



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

February 28, 2002

MAR 11 2002

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee

(02-19)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Texas Baptists establish rescue fund for disenfranchised SBC missionaries
- Texas Baptists move closer to endorsing chaplains
- Arthur Andersen reportedly seeking to settle Foundation case
- Supreme Court refuses case about Ten Commandments display

Texas Baptists establish rescue fund for disenfranchised SBC missionaries

By Bob Allen and Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Baptist General Convention of Texas has set up a special "transition fund" encouraging the state's churches to support any Southern Baptist Convention missionaries who resign or are fired for refusing to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

The safety net is centerpiece of a five-part recommendation by a Texas Baptist Missions Review and Initiatives Committee. It responds to a recent letter by SBC International Mission Board President Jerry Rankin asking all 5,100 overseas missionaries to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" or to explain why not.

Rankin's request has been widely criticized, not only by those who disagree with recent revisions to the official SBC faith statement, but also by voices who say appealing to any written authority except the Bible violates Baptists' historic aversion to creeds.

The BGCT transition fund would help missionaries with such immediate needs as housing, food, schooling and grief counseling. Intended to "meet the needs of these missionaries at this difficult time in their lives," it won approval of the state Executive Board Feb. 26 with one dissenting vote.

The response is the strongest to date in a growing rift between the conservative-led SBC and its largest state or regional affiliate. Two years ago, the moderate-led Texas convention voted to reduce funding to SBC seminaries and other selected agencies, charging they no longer represent the views of traditional Baptists. A separate study of SBC missions-sending agencies last year criticized both the International and North American mission boards but recommended no major funding changes.

After Rankin's letter, however, a review committee left in place to monitor issues involving the state convention's missions' relationships called a series of emergency meetings to draft a response.

Other parts of the recommendation approved by the Texas leadership board instruct:

-- A state Administrative Committee to establish a way for Texas Baptists to contribute to the transition fund.

-- The Executive Board staff to "actively seek churches and institutions that will assist in caring for these missionaries."

-- The state convention to "work with other Baptist groups who share this concern."

-- The Missions Review and Initiatives Committee to "explore positive and proactive ways in which the churches and institutions of the BGCT can encourage and assist these missionaries to express their God-given calling."

Eighteen individuals have already pledged a total of \$1 million to launch the effort. They include Houston multi-millionaire John Baugh, a longtime critic of "fundamentalists" in SBC leadership; retired Baylor University President Herbert Reynolds; and Paul Powell, retired president of the SBC Annuity Board and current dean at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

While about 1,500 IMB missionaries appointed during the last two years have already affirmed the new "Baptist Faith and Message," Rankin had earlier said veteran missionaries already on the field wouldn't be asked to do so.

In his recent letter to missionaries, however, Rankin said he changed his mind because of lingering controversy over the faith statement. Rankin said all missionaries should be accountable to Southern Baptists, who provide their support. Affirming the statement, he said, would protect them against unfounded charges of heresy.

The Southern Baptist Convention first adopted the "Baptist Faith and Message" in 1925 and revised it in 1963. The statement is not binding on local churches or individual Baptists but has been used for years as a guide for hiring and firing at SBC agencies.

Earlier versions, drafted in response to controversies of the time, attempted to define parameters of doctrinal consensus to embrace Southern Baptists' broad diversity. After conservatives won control of the nation's largest Protestant denomination in the 1980s, however, SBC leaders set out to narrow the document with amendments to correct what they considered lax doctrine in the 1963 edition.

Criticism of the current "Baptist Faith and Message" centers on:

-- A 1998 family amendment, which calls on wives to "graciously submit" to their husbands. Critics say it subjugates women and relies on a faulty interpretation of the fifth chapter of Ephesians.

-- A new proclamation in a 2000 rewrite of the confession that the Bible limits the office of pastor to men. While few women serve as senior pastors of Southern Baptist churches, critics say determining the biblical criteria for choosing a pastor is a matter for the local church, not the convention.

-- Removal from a statement on Scripture that Jesus Christ is the primary criterion for determining matters of interpretation. Proponents of the change say it had been abused and gave left-of-center Baptists a loophole to infiltrate denominational leadership in the 1960s and 1970s. Critics say removing the phrase created more questions than it answered by elevating the Bible to an object of worship on level with Christ.

-- A definition of the "Baptist Faith and Message" as a statement of "doctrinal accountability." Opponents say that language for the first time gives the document the force of a creed. Baptists historically suffered persecution for opposing creeds of official state churches in Europe and colonial America, insisting that believers are subject only to Christ as revealed in the Bible.

Despite recent changes in the faith statement, Rankin has said he still believes most, if not all, SBC missionaries will be willing to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

"Southern Baptists rightly expect the missionaries they send out and support to represent the confession of faith our churches have adopted," Rankin wrote in a Feb. 14 guest editorial submitted to Baptist state papers. "The administration of our mission entities should provide that assurance."

As a first step in its response to Rankin's request to missionaries, the Texas missions-review committee set up a confidential e-mail address inviting missionaries to indicate whether they would comply with Rankin's request. During its first two weeks, the address logged communications from 60 missionary couples who said signing the statement would violate their conscience.

Keith Parks, a former IMB president who initiated the e-mail solicitation, said it's unknown how many missionaries might eventually request help from the BGCT, but he predicted, "It won't be in the hundreds."

Charles Wade, executive director of the BGCT, said the number is irrelevant.

"If there is only one missionary family who for conscience's sake has to return, I will be honored to stand beside them and embarrassed if I fail to do so," Wade said.

Despite the protest, Rankin said in his editorial statement there is nothing new about his request. He said missionaries under appointment by the IMB have since 1970 been asked to affirm they have read and agree with the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Rankin said he asked missionaries to affirm the most recent version of the statement only "to remove suspicions that their beliefs and practices could be inconsistent with our common confession of faith and move us forward in reaching a lost world."

Rankin denied that his request implies any lack of confidence in missionaries. Their life's calling, he said, "doesn't come from theological relativism, but out of a conviction based on the authority of God's Word and obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ."

Rankin also responded to allegations that the SBC has changed its main priority from missions to doctrinal conformity by pointing to record missionary appointments during the last five years.

Rankin has said that missionaries who refuse to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" won't necessarily be fired.

But Wade said that is little consolation to missionaries in mid-career, who after years of sacrificial service are now being asked to sign a loyalty pledge.

"We have no reason to feel comfortable that the missionaries [who refuse to sign] are not now under serious attack from their own administrators and board," Wade said. "We have reason to believe the IMB trustees will press to remove these missionaries if the president does not do so."

The Texas action, without precedent by a Baptist state convention, is reminiscent of a 1993 offer by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to assume responsibility for SBC missionaries in Europe opting to resign after IMB trustees voted to defund an international Baptist theological seminary in Switzerland.

Backlash from the controversy provided a windfall in giving to the CBF's alternative missions program, then in its infancy.

With a waiting list of more than a hundred missionary candidates it can't afford to send, CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal said the Atlanta-based group isn't now in a position to extend a blanket offer to all SBC missionaries wanting to jump ship.

Vestal affirmed the BGCT for its "heroic and compassionate act," however, and pledged to help disenfranchised missionaries "in any way we can."

CBF Global Missions Co-Coordinator Gary Baldrige said the Fellowship is willing to work with the BGCT on referral of IMB missionaries whose skills match priority needs in the CBF's missions program.

However, for every new missionary family it appoints, Baldrige said, the CBF must raise an additional \$100,000 a year for total support.

-30-

-- With reporting by Ken Camp, Greg Warner and Lisa Jones.

Texas Baptists move closer to endorsing chaplains

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Chaplains and pastoral counselors soon will be able to seek endorsement from the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The BGCT Executive Board voted without dissent to create a chaplaincy endorsement board Feb. 26. This is the next-to-last step in a process that will make the BGCT the first state Baptist convention to offer the endorsements required by hospitals, prisons, businesses, law enforcement agencies and the military for the chaplains they employ.

The last step will be to gain official recognition by the Armed Forces Chaplains Board that certifies religious bodies as endorsers of military chaplains. Once that recognition is granted, most other employers of chaplains recognize the religious body as well.

The action responds to recent changes in policy by the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board requiring chaplains to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message." The BGCT has officially rejected the faith statement, objecting to changes in an earlier version adopted by the SBC in 1963.

In February, NAMB trustees also declared the SBC no longer would endorse female chaplains who have been ordained.

The proposal approved by the BGCT Executive Board calls for endorsing female and male chaplains for all roles to which they are called, whether ordained or not.

The endorsing board will focus primarily on Texas chaplains at first, but will eventually work with chaplains from outside the state as well, said Stephen Hatfield, chairman of the BGCT Administrative Committee and pastor of First Baptist Church of Lewisville, Texas.

In other action at the February meeting, the Texas Executive Board adopted a resolution asking SBC leaders to "cease and desist from seeking to undermine the mission endeavors of state conventions in general and the Baptist General Convention of Texas in particular."

The resolution, approved by the 220-member board with three dissenting votes, responded to an open letter sent to Texas Baptist churches by SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman.

Chapman's letter encouraged churches to designate their funds instead of giving through the BGCT's adopted budget as a way to get more money to the SBC.

BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade called the letter "improper, mean-spirited and ungrateful" for the \$36.5 million the state convention forwarded to the SBC last year.

-30-

Arthur Andersen reportedly seeking to settle Foundation case

By Bob Allen

PHOENIX (ABP) -- USA Today reported Feb. 25 that Arthur Andersen is quietly trying to settle a legal case involving the bankrupt Baptist Foundation of Arizona.

Andersen has come under public scrutiny for its alleged role in the collapse of the Texas energy giant Enron. An earlier, lesser-known lawsuit filed on behalf of BFA investors, meanwhile, claims Andersen ignored red flags and issued clean audits, in effect aiding and abetting Foundation officers who are charged with defrauding 13,000 investors out of \$590 million.

The newspaper reported that Andersen lawyers are hoping to reach a settlement prior to a 30-day trial scheduled to begin March 4. The report said Andersen offered \$150 million to the foundation's bankruptcy trust, and that amount would probably go higher. The suit by the trust asks for \$300 million in compensatory damages, plus punitive damages.

That follows an earlier report that a Phoenix law firm that gave legal advice to the Foundation had placed \$21 million in an escrow account for a possible future settlement.

Those settlements would come as good news to victims of an alleged Ponzi scheme. They have been told they can expect to recover no more than 39 percent to 44 percent of their original investment through a court-ordered liquidation of Foundation assets.

In a related development, more than a hundred investors packed a Phoenix courtroom Feb. 25 for a hearing about whether to certify BFA victims for a class-action lawsuit against Arthur Andersen. Andersen opposes certification, saying investors should have to sue individually. Investors say a class action would save money on legal fees and likely result in bigger rewards. A ruling is expected in about two weeks.

Also, CBS is reportedly planning to air a segment related to the BFA collapse on its "60 Minutes II" news program March 6. Details were unavailable when this story was written Feb. 27.

Andersen has denied any wrongdoing in the Foundation cases, claiming the firm's auditors also were misled by BFA executives intent on covering a crime. The accounting giant has settled other large class-action lawsuits in recent years, however, including \$220 million in the Waste Management case and \$110 million in a lawsuit by Sunbeam, without admission of wrongdoing.

Andersen also has reportedly offered up to \$800 million to avoid legal damage in Enron cases, but those overtures were rejected.

In criminal cases also stemming from the Arizona Foundation collapse, three former BFA executives have pleaded guilty to felony charges. Five others have been indicted and are awaiting trial on charges of fraud, theft and racketeering.

They are accused of hiding losses from investors through a maze of subsidiary corporations while paying off old investors with money invested by new ones. Victims, many who are elderly and invested their retirement funds, say BFA representatives continued to solicit new investors, in churches, when they knew the agency was in trouble.

Investors say they believed their investments would be used to start new churches and support Baptist ministries. In fact, most of the money was going into speculative property investments, which enabled the Foundation to enjoy high returns during a real-estate boon but left investors holding the bag when property values plummeted.

Rather than report those losses when they occurred, lawsuits allege, Foundation officials misled investors through paper transactions among subsidiaries that inflated the value of holdings far above their market value.

After a newspaper expose raised questions about BFA practices, Arizona's Attorney General's Office began an investigation and in 1999 ordered the Foundation to stop selling securities. The Foundation later declared bankruptcy, listing about \$640 million in debts and \$240 million in assets. It is thought to be the largest failure of a church organization in U.S. history.

-30-

Supreme Court refuses case about Ten Commandments display

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- For the second time in less than a year, the U.S. Supreme Court has declined to hear a case that could have cleared up confusion over the issue of government-supported displays of the Ten Commandments.

The high court did not comment in its refusal to hear a challenge to a lower court's ruling banning one such display in Indiana.

A group of civil libertarians in the state sued Gov. Frank O'Bannon over plans to erect a monument depicting the Ten Commandments on the grounds of the state capitol in Indianapolis. The Seventh U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals blocked the proposed monument, saying it would create an unconstitutional government endorsement of religion.

The seven-foot granite statue was to replace an earlier Ten Commandments monument that stood on the capitol grounds since the 1950s but was removed in 1991 after being defaced by vandals.

Last May, the justices also refused to hear an appeal by the city of Elkhart, Ind., to a similar ruling by the Seventh Circuit. That court ruled that a display of the Ten Commandments at the city's municipal building violated the religious-liberty protections of the First Amendment because it endorsed religion.

The Supreme Court routinely declines to comment when it refuses to hear cases. In a rare move, however, three conservative justices issued a written dissent to the refusal to hear the Elkhart appeal. Chief Justice William Rehnquist, joined by Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas, said the city's display "simply reflects the Ten Commandments' role in the development of our legal system."

Supporters of government displays of the Ten Commandments often argue that the displays are constitutional because they honor them as a legal document rather than as a religious one.

But as Justice John Paul Stevens pointed out in a rebuttal to Rehnquist's dissent, the first line of the Ten Commandments in the Elkhart monument was in larger type than the rest of the monument, and read "I AM the LORD thy God."

"[T]he graphic emphasis placed on those first lines is rather hard to square with the proposition that the monument expresses no particular religious preference," Stevens wrote.

At least four justices must agree to hear a case before the Supreme Court takes it up.

Despite the Seventh Circuit rulings and rulings in other regional U.S. appeals courts striking down government-sponsored Ten Commandments displays, lower court rulings in some parts of the country have gone the other way. This means that such displays could be considered legal in some parts of the country but illegal in others. The Supreme Court is the only legal entity with the authority to resolve the differences.

-30-

END
