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New ecumenical group targets evangelicals, Catholics, ethnics
By Robert Marus
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PASADENA, Calif. (ABP) – Christian leaders are moving forward with plans for a new ecumenical group that aims to be a broader coalition than has previously existed among American Christians.

In a late January meeting at California's Fuller Theological Seminary, a diverse group of representatives from 30 denominations crafted a governing structure for Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A.

Participants hope to form an alliance of denominations from five different Christian traditions: "evangelical/Pentecostal" Protestant, "racial/ethnic" Protestant, "historic Protestant" (mainline Protestant denominations), Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.

It will also include parachurch groups from many denominations and non-denominational congregations, such as World Vision or Call to Renewal.

The inclusion of evangelicals, Pentecostals and parachurch groups would distinguish CCTUSA from the much older National Council of Churches, which has had only limited participation from evangelicals and none from Catholics. NCC has experienced serious financial woes in recent years, and some denominational leaders view that organization as not truly representative of the theology and public-policy views of many U.S. Christians.

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, chair of the new group's steering committee, told Religion News Service: "We're not reaching everyone, but we're reaching a much wider expression ... of what American church life is really like." Granberg-Michaelson is executive director for the Reformed Church in America.

Several Baptist leaders participated in the organizing of CCTUSA. Roy Medley, general secretary for the American Baptist Churches, took part in an earlier organizational session for the group, and ABC director of ecumenical formation Rothangliani Chhangte was one of the delegates to the Pasadena gathering.

"It was a remarkable meeting not only because it brought together such a diverse group of Christians, but the fact that at the end of two-and-a-half days of meeting we were able to come up with a proposed statement that was agreeable to everyone and would become a basis for forming this new coalition," Chhangte told American Baptist News Service. "Given the diversity of theological perspectives present in the conference, many of us were skeptical about the outcome of the meeting."

A representative of the Southern Baptist Convention also attended the meeting as an observer, but reportedly expressed reserve about his denomination's formal participation in any such group. "Historically, Southern Baptists haven't been joiners," Barrett Duke, a vice president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, told Religion News Service. "It certainly would be quite out of the ordinary for Southern Baptists to join any organization, even one we might agree with."

Duke expressed appreciation for the group's care to include evangelicals.

The Southern Baptist Convention has never joined the National Council of Churches, even though all of the nation's other major Protestant denominations are members. SBC leaders also recently voted to reduce their support for the Baptist World Alliance, a diverse coalition of Baptist groups from around the world.

CCTUSA leaders say they have taken great pains to craft a statement of faith agreeable to all the traditions, inviting "all churches who confess Jesus Christ as God and Savior according to the scriptures to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit to join us on this journey."

According to the governing structure adopted in the Jan 27-28 meeting, CCTUSA will include on its steering committee three representatives from each of the five "families" of churches. The CCTUSA will formally come into

existence once 25 denominations have agreed to join.



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Church members mourn 7 killed in bus accident**By John Hall****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****February 21, 2003****Volume: 03-19-3465**

TEMPLE, Texas (ABP) – Seven long-stemmed red roses stood in tall, clear vases beside the pulpit at Memorial Baptist Church Feb. 16. They served as silent reminders of the seven people, including five members of the church, killed in a bus wreck two days earlier.

About 250 worshippers, many wearing black, gathered at the normal time for Sunday morning worship. But on this Sunday they gathered to support each other and remember their five friends who had died and the 28 others who were injured in the accident south of Waco.

The tragedy injured or killed every person aboard the chartered bus headed to Dallas for a Bill Gaither concert.

According to initial reports, the accident occurred amid a torrential rain. As the bus crested a hill, the driver reportedly swerved left to avoid a collision with cars stopped on a rain-soaked Interstate 35.

The bus crossed the grassy median and crushed a southbound sport utility vehicle, killing the SUV's driver and one of two passengers. Then the bus rolled onto its side in a ditch on the far side of the highway.

Ministers from the church arrived on the scene to find most members of the senior-adult group hurt and the bodies of the dead scattered about, covered with black body bags.

Associate pastor Robert Mattson, the second staff member on the scene, discovered one church member standing next to the body of his wife. Mattson, who had watched the bus leave the church an hour earlier, could manage only to put his arms around the man.

"There are no words," Mattson said later. "You're just numb. You're in shock."

As the injured were transported to two area hospitals, Mattson, pastor Roy Parker and youth minister Scott Benson split up to care for the families.

The church held a prayer vigil later that evening in response to a growing number of "devastated" people who were coming to the church as they heard of the wreck, Parker said. They came together to pray for the congregation and remember the church members who had died.

Martha McKee, 77, had been a Memorial member 1962 and served as editor of a newsletter for the church's senior adults. Joe Freeman, 70, was active in the church's ministry to the homebound and helped serve meals for funeral services. Delores Hinton, 72, was director of Memorial's women's ministry and a former professor at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

Melvin Acres, 76, was a deacon with a "smile that was contagious," Mattson said. Delois "Speedie" Acres, 72, Melvin's wife and a choir member, was the "perfect lady," Mattson said.

Brenda Dobelbower, 48, and Janice Roberson, 61, were killed in the SUV. Both worked at McLennan Community College in Waco.

Christians from across the country filled the church's answering machine with pledges of prayer. Local businesses and organizations provided food and counselors. The victim-relief unit of Texas Baptist Men arrived the next day with 11 chaplains to counsel church members.

These acts of fellowship and support were merely a prelude to the Feb. 16 worship service. Just after 11 a.m., a surge of emotionally worn church members entered almost silently into the sanctuary. Hugs abounded throughout the

church as the tight-knit congregation came together as a whole for the first time since the accident.

Worshippers spoke of Jesus as the strength who would see them through these difficult times. A woman in the first row of the choir burst into tears and collapsed in the arms of the woman next to her, who also began to cry. Tears rolled down scarred faces of injured victims throughout the room.

Later in the service, Parker confessed to the congregation that he did not know all the answers, but he knew God would work through the tragedy. He said it was all right to be mad at God, who would understand this was an emotional time.

The congregation held hands high in the air and sang the Doxology to dismiss the service. The congregation exited the sanctuary past a heart-shaped memorial wreath that had been blown over by a stiff wind.

Outside, members faced an intimidating row of television cameras and reporters who were camped out on the first row of the parking lot. Some worshipers stopped to speak to the reporters, but many walked around them. A few expressed displeasure with their presence.

Despite the mixed reaction, Parker thanked the media for carrying the story around the world. "I wanted us to try to share to the world how great and wonderful it is to be a Christian in a situation like this," the pastor said later.

The church will go on, he insisted. "There has been a resolution of the people that we are going to make it through this and the church is going to grow stronger," Parker said.



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BWA's Lotz 'saddened' by planned SBC funding cut
By Trennis Henderson and Robert Marus
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CAMPBELLSVILLE, Ky. (ABP) – The proposal by Southern Baptist Convention leaders to reduce funding to the Baptist World Alliance "could not come at a worse time in world history," declared Denton Lotz, BWA general secretary. BWA is a coalition of more than 200 Baptist denominational groups from across the globe.

Lotz, who was in Kentucky to speak at Campbellsville University, said he was "really sad and disappointed" by the SBC Executive Committee's action since BWA leaders "have bent over backwards to accommodate the concerns of our Southern Baptist brothers and sisters."

The SBC proposal would redirect \$125,000 originally budgeted for BWA to a proposed Southern Baptist initiative to bring together "like-minded Christian bodies." It comes amid complaints from Southern Baptist leaders that the BWA is considering accepting the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as a member body. While the SBC report acknowledges that the decision about CBF membership "rests solely with the BWA," it says the SBC "has much more than a passing interest in the ultimate decision to be made by the BWA."

"We have included SBC leaders in our top leadership positions and decision-making bodies," Lotz said.

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, serves as a BWA vice president. Lotz noted that one of the roles of BWA officers is raising funds for the alliance.

Lotz, himself is a member of a Southern Baptist congregation, said he is disappointed that Southern Baptist leaders are directing the effort to decrease BWA's funding.

"In partially defunding the BWA, this SBC decision actually is reducing funding for our brothers and sisters around the world who are suffering from religious persecution, lack of human rights and generally all the prejudices of a minority movement in a clash of civilizations," Lotz emphasized.

"If ever Baptists needed unity and to work together, it is now. How will our brothers and sisters in the 'Two-Thirds World' react who love the BWA and would love to support us but are in poverty conditions?"

Lotz said he fears the message being sent by SBC leaders to Baptists around the world is: "We do not need you. We will do it on our own and form our own alliances and networking."

Citing the SBC proposal to strengthen relationships with "like-minded Christians," Lotz asked, "If Baptists in the Baptist World Alliance are not 'like-minded Christians,' who are we then? Who are Baptists in Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, India, Brazil, Australia, Japan, Korea? Are we not all 'like-minded Christians?'"

Despite the proposed funding cut, Lotz said: "We love Southern Baptists and want them to participate in all of the life of the Baptist World Alliance. Baptists of the world need you and want you to continue to support us to the fullest extent."

The Executive Committee's decision to cut the funds was recommended by a special SBC task force on the BWA. Members of that committee were: Chapman, chairman; Jimmy Draper, president of LifeWay Christian Resources; Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board; Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; former SBC president Tom Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla.; Dallas-area pastor Gary Smith, chairman of the SBC Executive Committee; retired Texas appellate judge Paul Pressler of Houston, an architect of the SBC's so-called "conservative resurgence;" Houston attorney Joe Reynolds; and Bob Sorrell, a staff member of Bellevue Baptist Church in suburban Memphis, Tenn.

Messengers to the SBC's annual meeting in June must ratify the decision to cut BWA funds, but approval is almost assured.

Lotz said the subject of the cut would likely come up during the BWA's next executive committee meeting, scheduled for March 3-6 at the agency's Virginia headquarters.

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As war threatens, 'Gods and Generals' relives America's bloodiest conflict

By Ted Parks

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WASHINGTON (ABP) – More than a century before cruise missiles and precision bombing, American soldiers marched in neat columns to face their foes in close combat, praying to live long enough to fire back at least once. Now, 160 years later, the Civil War is still "vivid and unforgettable and essential" to our national identity, according to historian Michael Parrish.

With the country again on the brink of war, the new film "Gods and Generals" invites moviegoers to relive one of the nation's bloodiest conflicts ever.

Adapted from author Jeff Shaara's bestselling novel of the same name, "Gods and Generals" was written, directed and produced by Ron Maxwell, who also directed the 1993 Civil War drama "Gettysburg." Three-and-a-half hours long, Maxwell's latest film recounts the early years of the Civil War from 1861 to just before Gettysburg in 1863.

Centering on Southern Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson (Stephen Lang), the story also includes Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee (Robert Duvall) and Union Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain (Jeff Daniels).

Like the Civil War classic "Gone With the Wind," released in 1939 as war clouds gathered in Europe, "Gods and Generals" opens on the brink of another war, this time with Iraq.

For director Maxwell, his epic war film "seems to have gained a certain poignancy" in the current context. With its depiction of the horrors of fighting, the film by its nature is "anti-war," the director said. The movie is not intended as a commentary on the present but as a portrait of the past, Maxwell explained. But it portrays the "paradox" of war, with its ironic combination of suffering and death, heroism and sacrifice.

Striking in "Gods and Generals" is the profound religious faith of the war's leaders. Lee comments on the Southern attachment to the land by explaining that, more than lines on a map, the Confederates are defending the places they learned to love and for which they pray. Before the key Battle of Fredericksburg, Lee tells his officers that, with their fortifications solid, "the rest is in God's hand."

The most demonstrative displays of faith come from Stonewall Jackson. For example, the general quotes from the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians to remind his wife that the fragile "earthly house" in which each human resides is, after all, temporary. As an officer labors over military reports, Jackson admonishes him to consult the battle descriptions in the Old Testament for a proper model.

And the Bible-quoting general is a man of fervent prayer. Before battle, Jackson lifts his arms heavenward in a Christ-like pose, telling God, "I come to you with all the joy in my heart."

Actor Lang, who played Jackson, declined to describe himself as a committed Christian, but he underscored the importance of faith for the man he portrayed. The core elements of Jackson's character "really reside in his relationship with God," Lang said. "His faith ... has tremendous colors to it."

Not only does the film bring to the surface the deep religious faith of its participants, but it also gives an uncharacteristically positive view of the South and its reasons for fighting.

Rather than emphasizing slavery as the Confederate motivation, the movie portrays Southerners as fighting for freedom against outside armies poised to terrorize the homeland. And Northerners emerge not as pure-minded defenders of racial equality, but as Americans likewise prone to discrimination and maybe even as instruments of Northern industrialists hungry for profits on the backs of the South.

The movie's downplay of slavery as the conscious motivation for Union and Confederate soldiers has some basis in fact, according to historians. Michael Parrish, professor of history at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, said evidence

suggests that many Confederate soldiers saw themselves as "fighting for liberty and democracy."

But Parrish underscored that slavery was the key factor in the conflict. While some participants described themselves as battling for "states' rights," Parrish asked rhetorically, "States rights' for what?" Though individual soldiers thought they were defending liberty or preserving the Union, Parrish said, behind the war lay the divisive institution of slavery. "The fighting ... would not have occurred had slavery never existed," the historian said.

Critics have given the film mixed reviews, particularly for its stilted dialogue and its portrayal of the role of slavery. "War may be hell...but 'Gods and Generals' makes going to war feel like going to church," said Stephen Holden in his *New York Times* review of the film. Holden also accused "Gods and Generals" of falling into the same trap as the "Gone With the Wind" by "sanitizing the South's treatment of African-Americans. Its one-sided vision shows freed and about-to-be-freed slaves cleaving to their benign white masters and loyally serving the Confederate army."

But while the film's portrayal of the reasons for the war may strike viewers as unorthodox, the filmmakers' attention to historical detail suggests a passion for the past. Actor Jeff Daniels, who played Chamberlain, praised director Maxwell's concern for authenticity. "Never on this set did we hear, 'Oh, nobody'll notice,'" he added.

History also shows up in the dialogue, which is characterized by the florid style of 19th-century conversational prose. Actor Duvall commented on the challenge of the movie's script. "The speeches were so long sometimes," Duvall said, "they were kind of like a history lesson."

While the links to the past may thrill historians more than ordinary moviegoers, the makers of "Gods and Generals" hope it will speak a message that stirs American hearts. "The whole American experience ... is a dialogue," Maxwell said. "The Civil War is about a time when this conversation broke down."

"These are our parents," the director said of the generation portrayed in the movie. "They were very faithful people."

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