said.

Some states, but not all, require that adult backseat passengers be belted. Regardless, Swedenburg said, making sure all passengers are belted decreases the risk of injury if an accident occurs.

-- Vehicle safety checks. Regularly checking tires, brakes, lights, windshield wipers and seat belts for functionality and signs of wear may seem insignificant but in some scenarios could save lives, Swedenburg said.

Understanding the towing capacity of a vehicle is also important in the event that extra cargo space is needed for luggage or equipment.

-- Drivers. Swedenburg said churches have a responsibility to check and monitor all church van drivers.

"Make sure drivers are licensed," he said. "It's a good idea to make a copy of the driver's license and keep it in the church office while he or she is driving the van."

Churches should also check driving records. No one who has ever been arrested for DUI should be allowed to drive a church van, he said. Neither should anyone with a speeding ticket within the past 12 months.

-- Insurance. Drivers should be required to provide proof of personal liability insurance before being given the keys to a church van. Even though the church will carry insurance on the vehicle, the driver should have it as well. A church's insurer should be contacted with any questions about driver guidelines and coverage.

-- A commercial driver's license is required for a driver who is operating a vehicle with a gross vehicle weight rating of more than 26,000 pounds or one designed to transport 16 or more people, including the driver. The standard metal plate mounted on the doorframe will provide a vehicle's specifications.

-- Vehicle design. All the preparation in the world may not be enough if a van's design is dangerous.

Concerns about the safety of 15-passenger vans arose when the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration issued a consumer advisory that warned these vans carry three times the rollover risk when

fully loaded. A study found that the van's center of gravity shifts up and to the back, causing the vehicles to handle differently.

Panic maneuvers by drivers increase the risk, so the NHTSA has also recommended that only experienced drivers operate 15-passenger vans.

With no uniform regulation of church transportation, Swedenburg said it is up to churches to ensure the safety of van passengers by recognizing and acting to minimize risks.

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-- June Mathews is a correspondent for The Alabama Baptist.

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