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SBC not inclined to recognize separate Missouri convention

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention likely won't accept church gifts channeled through a new Baptist state convention proposed in Missouri, says Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee.

A group being tentatively called the Baptist Convention of Missouri had asked the Executive Committee for permission to collect funds on behalf of the SBC through the Cooperative Program plan for unified denominational support.

But Chapman, CEO for the organization responsible for distributing Cooperative Program funds, says while the SBC already recognizes competing state conventions in Texas and Virginia, it wouldn't be in the national body's best interest to do the same in Missouri.

In a publicly released letter written to a leader of the breakaway group, Chapman said he could find "no compelling reason" to recommend that the Executive Committee depart from its regular practice of working with a single state convention to collect funds in Missouri.

"We do not wish to send mixed signals to the churches in Missouri, nor do we wish to harm the work of the Missouri Baptist Convention or the Southern Baptist Convention," Chapman wrote.

The Executive Committee recognizes breakaway conventions in Texas and Virginia started by conservatives, while still receiving funding from larger, established conventions in those states that are led by moderates.

Unlike those groups, the proposed Missouri body is being led by moderates claiming conservatives who control the 168-year-old Missouri Baptist Convention are shutting them out.

Chapman said in his letter that the SBC is comfortable with the direction and leadership of the existing Missouri convention.

"Yours is the first-ever request for affiliation we have had from a group of Baptists with sentiments I would be hard-pressed to interpret as in 'friendly cooperation' with the purposes of the work of the Southern Baptist Convention," Chapman wrote to Jim Hill, the MBC's former executive director who is working to help organize the new group.

Bill Merrell, the Executive Committee's vice president of convention relations, told a reporter he had nothing to add to Chapman's statements about the Missouri situation. Chapman was traveling and unavailable for comment.

"I am saddened by your personal conflicts with MBC leaders and I regret that the disharmony remains at a high level," Chapman concluded in his letter to Hill, "but the interests of the Southern Baptist Convention will not be served by establishing a partnership with another regional convention in Missouri."

Hill said the new group would issue a statement of response after a leadership meeting Jan. 31.

About 350 Missouri Baptists representing more than 100 churches met Jan. 17 to lay groundwork for the new state convention. The new group is scheduled for official launch in April.

Initial plans called for the new convention to relate to the Southern Baptist Convention and commit to the welfare of all nine Missouri Baptist agencies, with particular attention to support of five entities defunded by messengers to the MBC annual meeting last October.

Those five include The Baptist Home, Missouri Baptist College, Windermere Baptist Conference Center, the Missouri Baptist Foundation and Word and Way, whose decisions to elect their own trustees drew the ire of a strong majority of messengers last fall.

At the first meeting, speakers said they were weary of infighting among MBC leadership and efforts to shut moderates out of leadership posts through manipulation of nominating processes. Other grievances include steps being taken by MBC leaders to possibly sue to regain control of the agencies that moved to self-perpetuating boards and exclusion of a church for non-support of the SBC.

Hill said the 104 churches represented at the Jan. 17 meeting gave more than \$4 million to the Cooperative Program in 2000. Should all those churches follow through and become part of a new convention, their aggregate membership would be 109,927.

A convention that size would be larger than 21 of the 41 existing Baptist state conventions, Hill said.

Baptist Press quoted Chapman as explaining the rationale that new state conventions were formed in Texas and Virginia "only after the original state conventions had corrupted the historic meaning of the Cooperative Program" by establishing channels to allow churches to bypass funding of the SBC.

Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, objected to Chapman's description of corruption of the Cooperative Program as "disingenuous."

"The Cooperative Program historically was built on mutual trust and shared vision, not a contractual arrangement," Wade said.

Wade said the SBC "cut that nerve of trust and vision" when it "deliberately excluded a sizeable number of supporting churches."

"The BGCT has made every effort to build trust by recognizing that churches have choices and by honoring the right of churches to give in a way that reflects their convictions," he added.

Meanwhile, Chapman also recently mass-mailed churches in Texas reminding them that recent changes to the BGCT's Cooperative Program budget reallocates funds that previously went to the support of SBC seminaries, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and Executive Committee.

"BGCT leaders say they want to direct this money for Texas missions work by themselves," Chapman says in the open letter to church leaders. "I believe most Baptists in Texas recognize the value of the national strategy of our North American Mission Board and desire to continue the historic partnership, especially in these days of dramatic opportunity for outreach to the whole nation."

Chapman's letter urges Texas churches "to stay with the traditional Cooperative Program" but welcomes "questions and comments" from churches that want to consider sending monthly gifts directly to the SBC Executive Committee.

IMB requests missionaries to affirm faith statement

By Bob Allen

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Reversing an earlier policy, the International Mission Board is asking its 5,100 missionaries to affirm the Southern Baptist Convention's "Baptist Faith and Message" statement.

Trustees of the Richmond, Va., -based IMB voted a year ago not to require missionaries already on the field to endorse recent changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message." Last January, trustees upheld a traditional practice of requiring missionaries to work within parameters of the statement even if they disagree with minor points. Leaders said at the time that policies in place for preventing and dealing with aberrant theology already provided adequate safeguards for doctrinal accountability.

In a letter now being received by missionaries, however, IMB President Jerry Rankin cites ongoing controversy about the issue and is asking missionaries to read and affirm the current version of the "Baptist Faith and Message."

"Failure to ask for this affirmation is creating suspicion that there are IMB personnel whose beliefs and practices are inconsistent with those represented by Southern Baptists," he wrote.

"While we believe this is unfounded, we do not need an issue such as this to generate needless controversy, erode support and distract us from the focus on our task at such a critical time of opportunity around the world."

The "Baptist Faith and Message" is not binding on local churches or individual Southern Baptists, but convention agencies use it as a guide for hiring. While the statement has been around in some form since 1925, revisions in 1998 and 2000 have sparked unusual controversy.

A 1998 amendment on the family made headlines by proclaiming the Bible teaches that wives should "graciously submit" to husbands. A more comprehensive rewrite two years later said women should not be allowed to serve as pastors and removed a provision in a 1963 statement on the Bible that the criterion for interpreting Scripture is Jesus Christ.

Rankin said those aren't "major" changes but along with others constitute "appropriate responses to contemporary issues and challenges."

"To assist our board in assuring Southern Baptists that all those who serve with the International Mission Board and [are] supported by the convention affirm and support the current 'Baptist Faith and Message,' I am asking that you sign the attached form indicating your affirmation and return it to your regional leader."

An attachment asks missionaries to respond yes or no to the statement, "I have read and am in agreement with the current 'Baptist Faith and Message.'" The form asks anyone replying "no" to cite any area of difference.

By signing and dating the form, the missionary also affirms, "In accountability to the International Mission Board and Southern Baptists, I agree to carry out my responsibilities in accordance with and not contrary to the current 'Baptist Faith and Message' as adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention."

Rankin said neither trustees nor the SBC required him to ask personnel for the affirmation but the board is aware of the action and supports it. While Rankin's letter doesn't spell out the consequences for not affirming the statement, he advises, "I cannot overemphasize how important your cooperation is in order for us to move forward in fulfilling the Great Commission."

"[W]e who have chosen to serve with a denominational mission agency are expected to be doctrinally accountable to those who provide our support and send us out," Rankin writes. "There should be no reticence in our willingness to express agreement with what the SBC has adopted."

Rankin wasn't immediately available for comment.

But IMB spokesperson Wendy Norvelle said administrators "expect most, if not all," missionaries will comply with the request. She said some might not understand what they are being asked to affirm, because they have been isolated from denominational affairs, however.

She said regional leaders would counsel with those who express concerns about signing the pledge.

Rankin said willingness to endorse the statement would protect missionaries "from charges of heresy behind your back while you are overseas and cannot defend yourself" and "disarm those who may be trying to use the BF&M to divide Southern Baptists." It will "also clearly communicate to overseas Baptists and Great Commission partners what we believe," he added.

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Voucher opponents seek review of Wisconsin 'school choice' plan

By Robert Marus

MADISON, Wis. (ABP) -- The long battle over "school choice" -- giving public money to private schools -- is revving up again in the state where it began. A group of taxpayers has asked the Wisconsin Supreme Court to review its 1998 decision upholding expansion of a school voucher program in Milwaukee.

Four plaintiffs in the original lawsuit are asking the state's highest court to overturn its decision allowing expansion of the program to include religious schools. They claim one of the justices deciding the case had a conflict of interest, violating their right to due process.

The justice, Jon Wilcox, voted with the 4-2 majority upholding the voucher program in 1998.

A year earlier, however, Wilcox received contributions from pro-voucher individuals and groups in a re-election campaign against a voucher opponent. Wilcox's campaign organization and its manager recently settled another lawsuit with the state elections board, which had charged the campaign with illegally coordinating resources with pro-voucher forces in order to win the election.

The original plaintiffs claim Wilcox should have known that he had received campaign contributions from pro-voucher groups and removed himself from the case.

Wisconsin Gov. Scott McCallum criticized the request for review of the 1998 decision. "School choice in Milwaukee is working," he said in a statement. "It is successful. It has helped so many children and their families. Why these people want to hurt economic-disadvantaged children is beyond me."

The Wisconsin case could become moot pending outcome of an Ohio voucher case currently before the U.S. Supreme Court. That body will review a Cleveland "school choice" program and may decide if such programs nationwide are constitutional.

Oral arguments before the court in the Cleveland case are scheduled for Feb. 20.

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Top leaders resign at Mars Hill College

By Tony Cartledge

MARS HILL, N.C. (ABP) -- President Max Lennon and Chancellor Robert Knott resigned their positions amid faculty unrest at Mars Hill College Jan. 24. The resignations were announced in a statement from the executive committee of the college's board of trustees.

"It is with much reluctance, but with a firm focus on the future, that we accept the decision of these two distinguished gentlemen," board chairman Kyle Carver said. "The leadership, service and passion these two educators have shared with the college will be missed."

Dan Lunsford, dean of the school of education and leadership, took over immediately as interim president of the Baptist-affiliated college in North Carolina.

Lennon, president since March 1996, has been under fire from faculty members over his leadership of the small liberal arts college. Areas of contention reportedly included faculty pay, hiring practices and the creation of a foundation in 1998 to raise more money for the school.

Lennon's previous experience was mostly in larger universities, including Clemson University, where he was president from 1986-94. He came to Mars Hill from Eastern Foods, Inc., where he was chief executive officer.

Representatives of the school's 85 faculty members met with Lennon in December and with a committee appointed by the trustees to address issues between the faculty and administration.

Associate professor of English and elected faculty spokesperson Carol Boggess said no one doubted Lennon's commitment to the college. "He had noble, honest intentions," she said. "We just felt his leadership was not effective for this time, at this school."

Faculty representatives had planned to meet with trustees during a special meeting of the board's executive committee on Jan. 24, expecting the meeting to include a discussion of their concerns. However, trustees opened the meeting by announcing that the board had already chosen to accept resignations from both the president and chancellor.

The faculty had hoped Lennon would resign, but Knott's departure was an unwelcome surprise.

Kathy Meacham, who teaches religion and philosophy at the school, told the Asheville Citizen-Times that faculty members were extremely disappointed the board agreed to accept Knott's resignation.

Boggess said the faculty had complete confidence in Knott. "We are very indebted to Dr. Knott. He has really been the glue that has held us together the past few years."

Students reacted by packing into Belk Auditorium Thursday night for a forum with faculty representatives. An estimated 400 students -- about one third of the student body -- were present. Many expressed dismay that they had been uninformed about the issues and left out of the faculty/trustee discussions. Some said they first learned of the resignations from newspaper accounts.

Students expressed appreciation for both leaders, though they related most closely to Knott. Students rallied the following day, posting numerous signs that pleaded "Don't Untie Our Knott," and wearing knotted ribbons in school's trademark blue and gold colors.

Knott, who taught philosophy at Mars Hill from 1969-1975 and 1980-1982, returned to the college in 1998 as executive vice president for academic affairs. He was elevated to chancellor in August 2000 when trustees restructured the school's top leadership. At that time, Knott was given responsibility for relating to the faculty and for day to day operations at the college. Lennon retained the title of president, with his primary emphasis to be on fund raising.

Troy Day, a college trustee and chairman of the board of the Mars Hill College Foundation, told the Citizen-Times that trustees accepted both resignations because they wanted to start fresh.

"Dr. Knott and Dr. Lennon are the top leaders of the school. The ultimate responsibility lies in their hands," he said. "We felt the best answer to the situation was to accept the resignations of both holding the responsibility."

During Lennon's tenure, the college experienced strong growth in fund raising, including a number of six- and seven-figure gifts from private individuals, the securing of a \$10 million bond issue from the state of North Carolina, and the development of a \$5 million capital improvement fund. The college's endowment grew from approximately \$20 million to over \$45 million, according to a college press release.

But Boggess said faculty believed other concerns sometimes took precedent over the welfare of students. "Our main focus is to equip students," she said. "His focus sometimes did not seem to stay on the primary goal."

Lennon told the Citizen-Times he believed resigning was the right thing to do in the face of faculty unrest. "We have been really blessed here," he said. "We've had lots of successes. I think it's time that we have fresh leadership to build on our successes."

Knott was president of Tusculum College in Greeneville, Tenn., eight years prior to becoming chancellor at Mars Hill College. He recently led the school through a successful accreditation process, provided leadership for the college's current organizational structure, and oversaw an extensive restructuring of the college's finances.

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-- Tony Cartledge is editor of the Biblical Recorder. Additional reporting or information provided by assistant editor Jimmy Allen and by Marla Milling, director of communications for Mars Hill College.

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