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D.C. Baptists turn down NAMB request for governance

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The District of Columbia Baptist Convention has refused demands for increased accountability to the Southern Baptist Convention, setting up a showdown that could end 125 years of a joint Baptist witness in the nation's capital.

In a meeting closed to the press, the DCBC executive board voted March 11 to turn down a series of requests by the SBC North American Mission Board to address a perceived rift between Southern Baptists and the state affiliate.

Among them was that the DCBC change its organizational structure so that all funding from NAMB would be administered by a person directly accountable to Southern Baptists and not the state convention's executive director.

But leaders of the Washington convention said that would "violate basic management principles" in rejecting a 12-month trial period proposed by NAMB to implement the changes.

The four-page response to the NAMB proposal further requests a formal statement within 45 days from NAMB President Robert Reccord about the agency's intentions concerning the future of its partnership with the DCBC.

Southern Baptists provide nearly a third of the D.C. convention's \$1.5 million annual budget. Most of that comes from the Alpharetta, Ga.,-based NAMB in the form of joint funding of projects outlined in a cooperative agreement.

Unlike most other Southern Baptist state conventions, however, the DCBC isn't aligned solely with the SBC. Historically affiliated with both the SBC and American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., the group added ties to the predominantly African-American Progressive National Baptist Convention in 1998.

NAMB officials had cited disagreement with American Baptists in stated positions on abortion, women's ordination and acceptance of gays, saying those differences raised "stewardship" issues about continuing the joint witness.

In a letter to DCBC leaders last fall, NAMB officials outlined six conditions for continuing the historic partnership:

-- Change the DCBC structure so that programs funded by NAMB are distinct from other areas and are overseen by a NAMB strategist.

In their response, D.C. leaders said the idea would "fragment" the state convention's work and "segregate our program and staff along denominational lines." No one has ever questioned the convention's handling and distribution of NAMB funds, they said, and the state convention has increased its giving to Southern Baptist causes. "We deeply regret NAMB's questioning our stewardship," the response continued.

-- Agree not to promote "cultural festivals" that include non-Christian religions.

In the response, D.C. leaders said there is no program promoted under that title. Recognizing the autonomy of local churches, however, the leaders said they don't discourage member churches from engaging in interfaith dialogue and collaboration. Rather than implying endorsement of other faiths, they said such relationships provide opportunities for Christian witness and dialogue.

-- The Capital Baptist newspaper should not contain articles that "denigrate" the SBC.

The response said the newspaper would be careful to label opinions that do not represent official stances of the state convention and strive for a "balanced tone."

-- Speakers at DCBC events should represent "theological tenets" of the SBC and that criticism of the SBC follow the pattern in Matthew 18.

D.C. leaders said they don't believe any speakers have denigrated the SBC, but they don't assume responsibility for oral and written comments of invited speakers. In addition, they said, "We affirm Matthew 18."

-- The NAMB strategist administer all NAMB funds "in consultation with" the DCBC executive director.

The executive board response welcomed "enhancement" of administration of NAMB funds but said sufficient accountability is already in place to ensure that NAMB funds are distributed in keeping with NAMB policies.

-- The NAMB strategist shall supervise all jointly funded mission personnel.

"All employees receiving their checks from the DCBC come under supervision of the executive director/minister of the DCBC," the response said. "In our opinion, the introduction of a NAMB strategist would violate basic management principles."

"After prayerful consideration," the response concluded, "we believe that NAMB's proposed 12-month trial arrangement would promote increased tensions or ill-will between DCBC and NAMB."

It said Washington Baptists desire to continue and strengthen the historic relationship, and that stated core values and missions of the DCBC and NAMB are consistent. It also affirmed a commitment to comply with the cooperative agreement between the two entities.

Reccord said through a spokesman March 12 that he hadn't had time to review the response thoroughly, but he is "disappointed that it appears the D.C. convention has rejected NAMB's proposal."

Reccord said NAMB officials and trustees "will carefully study" the issue before responding. He said he doesn't feel constrained to respond within the 45-day limit, however, noting that the DCBC took nearly six months to respond to NAMB proposal.

NAMB spokesman Marty King said he was disappointed that neither agency representatives nor the media were allowed to attend the meeting "in order to better understand" the convention's response.

Tish Jones, administrative assistant and treasurer for the DCBC, said leaders decided to close the meeting "so the family could discuss its business before we released what we wanted to say." She said a press release would be issued March 13.

Jones said final figures weren't immediately available for the number of registered delegates, but a total head count of people attending the meeting reached 170. The vote on the response to NAMB passed on a show-of-hands vote by a "very obvious" majority, she said.

Jim Burcham, pastor of First Baptist Church in Upper Marlboro, Md., was one of those against the D.C. response. Burcham, whose suburban church is the D.C. convention's second-largest financial supporter, said he doesn't think the concerns raised by NAMB are unfounded.

Burcham, a conservative Southern Baptist, said he has been concerned for some time about the leadership of the District of Columbia convention and predicted his congregation "will be faced with a decision very shortly about what we're going to do" in response.

Burcham also claimed opposing views were "squelched" at the executive board meeting and that one speaker was shouted down.

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Mainstream groups rally support for missionaries

By Robert O'Brien

SAN ANGELO, Texas (ABP) -- Leaders of a Mainstream Baptist Network have endorsed a fund set up by Texas Baptists to aid Southern Baptist missionaries who object to a new requirement that they affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

Meeting by conference call March 7, the network's national board of directors affirmed the Baptist General Convention of Texas for standing against what they call "creedalism."

The network claims to represent traditional Baptist views while rejecting "fundamentalism" that members say dominates the Southern Baptist Convention. Mainstream leaders have been critical of recent policies by the SBC International and North American Mission boards and Executive Committee they say exclude non-fundamentalists.

Meanwhile, state Mainstream organizations have taken action on their own since the BGCT announced a new fund to care for missionaries who refuse to affirm the faith statement as a matter of principle.

In Oklahoma, Mainstream Baptists plan to promote and receive offerings from people in the state who want to contribute to the BGCT Missionary Transition Fund. Pledges in Oklahoma have reached \$250,000 so far, said Bruce Prescott of Norman, Okla., executive director of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists.

He said Oklahoma funds will be given "with the understanding that, when the funds are distributed (by Texas Baptists), priority will be given to meeting the needs of Southern Baptist missionaries from Oklahoma."

In Arkansas, the board of directors of Arkansas Baptists Committed has sent out letters across the state, reporting establishment of a "Save the Missionaries" fund, according to Tony Woodell of Little Rock, ABC president.

In South Carolina, the Mainstream board of directors voted "to promote, encourage and forward funds to the Missionary Transition Fund established by the Baptist General Convention of Texas," said J. Floyd Parker, president of Mainstream South Carolina Baptists.

In Alabama, Mel Deason, of Birmingham, executive director of Mainstream Alabama Baptists, said plans are underway for a response.

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Past, present leaders disagree about impact of new IMB request

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- The controversy over a recent request that Southern Baptist missionaries affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" has prompted a curious argument: Is it really anything new?

Current administrators of the SBC's International Mission Board say "no."

Former administrators of what was previously named the SBC's Foreign Mission Board say "yes."

The question has generated tense debate in recent weeks, since IMB President Jerry Rankin wrote more than 5,000 missionaries asking them to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" as revised by the SBC in 2000.

Critics say Rankin is requiring missionaries to sign a creed, something they view as un-Baptist.

Rankin and other IMB leaders insist that isn't true. In fact, they say, they are asking nothing different than what was required in the past, before fundamentalists gained control of the SBC hierarchy.

"Requiring missionaries to affirm the 'Baptist Faith and Message' has been the board's practice for decades, even under the administration of Keith Parks," said Larry Cox, IMB vice president for mobilization. Parks, who served as president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board from 1980 to 1992, now serves on a Baptist General Convention of Texas committee that recently created a transition fund to support IMB missionaries who won't sign the faith statement.

Rankin echoed Cox's assessment in an editorial piece distributed to state Baptist newspapers.

"Since 1970, under the leadership of Dr. Baker James Cauthen, and later under Dr. Keith Parks, every Southern Baptist missionary appointed by what was then the Foreign Mission Board signed a statement that he or she had read and was in agreement with the 'Baptist Faith and Message,'" Rankin wrote.

But Parks and other former missionary personnel administrators contend there is a vast difference between what was required of missionaries then and now.

"This current demand is different from what was expected of missionaries in the past," Parks asserted, explaining that in 38 years of service with the Foreign Mission Board, he went through the candidate process himself, later worked in the missionary personnel office walking others through the process and eventually administered the process as agency president.

"Previously, persons seeking missionary appointment were examined for doctrinal beliefs to determine if they represented basic beliefs of Baptists in general," he explained. "They were requested to state what they believed in their own words. Staff and board members reviewed their statements and raised questions if needed. They also asked if they were in general agreement with the 'Baptist Faith and Message.'

"I personally stated that I could never sign anything except a Bible as my statement of faith. Nor did I expect or desire missionaries to sign a statement about the Bible written by fallible human beings."

Bill Marshall, a veteran missionary to Israel who later became vice president for human resources in the Parks administration, confirmed Parks' recollection.

"The 'Baptist Faith and Message' statement was not considered a criteria for appointment," Marshall said. "Rather, there were specific theological areas to which missionary candidates were to respond in writing as a part of their process. Those questions or statements, which were to be in their own words, included the nature of God, the Bible, the Holy Spirit, Jesus, the church, etc."

"Current IMB leaders err in their historical reflection as to what potential missionaries had to sign to be appointed," he said.

Louis Cobbs, another former personnel director for the Foreign Mission Board, made similar claims in a Feb. 18 letter to the editor published in the Baptist Standard.

"For many years, missionary candidates were requested to write 'in their own words' their confession or statement of faith," Cobbs wrote. "Although there was one recommendation adopted in 1919, but never implemented, for candidates to subscribe to 'A Statement of Belief,' it was not until 1970 that FMB trustees required candidates for appointment to sign their response to the question, 'Are your doctrinal beliefs in substantial agreement with those adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention as printed in the 'Baptist Faith and Message.'"

Confronted with those opinions, an IMB spokeswoman repeated that "asking for affirmation of the 'Baptist Faith and Message' has been a part of the missionary appointment process for many years."

Wendy Norvelle, an IMB assistant vice president for mobilization, outlined evolution of the wording used to ask missionary candidates about their agreement with the 'Baptist Faith and Message' since 1970.

In 1970, candidates were asked: "Are your doctrinal beliefs in substantial agreement with those printed in 'Baptist Faith and Message' (1963) and adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963?"

In 1975, the question was modified to ask: "Are you familiar with the contents of the 'Baptist Faith and Message?' Are you in substantial agreement with this statement? Please cite and explain the areas of differences in beliefs and/or interpretations."

By early 1976, the question was modified again to ask: "Are you familiar with the contents of the 'Baptist Faith and Message?' Are you in agreement with the statement? Please cite and explain any area of differences."

In 1990, the question read: "When did you last read the 'Baptist Faith and Message?' Are you in agreement with the statement? If no, attach a separate sheet of paper citing and explaining any area of difference."

In 1995, the question was stated more succinctly, with a place to respond yes or no to this statement: "I have read and am in agreement with the 'Baptist Faith and Message.'" Candidates who checked "no" were asked to "attach a separate sheet of paper citing and explaining any area of difference."

Currently, candidates are asked to respond "yes" or "no" to this statement: "I have read and am in agreement with the current 'Baptist Faith and Message.'" If they check "no," they are instructed to "please cite any area of difference." Then they also are asked to sign a second statement: "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."

In addition to the debate over how earlier and current requirements compare for missionary candidates, critics of the latest IMB policy say it is unfair to change the terms of employment for missionaries who signed on under the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message." Missionaries who were examined and appointed in broad compliance with the 1963 faith statement now are being asked to affirm a different faith statement.

Although overwhelmingly adopted by messengers to the 2000 SBC annual meeting, the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" has met with strong opposition. Messengers to BGCT annual sessions twice have refused to endorse changes to the faith statement.

Objections include the statement's description of itself as an "instrument of doctrinal accountability," removal of a phrase that said Jesus Christ is "the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted" and weakened language concerning the Baptist doctrine called the priesthood of the believer.

It's still unclear about what will happen to IMB missionaries who refuse to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" or who note objections to parts of it. Rankin told a group of Baptist editors in February that missionaries who didn't sign would not necessarily be terminated, but he acknowledged final decisions had not been made on how to deal with such a problem.

Some missionaries on the field, however, have reported that lower-level administrators have sent them a clear message that failure to sign the statement as requested by Rankin could imperil their jobs.

Norvelle said IMB personnel "have long had the freedom to cite differences" with the SBC's faith statement and "that hasn't changed."

Neither she nor other IMB officials, however, responded to a question about discussion of this matter among IMB trustees in board meetings last year. Trustees reportedly discussed requiring missionaries to sign the affirmation of the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," with some asserting that any who did not sign should be removed.

Rankin has said he asked missionaries to sign the affirmation as an administrative action so IMB trustees would not have to make that an official board policy.

He said his request was needed to silence questions some have about the doctrinal integrity of the missionary force.

"The reason I have asked them to reaffirm their beliefs in regard to the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message' is 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," he wrote in the editorial piece disseminated by the IMB.

In the letter to missionaries, Rankin explained: "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."

But Parks said those suspicions are unfounded. During his 13 years as president of the mission board, he said, only 10 missionaries out of 3,000 were ever charged with heresy. After careful examination, just two of those were found to have "drifted from acceptable Baptist doctrine" and terminated.

"The former system was reliable as well as baptistic," Parks said.

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