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Mainstream leader accepts invitation to visit IMB

By Bob Allen

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) -- A leader of a self-described group of "mainstream" Baptists has accepted an invitation to meet with officials of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board.

David Currie, national consultant for the Mainstream Baptist Network and executive director of Texas Baptists Committed in San Angelo, Texas, said he received the invitation from a longtime acquaintance who is currently an IMB trustee.

Currie said that David Evans, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Amarillo, Texas, recently invited Currie to meet with him and President Jerry Rankin at IMB headquarters in Richmond, Va.

Asked why the invitation was offered, Evans told him, "We just want you to see the work of the International Mission Board."

"I'm going to go to the IMB," Currie announced Feb. 16 at the first national convocation of the Mainstream Baptist Network, a group that claims to represent traditional Baptist views while rejecting "fundamentalism" they believe dominates the Southern Baptist Convention. "I don't know when, and I'm going to ask questions on behalf of mainstream Baptists."

In the meantime, Currie said he is writing Rankin requesting the names and addresses of all missionaries that can be shared, and asking what is going to happen to missionaries if they don't sign the "Baptist Faith and Message" and for documentation of any charges of heresy against Southern Baptist missionaries.

"I'm going to ask those things and will report back to you," Currie said. "We deserve some answers. We care for these people. The real question is who is going to save these missionaries from their own board."

Earlier in his address to the Mainstream group, Currie criticized Rankin for asking the IMB's 5,100 missionaries to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," an act he earlier said wouldn't be required.

"Jerry Rankin and the IMB have drawn a line in the sand and said if you'll give up your freedom, step over it," Currie said. "What they've really said is if you'll replace 'Jesus is Lord' with 'the SBC is Lord,' step over it."

"To those on the mission field, I would say to you remember who sent you," Currie said. "You came from local churches. You may have been commissioned by the IMB, but the one who sent you was Jesus."

Rankin said he asked missionaries to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" because of suspicion that some may hold views that aren't shared by Southern Baptists. Currie, however, said it's "their own board," and not outsiders, that is raising such questions about missionaries. "Who is actually attacking the missionaries? It's their own board," he said. "Who has raised these issues? Their own board."

Currie said asking missionaries who have already been through the appointment process and served on the mission field to affirm that their views haven't changed would be like asking a pastor after 10 years out of the blue if he still believes in the resurrection.

Currie said he doesn't think SBC leaders are concerned so much about missionaries' theology as their agreement with a right-wing political agenda. "I call it spiritual terrorism or spiritual clergy abuse to ask a group of people to violate their conscience to appease people and their social agenda," he said.

"These folks we have sent out . have gone all over the world to say the Kingdom of God is near," Currie said. "We have the nerve to question their commitment and integrity. It's an amazing thing to me."

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Missionaries asked to choose between calling and integrity, father of two says

By Bob Allen

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist missionaries who object on principle to signing the "Baptist Faith and Message" are being forced to choose between their calling and their personal integrity, according to a father with two sons serving two-year mission stints in Asia.

Michael Chancellor, pastor of Crescent Heights Baptist Church in Abilene, Texas, has emerged as a leading critic of a recent letter by International Mission Board President Jerry Rankin asking 5,100 missionaries to affirm the faith statement as revised by the Southern Baptist Convention in 2000.

After reading Rankin's letter, Chancellor wrote a letter of his own criticizing Rankin's decision to require affirmation of the "Baptist Faith and Message" barely a year after saying missionaries wouldn't be required to do so.

Chancellor called Rankin's reversal a "betrayal of trust." Chancellor said the family initially had "profound reservations" about the nature of his oldest son's assignment through the IMB's two-year Journeyman program. "He told us that he trusted God and trusted the IMB to work in his best interests," Chancellor wrote.

Rankin has defended his request by saying that an earlier decision by IMB trustees not to require missionaries already on the field to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" had raised suspicions that there might be missionaries with unorthodox views.

"So you have some members of your board who are suspicious?" Chancellor chided Rankin. "Buy them a ticket to where our son is freezing in a dorm cell and let them backpack with him for eight days in the mountains looking for his people group that have yet to hear the gospel.

"Let those suspicious persons contract giardia because of the lack of good hygiene. Let them depend on the hospitality of strangers. Let them try to communicate with the native people and watch my son's devotion and love not only for Christ but for the people he was called to reach. Let these doubters sleep in the snow and walk for days with nothing more to eat than protein bars.

"And then if these gutless idiots don't have all their questions answered, before they retreat to their comfortable offices and homes in the States, let them stand there in the freezing snow and ask my son what he really believes about God, man, Christ and the universe."

Chancellor's letter was circulated widely over the Internet, leading to his invitation to deliver a "testimony" at the first-ever national convocation of the Mainstream Baptists Network.

"What Dr. Rankin has done, and I'm going to call it 'Rankin's great waffle,' is to lose sight of what is vitally important," Chancellor told Baptists meeting Feb. 15-16 in Charlotte, N.C.

Chancellor said missionaries that disagree with specific parts of the "Baptist Faith and Message" or as a matter of principle object to signing a creed are being asked to conclude that "one's calling is more important than one's personal integrity."

A few days before the Mainstream convocation, Chancellor said he received calls from his sons in East Asia reporting "they had been pulled aside and visited about" their father's open letter.

Chancellor said he apologized for hurt or problems he has caused his son, "but I reminded him there are issues here far larger than our family."

"These are some of the heaviest and saddest days of my life," Chancellor said. "I feel like I've had a fire in my house."

"We have missionaries on the fields of this world whose houses are in ashes, yet in their heart there is a call of God on their lives. It's a call that cannot be lived out in the United States. It has to be lived out on the field.

"What will we do? What will we say? We've got to speak. We've got to promise them that out of the ashes God is going to raise up something new."

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'Mainstream' Baptists request reversal of SBC policy decisions

By Bob Allen

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) -- A national organization of "mainstream" Baptists has challenged Southern Baptist Convention officials to rescind a series of recent actions in an effort to "restore an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect" within the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

The leadership board of the Mainstream Baptist Network -- a new national organization that claims to represent traditional Southern Baptist views while rejecting "fundamentalism" that the group believes dominates the SBC -- unanimously approved a resolution Feb. 15 addressed to trustee boards of three denominational agencies.

The action came on the eve of Mainstream Baptists' first-ever national convocation, held Feb. 15-16 in Charlotte, N.C.

The statement cited four recent actions that leaders said have left mainstream Baptists "deeply disturbed:"

The president of the SBC International Mission Board recently requested missionaries to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" after earlier saying they would not be required to do so. IMB President Jerry Rankin said the reason for the change is that not requiring missionaries to sign the document in the first place raised suspicion that some missionaries hold unconventional views.

"Baptists have never been a creedal people," the Mainstream Network leaders responded. "Requiring missionaries to sign a confession that violates their conscience and conviction that there is no creed but the Bible does nothing to address the forces that are disrupting our mission efforts by creating a climate of mistrust and suspicion surrounding our missionaries."

-- The North American Mission Board recently wrote the triply aligned District of Columbia Baptist Convention asking for direct oversight of personnel paid with NAMB funds. NAMB leaders based the request

on theology of other sponsoring bodies that they regard as liberal and the perception that speakers at D.C. convention meetings were too critical of SBC policies.

"This violates the Baptist principle of autonomy governing relationships between the Southern Baptist Convention and autonomous Baptist state conventions and associations," the Mainstream resolution said. "Never before have Southern Baptists attempted to exercise this kind of hierarchical control."

-- NAMB also recently decided it would no longer endorse ordained women as chaplains. NAMB officials reasoned that many Baptists believe ordination is appropriate for pastors but not other ministers, and the "Baptist Faith and Message" says women shouldn't be senior pastors.

The Mainstream resolution said the action "violates the Baptist principles of the priesthood of every believer and of local church autonomy."

"Females called by God and ordained by Baptist churches deserve the encouragement and endorsement of the convention that serves their churches," it continued. "It is disturbing that in the future no Southern Baptist female will be able to serve the men and women in the United States military and in our prisons, hospitals and other institutions that require ordained chaplains."

-- Executive Committee President Morris Chapman told leaders of a new Baptist convention being organized in Missouri that the SBC would not relate to the new body or receive funds from it. While the SBC already recognizes breakaway conventions in two moderate-led states, Chapman said recognizing an alternative convention in Missouri would harm the conservative-led Missouri Baptist Convention and confuse churches.

"If the SBC can relate to and receive funds from multiple state conventions in Texas and Virginia, there should be no valid reason to refuse funds from multiple state conventions in Missouri," the Mainstream resolution said. "If there are valid reasons for limiting relations to a single convention in Missouri, then the Executive Committee of the SBC should have the integrity to limit relations to a single state convention in Texas and Virginia."

"Mainstream Baptists honor the cherished Baptist principles of liberty of conscience, priesthood of every believer, the autonomy of the local church and the sole authority of the Holy Scripture," the statement concluded. "Therefore, we respectfully request that the trustees of the IMB, the NAMB and the Executive Committee of the SBC restore an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect within the SBC by reviewing and rescinding these disturbing actions."

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Bush proposes tax credits for private education

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bush's proposed budget for fiscal year 2003 contains a tax-credit provision that some critics term a "back-door" approach to tuition vouchers for private schools.

The concept of the government providing tax dollars to pay for tuition at private and parochial schools was a prominent feature in a Bush-proposed education bill last year. Congress removed the voucher proposal before passing the bill, however, because it was so controversial.

Opponents to school vouchers say they hurt public schools and that government funds going to parochial schools violates the separation of church and state.

Bush's new proposal would set up an "Alternative to Failing School" tax credit for families in certain public school districts who choose to send their children to private schools. The credit would reimburse parents for tuition and other educational expenses up to \$2,500.

Supporters say the plan simply returns parents' money to them to do with as they choose. Opponents argue it would put the government in the business of subsidizing religious and other private schools.

A coalition of public-school, civil-libertarian and religious-liberty groups announced opposition to the proposal Feb. 9. "Because the tax credit could be applied to reimburse dollar-for-dollar private religious school tuition, it raises serious church/state concerns and undermines accountability for how public education dollars are spent," the National Coalition for Public Education said in a letter to members of Congress.

The coalition also opposes another aspect of Bush's education-budget proposal. A new \$50 million "Choice Demonstration Fund" would be used to support research on vouchers and conduct a pilot voucher project. Congress rejected a similar proposal last year.

The total estimated cost of the tax-credit and voucher-demonstration projects would approach \$4 billion over the next five years.

Congress will address the proposals when it considers Bush's budget later this year.

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Female-led missions group seeks to overcome neglect

By Bob Allen

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) -- A "misogynist missiology" in the Southern Baptist Convention prompted formation of a new missionary-sending organization led by and focused on women, according to a leader of the movement.

"The SBC no longer represents women or reaches women," said Catherine Allen, a founder of the new group Global Women.

She commented during the first national convocation of the Mainstream Baptist Network -- an organization that claims to represent traditional Southern Baptist views while rejecting "fundamentalism" that the group believes dominates the SBC -- held Feb. 15-16 in Charlotte, N.C.

Allen, a historian who has written books on women's involvement in missions, said missions has been the "main thing" that has held Southern Baptists together.

For many Baptists today, however, missions is no longer the main thing, she said. In a recent survey, missions ranked ninth out of 10 priorities rated by leaders of local Southern Baptist churches. "I imagine it has slipped since then," she said.

Historically, she said, women were a driving force for Southern Baptist missions. Women in 1888 defied tradition by organizing Woman's Missionary Union as a female-led auxiliary to the SBC for support of missions.

Allen, a former long-time employee of WMU, said that also is changing. She quoted a former convention president as saying publicly that Southern Baptist missions "must be de-feminized."

"We have had a defective doctrine foisted upon us," she said. "There is a misogynist missiology at work."

Allen said traditional missionary-sending organizations tend to neglect women.

"Women who most need to hear the gospel are not going to hear it," she said. "If they happen to hear it from a Southern Baptist missionary, it will be a gospel that puts them in their place," she added in a reference to recent SBC edicts that women should not preach the gospel and must submit to their husbands in the home.

Allen also said women are "being silenced" on the mission field, citing a "dwindling" proportion of women in foreign missions.

In a third disturbing trend, Allen said women "are leaving the first love of missions and the church."

The percentage of women in membership of Southern Baptist churches is now below the norm for evangelicals, she said.

"Women's work for women was the hallmark of the great successes of our Baptist heritage," Allen said. Today, however, "There are twice as many unevangelized women in the world as there are Christian women."

"The question before us is not simply whether we [women] have the freedom to proclaim the gospel," she said, "but whether they [women] have the freedom to hear the gospel."

Global Women, a Birmingham, Ala., -based missionary-sending organization led by and focused on reaching women, formed last year because founders "saw what had to be done, and we did it," Allen said.

Some have criticized the group as competing with WMU. "Global Women is a new kind of mission agency," Allen said. "It's not a replacement for anything. It's not like anything else."

While the organization is led by women, she said, it "welcomes partnership" with men.

Unlike other missions agencies, she said Global Women will "support women regardless of marital status" and will "cooperate with any missions organization that treats women decently."

Suzanah Raffield, a member of the founding board and the group's paid coordinator, said 33 percent of the world's women haven't heard the gospel message, making them the largest unreached-people group on Earth. They also suffer disproportionately from poverty, abuse and other ills.

"In the cries of women we hear the voice of God," she said.

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Former Illinois exec Wiley joins NC convention staff

By Tony Cartledge

CORRECTION: This story went out previously with an incorrect byline.

ASHEBORO, N.C. (ABP) -- Bob Wiley, who resigned last fall after five years as executive director of the Illinois Baptist State Association, will join the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina staff as senior consultant for church planting for the state's eastern region.

Wiley's appointment was approved by the convention's executive committee Jan. 29.

Prior to his tenure as the Illinois convention's top executive, Wiley was director of the associational missions division for the Home Mission Board (now the North American Mission Board) from 1986 to 1996. He worked as a director of missions and served in other positions with the Home Mission Board from 1976 to 1986.

Milton Hollifield, executive team leader for the mission-growth evangelism team, said Illinois Baptists started more than 200 new churches during Wiley's and that he "continues to think creatively and plan strategically in assisting pastors and directors of missions."

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