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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Second Missouri convention moving forward despite setback
- What's in a name for Missouri Baptists?
- CBF reports increase in mid-year giving totals
- President names head of faith-based office

Second Missouri convention moving forward despite setback

By Bill Webb

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Plans for a second state Baptist convention in Missouri will move ahead even if the Southern Baptist Convention doesn't acknowledge the new group or allow it to collect funds for the Cooperative Program unified budget.

SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman said Jan. 25 that he would not recommend that Southern Baptists recognize separate state conventions in Missouri, even though they do so in two other states.

While breakaway conventions in Virginia and Texas were started by conservatives sympathetic to the SBC, Missouri's new body, scheduled to organize in April, is being supported by moderates, of whom Chapman said he would be "hard pressed to interpret as in friendly cooperation" with the SBC.

Leaders of what is now being called the Baptist General Convention of Missouri met via conference call on Jan. 31 to draft their response.

"While the SBC leadership has chosen not to acknowledge or cooperate with the Baptist General Convention of Missouri, we will cooperate with the SBC," new convention leaders said in 1,700-word "open letter" released to the media.

The release said the group would ask affiliating churches to send the national portion of their Cooperative Program gifts directly to the Executive Committee's offices in Nashville, Tenn.

"It is our hope that at some future time the SBC leadership will choose to build a working relationship with the Baptist General Convention of Missouri."

In the meantime, the convention will collect and distribute funds to agencies of the Missouri Baptist Convention, including five that had funding frozen by the MBC after moving to self-perpetuating boards of trustees.

Leaders of the group settled on a new name after opponents filed incorporation papers to block the new group from using the previously announced working name, the Baptist Convention of Missouri.

Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association members Cindy Province and Kerry Messer, who filed the papers securing the proposed name, said it was too close to the Missouri Baptist Convention and was designed to confuse the state's Baptists.

Leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Missouri said it is clear that Chapman is collaborating with leaders of the conservative Project 1000 group now in control of the Missouri Baptist Convention to make it

harder for their group to start up and discourage churches from joining.

"We regret very much that our Southern Baptist leaders would seek to become involved in the life of a state convention in this way," the leaders said. "We know of no historical precedent for this type of action.

Still, BGCM organizers said they have no desire to fight with the MBC or the SBC. "On the contrary, we desire to build a relationship of cooperation that would enhance our efforts to work together to reach our world for Christ."

The new convention's leaders say the driving forces behind their venture are actions during the MBC's annual meeting last fall:

-- To escrow Cooperative Program funds for five institutions with boards that took action to elect their own trustees;

-- A "decision to pursue legal action against these institutions;" and

-- The application of "new qualifications established for leadership and membership" in the MBC.

The statement also responded to four reasons in Chapman's letter for not recognizing the new convention:

-- First, they took issue with Chapman's suggestion that the BGCM should not be recognized because the SBC already has a relationship with the MBC.

"Of course, the SBC already had a relationship with Southern Baptists in Virginia and Texas, but that did not keep them from developing a new relationship with the new conventions established in these states during recent years," BGCM organizers said.

-- Second, they responded to Chapman's assertion that "many of those persons opposing the current direction of the Missouri Baptist Convention are the same ones who have been opposing the direction of the Southern Baptist Convention in recent years and who have been attempting to dissuade churches in Missouri from supporting our work."

On the contrary, according to the news release: "The individuals that are represented in the workgroup leadership for the new convention are members in some of Missouri's oldest and most historic churches. A number of these churches are and have been among the leaders in Cooperative Program gifts as well as support for the Southern Baptist mission offerings for many years.

"These churches have been and continue to be loyal Southern Baptists. It is absurd to imply that they are not in 'friendly cooperation' with the purposes and work of the Southern Baptist Convention."

-- Third, Chapman asserted in his letter that the proposed convention "plans to incorporate practices contrary to the best interests of the Southern Baptist Convention."

"How can it be contrary to the interests of the Southern Baptist Convention to allow Southern Baptist congregations that have formed an autonomous state convention to forward Cooperative Program funds to SBC causes?" BGCM leaders asked.

-- Fourth, the leaders took issue with Chapman's suggestion that a new partnership would "tend to confuse the churches and complicate their financial support of the SBC" and that "Missouri churches do not need another avenue for getting their support to the SBC."

"We believe the Missouri Baptists are clearly capable of understanding the processes involved, and we do not believe it would complicate their support of the SBC," the leaders said. "In fact, requiring churches to send the national portion of Cooperative Program gifts directly to the SBC complicates the process."

BGCM organizers said another option is needed in Missouri because 11 percent of CP funds sent to the MBC will be placed in escrow rather than used for their intended purposes. Further, they said, there are no guarantees that the funds will not eventually be used to cover legal fees related to litigation against Missouri Baptist institutions.

What's in a name for Missouri Baptists?

By Mark Wingfield and Bob Allen

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- The drama surrounding a quest to start a new Baptist convention in Missouri has taken on Shakespearean proportions.

What's in a name?

At a Jan. 17 meeting in Sedalia, Mo., 350 Baptists representing 104 churches gathered to consider starting a new state Baptist convention. Their winter of discontent stems from conservatives they claim have changed the rules and character of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

At that meeting, organizers announced plans to constitute a new group to be called the Baptist Convention of Missouri. But alas, they hadn't filed papers with the Missouri secretary of state.

Enter Cindy Province, a lay leader in Project 1000, the group that toiled in denominational war to win control of the Missouri Baptist Convention in recent years.

Less than a week after the new group's announcement, Province, who lives in the St. Louis area, went to the secretary of state's office in Jefferson City and filed papers to incorporate a non-profit entity to be called Baptist Convention of Missouri.

"My primary purpose in doing that is not really hard to figure out," she said. "I simply wanted to protect the name."

She believes something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

"What this new convention is trying to do is deliberately deceptive in getting a name that is so close to Missouri Baptist Convention," she said. "Just rearranging the name, Missouri and Baptist and Convention and adding a two-letter preposition" is "not very honest."

So she paid a \$25 filing fee and took the name out of circulation Jan. 23, even though she has no intention of using the incorporated name.

"I'm a fourth-generation Missouri Baptist and took the steps that I felt needed to be taken personally to protect the Missouri Baptist Convention," she said.

Although she is a member of the Missouri Baptist Convention's executive board, she took the action on her own, she said. "No one on the executive board had any knowledge of what I was doing."

"As you like it," organizers of the new convention reacted on hearing their preferred name was nothing more than a midsummer night's dream. They adopted the name the Baptist General Convention of Missouri.

And this time, they took precautions to protect their name. W.B. Tichenor, an attorney working with the organizers, filed papers with the secretary of state Jan. 24, just to make sure love's labor wasn't lost.

Though full of sound and fury, the dispute really is much ado about nothing, suggested Jim Hill, who last year resigned as executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

Contrary to Province's accusation that the new group did practice to deceive in choosing a name, Hill said they merely wanted to thine own selves be true.

"We wanted a simple approach," he said. "Any word you add makes it a word you have to explain."

Adding to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the breakaway convention could have chosen to incorporate under the name Missouri Baptist Convention. Although that name has been in use by the existing convention since 1958, it never has been incorporated, he said.

But organizers of the new convention thought that would just further prove what fools these mortals be. "The name wasn't the most important issue to us," Hill said. "We did not want to argue with this group about a name."

So, as Shakespeare might have said about this tempest in a teapot, "All's well that ends well."

CBF reports increase in mid-year giving totals

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship reports contributions from churches and individuals slightly ahead of the last year's halfway mark.

The Atlanta-based CBF received nearly \$6.4 million in total contributions for July-December 2001, up 1.6 percent compared to the same period in 2000.

Undesignated gifts to CBF's missions and ministries budget, meanwhile, increased 4.1 percent.

Contributions to the 2001-02 Offering for Global Missions declined 10 percent, totaling more than \$1.2 million. The offering goal is \$6 million.

Other designated gifts were up 9.2 percent over the previous year. These included more than \$207,000 in contributions to two CBF emergency relief funds -- one for ministries in New York City and Washington, D.C., following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and a second for refugee ministries in Afghanistan.

Total revenues, which include all contributions plus earnings from the sale of church resources and earnings from investments, were 2.6 percent ahead of the same period last year.

"We know that giving is closely correlated with the economy," said Jim Strawn, CBF coordinator for finance and administrative services. "As our economy slipped into a recession last year, general giving to CBF slowed. But as often happens following a national crisis, designated gifts increase as in the case of the Sept. 11 tragedy."

CBF's budget for 2001-02 is \$18 million.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

President names head of faith-based office

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bush has named a new leader for his "faith-based initiative." Bush announced Feb. 1 that Jim Towey is the new director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

Towey, who has had experience with several religious non-profit agencies, most recently was the head of Aging with Dignity, a Florida-based advocacy group.

He describes himself as a Democrat and was director of Florida's human services agency under Democratic Gov. Lawton Chiles. However, he later endorsed Chiles' Republican successor, Gov. Jeb Bush, who is President Bush's brother. Towey also has worked for retired Republican Sen. Mark Hatfield of Oregon.

Towey is a Catholic who lists the late Mother Teresa as one of his major inspirations. Towey worked in India with Mother Teresa, and later volunteered at a home for AIDS patients in Washington operated by the nun's ministry.

Critics of the president's faith-based measure called Towey's appointment an effort to revive a controversial proposal that is floundering in Congress and said it sends mixed signals about the administration's commitment to the more controversial elements of the plan.

When announced a year ago as a cardinal aspect of Bush's domestic policy, the legislation called for expanding the ability of government agencies to provide direct grants to churches and other pervasively religious organizations that provide social services.

Both liberals and conservatives objected to parts of Bush's plan, however, saying such grants would provide unconstitutional government endorsement of religion as well as endanger the integrity of the religious organizations receiving money from the government. The legislation passed the House but stalled in the Senate.

According to news reports, White House officials have offered to drop the most controversial parts of the plan. They include the expansion of government grants to sectarian organizations and an exception that would have allowed religious groups that receive government money to discriminate in their hiring practices.

Also, Bush's announcement made clear that Towey's position and office have been reduced in their importance. Originally a cabinet-level position, Towey's office now is under the newly created White House office on national service

Towey was quoted in the Miami Herald last year as cautioning against government funding of pervasively sectarian social-service activities. "You shouldn't be trying to get converts on the government's nickel," he said.

However, in Friday's announcement, Bush employed rhetoric similar to what he has been using for more than a year to promote government support for religious agencies. "Government must expedite and stand on the side of faith-based programs," he said. "[Towey will] work closely with members of Congress from both parties to pass legislation that will put government squarely on the side of our faith- and community-based groups."

Critics of Bush's faith-based initiative greeted Towey's appointment with skepticism. "The faith-based initiative is stalled on the tracks," said Barry Lynn, head of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. "It will take more than a new conductor to get it rolling again."

-30-

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