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Baptist Press

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June 3, 2002

(02-47)

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**Merritt won't respond
to letter from Soulforce**

By Bob Allen

SNELLVILLE, Ga. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Convention president James Merritt will ignore an invitation to meet with representatives of Soulforce at the upcoming SBC annual meeting, a spokesman said June 3.

A May 23 letter to Merritt threatened escalated protests this year in St. Louis, unless the SBC president joins Soulforce in denouncing views the group says promote violence against gays.

Dan Greer, Merritt's associate pastor at First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga., said Merritt has been traveling out of the country and didn't get a chance to read the letter from Soulforce founder Mel White until June 3.

Greer said Merritt has responded to other letters from Soulforce in the past, however, explaining his position on the subject.

"He feels like he has made his position clear to them and will not be responding to this particular letter," Greer said.

In his letter, White had asked Merritt and at least five members of the SBC Executive Committee to attend part of a summit criticizing the denomination's anti-homosexual teachings, scheduled June 10 at the Centenary United Methodist Church in St. Louis.

He also asked Merritt to join a press conference outside the convention meeting hall 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.

Should Merritt refuse those invitations, White said the entire Soulforce delegation plans to kneel in prayer on the sidewalk at the entrances of the America's Center, while a small group of volunteers marches into the convention hall in hopes of addressing messengers directly.

Merritt, who leaves office after completing his second one-year term as convention president at the close of the June 11-12 annual meeting, has in the past refused to meet with Soulforce, which has picketed outside the SBC annual meeting each of the last two years.

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.

Soulforce spokesperson Laura Montgomery Rutt said Merritt's refusal "to repudiate Justice Moore's statement that the state has the right to execute gays and lesbians to prevent them from being parents should horrify the 15 million members of Southern Baptist churches.

"It is our hope that his silence is not a sign that all Southern Baptists condone violence against gay people."

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Missouri convention, agency leaders air concerns in amicable meeting

By Vicki Brown

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- The Missouri Baptist Convention executive board will meet in a special called session June 6 to hear a report from the board's legal opinion task force.

Set for 10 a.m. at the Baptist Building in Jefferson City, the session will focus on information and issues that emerged from reportedly amicable discussions among representatives of the convention and five MBC agencies at a meeting in St. Louis May 28.

Last year, The Baptist Home, Missouri Baptist College, Windermere Baptist Conference Center, Missouri Baptist Foundation and Word and Way chose to elect their own trustees rather than to allow the convention to appoint them.

The executive board authorized MBC president Bob Curtis to name a task force and to hire legal counsel upon administrative committee recommendation in December. The recommendation came in response to a motion approved at October's annual meeting.

That motion instructed the executive board that "if the legal opinion indicates [the agencies'] actions were improper," the board is "to take any and all steps necessary to restore [them] to their former relationship" with the convention.

Task force chairman Gary Taylor described the called June 6 session as primarily "an informational meeting to discuss where we are and to update the board."

"I do not feel we have done an adequate job to inform the executive board," Taylor said. "We thought this informational meeting would be especially helpful. It will give anybody and everybody an opportunity to say what they want to say. There won't be people left on the periphery."

Board members likely will hold most of their discussion behind closed doors. "In the light that the other boards have conducted meetings in executive session and that we have gotten a couple of letters from lawyers indicating lawsuits are a possibility, we will probably meet in executive session," Curtis said.

When asked if the board will take any action at the meeting, Curtis said: "I'm not sure at this point. We'll just see how the meeting goes."

Calling the May 28 session "very amiable," Taylor, Curtis and agency representatives said they "openly shared" their respective positions and feelings regarding the conflict.

"I was well pleased with the spirit and attitude," Taylor said. "The talk was candid but cordial. It was really everything and more than I expected our initial meeting would be. We differed on some things ... but there was not any spirit of combativeness. Our goal was to listen and to hear the five agency presidents in what they had to say."

Agency heads agreed. "I was grateful for the good atmosphere, the good tone and the honest discussion. It was very biblical," foundation president Jim Smith said.

"I feel like we all listened to each other," Larry Johnson, president of The Baptist Home, noted. "I thought that the five institutions had more time to tell the full story than at any other time we have met with the convention, like at administrative council meetings."

Participants began the session by sharing their individual salvation experience - an openness that most agreed set the meeting's tone. "We started with sharing our conversion experience," Taylor said. "Wow! That led us into each other's heart."

Although Curtis acknowledged that "just sitting down and talking is a good step," he had hoped for a different outcome. "Nothing was accomplished as far as our saying that we accept what you have done or their saying that they would come back."

"I was praying that they would come back, but that didn't happen. I was not surprised, but I was optimistic that the Lord would have moved in that direction."

While they acknowledged that they "didn't get things solved," most participants agreed the meeting should allow them to continue to seek a biblical solution. "The meeting enabled seven of us who represent different entities of the Missouri Baptist Convention to sit and talk to each other instead of being in an environment where we tend to talk about each other," Taylor said.

"When believers have differences, the biblical standard is to get together and talk about them."

Taylor added that while they did not reach specific agreement, participants did talk about possible solutions, including conciliation and binding Christian arbitration. He gave each agency representative a copy of "The Peacemaker: a Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict" and "Guidelines for Christian Conciliation."

As defined in the guidelines, conciliation is an attempt by both parties to reach an agreement privately. If that attempt fails, the parties can seek mediation by an objective outsider. If no agreement is reached, the conflict can move to binding Christian arbitration in which both parties are legally bound to a third-party ruling.

"I will look at the material they gave us, and I look forward to meeting again and developing a covenant relationship," Windermere president Frank Shock said.

Word and Way Editor Bill Webb also pointed to a covenant agreement as a possible alternative. "The idea of working through covenant agreements between the convention and each agency occupied a healthy part of our dialogue," he said. "A covenant agreement has the potential for all parties to feel positive about the outcome," he said.

Taylor said he would contact the seven participants in a few weeks to set up another meeting.

The agency heads also want another session. "I think we must have more for the issues to be resolved," Smith said. "I would like to continue to work with the same group of seven to begin to think together what the process should be to reach resolution."

"It has been done amiably in other states. I think Missouri can, too, but we need a process, the right process, to address the issues and to work through them together."

"The question I ponder is how do we move into the future together? How do we walk together, walk in unity for the kingdom and for the sake of the gospel? Historically, whenever there has been change in Missouri Baptist life, we have moved forward."