



Associated Baptist Press

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Texas Baptists to consider launching missions network

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptist leaders are proposing creation of a world missions network to help churches and individuals sponsor missionary work across the United States and around the world.

The network, which would be established as a not-for-profit affiliate of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, does not replace existing relationships with mission boards of the Southern Baptist Convention, but augments them with "fluid and flexible structures" that are church-driven and responsive to changing needs.

"Texas Baptists are interested in a bold new vision, not recreating what already exists through traditional missions-sending agencies," said Charles Wade, BGCT executive director. "This world missions network would create a way to connect churches and institutions with needs, opportunities and resources."

The world missions network is the centerpiece of a 25-page report by a 24-member missions review and initiatives committee. The BGCT administrative committee gave its preliminary approval at an Aug. 29-30 meeting in Dallas.

The BGCT executive board will vote on the proposal Sept. 24. If approved, it will go forward for final approval by messengers to the state convention, scheduled Nov. 10-11 in Waco.

Sharp disagreements between leaders of the BGCT and SBC in recent years have led some to speculate that the state organization might begin appointing its own national and international missionaries. The report stops short of that, but it does suggest Texas Baptists will take more initiative in setting their own worldwide missions agenda.

"Anybody who wants to come to the table can do so, but they can't set the menu for everyone else," said Clyde Glazener, pastor of Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth and chairman of the missions review and initiatives committee.

The report faults the SBC International Mission Board for asking its missionaries to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" and for its "New Directions" missions strategy that some complain diminishes cooperation with national Baptist conventions and de-emphasizes support for institutions and meeting human needs.

It calls upon the BGCT to "find ways to enable missionaries" who refuse to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" as a matter of conscience.

The report also takes aim at the SBC North American Mission Board for its decision to no longer appoint ordained women as chaplains and for attempting to control the spending of funds it gives to the District of Columbia Baptist Convention.

It urges Texas Baptists to adopt a new cooperative agreement with NAMB that recognizes the state convention's right to reallocate funds to accommodate jointly funded state missionaries who object to signing the "Baptist Faith and Message."

The report doesn't call for severing ties with those agencies, however. It instead pledges to "work closely with existing Baptist agencies," including the two SBC mission boards, the Baptist World Alliance and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and also with BGCT-affiliated ministries and institutions involved in missions.

The study committee affirms relationships that exist between the Atlanta-based CBF and various groups, associations, churches and individuals in Texas. Citing "certain political facets of the relationship of the CBF with various Baptist bodies," however, the committee recommends that the BGCT continue to work with CBF on projects but not enter into a formal relationship.

CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal said he had discussions with several subcommittees of the task force, which he described as "cordial."

"I never expected this committee to recommend a connectional relationship with CBF like they've had in the past with the SBC," Vestal said. "I had hoped for and am pleased with their recommendation that BGCT find ways to partner with CBF. We look forward to that. We already partner with Texas Baptists in a number of ways."

The report cites scholars who point "to hands-on involvement as the future of missions." Many churches already sponsor volunteer mission opportunities, the report said. As a result, the distinction between local and worldwide missions is "blurring rapidly."

"Texas Baptists need a mission vision that recognizes missions as the responsibility of every church and every Christian," the report says. "Churches increasingly want to own that vision, but they also want a collective vision of what Texas Baptist churches can do together. They see any vision that views missions exclusively in the context of institutions or boards that they only pray for and pay for as an incomplete vision. For many, the question is not only, 'How do we support missions?' It is also, 'How do we do missions?'"

The proposed network would be responsible for facilitation and support of missions efforts; training; screening of personnel; establishing a database of missions opportunities, resources and activities; research; education; and helping churches develop missions strategies.

Partial funding for the new network would come through Texas Baptists' unified budget, the Cooperative Program, along with direct gifts. Some work done through the network would be funded directly by churches.

It would be structured as an independent non-profit, similar to other free-standing agencies like Buckner Baptist Benevolences and the Baptist Standard, to maintain a close working relationship to the BGCT while allowing quick response to developing global situations. Not-for-profit status would qualify it for recognition as a non-governmental organization, which in some cases gives credibility and better access.

In a separate action at the same meeting, the administrative committee approved changes to a form it sends to churches to record the amounts they contribute to the BGCT.

The new form removes a controversial cap on the amount of BGCT funding for SBC seminaries. It also ends negative designations against the SBC Executive Committee and Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

Wade said the change is intended both to simplify the form and to promote peace with the SBC. Texas Baptists will no longer comment on how the SBC spends the money it receives from the BGCT.

The new form increases the percentage of church gifts remaining in Texas in the BGCT Cooperative Giving Budget from 67 percent to 79 percent. Churches may channel their 21 percent earmarked "worldwide endeavors" to the SBC, CBF or BGCT world missions, including the new missions network. As before, churches can instead choose a designated giving option, in which they set their own percentage distributions between BGCT and global missions.

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-- Ken Camp and Marv Knox contributed to this story.

Recommendations of BGCT study committee

DALLAS (ABP) -- The following is a summary of recommendations of the Baptist General Convention of Texas missions review and initiatives committee. If approved by the BGCT executive board, they will be presented at the state convention's annual meeting, Nov. 10-11 in Waco.

-- That a world missions network be established to help churches, associations, institutions and individuals fulfill their missions calling through both short-term and long-term missions endeavors across the United States and the world.

-- That this world missions network connect churches, associations, institutions and individuals to available missions research, education, information, facilitation, training, screening, strategy development and support.

-- That this world missions network, like other existing Texas Baptist entities, be established as a not-for-profit [501(c)(3)] affiliate of the Baptist General Convention of Texas with a permanent, strong connection to the BGCT, and that the director of the network serve on the BGCT Leadership Council.

-- That this world missions network be governed by a 32-member rotating board, all of whom are Baptists; and that the BGCT elect through the committee on nominations for institution boards three-fourths of the board members and the board choose one-fourth.

-- That the initial board of this world missions network be chosen by the president of the convention, the chair of the BGCT executive board, the chair of the administrative committee, the chair of the missions review and initiatives committee, the president of Woman's Missionary Union of Texas, the president of Texas Baptist Men and the executive director of the BGCT.

-- That this world missions network establish an advisory council to bring together missions experts and representatives of Baptist conventions from across the world on a regular basis to work on further missions endeavors, and that the executive directors of the BGCT, Woman's Missionary Union of Texas and Texas Baptist Men serve on the advisory council.

-- That the Baptist General Convention of Texas affirm all Baptist missionaries and express gratitude for their commitment to follow God's call upon their lives and appreciation for their service.

-- That the Baptist General Convention of Texas encourage Texas Baptist congregations and pastors to educate and nurture a vision of missions and the call to career missions.

-- That the Baptist General Convention of Texas continue to offer help in the transition of Southern Baptist missionaries who cannot, in good conscience, affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

-- That the Baptist General Convention of Texas find ways to enable missionaries to serve who cannot, in good conscience, affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

-- That the Baptist General Convention of Texas seek fraternal relations with Baptist conventions and unions in other countries for mutual growth and the extension of the Kingdom of God.

-- That the Baptist General Convention of Texas continue to work on specific missions projects with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, without entering into a formal relationship.

-- That the 2002 Cooperative Agreement between the North American Mission Board and the Baptist General Convention of Texas be adopted.

-- That Texas Baptist churches pray for the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and its valiant efforts to win people to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and minister to the needs of those who live in the nation's capitol.

-- That the Baptist General Convention of Texas urge the North American Mission Board to reconsider its action regarding the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and that NAMB take strategic action that will enable it to work with the District of Columbia Baptist Convention in ways that will advance the cause of Christ.

-- That the Baptist General Convention of Texas encourage churches to express their obedience to the Great Commission through prayer, sacrificial giving and active participation in missions.

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Religious practice in America unchanged by 9/11, Barna says

VENTURA, Calif. (ABP) -- Last year's terrorist attacks had no lasting impact on America's religious practices, according to pollster George Barna.

About half of Americans surveyed by the Barna Research Group said their faith was an important resource for helping them deal with events of Sept. 11. One fourth of all adults (25 percent) said it was the "single most important resource" they have relied on, and 23 percent said their faith was "one of several important resources" that helped them deal with the tragedy.

Church attendance spiked for several weeks after Sept. 11, but it was a short-lived revival. By November, attendance levels were no different than before the attacks.

Barna found little or no change in the last year over the percentage of Americans who read their Bible regularly (41 percent), attend church (43 percent) or pray (83 percent). The percentage of unchurched Americans remained constant at 33 percent.

Some theorized that shock from the attacks might serve as a spiritual wake-up call for Americans, leading to a religious revival. But Barna said he could find no statistically significant change in religious belief or practice in the past 12 months.

Just 12 percent of Americans said the terrorist attacks had any impact on their religious faith. Among born-again Christians, the percentage is 18 percent.

"I was among those who fully expected to see an intense spiritual reaction to the terrorist attacks," said Barna, an evangelical Christian. "The fact that we saw no lasting impact from the most significant act of war against our country on our own soil says something about the spiritual complacency of the American public."

Barna said the increased worship attendance after 9/11 is explained by a rallying of church members who attend infrequently, rather than an influx of new believers.

"What we witnessed was the people who attend once every month or two suddenly returning on a consistent basis for a month or two before falling back into their regular pattern of irregular attendance," he

said. "It appears that very few people radically changed their personal agenda and added church involvement to their schedule when previously there had been no such activity."

Barna said barely half of the nation's churches acknowledged or addressed the attacks in any way during the last 12 months. Only one in four adults attending a Christian church (23 percent) said their church engaged in prayer specific to the attacks, 16 percent said their churches provided sermons or other teaching related to the attacks, and 10 percent said their church had provided special services.

Yet six out of 10 (58 percent) said their religious center has done an "excellent" or "good" job in addressing these matters.

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News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Birmingham church calls woman as pastor

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. -- Birmingham's Baptist Church of the Covenant elected its first female pastor Aug. 11. Sarah Jackson Shelton received a 131-2 affirmative vote for the job. She has served the church as interim pastor for the last year.

Betty Bock, chairwoman of the pastor-nominating committee, cited Shelton's preaching skills and pastoral care. The fact she is a woman is "no big deal," said Bock, who is an ordained minister.

Shelton is a graduate of the University of Alabama. She received both the master of religious education (1979) and the master of divinity (1981) degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where she won the coveted Clyde T. Francisco Preaching Award.

She is currently the only known woman pastor of a church aligned with the Alabama Baptist State Convention, an affiliate of the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC revised its "Baptist Faith and Message" in 2000 to say that the Bible limits the role of pastor to men. Local churches are autonomous in how they interpret Scripture, however, and are free to call their own leaders. (ABP)

Bible not a 'blueprint' for U.S. foreign policy, ethicist says

NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- Some religious conservatives argue that the United States ought to support Israel because the Bible says God gave the land to Abraham and his descendants. But a Baptist ethicist says Genesis isn't a blueprint for foreign policy.

Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics says that even if one takes promises of the Promised Land literally, the Old Testament is too vague in defining boundaries to be useful in sorting out claims to disputed areas such as the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In Gen. 13:15, Parham writes for EthicsDaily.com, God promises to Abraham all the land as far as the eye can see. In another place, Gen. 15:18, the covenant extends from "the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates." Taken literally, that would include not only modern Israel, but also areas occupied by Egypt, Syria, Turkey and Iraq.

Parham also raises question about the story in Gen. 13:11, where Abraham turns over the Jordan Valley to his nephew, Lot. The Bible gives no reference to the land reverting back to Abraham's descendants after Lot's death.

"The Bible speaks to all of life, teaching us about moral character and giving us guidelines for discerning social relations," Parham observes. "But the Bible offers no literal blueprint for American foreign policy in the Middle East." (ABP)

North Carolina church leaves association over dispute

CULLOWHEE, N.C. -- A North Carolina Baptist church that faced criticism for calling a woman as co-pastor has withdrawn from its association. At least two other churches are also considering leaving.

Cullowhee Baptist Church voted Aug. 4 to withdraw from Tuckaseigee Baptist Association in western North Carolina. First Baptist Church in Sylva and East Sylva Baptist Church also planned meetings to consider similar action.

Earlier, the association's executive committee voted in closed session to ask a credentials committee to counsel Cullowhee and First Baptist Church of Sylva over matters of faith and practice.

The Cullowhee church came under fire after calling Jeffrey and Tanya Vickery as co-pastors in January. Both the Sylva First and East Sylva churches have voiced support for the Cullowhee congregation.

The Southern Baptist Convention's "Baptist Faith and Message" says the Bible teaches that pastoral roles are limited to men. Local churches aren't bound by the confession of faith, however, and are free to call their own leaders. Associations, meanwhile, are also autonomous, and therefore free to choose their own membership criteria.

A letter in January by the association's pastors' conference cited "matters of faith and practice within the Cullowhee Baptist Church that do not conform to the clear teachings of the New Testament." (ABP)

Scholars debate newly discovered letter by Jefferson

ELKTON, Md. -- The discovery last May in Elkton, Md., of an original letter from President Thomas Jefferson to the Delaware Baptist Association, is creating a stir.

The letter, valued at \$700,000, predates by six months Jefferson's famous letter in 1801 to Baptists in Danbury, Conn., in which he introduced the metaphor of the "wall of separation" between church and state.

In the letter to Delaware Baptists, one of several composed by Jefferson thanking Baptist groups that had congratulated him on his election as president, Jefferson credits the "Almighty Ruler" for "happy consequences of our revolution." He goes on to list "the establishment here of liberty, equality, of social rights, exclusion of unequal privileges civil and religious and of the usurping domination of one sect over another."

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said the letter gives new insight into Jefferson's thinking, which he said "is not nearly as radical as the liberals try to make it."

"That is not a secular vision," Land told the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware news journal Baptist Life.

But Loyd Allen, a church history professor at McAfee School of Theology, says anyone thinking the letter reveals Jefferson as a "closet Christian" are going to be disappointed. In an article for EthicsDaily.com, Allen said other writings by Jefferson rejected the divinity of Christ and denied the miracles, resurrection and the atonement.

"Some contemporary Christians apparently cannot comprehend how born-again Baptist Christians in [the] early 19th century ... could -- after the election of a non-orthodox, non-Trinitarian, non-Bible-accepting,

deist president -- willingly praise that president because he vouched for the freedom of all consciences, believer and non-believer alike."

That, Allen said, points to "the loss of wise Jefferson's clear vision of the importance of a wall of separation between church and state." (ABP)

-- By ABP staff

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