



# Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen  
Executive editor: Greg Warner

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

May 29, 2002

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES  
Nashville, Tennessee

JUN 07 2002

(02-45)

## IN THIS ISSUE:

- Gay-rights group plans to step up St. Louis protest
- SBC registration secretary predicts 10,000 messengers
- Georgetown panel defends 'provocative' art exhibit
- News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

## Gay-rights group plans to step up St. Louis protest

By Bob Allen

LAGUNA BEACH, Calif. (ABP) -- A gay-rights group that has picketed the Southern Baptist Convention two years in a row is vowing to "escalate" its protest this year in St. Louis, unless the convention's president agrees to certain demands.

Soulforce, an interfaith organization based in Laguna Beach, Calif., claims that SBC teachings against homosexuality contribute to violence against gays. Its executive director, Mel White, has written a letter asking SBC president James Merritt to meet with the group and to repudiate a statement by a well-known Southern Baptist implying that homosexuals should be put to death.

A spokesperson at Merritt's church said May 29 that he was traveling out of the country and had not seen White's letter. In the past, Merritt has refused to meet with Soulforce activists, who in turn responded with civil-disobedience protests at SBC meetings in 2000 and 2001.

"Because you have refused to hear our concerns about the tragic consequences of the SBC's anti-homosexual words and actions, we must escalate our protest in St. Louis," White said in his May 23 letter to Merritt.

Should Merritt refuse the group's most recent demands, White said, the entire Soulforce delegation will kneel to pray on the sidewalk at the entrances of the America's Center, site of the June 11-12 SBC annual meeting. Meanwhile, a small delegation of Soulforce volunteers, mostly with Southern Baptist roots, will approach the podium in hopes that Merritt will stand aside and let them address messengers directly.

Thirty-four demonstrators were arrested outside last year's convention in New Orleans upon trying to enter the meeting hall. Twenty-seven were arrested under similar circumstances in 2000 when the convention met in Orlando, Fla.

"You may be hoping that in time, we will simply give up and go away," White wrote. "It will not happen. Quite to the contrary, the tragic true stories that we are gathering continue to convince us that Southern Baptist teachings about sexual and gender minorities lead to intolerance, suffering, and even death for God's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender children. By refusing to consider the latest psychological, historical, scientific, pastoral and even biblical evidence, you cause great pain to the people you are called to

serve, and you break the heart of God who has called you to that service."

White is asking Merritt and at least five members of the SBC Executive Committee to attend at least an hour of a day-long summit at the Centenary United Methodist Church in St. Louis, where 25 current and former Southern Baptists will describe their stories of how the SBC's anti-gay teachings caused them to suffer.

He also asked Merritt to join a press conference outside the meeting hall just prior to his president's address to repudiate a recent "legal opinion" by Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore saying the state must use "confinement and even execution" to prevent gays and lesbians from parenting children.

"Though you disagree with us about homosexuality and homosexuals, in St. Louis we are also giving you an opportunity to take a stand against false and inflammatory anti-homosexual rhetoric by a Southern Baptist that is unquestionably dangerous, misleading and truly un-American," White wrote.

White also wrote St. Louis police outlining the plan. "We apologize in advance for the inconvenience and extra worry that our presence in St. Louis might cause for you and your colleagues," he wrote. "We understand that your commitment is to public safety for all. Because we are committed to the principles of nonviolence ... we too are committed to public safety for all. For that reason, we are coordinating our every move with you and with our Southern Baptist adversaries.

White, a longtime evangelical minister, came out publicly as a gay person in 1993. He published his book, *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*, in 1994,

In the past, he had ghost written several books for well-known evangelicals, including Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker and Jerry Falwell. Since 1993, he has worked full time to minister to gays, lesbians, bisexuals and "transgendered" persons through contacts with the media, politicians and religious leaders.

-30-

## **SBC registration secretary predicts 10,000 messengers**

By Bob Allen

LAWRENCEVILLE, Ga. (ABP) -- About 10,000 Southern Baptists are expected to register as messengers at their upcoming annual convention, according to Lee Porter, the Southern Baptist Convention's longtime registration secretary and unofficial prognosticator.

"I think we'll register around 10,000," Porter predicted about the national meeting, scheduled June 11-12 in St. Louis. "Give me 200 or 300 either way, and I think we'll be right on top of it. I don't think we'll go much over 10,000."

That would be a far cry from the 25,607 who registered in 1987, the last time the convention met in St. Louis. That year's meeting -- held at the zenith of the SBC "holy war" between moderate and conservative leadership factions -- featured the much-anticipated report on a two-year study by a "Peace Committee" formed to address issues at the heart of the controversy. Rather than resolving the conflict, however, the historic vote proved to be a decisive victory for conservatives, who in time went on to solidify their control of the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group.

Since 1990, the last year moderates mounted a legitimate challenge for the convention's powerful presidency, the size of the annual meeting has been greatly diminished. Recent conventions have drawn only a fraction of the all-time record of 45,519 messengers set in 1985 in Dallas.

Porter, a retired Baptist Sunday School Board official who lives in Lawrenceville, Ga., has been

forecasting convention registration totals since his election as registration secretary in 1978.

He said he doesn't have any scientific method for estimating the convention size, but he takes a number of factors into account -- such as location and whether a major business item or contested election is anticipated.

But he points to past successes. "The last 15 years or so, I've been almost on top of it most of the time," he said.

Porter said he believes a trend of smaller conventions is going to continue for at least the immediate future. Last year, in New Orleans, registration topped out at 9,584. More than 13,000 had registered when the convention met in New Orleans just five years earlier, in 1996.

In 2000, in Orlando, Fla., about 11,800 messengers registered for the convention. When the SBC met there in 1994, registration was 20,370.

Not only are recent meetings smaller than conventions during the height of the controversy, they are smaller than typical conventions during the 1960s and 1970s. When the convention met in St. Louis in 1971 and again in 1980, registration topped 13,700 and 13,800, respectively.

Perhaps more significantly, Porter said, he has in the last two or three years seen a substantial drop in the number of churches that send messengers to the convention.

Throughout the 1980s and most of the 1990s, between 8,000 and 9,000 churches were represented at the SBC in a typical year, he said. Last year the number of churches represented was 3,829, down from 4,830 in 2000 and 5,287 in 1997 in Dallas.

Porter said he believes the smaller numbers are cause for concern. Declining interest in attending the annual meeting, he said, might reflect a feeling among grassroots Baptists that they are disconnected from the convention's leadership.

"I think ultimately this has to hurt," Porter said. "I worry about the number who attend, because I don't think they really feel like they're a part of what's happening."

"Messenger" is the term used in the SBC constitution to describe delegates that are elected by churches that are "in friendly cooperation" with the convention and "sympathetic with its purposes and work." Since a 1996 amendment, churches not in "cooperation" include any that "act to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

Each cooperating church that has been a "bona fide contributor to the convention's work" during the previous fiscal year is allowed one messenger. One additional messenger is earned for each 250 members or \$250 in financial support, up to a maximum of 10.

Messengers must be "appointed and certified" by their church and must be a member of the appointing church. The convention does not register alternate messengers.

Porter, 72, said he intends to be nominated in St. Louis for another one-year term as registration secretary, his 26th. Despite numerous challenges to his office over the years, he remains the sole link to the SBC's old "moderate" leadership, which has been systematically replaced by conservatives since 1979.

Porter estimated that he has faced a challenger "18 or 19" of the 25 times he was elected to the office. The most recent was last year, when he defeated Missouri Director of Missions and former SBC Executive Committee member Jim Wells by a vote of 1,717 to 950.

"I'm used to it now," Porter said of the opposition. Asked why he is seeking another term, he replied, "I feel like God wanted me for the job."

While votes at the SBC haven't always gone his way, he said, "What I have tried to do is keep the election -- every vote -- totally honest."

When he first took office, Porter said it was common for members of the tellers committee, which counts votes, to leak election results on the convention floor before they were announced from the platform. In some cases, he said, reporters covering the convention knew the outcome of convention votes before the messengers who cast the ballots. One of his first acts, he said, was to put a stop to that practice.

And that applied to everyone. He said he at times clashed with convention presidents because he refused to tip them off before he announced results of a vote to the entire convention.

"That's something I feel strongly about," he said. "The vote is announced to everyone at the same time."

-30-

## **Georgetown panel defends 'provocative' art exhibit**

By Trennis Henderson

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- How far is too far when it comes to displaying provocative artwork on a Baptist college campus?

Georgetown College officials wrestled with that question before honoring a commitment to host "Beatitudes Betrayed," an 18-piece art exhibit highlighting artistic responses to religious injustice.

The traveling exhibit stirred controversy in nearby Mount Sterling, Ky., where it debuted in February, over some of the show's topics and graphic depictions. Works drawing criticism ranged from pieces about abortion and capital punishment to sexual repression and women's ordination.

In an effort to avert similar concerns at Georgetown, officials at the Kentucky Baptist-related school held a panel discussion midway through the two-week exhibit. The panel, moderated by Dwight Moody, Georgetown's dean of the chapel, included Georgetown President Bill Crouch; show curator Sue Spaid; and John Dews, rector of Ascension Episcopal Church in Mount Sterling and a member of the Montgomery County Art Council, which commissioned the show.

Spaid, curator of the Contemporary Arts Center in Cincinnati, said religious injustice is a topic "very few artists deal with on any level."

She said the theme of "Beatitudes Betrayed" reflects her view that "the Beatitudes were the aspect of Scripture that really talked about being in the world and how we're supposed to behave."

Acknowledging that some critics have described works addressing such topics as abortion and gay-bashing as "disgusting," Spaid asked, "Is it disgusting or painful?"

Dews said that as criticism of the show grew in Mount Sterling, he "got a little upset at all the shrieking, particularly at the assertion that it should be taken down."

"I do not necessarily endorse or understand all of these images," he said, "but I don't have to."

Noting that he found most of the works "more confrontational than inspirational," Dews added, "We've reached a time in the church that we need confrontation perhaps more than inspiration."

Crouch said that when Georgetown officials began to discuss reactions to the show, "never once did I consider not bringing the show here."

"The question was how can we handle this show in a way that would be instructive and educational and be in tune with who we are as a Baptist college," he said.

Noting that the school's students finished classes for the semester before the show opened on campus May 15, Crouch said, "At first I was glad the students weren't going to be here."

"After viewing the art, I'm sorry the students aren't here," he added. "There are lessons to be learned in this room. The key is the conversation. When we engage in conversations, there is learning to be had."

Crouch said one of the motivations for hosting such a show is that "we are part of a denomination -- the Baptists -- that is viewed as very narrow and closed-minded."

As Georgetown seeks national Phi Beta Kappa status, he said, "We've been told by Phi Beta Kappa

that our chances of getting that are very slim because we're Baptist and Baptists are narrow and closed-minded."

"It's important for me to help stand up for our denomination and say that might not be a fair characterization of the denomination," he said. "This is something we're doing for our denomination as well as creating the conversation, which I think education is all about."

For those who view the show at Georgetown, a sign on the door of the art gallery warns: "This show contains some graphic imagery. Parental discretion is advised."

Two of the pieces specifically challenge Catholic practices. Mary Craik's "The Last Luncheon" is described in the show's printed guide as "a humorous take on Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting," replacing "Jesus and his 12 apostles with a group of feisty self-empowered women."

The artist's notes call the work a light-hearted response to the Catholic view "that women cannot become priests because there were no women apostles."

In another work aimed at Catholic teachings, "Karen Telford's 'Werevulv' suggests how nuns' repressed sexuality and impotency can infect the girls in their care," the guidebook notes.

In addition to the exhibit's more controversial works, other pieces address such issues as the Holocaust, world hunger, racial tension and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Maribeth Hambrick, a member of the Kentucky Baptist Convention Executive Board, was among viewers who attended the May 21 panel discussion.

Describing the artwork as "insightful and thought-provoking," Hambrick said, "I came here thinking it shouldn't be here but it should be here. I think it was very proper and educational."

The exhibit was to remain on display at Georgetown's Anne Wright Wilson Fine Arts Gallery through May 31.

-30-

## **News briefs from Associated Baptist Press**

### **Libby Fields succumbs to leukemia**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- Libby Fields, wife of the long-time director of Baptist Press, died May 23 after a five-year bout with leukemia. She was 77.

A high school English teacher for 23 years, she traveled the world with her husband of 56 years, visiting all seven continents and sailing all seven seas. In all, they visited 132 countries.

Wilmer C. Fields, who survives his wife, retired in 1987 after more than 27 years at the helm of Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist Convention's news service based in Nashville, Tenn. Funeral services for Mrs. Fields were held at Woodmont Baptist Church in Nashville. (ABP)

### **Dallas CPA named BGCT treasurer**

DALLAS -- David Nabors, a certified public accountant with more than two decades of banking experience, has been named treasurer and chief financial officer of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The BGCT Executive Board at its May 21 meeting in Dallas unanimously elected Nabors, a former senior vice president with Bank of America. He succeeds Roger Hall, who retired March 31 after more than 18 years with the BGCT.

Nabors has worked 21 years with Bank of American in Dallas, including experience as senior vice president and financial manager for Texas Consumer Bank. He is a member of Cliff Temple Baptist Church in Dallas.

The BGCT has an annual operating budget of \$47.5 million and total assets of about \$163.7 million.  
(ABP)

**Texas volunteers help out at New Mexico camp**

CLOUDCROFT, N.M. -- Volunteers from the ministry group Texas Baptist Men manned chainsaws to help out Baptists in neighboring New Mexico clean up forest-fire damage in and around Sivells Baptist Retreat and Conference Center.

Chainsaw crews are cutting burned trees and building dams and berms to control erosion and feared flooding at the camp due to the loss of underbrush that formerly provided natural flood control. Volunteers from Texas are expected to continue their work until the camp opens the second week in June.

"Their efforts are not only helping the camp to prepare for a safe summer season, but also benefiting the entire mountain community," said Shiela Klopfer of Sivells Conference Center in an e-mail.

This summer, Texas Baptist Men plans to join partners in North Carolina and Tennessee to distribute food in the Gaza Strip. (ABP)

**END**

---