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June 14, 2002

(02-52)

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**Convention messengers offer,
but don't debate, motions**

By Mark Wingfield

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- A dozen motions, including two related to mission boards requiring missionaries to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," were offered by messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting June 11-12.

The convention's committee on order of business referred 10 motions to agencies for review. The other two motions were ruled out of order.

Motions that are referred to agencies carry no weight of messenger endorsement, although the agencies are required to report back next year whether they considered the suggestion and what their decision was.

Two referred motions would have rescinded the requirement of SBC missionaries to sign an affirmation of the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message." Both motions focused on missionaries who were appointed under the 1925 or 1963 versions of the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Both motions were referred to the International Mission Board and North American Mission Board for consideration without debate by convention messengers.

"We trust the trustees to study this and make the decision," said Ron Rogers, chairman of the committee on order of business.

But Robert Casey of Parkview Baptist Church in Gainesville, Fla., and Bruce Prescott of First Baptist Church, Norman, Okla. -- the two originators of the motions -- appealed the decision of the committee to refer.

"I hope we will honor the service of our missionaries in the past," Casey said. "They have served God, the convention and the people they were appointed to serve in a faithful and honorable way. We should not force them to sign the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message.' ... This does not apply to any candidates appointed after the 2000 'Baptist Faith & Message.'"

Prescott noted the numerous references about accountability that come with discussions of the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message." "If trustees can hold missionaries accountable, who holds the trustees accountable?" he asked. "I believe it is the messengers who meet here this week. We will thwart the constitution if we do not allow them speak on this issue and vote."

A voice vote to schedule debate on one of the referred motions failed.

Also referred to NAMB was a motion calling for NAMB to withdraw chaplaincy endorsement from any ordained female. NAMB trustees recently voted not to issue future endorsement to female chaplains who are ordained, even though ordination is a requirement for chaplaincy work in many places, including segments of the U.S. military.

The motion was made by William Blosch of First Baptist Church of Dunedin, Fla. In addition to rescinding endorsement of any female chaplain who is ordained, the motion would have removed endorsement from any female chaplain "unscripturally serving as the pastor of a chapel congregation."

During the NAMB presentation June 11, NAMB President Bob Reccord explained that ordained female chaplains already serving with NAMB were "grandfathered in" under the new policy, which does not allow ordained female chaplains to be endorsed.

Regarding the possibility of female chaplains gaining ordination after their endorsement with NAMB, Reccord said: "That is a hypothetical situation and does not exist. We will have to deal with it at the time. But we don't expect it to happen."

Chaplaincy endorsements are not lifetime endorsements, but must be renewed on a periodic basis. Many ordained females currently endorsed by NAMB have begun seeking alternate endorsement, often from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Another motion referred to the SBC Executive Committee originated with Bob Stephenson of First Baptist Church of Norman, Okla. His motion would have instructed the Executive Committee to recognize and accept gifts from only one convention in each state.

His concern, he said in a later interview, is that the SBC treats dual-convention states differently. In Texas and Virginia, conservatives have formed new conventions, and the SBC recognizes both the historic convention and the new convention. But in Missouri, the SBC has refused to recognize a new state convention formed by opponents of fundamentalism who still want to support SBC missions causes.

Stephenson said the SBC should be consistent in the way it relates to states with dual conventions.

Two motions were ruled out of order.

The first of those was made by Bill Tweeddale of Harbor City Baptist Church of Melbourne, Fla. He suggested that "every college receiving endorsement from any entity of the convention have a statement of inerrancy that will be signed by staff and trustees of that institution."

Historically, the SBC has not operated colleges, only seminaries. A large number of Baptist colleges and universities are operated by state Baptist conventions, which in Baptist polity are not directly governed by the national convention. In recent years, however, some of the SBC seminaries have launched college-degree programs in addition to their graduate programs.

The other motion ruled out of order was made Dennis Wynn of First Baptist Church of Moberly, Mo. He wanted all people nominated for SBC offices to provide information about Cooperative Program giving as a percentage of their church's budget.

Other motions referred to agencies by the committee on order of business were:

-- That changes be made in wording in the "Eternal Life" witnessing tract produced by NAMB. The motion by Fred Winters of First Baptist Church of Maryville, Ill., was referred to NAMB.

-- That NAMB develop evangelism strategies to reach disabled people, including the learning disabled. The motion by David Rice of First Baptist Church of Pompano Beach, Fla., was referred to NAMB.

-- Instructing the Annuity Board to pull all investments in companies that sell alcoholic beverages. The motion by Jimmy Owen of Broadmoor Baptist Church of New Orleans was referred to the Annuity Board.

-- Asking the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission to monitor recent structural changes within the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other government agencies and "inform us of the ramifications such changes may have on our religious liberty." The motion by Timothy Faber of East Tipp Baptist Church of Lafayette, Ind., was referred to the ERLC.

-- Asking LifeWay Christian Resources to develop a ministry focused on children of ministers and missionaries. The motion by Rebekah Britt of Cherokee Baptist Church of Woodstock, Ga., was referred to LifeWay.

-- Asking LifeWay to develop a training program based on "spiritual missionary empowerment" through praying, fasting and doing good deeds. The motion by Casey was referred to LifeWay.

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-- With reporting by Jennifer Davis Rash of the Alabama Baptist and Marv Knox of the Baptist Standard

Religious leaders react to comments about Mohammad

By Mark Wingfield

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Was Mohammad, the prophet of Islam, a "demon-possessed pedophile" who married a 9-year-old?

That's the message carried around the world from the pulpit of the Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference, where Florida pastor Jerry Vines made the assertion in a sermon June 10.

The Pastors' Conference precedes the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting. Vines, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., is a former SBC president.

Islamic leaders in the United States reacted with shock and anger over Vines' comments, particularly after other prominent SBC leaders declined to repudiate his views.

"It's really unfortunate that a top leader in a mainstream Christian church would use such hate-filled and bigoted language," Ibrahim Hooper told the Dallas Morning News. Hooper is a spokesman for the Washington-based Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Ingrid Mattson, vice president of the Islamic Society of North America, called Vines' comments "medieval," according to Associated Press. Such statements could lead to violence against Muslims, she said. "It makes me wonder what's the hateful religion right now that we should be worried about."

Eric Vickers, executive director of the American Muslim Council in St. Louis, told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that Vines' statements are "offensive to Muslims, Jews and Christians."

"We need to educate him and pray for him," Vickers said.

But is there any truth to what Vines said?

Asked about Vines' comment in his post-election press conference, SBC president Jack Graham said Vines is accurate. Graham said Mohammed had 13 wives, and he married one wife when she was 6 years old and consummated the marriage when she was 9.

Syed Ahsani, chairman of the American Muslim Alliance, disputed Vines and Graham in the Dallas Morning News. He said Mohammed had nine wives, and the youngest was 18.

"The Wives of the Prophet," written by Muslims affiliated with the Alharamain Islamic Foundation, gives brief descriptions of 12 wives of Mohammed. The book is referenced by the University of Georgia's Islamic studies faculty as an authoritative source.

According to this Muslim-written resource, as well as other resources produced by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, Mohammed's third wife was named A'isha. She was "married to the prophet in the 10th year of prophethood, when she was 6 years old, but the marriage was only consummated when she was 9 years old," according to "The Wives of the Prophets."

"There is a difference of opinions among scholars as to when this marriage was solemnized," the authors explain. "But what is most authentic is that A'isha was married . when she was 6 years old and the marriage was consummated . when she was 9 years old."

Christians may have difficulty understanding the lifestyle of Mohammed, according to a resource page written by the University of Georgia Islamic studies faculty.

"Unlike Jesus, who lived a celibate life, Mohammed was married. Furthermore, after the death of Khadija (his first wife) in 619 until the time of his death in 632, Mohammed married a total of 11 more wives. Muslims, however, are not alarmed by his numerous marriages, since they know the following: (1) that it was not unusual for a powerful Middle Eastern chieftain to marry a number of wives; and (2) that almost all of these 11 other wives were widows when he married them; and (3) for the most part, these marriages were contracted in order to cement political ties with the tribes of the wives."

Even if Baptists find truth in what Vines reported about Mohammed, making such a declaration in a public setting did nothing to enhance goodwill between Muslims and Christians, some observers noted.

Frank Ruff, a representative of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to the SBC, predicted Vines' comments would hurt the SBC.

"It is shortsighted because they will have less credibility," Ruff told the Houston Chronicle. "I would expect the derogatory remarks about Islam would increase hostility of Muslims toward Christianity."

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Mercer, Curry address SBC

By Lacy Elwood

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Dayna Curry and Heather Mercer, missionaries who spent 109 days in an Afghanistan prison, thanked Southern Baptists for their prayers and praised their overseas mission work during the Executive Committee report of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"It's so easy to get to everybody," Curry said. "There's 2.5 billion people out there who haven't heard the word of Jesus. God's given you resources so that you can touch the ends of the earth."

Curry told the crowd that originally, she would never have considered herself a "top prospect for the mission field."

"I was a mess," Curry said. "In high school, I'd fallen into drinking and experimenting with drugs. I was hurting, so full of guilt and shame."

Curry went onto to describe how "God sent people my way," through her college group at Highland Baptist Church in Waco, Texas. The group encouraged students to get involved in mission work.

"They taught us to spread his love," Curry said. "They told us there are people all over the earth who have never experienced his love."

Curry began to work with mission training schools offered by the church. The decision to go overseas was not easy, Curry said, but through studying the verse Isaiah 6:8 and the encouragement of her church, she chose to get involved in foreign missions.

"I realized God was just looking for anyone who would go," Curry said. "Our pastor shared with us that one of the main motivations for evangelism was to heal God's broken heart. His heart breaks everyday for those who never get the chance to hear his love. Since God had healed my broken heart, I wanted to help heal his."

Mercer described how she faced opposition in her decision to travel to Afghanistan.

"When I went to Afghanistan, they said it's impossible," Mercer said. "Why go to someplace so dangerous where they don't really want to hear what you have to say? We have the opportunity to be a part of a dream in God's heart to make his name known. I realized that there aren't enough people standing around the throne of God from Afghanistan."

Mercer told the story of Gideon, the Afghan man the women hired as a doorman, to convey to SBC messengers the Afghan people's desire to hear about Christ.

"Over time, we built a relationship with him and decided to give him a short wave radio so he could listen to stories on the life of Jesus. I remember I was coming home from work one day and Gideon opened the door. He had the radio up to his ear, and he looked at me and said 'It's so beautiful. Jesus loves me,'" Mercer said.

"He had never heard God loved him. He had never known God had a purpose for his life. Finally, he saw the Jesus film and asked us to lead him to the Lord. He said, 'I just have to ask you one thing. If you knew this, how come you didn't tell me sooner?' There are thousands of Gideons in Afghanistan. They are hungry and they are desperate."

Curry admitted that the women had shown a film about Jesus, produced by Campus Crusade for Christ, to an Afghan family. The women were then arrested by the Taliban along with six other foreign aid workers and imprisoned until November.

The women faced prison differently. For Curry, reciting scripture and singing songs helped her to feel "God's presence wash over us." Mercer, however, told the crowd she struggled with captivity.

"I had a really hard time in prison," Mercer said. "I did not do prison the way I hoped I would. I found myself wrestling with God. I asked him all the hard questions."

In prison, the women found their relationship growing. They had not known each other well prior to moving to Afghanistan, the women said in a press conference, but they shared a common bond in their faith.

"Our friendship was just getting started before we were put in prison. Because of the church we came from, we really value worship and praying together," Curry said. "That's what we clung to, that's what we did while we were in prison, that's where we were able to find comfort, and that's what kept our sanity. We knew how to get in God's presence, how to run to him in our situation, how to support one another."

Both graduates of Baylor University and members of Waco's nondenominational Antioch Community Church, the women had been roommates in Afghanistan for about four months before their imprisonment.

Both women plan to return to Afghanistan to continue their work and encourage others to follow.

"For those that know Jesus and love him, I would give them the encouragement that he is still worthy to be followed even if it costs us something," Mercer said. "There's something people see in a culture where it's difficult to follow Jesus or make his name known. They see us willing to pay a price for doing that and it reflects how wonderful Jesus really is."

Curry said she is ready to get back to Afghanistan "as soon as I can."

"When I've gone overseas, I've felt so loved and accepted by the people. I've only felt welcome and a lot of times I've felt safer there than here in a lot of ways," Curry said. "Friends who have just recently been in Afghanistan say that you are just put up on the highest pedestal. They love Americans right now and are so thankful for what the military has come and done to help free their country."

Curry also encouraged single women to not have any apprehension about foreign mission work.

"Don't feel intimidated as a single woman," Curry said. "You can make a huge impact. It's so easy to make and create relationships as a woman, and as an American you can make a great difference just by giving out food or helping to provide jobs."

The women said they realize it's difficult for many Americans to understand what they endured, but they plan to continue telling their story. Their book, "Prisoners of Hope," was released June 11.

"The thing we've tried to communicate since we've been back is that no matter what the trial is we go through in life, Jesus is faithful and if we call on him, he'll meet us in our place of need," Mercer said. "Even

though our story may be unique in this culture, the story of trial and have to find a place of peace in the midst of it, is a story any American can relate to."

All proceeds from their book and speaking engagements go to fund ministries in Afghanistan.

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Missouri DOM unseats SBC registration secretary (corrected)

By Bob Allen

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story corrects and replaces yesterday's version. It corrects an error in the final paragraph.

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Hell didn't quite freeze over, but for the first time in 25 years, someone other than Lee Porter was elected registration secretary for the Southern Baptist Convention.

While what is commonly called the "conservative resurgence" long ago all but erased any vestige of the SBC's pre-1979 "moderate" leadership, Porter, 72, continued to defy odds by winning contested elections most years.

"I'm used to it now," Porter said of the opposition in a recent interview.

But Porter's streak came to an end June 12, when he lost to Missouri director of missions Jim Wells, a conservative, 1,839-1,222.

After the vote was announced, SBC president James Merritt, also a conservative, expressed admiration for Porter, a retired Baptist Sunday School Board staffer who lives in Lawrenceville, Ga. "I do appreciate 25 years of service Lee Porter has given to this denomination," said Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga.

Long before "hanging chads" entered America's political vocabulary, Southern Baptist messengers were familiar with the complexities of punch-card ballots through Porter's trademark voting instructions.

"Use ballot number three and only ballot number three," he would recite. "Any other ballot than number three will be rejected." Other specifics would follow. Remove the ballot completely. Punch "1" if you are voting for Candidate X. Punch "2" if you are voting for Candidate Y. Remove any portion of the tab hanging from the back of your ballot. Pass your ballot to the usher.

Despite such meticulous instructions, someone usually got it wrong. Announcements of election results routinely included a number of spoiled ballots because voters had used the wrong ballot or made an improper selection.

That attention for detail and setting aside of personal bias might best explain Porter's long tenure, even while another largely administrative elected post, recording secretary, went to a conservative years earlier.

While votes at the SBC haven't always gone his way, Porter said recently, "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."

Most other elections at the June 11-12 SBC annual meeting were more routine, with previously announced candidates being elected by acclamation. Texas pastor Jack Graham won the convention presidency without opposition. Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, takes over for Merritt, who completed his term when the meeting adjourned.

Paul Pressler, a retired appeals court judge from Texas who is credited with launching the SBC's conservative movement, was unopposed for first vice president.

"All of us who call ourselves Southern Baptists owe an incalculable debt to this great Christian, to this great Christian statement," said Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, in nominating Pressler for the office.

In the lone other contested race, E.W. McCall, an African-American pastor from California, won the office of second vice president over Bob Collins, a pastor and past president of the Missouri Baptist Convention, and Louisiana pastor Ernie Don Rogers.

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