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Texas Baptist leaders support new world missions network

By Mark Wingfield and Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- A leadership board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas showed strong support for creation of a new world missions network in the state.

The BGCT executive board voted Sept. 24 to approve recommendations of a missions-review-and-initiatives committee, including creation of a network to help churches and individuals sponsor missionary work in the United States and worldwide.

The network would be established as a not-for-profit affiliate of the BGCT. It does not replace existing relationships with the Southern Baptist Convention, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist World Alliance, but augments them with "fluid and flexible" structures driven by churches and responsive to changing needs.

Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention have criticized the plan, which must be approved at the BGCT annual meeting scheduled Nov. 11-12 in Waco. They say it duplicates work already being done by SBC agencies and signals that Texas leaders are pulling further away from identifying with Southern Baptists.

In a Baptist Press report Sept. 6, Jerry Rankin, president of the SBC International Mission Board, said the proposal would divert funds away from Southern Baptist missions.

"Southern Baptists in Texas already have -- in the International Mission Board -- an excellent network for personalized involvement," Rankin said. "The IMB's role is to facilitate churches, associations and state conventions in their efforts to be obedient to the Great Commission."

In presenting the report to the Texas executive board, the chair of the missions-review committee addressed "spin" put out by critics.

"One of those spins is that the International Mission Board has not changed," said Clyde Glazener, pastor of Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth. "That's not terribly candid."

The committee's 25-page report criticizes several policies of the IMB, but doesn't call for a change in the relationship between the agency based in Richmond, Va., and the BGCT.

Some on the executive board questioned whether the network is a first step toward Texas Baptists sending their own foreign missionaries. "If we're going to become a missions-sending agency, ... we need to say so," said Bobby Worsham of Second Baptist Church in La Porte.

E.B. Brooks, coordinator of church missions and evangelism for the BGCT, said the review committee has "developed no strategy beyond this report."

The missions-review-and-initiatives report emphasizes hands-on, volunteer missions and recognizes that missions is the responsibility of every local church, and not just state and national agencies.

In his statement to Baptist Press, Rankin said it is unnecessary. "Rather than diverting missions gifts to create and maintain a new institution that duplicates work already being done by other entities, we encourage Southern Baptists in Texas to stand by their missionaries and press forward with them in taking the good news of salvation to a lost world," he said.

But other experts in missions strategy say the Texas plan recognizes a direction where churches are already heading.

"The amateurization of missions is a real trend," said Mike Stroope, associate professor of global missions at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. "The task of missions is being taken away from professionals and assumed by churches," said Stroope, a former IMB missionary. "They are doing it. Let's help them."

Justice Anderson, who served 17 years as a Southern Baptist missionary in Argentina and taught missions 27 years at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said the trend cuts across denominational lines. "The general trend in missiology is a movement back to the local church as the basic sending body, instead of turning that responsibility over to societies and boards."

Anderson said he applauds increased involvement by local churches, but remains committed to the notion of career missionaries. "The cross-cultural communication of the gospel needs specialists," he said. "I guess I'm of the old school on that point, since my generation did it that way."

Bill O'Brien, retired director of the Global Center at Samford University, agreed that any missions network needs field personnel who live in other cultures and speak the language. "There will always be a role for the career missionary, if by that we mean an incarnational presence working cross-culturally," he said.

Stroope, Anderson and O'Brien all agreed that the new network could address what some perceive to be weaknesses in the IMB's approach.

Anderson said he hopes the network will provide a way to help missionaries who are unwilling to comply with an IMB requirement that they affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

All three said it is imperative for the network to work closely with Christians in nations where churches send missionaries. The IMB has been accused of "distancing" itself from national Baptists and implementing a more top-down approach.

And unlike the IMB, which doesn't work with the moderate-led Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, O'Brien said the Texas network would be free to relate to "all Great Commission Christians."

"For years, I've been advocating more collaborative strategic planning with the larger body of Christ around the world," O'Brien said. "I believe the last frontier in missions is the frontier of cooperation and collaboration with Christian bodies around the world."

Also at the Sept. 24 meeting, the BGCT executive board approved a recommended budget of \$50.8 million, with a goal of \$46.2 million through the Cooperative Program unified budget.

The budget is divided 79 percent for BGCT ministries and 21 percent to worldwide causes. That is a shift of 7 percent from worldwide to Texas, brought on by reduced support from churches.

"We have lost 1,000 churches," said Stephen Hatfield, chairman of the administrative committee. "I don't know any other way to say it. We have lost 1,000 churches, and we need to keep funding the work of the BGCT."

The BGCT competes for funding in the state with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, which formed in 1998, citing differences with the BGCT's moderate stance. The Southern Baptist Convention recognizes both conventions.

According to a report in the Sept. 16 Baptist Standard, the breakaway convention is taking in more money than it can spend.

The SBTC won't support Texas ministries that refuse to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message." As a result, the organization is projecting a \$2.8 million in-state surplus this year, on top of \$2.4 million held in reserves from last year.

Plans for spending the money include building a new convention headquarters in Grapevine, and creating its own departments for human care and family ministries -- including foster care, adoption and intervention in crisis pregnancies -- and mission services -- including volunteer church builders, disaster relief and prison ministry.

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Texas Baptists, NAMB disagree over agreement

By ABP staff

DALLAS (ABP) -- Leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board disagree over a proposed agreement about how the two entities will work together.

Staff from the BGCT and NAMB worked together a year to negotiate a new cooperative agreement for the first time since 1991.

A main sticking point is a NAMB policy requiring that all personnel affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message," adopted by the SBC in 2000. The BGCT opposes some of the most recent revisions to the faith statement and insist it shouldn't be used as a creed.

As approved by the BGCT state missions commission in August, the new cooperative agreement said that personnel employed jointly by NAMB and the BGCT must conform to policies of both. That means new jointly funded missionaries would be required to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" in keeping with NAMB policy.

However, the new agreement acknowledges that the BGCT would retain about \$1.3 million in funds it sends to NAMB -- the amount that NAMB sends back to the state -- and use it, if needed, to pick up the full cost of any Texas missionaries who refuse to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message."

But that compromise unraveled when the BGCT executive board voted Sept. 24 to delete a reference saying that jointly appointed personnel "shall comply with the 'Baptist Faith and Message' 2000."

E.B. Brooks, coordinator of the BGCT's missions programs, said the statement would allow the state convention to maintain ties with churches that want the BGCT to work with NAMB, while providing alternative funding for those who oppose NAMB restrictions. It would apply only for future appointments, and not to volunteers. "This will not hinder our work," he said.

In discussion, members of the board said they desired cooperation but didn't want to appear to endorse the "Baptist Faith and Message."

"I'm concerned about appearances," said Glen Schmucker, pastor of Cliff Temple Baptist Church in Dallas.

"When people in Texas see that sentence, they're not going to understand the understanding of it," said Lisa Robertson, a member of Southmont Baptist Church in Denton.

NAMB issued a statement Sept. 25 saying that Brooks had informed leaders that the "Baptist Faith and Message" reference had been removed because it is "redundant."

"The North American Mission Board doesn't believe clear delineation of the foundational doctrinal beliefs held by our denomination, this agency and our missionaries to be redundant, but necessary," the statement said.

NAMB President Robert Reccord said he was "dumbfounded" by the executive board vote. He said he planned to present the original document to NAMB trustees in October, which includes assurances that new NAMB missionaries will affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Reccord has also said he disagrees with the BGCT's contention that retaining funds it currently sends to NAMB will allow mission programs to run more efficiently without NAMB regulations. Reccord says he views the change as a "defunding."

"It is not the state's money that is returned to the state," Reccord wrote in a letter quoted by Baptist Press. "It is funds representing the gifts of Southern Baptists all over North America who are contributing to a coordinated mission strategy for the continent."

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-- Adapted from reporting by Mark Wingfield and Ken Camp

Texas Baptists endorse first group of chaplains

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Baptist General Convention of Texas has endorsed its first 42 chaplains and pastoral counselors and begun developing a process to approve new applicants for endorsement.

At its initial meeting in Dallas on Sept. 23, the nine-member endorsement board unanimously voted to grant transfer of endorsement from other Baptist entities to 39 chaplains and three pastoral counselors.

The 42 pastoral caregivers -- 36 male and six female -- included 41 previously endorsed by the Southern Baptist Convention North American Mission Board and one who had been endorsed by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

NAMB requires new chaplains, or chaplains needing endorsement for a new service assignment, to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message." NAMB also denies endorsement to ordained women.

Thirty-one of the BGCT-endorsed pastoral caregivers are Texas Baptists, and 11 serve outside the state, including five Texans in the military chaplaincy.

The 39 chaplains include 22 in health care, 10 military, six in restorative justice, and one serving in business and industry.

The board agreed to a streamlined process for transfer of endorsement and for reaffirmation of previous endorsement -- a step required when a pastoral caregiver moves from one place of service to another.

The endorsement board also began establishing guidelines for screening applicants who have not been through the endorsement process with another recognized chaplain-endorsing agency.

At the time the board met, the BGCT Office of Chaplaincy Relations already had received 22 requests for first-time endorsement.

State and federal institutions such as prisons and the military -- as well as many hospitals and other entities -- require chaplains to be endorsed by an officially recognized endorsing organization.

The U.S. Armed Forces Chaplains Board on July 24 approved the BGCT as an authorized endorsement agency. The Veterans Administration, Federal Bureau of Prisons and American Association of Pastoral Counselors have done the same.

At its first meeting, the endorsement board agreed that its purpose would be to "establish a framework for a supportive community of called pastoral caregivers that will provide a caring ministry to empower its membership through endorsement, recognition and mutual accountability towards the fulfillment of the Great Commission."

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Second judge strikes down federal death penalty law

By Robert Marus

BURLINGTON, Vt. (ABP) -- A federal judge in Vermont has become the second magistrate in two months to say the current national death-penalty law is unconstitutional.

U.S. District Judge William Sessions ruled Sept. 24 in Vermont that the federal Death Penalty Act does too little to ensure that the rights of defendants in death-penalty cases are safeguarded.

The judge struck down a law passed by Congress in 1992, citing a series of recent Supreme Court decisions narrowing application of the death penalty. One delivered in June that said only juries could sentence defendants to death.

Sessions said federal prosecutors should not have used a confession from an alleged accomplice to argue for the death penalty of 22-year-old Donald Fell, convicted of kidnapping and beating to death a 53-year-old Vermont woman in 2000. That is because the same evidence would not have been allowed at trial.

"It is inconceivable to this court that Congress could have intended ... to provide less protection in a capital proceeding than in a non-capital proceeding," Sessions wrote.

Sessions implied that Congress could fix the problem, however, by passing a better federal death-penalty law.

The Vermont case comes on the heels of a July ruling in New York by Judge Jed Rakoff of the Federal District Court in Manhattan.

Rakoff went further than Sessions in declaring that the death penalty itself is unconstitutional. The judge said the recent spate of high-profile cases of death-row inmates being exonerated by DNA evidence shows that the death penalty is applied unfairly. In many cases, Rakoff said, capital punishment amounts "to foreseeable, state-sponsored murder of innocent human beings."

Those rulings conflict with other recent federal court rulings from Pennsylvania and Virginia upholding the Death Penalty Act.

Prosecutors said they would appeal the rulings against the act.

"In our system of government, it is the legislature elected by the American people which determines the proper punishment for federal crimes, not lone members of the judiciary," said Barbara Comstock, a spokesperson for Attorney General John Ashcroft. "Congress passed the Federal Death Penalty Act to save lives, and the Supreme Court of the United States has repeatedly said the death penalty does not violate the Constitution."

Sessions' ruling does not affect state death-penalty laws, under which most executions are carried out.

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French troops rescue missionary children

By John Hall

DALLAS (ABP) -- French troops on Sept. 25 escorted more than 100 children of missionaries, including several International Mission Board missionaries' kids, out of an Ivory Coast boarding school that was surrounded by armed forces during a military uprising.

All the children and about 100 staff members at the International Christian Academy are safe, according to James Forlines, director of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, which has ties to the school.

School staff locked the students in a dormitory Friday as armed rebel troops moved just outside the campus on the outskirts of Bouake in the central Ivory Coast. Gunfire erupted over the next six days as the military took control of the city.

Reports vary about whether or not rebel soldiers fired toward the school or came onto school grounds. A report from inside the school stated that no military entered school grounds and rebel troops only fired in the air.

Forlines, however, said that two men walked on to the south campus grounds and fired into the air, which "scared the students to death." On another occasion a group of rebels came down a hill in front of the school firing, but it was unclear whether they were firing at the school, he said.

Students had plenty of food and water and gained some freedom Saturday as the soldiers moved closer to the city and away from the school. Students roamed freely within a restricted area as staff with radios kept watch.

About 100 French soldiers secured the school Sept. 25 and escorted the children to Yamoussoukro, where they are then to be taken to Ghana and processed by their respective embassies.

Forlines said the rescue is the direct result of worldwide prayer, and that God intervened to save the children. "I believe there has been a hand of protection over the campus," he said.

Mark Kelley, a spokesman for the International Mission Board, did not release the names or exact number of IMB missionaries' children to protect them and their families from media attention and questioning. He said the IMB has some representatives in Western Africa to help the missionary families however they can. IMB missionaries remain in the country. Rebel forces continue to control Bouake and Korhogo, located in the north.

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-- John Hall writes for Texas Baptist Communications

SBC healthier than ever, Graham tells journalists

By Robert Marus

NASHVILLE (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention is at its strongest point in history, SBC president Jack Graham told religious journalists meeting Sept. 20-22 in Nashville, Tenn.

"Southern Baptist life and work and witness is extremely healthy at this time," Graham said at an annual gathering of the Religion Newswriters Association, an organization for religion reporters at secular publications.

Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in suburban Dallas, said Southern Baptists worldwide are currently baptizing new believers at the rate of one every 40 seconds.

He also touted the SBC's vocal stands on controversial social issues as a sign of health. "In an age of relativism, Southern Baptists are sending a message to the world that is clear and certain," Graham said.

A reporter asked Graham if he was concerned that the SBC has not shown significant gains in average Sunday-school attendance or baptisms in several years -- both generally viewed as measures of denominational health.

Graham said he was "concerned that Southern Baptists do a better job of reaching their communities with the gospel."

Another SBC leader, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission President Richard Land, also spoke to the gathering.

Land said religious conservatives are encouraged in recent developments in America's so-called "culture wars."

Three years ago, leaders of the Religious Right were about to give up after failing to remove President Clinton from office. But now, with one of their own in the White House, Land said religious conservatives "are far more willing to re-engage the culture."

Land said religious conservatives also were encouraged by Americans' response to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. "They looked around and discovered that there were a lot more people who felt the way they did about patriotism and about faith resources in a time of crisis than they had been led to believe," he said.

Graham echoed comments he had made earlier in the week to the SBC Executive Committee that, as president of the denomination, he would encourage Southern Baptist churches to enter the private-school business.

"One of the things I'm going to emphasize as president is the starting of Southern Baptist-style Christian schools by our churches," Graham said.

The "greatest cultural issue of our time," Graham said, is "the restoration and redemption of the family."

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