



# Associated Baptist Press

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Nashville, Tennessee

April 15, 2002

(02-29)

**APR 22 2002**

## IN THIS ISSUE:

- Missouri Baptist Convention 'owns' renegade agencies, legal opinion says
- Virginia Baptists to meet to vote on revisioning plan

### Missouri Baptist Convention 'owns' renegade agencies, legal opinion says

ROACH, Mo. (ABP) -- Five Missouri Baptist Convention agencies should rescind actions allowing them to elect their own trustees and recognize trustees elected by the state convention, according to a legal opinion obtained by a task force of the MBC executive board.

In a separate but related action, the Missouri Baptist executive board also authorized creation of a new Web-based newspaper to replace Word and Way as the convention's official news journal.

Made public after presentation to board members in a two-hour executive session April 9, a report of a legal-opinion task force said trustees of the Baptist Home, Windermere Baptist Conference Center, Missouri Baptist College, Missouri Baptist Foundation and Word and Way lacked legal standing to change their charters without the convention's permission.

"The law is clear that the Missouri Baptist Convention has the legal right to control these agencies," the task force said, citing opinions it obtained from three law firms.

The task force said the five agencies "must recognize new trustees duly elected by the MBC, and must remove any trustees not duly elected by the MBC" and "rescind any decisions that are not approved by the executive board of the MBC."

While the report suggested that the convention might prevail in a lawsuit, MBC president Bob Curtis, who appointed the task force in December, said he hopes the dispute can be resolved out of court. "It is our desire that biblical restitution and reconciliation will take place," he said.

According to the task force report, the MBC is the sole owner of the five agencies. It also said that individual trustees of the five agencies could be held liable for damages if they refuse to rescind their actions.

Another committee appointed to study feasibility for starting a news journal joined with the MBC administrative committee to recommend a Web-based product to fill a "critical need for accurate information in Missouri Baptist life." The plan includes \$60,000 for initial funding and calls for a printed version to be developed later.

The action stopped short of severing ties with Word and Way, the convention's 107-year-old newspaper, and leaders said efforts aimed at reconciliation with Word and Way trustees would continue.

Board member Bill Miller, pastor of First Baptist Church of Farmington, Mo., said the new journal shouldn't begin unless those reconciliation efforts fail. He described Word and Way as "accurate and reliable."

But John Martin of Hallsville, Mo., said Word and Way trustees "formed an offshoot group to do what they want." He accused Word and Way of "actively promoting giving outside of the Cooperative Program" and of "actively working against" the state convention.

Word and Way Editor Bill Webb said that "sweeping statements" about the paper opposing the MBC "are more reflective of an effort to discredit or silence a cherished source of news and information than they are reflective of either our actual content or our intent."

"Our readers know better," Webb said.

The executive board agreed with the subcommittee's recommendation to delay action on the tenant status of Word and Way at the Baptist Building until the July meeting.

Meeting at Windermere, the board also voted 25-20 that the executive board could continue to sign contracts to hold future events at the conference center, but they must be "contingent upon the Windermere board rescinding its decision to remove itself from its historic relationship with the Missouri Baptist Convention."

Dispute between theological factions in the MBC has prompted moderates to take steps toward starting their own convention. The Baptist General Convention of Missouri is planning its organizational meeting April 19-20 in suburban St. Louis.

The conflict already appears to be taking a toll on finances of the established convention, however.

Gifts through Missouri Baptists' Cooperative Program were 25 percent under budget in the first quarter of 2002. Receipts through the unified budget totaled \$1.28 million, about \$428,000 under budget.

Designated gifts, meanwhile, totaled \$104,803, more than four times the \$25,000 budgeted for the three-month period.

Controller Carol Kaylor said some of that money was designated for five MBC agencies for which the convention has held funding in escrow since they changed their charters to make trustee boards self-perpetuating.

"Much of this usually comes through as Cooperative Program," Kaylor said.

The executive board approved transferring money from reserve and contingency funds and established a line of credit of up to \$500,000 to cover what Kaylor described as a "cash effect" rather than a deficit. "It is a reflection of cash flow," she said.

Larry Thomas, co-interim executive director, said spending for the current year was also under budget. "We have agreed not to fill vacant positions, and we've asked staff to curb spending," he said. "We feel like by July we will certainly have a better feel for where we are."

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-- By ABP staff. Adapted from reporting by Vicki Brown, Word and Way news writer

## **Virginia Baptists to meet to vote on revisioning plan**

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Virginia Baptists will meet May 10 in a rare special session to vote on a new missions vision designed to expand and strengthen the Baptist General Association of Virginia and position it for the 21st century.

The Virginia Baptist Mission Board unanimously affirmed the vision April 10, saying it would send a signal to the 1,400 BGAV congregations and affiliated agencies that "everyone has a place at the table."

Tentatively called "Kingdom Advance," the still-evolving plan would fund and administer missions workers in Virginia, the United States and around the world; aggressively start and rejuvenate churches; identify and develop a new generation of leaders; and empower pastors and other church staff to minister more effectively.

The vision will be presented as a still-developing process at a called meeting of the BGAV on May 10 in Charlottesville, Va. The meeting's location -- First Baptist Church of Charlottesville -- carries symbolic weight for most Virginia Baptists as the congregation that baptized Southern Baptist missionary pioneer Lottie Moon in 1858.

It will be the first called meeting of the BGAV since 1986, when the General Association was asked to buy what is now the Virginia Baptist Resource Center in Richmond.

The impetus for "Kingdom Advance" came from John Upton, who on March 1 became executive director of the BGAV and the Mission Board, which functions as the BGAV's executive body. He had spent the previous six years as a board staff member, coordinating Virginia Baptists' mission endeavors.

He said the initiative would require about \$1 million annually in new money.

"This is a moment of great opportunity for Virginia Baptists," Upton said. "This is a time when churches and pastors are hungry for God-sized ministries. ... And the context in which Virginia Baptists minister demands boldness."

Details of "Kingdom Advance" are intentionally incomplete, Upton said, because this vision "has to bubble up from the grassroots."

"Virginia Baptists need to have their hands all over this vision," he said. "This isn't a package we're presenting; it's a process."

But he said his "dream" would be to begin funding the initiative this fall and to have two missionary couples commissioned by Jan. 1, 2003 -- one in Europe to coordinate work with the BGAV's mission partners there and another to minister among the growing Muslim population in the Washington suburbs of Northern Virginia.

Though introduction of "Kingdom Advance" comes on the heels of controversial actions by the Southern Baptist Convention's two mission agencies, Upton said his vision for Virginia Baptists' future was not motivated primarily by recent decisions of the International and North American mission boards.

The NAMB earlier this year announced it will not endorse ordained women as chaplains, while the IMB now requires its missionaries to sign the 2000 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement. SBC moderates have criticized both actions.

"I know the context we live in," said Upton. "You can't avoid the political dimensions."

But Upton said his vision emerged from conversations with hundred of pastors and other Baptist leaders in the state.

"What's amazed me is that I've heard the same comments in every discussion," he said. "People tell me: 'Please help us find a way out of the denominational mess we're in.' 'Is there a place for us [all factions in Baptist life] at the [denominational] table?' 'We need something to belong to that's bigger than us.'"

As presented to the Mission Board, "Kingdom Advance" has four components, each with a "grassroots" council to assist the board staff in administering it:

-- Empowering Leaders. Churches are seeking better ways of identifying and calling their leaders, and ministers need help in finding places to serve, said Upton. A more effective staff placement process that does not infringe on congregational autonomy must be developed, and "assimilation" of new ministers into Virginia Baptist life must be intentional and strategic, he said. In addition, he said, "burnout" among ministers is an increasing concern that must be addressed.

-- Courageous Churches. "If our churches are not healthy and vibrant, the General Association cannot be strong," said Upton. Accomplishing that goal will require starting more churches, rejuvenating existing churches, offering customized discipleship and Bible study curriculum and helping with conflict resolution.

-- Emerging Leaders. "Virginia Baptists are about 15 years away from a leadership crisis in our churches," Upton said. "We're doing a lot better job of talking people out of their call to ministry than in helping them find their call." He proposed a deliberate program of leadership identification and development that begins with children and continues through young people, college and seminary students and adults.

"I would love to see us help at least 25 churches develop internship programs to help potential leaders see what it's like to minister in a congregation," Upton said.

-- Glocal Missions. Upton described Virginia Baptists' missiology as glocal -- both global and local -- with a mobile missions force as its vehicle.

In 1900, about 87 percent of Christian churches were in the United States and Europe, said Upton. In 2000, only 37 percent were located in those two locations, and by 2025, it will be 30 percent. "Yet we still do missions like we did in 1900. What we need is a mobile mission force that can connect with the 70 percent of churches outside our borders and partner with them in sharing the gospel. We need the rest of the Christian family just as much as they need us. We need to join the global Christian family."

That could be accomplished, he said, by several categories of mission workers:

-- Advance Skill Teams, who would serve a maximum of two years using specialized skills such as teaching youth or music.

"The future of missions is short term," Upton said. "We currently think in terms of battleships. What we need is special operations. We need to go in, make a strategic difference and then back out. And we need to encourage Christians outside of the U.S. to come here, make a strategic difference and back out."

-- Ambassadors, who would serve in five-year increments, with evaluations at the end of each five-year period.

"For those who can sign the 'Baptist Faith and Message' statement, there is a wonderful organization [the International Mission Board] where they can serve," said Upton. "We should encourage them to do so. For those who are called to the 10/40 window [the region of the world that includes the least evangelized people and is a significant focus of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship] there is another wonderful organization for them to serve with.

"But what happens when you can't sign the statement or if you're not called to the 10/40 window?" Upton asked. "Are we going to raise up emerging leaders and offer them nothing?"

-- First Responders, primarily young people in college and seminary who would serve a maximum of one year.

In addition, glocal missions would include "strength-to-strength links" between churches and regions; community care, involving Virginia Baptists' historic benevolent agencies; and disaster relief teams. It also would continue the growing number of short-term mission trips undertaken by thousands of volunteers each year.

In a question and answer forum, Upton identified four funding options for "Kingdom Advance."

"There may be many others," he said. "We aren't limited to these."

The possibilities include:

-- A special statewide offering. The Alma Hunt Offering for Virginia Missions currently funds projects in Virginia only, based on a 1976 agreement between the BGAV and Woman's Missionary Union of Virginia. The agreement would need to be modified for the offering's funds to support "Kingdom Advance." In endorsing the mission initiative April 10, the Virginia Baptist Mission Board also asked the BGAV to work with WMU of Virginia to make the necessary changes at the called meeting on May 10.

-- A combination of funds from a special offering and from the World Mission 2 track of the BGAV budget. That track churches in the budget international ministries selected by the BGAV. Two other tracks fund exclusively ministries of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, respectively. Upton pledged to leave those tracks unchanged, as well as to preserve the right of churches to craft their own giving plans.

- A new World Mission 4 budget track that would fund only "Kingdom Advance."
- Designated gifts and endowments.

Upton said at least an additional \$1 million each year will be necessary to carry out the vision. The BGAV's current budget is \$15.2 million.

"This [vision] is more than about money," Upton said. "I know it takes money to accomplish it but it's about more than that Virginia for Christ."

Upton said Virginia Baptists can't afford not to take risks as they move into the future. "God has preserved us for a purpose," he said, despite a drop in contributions from churches over the past decade and the loss of about 200 congregations who took issue with the BGAV's theological stances.

"Do we want to manage decline or do we want to take a step in a bold direction?" Upton asked. "There are too many issues that will chip away at us if we don't move. I pray that this vision will be the impetus to turn us around and get us excited."

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