



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

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

October 22, 2002

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee

OCT 31 2002

(02-99)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- CBF leaders adopt identity statement
- News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

CBF leaders adopt identity statement

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is a "Baptist association of churches and individuals" separate from the Southern Baptist Convention but declines to define itself as a convention or denomination, according to a new statement by CBF leadership.

The statement, adopted by the CBF Coordinating Council Oct. 19, responds to a request by a Baptist World Alliance membership committee that the Atlanta-based group affirm publicly that it is not an "integral part" of any current BWA member -- specifically the SBC.

The CBF, which formed in 1991 as a result of SBC controversy, first voted to apply for membership in the BWA, a worldwide fellowship of Baptists, in 2000. A BWA membership committee denied the group's first application last year, saying the Fellowship did not appear to qualify as a traditional Baptist convention or union for membership.

A second application this year, however, got a more favorable hearing when the BWA General Council met in Seville, Spain, in July. The group overwhelmingly approved a report that the CBF could qualify for membership by next year if its leaders would "affirm publicly ... that they have separated themselves from the structures and organization of the SBC, and have a distinctively diverse understanding to the SBC of what it means to be an organized body of Baptist churches and individuals in covenant relationship."

The CBF council responded with a statement listing 20 indicators that the Fellowship is "no longer integral" to the SBC, including the fact that the SBC has in effect recognized CBF as a separate entity by refusing to accept funding from the Fellowship for the past seven years.

The CBF also has its own organizational structure, missionaries, foundation and benefits board and endorses chaplains, according to the statement. More than 150 CBF churches have no formal membership in the SBC. The United Nations recognizes the CBF as a non-governmental organization, and several Baptist state conventions allow churches to give to CBF through their budgets.

Consistent with earlier statements, however, leaders of the Fellowship insisted the moderate breakaway group is not a denomination.

"Though fully independent of the SBC or any other union, we do not declare that we are a denomination or convention," the statement says. "Rather, we are Baptist by conviction and we are a partnership of churches and individuals by philosophy. We have chosen instead to define ourselves as a

'fellowship,' which means that we are a 'Baptist association of churches and individuals' in partnership for the advancement of God's Kingdom."

Founded in 1905, the Baptist World Alliance represents more than 200 Baptist unions and conventions that include 44.5 million baptized believers in 193,000 Baptist churches around the world.

CBF leaders believe membership in the BWA would expand opportunities for ministry through overseas partnerships and add legitimacy to the CBF by affirming it is more than a "splinter group."

"I believe it is important for us to be a part of the BWA," said CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal. "I believe it is important for the BWA, and I believe it is important for the Kingdom of God."

Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention oppose the CBF's membership application. Members of the SBC delegation voted against the BWA membership committee report in Spain, commenting that the Fellowship should first declare itself a new convention in order to sufficiently separate from the SBC.

"I think there are some people who desperately want us to declare ourselves a convention of churches rather than a fellowship of individuals and churches," Vestal told the CBF Coordinating Council. "I don't think we want to go down that road."

CBF leaders said the new identity statement is significant not only for the BWA application, but it also gives the organization a chance to define itself more clearly to the general public.

Jim Baucom, past moderator of the CBF, said before attending the BWA General Council meeting in Seville, he assumed everyone understood that the organization is not "an integral part" of the SBC.

Baucom said he soon discovered, however, that "almost no one outside of our movement understands that."

"They believe we are part of the SBC, sort of a shadow organization, but not a separate organization," said Baucom, pastor of Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va.

Compounding that perception is the CBF's evolving self-awareness. A public statement announcing the CBF's formation in 1991 said differences with the SBC did "not require that we sever ties with the old Southern Baptist Convention."

Five years later, following a yearlong study, the Fellowship voted against forming a new convention.

Over time, however, leaders say CBF supporters have increasingly come to view the organization as distinct from the SBC. Symbolic of that trend, former President Jimmy Carter two years ago renounced his SBC ties and declared allegiance to the CBF.

Leaders say the newest identity statement doesn't so much break new ground for the CBF as accurately describe present realities.

"I don't think we're making a significant statement that changes who we are," said CBF moderator Phill Martin. "We're just clarifying our identity."

"I think for some people it will be perceived as a declaration of independence," Martin said. "Personally, I did that 10 years ago."

SBC leaders have indicated they might leave the BWA or reduce funding if the CBF is allowed to join. The SBC is the largest BWA member, with 16 million members, and provides funding for about 20 percent of the BWA's \$2.1 million annual budget.

BWA leaders have urged healing in the rift separating the SBC and CBF. The groups differ over a variety of theological and social issues, including women's roles in the family and church.

"I do not want the Southern Baptist Convention to leave the BWA," Martin said. "They are brothers and sisters in Christ. I've had conflict with them, and I can no longer be part of them, but they are part of the Baptist family."

While CBF leaders in the past shied away from talk of forming a convention because of potential fallout from churches that might feel compelled to choose between funding the SBC or CBF rather than both, most now say they oppose the idea because the convention model is becoming outdated in a "post-denominational" age.

Some in the CBF movement, however, still believe a more formal split with the SBC is inevitable in the future.

At this summer's CBF General Assembly, retired CBF Coordinator Cecil Sherman said he believes a new convention will be formed sooner or later, and it is now time for "mainstream" Baptists to begin thinking about what form it will take. "We've been building a denomination for 10 years," Sherman told a Mainstream Baptist Network gathering June 27.

Vestal disagreed with his predecessor's assessment. Asked in a separate breakout session if he believed a new convention is around the corner, Vestal replied: "It ain't gonna happen. You don't just form a convention by announcing it. I don't think churches are going to join a new convention."

Vestal, however, has said previously that he believes Fellowship supporters were yearning for an identity that separates the group more clearly from the SBC.

"I'm not afraid of using the 'D-word,' but I guess I'm more comfortable in saying we are a fellowship that functions like a denomination," Vestal said at a dialogue session in September 2000. "I guess I have bought into the reality that we are living in a post-denominational world."

-30-

News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Missouri lawyer files brief in state convention's lawsuit

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. -- A Missouri attorney filed an amicus brief Oct. 21 on behalf of 2,485 individuals and 35 churches opposing legal action by the Missouri Baptist Convention against five of its agencies over a leadership dispute.

Bart Tichenor, a lawyer in Columbia, Mo., said the brief argues for dismissal of a petition of declaratory judgment against The Baptist Home, Missouri Baptist College, Missouri Baptist Foundation, Windermere Baptist Conference Center and Word and Way.

The lawsuit, filed Aug. 13 in Cole County Circuit Court in Jefferson City, Mo., asks a judge to determine who has the right to elect trustees for the agencies, with combined assets totaling \$200 million.

The petition claims that the five MBC agencies violated the law when they changed their charters to make themselves, rather than the state convention, responsible for electing their boards of trustees.

Tichenor said the brief is significant because it challenges a claim by the MBC executive board and six plaintiff churches that they have legal standing to represent all Missouri Baptists. Tichenor said the individual signers of the amicus brief come from 146 different Missouri Baptist churches.

"The plaintiffs in this lawsuit, in contradiction to nearly 400 years of Baptist polity, have asserted to the court that they possess the authority to represent all Missouri Baptist churches," Tichenor said in a statement. "Many Missouri Baptists would probably be very surprised to know that another Baptist church would even attempt to assert such a position." (ABP)

D.C.-area seminary president issues call for prayer

FALLS CHURCH, Va. -- The president of the John Leland Center for Theological Studies has issued a call for prayer for people in and around Washington terrorized by a series of sniper attacks.

"Stress is not unusual in the nation's capital," said Randal Everett, president of the Baptist-affiliated seminary in Falls Church, Va. "The normal challenges of gridlock, high cost of living and high-stress jobs have been complicated during this last year with the constant threat of another terrorist attack."

"However, I have never observed more fear in our community than during these past two weeks with the sniper killing ordinary citizens who are in the midst of normal daily activities," said Everett, who was senior pastor at Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church before becoming the Leland Center's first president last year.

He urged Baptists to pray for law enforcement officials, the media and particularly for victims and their families. He also encouraged prayer for churches in the area "to be strong and to communicate the message of hope and peace." (ABP)

Church sues school board

CONOVER, N.C. -- A North Carolina Baptist church is suing a county school board for refusing to allow it to display a Bible verse on a banner it purchased for display at a middle school athletic field.

Oxford Baptist Church in Conover, N.C., sued the Catawba County Board of Education and a middle-school principal in federal court, alleging violation of the church's freedom of speech.

The school board asked community organizations to buy banners for a fundraiser to be displayed at the athletic field at River Bend Middle School. But the school board refused to allow the church to include a Bible verse, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God," on theirs. The banner appeared on the field without the scripture.

A spokesman for the Alliance Defense Fund, a Christian legal group representing the congregation, said the school district "doesn't want a mere separation of church and state, but segregation of church and state." (ABP)

Baptist newspaper adopts policy on church firings

ATLANTA -- The Christian Index won't publish stories about most ministerial firings -- including ones involving moral failure and fiscal malfeasance -- considering such disputes "local church matters," according to a policy adopted by the newspaper's board of directors Sept. 24.

According to a report of the meeting in the paper's Oct. 10 issue, the directors adopted a policy in light of allegations that Roman Catholics and other religious groups covered up reporting of instances of child abuse.

For that reason, the Baptist newspaper policy allows exceptions to the general policy when stories have already been widely reported in other media or criminal convictions are involved. In cases involving criminal charges, the accused generally "will be given the benefit of the doubt" until a conviction or guilty plea is entered, according to the policy.

The policy emphasizes reporting of child abuse, as a way to prevent predators from moving elsewhere and abuse others. It also allows reporting of "major financial scandals," such as the Baptist Foundation of Arizona collapse, before they are settled. (ABP)

Officials say 99 percent of missionaries affirm 'Baptist Faith and Message'

RICHMOND, Va. -- Nearly 99 percent of Southern Baptist missionaries have complied with a request to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," according to officials at the International Mission Board.

Avery Willis, senior vice president for overseas operations, reportedly is talking personally with missionaries who haven't yet complied with a January request by IMB President Jerry Rankin to sign an affirmation of the faith statement.

A total of 26 missionaries have resigned while specifically citing the request as a factor in their decision, according to a news release Oct. 18. Resignations for six others are awaiting trustee action in November. A total of 5,437 international missionaries currently serve with the IMB.

IMB officials estimated that about 1 percent of missionaries still haven't indicated whether they will affirm the document. (ABP)

History society developing how-to kit for churches

BRENTWOOD, Tenn. -- The Baptist History and Heritage Society is releasing a new resource Dec. 1 to help local churches research and preserve their history.

"The Baptist History and Heritage Society strongly believes that one of its primary duties is to provide resources and services that support the development of meaningful local-church history programs," Charles Deweese, the society's executive director, said in a statement.

"A How-to Kit for Your Church's History" includes a 120-page manual with chapters on how to develop a church-history committee, celebrate an anniversary and research, write and publish a church's history, plus other topics.

Information on ordering the kit, which costs \$27.95, is available on the society's Web site, www.baptisthistory.org. (ABP)

-30-

END
