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**Downsized DC convention meets
after SBC de-funding takes effect**

By Robert Marus

SILVER SPRING, Md. (ABP) -- Despite having nearly a third of its funding cut off by the Southern Baptist Convention, leaders of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention gave upbeat reports during the organization's 127th annual meeting Oct. 27-28.

Among other actions, the delegates to the meeting adopted a 2004 budget that reflected a slight reduction from its 2003 budget, approved a minimum annual contribution for participating churches, signed a covenant reflecting the re-organized convention's purpose and accepted 10 new churches into the fellowship.

The meeting was held at Luther Rice Memorial Baptist Church in the Washington suburb of Silver Spring, Md.

The SBC's North American Mission Board announced last year that it would cut off nearly \$500,000 in annual funding it sent to the DCBC because of perceived doctrinal differences between the two organizations.

Theological and political conservatives control the SBC and the vast majority of its churches, while the DCBC has long been home to a wide array of conservative, moderate and liberal congregations.

DCBC is unique among Southern Baptist-related state or regional conventions in that it is also affiliated with two other national Baptist bodies -- the American Baptist Churches and the Progressive National Baptist Convention. In addition, many DCBC churches are affiliated with two moderate splinter groups of the SBC -- the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists.

Approximately 150 churches belong to the DCBC, including many in Washington-area suburbs of Virginia and Maryland and beyond.

The funding cuts took effect at the end of June. Partially in reaction, DCBC has significantly downsized its staff and streamlined its ministries. It also has trimmed its budget over the last two years -- but by less than the amount lost.

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"Over the last year, we have endured much hardship as soldiers of Jesus Christ," Jeffrey Haggray, the convention's executive director-minister, told delegates. He especially noted that, two years ago, the convention employed 23 full- and part-time staff members. Now there are 10.

The downsizing resulted from the budget cuts and a reorganization plan that the convention's executive board adopted in January. The plan, called "Vision 2010," focuses on supporting and coordinating ministries developed out of local churches rather than centralizing ministry efforts in the convention's staff and institutions.

Haggray said that, despite the hardship, the de-funding and attendant re-organization plan had created timely opportunities. "Our churches want hands-on ministry that is indigenous, contextual, staffed by their members and is driven by them as they feel led by the Holy Spirit," Haggray said.

Haggray said another inadvertent benefit of the defunding is that, although it made DCBC "the only state convention of the SBC that does not receive corporate and financial support for missions from the home-missions agency of the denomination," that also means that all DCBC staff members' salaries are now 100 percent underwritten by the DCBC itself.

And although leaders of at least two churches supportive of the SBC's conservative wing indicated they would withdraw support from the DCBC as a result of the controversy, Haggray noted that several times as many congregations have affiliated with the body since the controversy began.

A DCBC spokesperson told ABP that the convention has not been aggressively recruiting churches since the controversy, but that several existing churches had sought out DCBC for affiliation.

Haggray also insisted that the convention's relationship with the SBC was otherwise unchanged. "DCBC continues to relate fully to all of the other boards, committees and agencies of the SBC," he said. "The DCBC continues to be the cooperating state convention of the SBC in the District of Columbia. The DCBC continues to consist of churches that are loyal to the mission of the DCBC and of the SBC."

Delegates later approved a 2004 budget of \$1.27 million, a slight decrease over the 2003 budget. That budget had been reduced by about \$300,000 from the 2002 amount, in anticipation of the cut-off of SBC funding.

In an additional move to shore up finances, DCBC delegates adopted a motion to set an annual minimum contribution of \$500 for cooperating churches. Previously, the convention's constitution had only required that member churches be financially supportive of the convention without specifying any required amount.

In other business, delegates unanimously elected Fred Herring, a layman and member of Fort Foote Baptist Church in Fort Washington, Md., as president. Herring succeeds Charles Updike, who is pastor of the First Baptist Church of Gaithersburg, Md.

Annette James, a member of the First Baptist Church of Hyattsville, Md., was elected vice president. Delegates also re-elected longtime convention recording secretary Tish Jones. She is a DCBC employee and a member of Georgetown Baptist Church in Washington.

Next year's annual meeting will take place Oct. 25-26, 2004, at Vienna Baptist Church in Vienna, Va.

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Mississippi Baptist Convention votes

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not to exclude CBF members as leaders

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) -- Messengers to the Mississippi Baptist Convention voted down a proposed constitutional amendment Oct. 28 that would have excluded Cooperative Baptist Fellowship members from serving in leadership positions in the convention.

The amendment, proposed during last year's annual meeting by Ralph Henson, pastor of Arrowood Baptist Church, Meridian, would have disqualified anyone who is currently serving in an "employed, elected, or appointed position with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship" from serving in any capacity with the Mississippi Baptist Convention.

In accordance with the convention's constitution, Henson's motion was referred last year to the constitution and bylaws committee for action at this year's annual meeting. Rick Courtney, an attorney and chair of the committee, reported the committee was unanimous in recommending the proposal be rejected. Messengers agreed by a vote of 572 to 376.

In other business, messengers adopted a slightly slimmer 2004 budget and elected longtime Mississippi pastor Gene Henderson as president.

Henderson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Brandon, was elected by acclamation after no other nominations were made. He will replace Frank Pollard, retired pastor of First Baptist Church of Jackson, who was in his second one-year term and ineligible for re-election. Thad Moore, pastor of Poplar Springs Drive Church in Meridian, was elected by acclamation to serve as first vice president, and Archie Herrin, missions director for Tri-County Association in Columbia, was re-elected to a second term as second vice president.

The 2004 budget is 2.3 percent less than the record 2003 budget of \$31,592,787. Giving to the 2003 budget is running behind and likely will fall short of the budget amount. The Southern Baptist Convention portion of the 2004 budget will remain at 35 percent -- or \$10,799,240 -- a decrease of 2.34 percent that reflects the overall budget decrease for the coming year.

- By ABP staff with reporting by William Perkins

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Youth-ministry pioneer Yaconelli dies in single-auto accident

By Steve DeVane and Greg Warner

YREKA, Calif. (ABP) -- Mike Yaconelli, owner and co-founder of Youth Specialties, died early Oct. 30 after being involved in a car wreck the night before.

According to news reports, the accident occurred outside the town of Yreka, in northern California, where Yaconelli lived and served as volunteer pastor of Grace Community Church.

Police do not know why the light truck Yaconelli was driving left the highway and hit a light pole. He was taken to a hospital but later died of his injuries. No other vehicles or passengers were involved.

Yaconelli, 61, is considered by many to be the father of modern youth ministry. Youth Specialties is a San Diego-based company dedicated to equipping and training youth workers through events and resources, according to the organization's Web site. The company has sponsored the National Youth Workers Convention for almost 30 years.

Yaconelli also was the founder and general editor of The Door (formerly The Wittenberg Door), the author of numerous books, and a contributing columnist to Youthworker journal.

He is survived by his wife, Karla, five grown children and four grandchildren.

"Mike was the incarnation of his book titles, *Dangerous Wonder* and *Messy Spirituality*," said Tic Long, president of events at Youth Specialties. "He lived a life of wonder and amazement at God's grace. He never claimed to be perfect. He just lived as he was -- a man after God's own heart."

Mark Oestreicher, president of Youth Specialties, recently introduced Yaconelli at the National Youth Workers Convention as "a wonderfully complex group of seeming contradictions. Many of you know that Mike is extremely playful. And while many playful people are only that, Mike is a deep well, a contemplative man with a mushy pastor's heart. Mike is one of those rare people who truly lives in the upside-down kingdom of God."

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News briefs from ABP's Washington bureau

By Robert Marus

Muslims use Ramadan to criticize Bush

WASHINGTON -- A coalition of Muslim-American organizations and other religious and human-rights groups used the Islamic holiday of Ramadan to protest President Bush's dealings with Muslims.

As Bush held a banquet with Muslim leaders at the White House Oct. 28, leaders from the Muslim American Society, the North American Council for Muslim Women, the National Council of Churches and other groups staged a competing Iftar banquet across the street.

Iftar is a name for the dinner that marks the daily breaking of the fast that Muslims keep during the holy month of Ramadan.

The groups protested Bush administration policies and what the Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation called Bush's "lack of substantive dialogue with the Muslim-American community." At a press conference earlier in the day, the group's executive director said Bush was more interested in "photo opportunities" than true dialogue.

Among the issues the groups said they want to discuss with administration officials are what they perceive as the erosion of Muslim- and Arab-Americans' civil liberties in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. They also criticized the lack of public discipline of administration officials who have made what they consider anti-Islamic public comments. (ABP)

Supreme Court allows Iowa courts into church suit

WASHINGTON -- The Supreme Court has declined a church's attempt to dismiss a lawsuit against it, even though the church contended courts should not get involved in a religious matter.

The court declined Oct. 20 to hear the Iowa United Methodist Church's arguments that a defamation lawsuit against it should be dismissed. This means that a judge in Butler County will now decide whether the phrase "spirit of Satan"

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written in a bishop's letter to a feuding congregation defamed a member.

A church district superintendent wrote a letter in 1999 to the congregation of the United Methodist Church in Shell Rock, Iowa, in which he told the church that the "spirit of Satan" was at work among them. Gerald Swinton also asked the church, "When will you stop the blaming, negative and unhappy persons among you from tearing down the spirit of Jesus Christ among you?"

Church member Jane Kliebenstein, who was at the center of the church's controversy, sued the Methodist region, believing she was the one being referred to as the "spirit of Satan."

A state court initially dismissed the case, claiming that courts have little jurisdiction in what is essentially a religious dispute within a church group. However, the Iowa Supreme Court reversed that decision, saying the public circulation of the letter weakened the church's constitutional protection against court interference. (ABP)

Scholars say Bush changes may violate Constitution

WASHINGTON -- An analysis by two legal scholars says recent regulatory changes announced by President Bush raise significant constitutional concerns.

Bush recently announced several federal regulatory changes to make it easier for government organizations to provide federal social-service funds to churches and other pervasively religious charities.

In an analysis of Bush's changes for the non-partisan think-tank Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, law professors Ira Lupu and Robert Tuttle said some aspects of the changes are problematic.

In particular, Lupu and Tuttle said, "on the most important legal question -- the extent to which government may directly finance religious activity -- the rules perpetuate a fundamental misunderstanding of the law" regarding the Constitution's ban on government support for religion.

The scholars, both professors at George Washington University Law School, went on to add that parts of the rule changes "implicitly invite faith-based organizations to test the limits" of what is constitutionally acceptable as they provide government-funded services. (ABP)

Congregations challenge part of Minnesota gun law

ST. PAUL, Minn. -- A coalition of churches and other religious congregations is challenging part of a new right-to-carry handgun law in Minnesota.

The coalition is led by a suburban Minneapolis Lutheran church and includes Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Buddhist and Jewish congregations. They are challenging a part of the law that prohibits churches and other property owners from banning handguns in their parking lots.

The congregations say the requirement is an unconstitutional violation of their freedom of religion. The Minnesota Constitution has a higher standard than does the U.S. Constitution for the state to meet before it can significantly burden an individual or group's religious activities.

The case is currently before the Minnesota Court of Appeals. The congregations won another part of their case in a lower court. A county judge exempted churches from rules in the law that require property owners to post signs indicating that guns are not allowed inside their buildings. (ABP)

Religious-freedom commission marks anniversary

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WASHINGTON -- A federal panel charged with monitoring conditions for religious freedom around the globe celebrated the five-year anniversary of the legislation that created it.

On Oct. 27, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom marked the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. The act set up the independent, bi-partisan panel and created offices dedicated to religious freedom in the State Department and at the National Security Council.

A commission press release noted that by passing the act, "Congress made clear that because of the critical importance of this most fundamental freedom, the promotion of religious freedom should be a central element of U.S. foreign policy."

Commissioners are appointed by congressional leaders of both parties as well as by the president. The commission also announced that House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) had appointed Patti Chang of San Francisco as a member of the commission.

Chang, president of the Women's Foundation of California, is a long-time activist for women's rights. She is a graduate of Stanford University and Stanford Law School. (ABP)

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