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SBC leaders explore means of achieving
and publicizing racial reconciliation

Baptist Press
5/29/96

By Dwayne Hastings

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--A task force charged with exploring ways to eradicate racism within the Southern Baptist Convention held its first meeting May 26 in Nashville.

The racial reconciliation task force, a panel formed earlier this year by the Inter-Agency Council, a group composed of the chief executives of SBC agencies, boards and seminaries, focused on examining ways SBC entities could become more reflective of the ethnic and racial makeup of the convention's membership.

"We have to realize that we're the ones responsible now," said James T. Draper Jr., president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board and a member of the task force formed by the IAC in response to adoption of a racial reconciliation resolution at last year's convention in Atlanta.

Members of the task force, representing the entities of the SBC, spent most of the day describing efforts to overturn racial and ethnic bias within the convention as a whole and their particular agencies.

The task force acknowledged the challenge of getting the racial reconciliation message to local churches, noting there is positive news on the issue not being heard by the people in the pews. The group agreed the CLC could act as clearinghouse for reports of reconciliation between believers and for suggested reading lists from the six seminaries in the area of cross-cultural relations.

Richard Land, chairman of the task force and president of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, acknowledged any transformation of the Southern Baptist Convention will have to be worked out on "person-to-person, family-to-family, church-to-church basis," saying the reconciliation will only be lasting if it begins at "the local level and works its way up to the convention leadership level."

"Racism is a sin problem," Land said. "It is a functional denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are seeking reconciliation because we have been reconciled in Christ Jesus -- that empowers us and impels us to seek reconciliation with others," he said, citing the apostle Paul's "ministry of reconciliation" in 2 Corinthians 7:15.

"There needs to be very clearly taught and proclaimed the theology of reconciliation going right along with our Christology, soteriology, hamartiology and the like," said Gary Frost, pastor of Rising Star Baptist Church, Youngstown, Ohio, and current 2nd vice president of the SBC.

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"We need reconciliation doctrine in the midst as well so that those who are going to fight against what God is doing will have to fight from other bases than theological," Frost continued, "We need to lay a very strong theological base."

Task force members called for the development of a "pool of resources" -- black and ethnic Southern Baptists who are willing to serve within the convention's structure.

"The leadership needs to be more reflective of the constituency," Frost said "Ideally, it would resemble a rainbow -- the entire spectrum of American society represented within the structure of the Southern Baptist Convention."

The task force suggested the next president of the SBC meet with the Committee on Nominations immediately after his election at the convention in New Orleans "to personally appeal to them to increase the ethnic and racial representation on our boards of trust." The panel further called for "an aggressive implementation of programs to increase racial and ethnic minorities on agency program staffs and in student recruitment."

"We have to find ways to make the distinction between acknowledging it has not been a level playing field in the past -- apologizing for that and seeking to work redemptively to change that -- without getting into a situation where you have different standards for different people," Land continued.

Warning the convention must not degenerate into setting 'quotas and set-asides' to guarantee minorities positions within the convention leadership," Land said, "First of all, that is wrong and, secondly, such a move would justifiably bring down the wrath of the convention upon our heads."

Land explained the task force has a responsibility to not be misunderstood on this issue, saying, "There is an enormous difference between voluntary goals and mandated quotas."

Frost noted few blacks had grown up in Southern Baptist churches so there is a lack of awareness of the denominational structure and operation. "There has to be mentoring where you develop relationships at various levels so you can bring along people to understand how the system works."

Many white Southern Baptists have never met a black evangelical believer, Frost said. "They are shocked you are talking the same language and that you believe the same thing -- it comes back to relationships. The strength is relationships."

"Many of the issues we are confronting are not racial but socioeconomic, and suburban versus urban, cultural kind of things," Frost explained, noting many black Americans living in the suburbs are wrestling with the same issues.

"We must be careful to make those distinctions so we don't lump everything together as a racial problem."

Land said most white Southern Baptists have no awareness of the extent to which racial and ethnic prejudice continues to exist in the U.S. "They are shocked when they hear of that which is part of the daily experience of African-Americans and other minorities in this country."

Leroy Gainey, associate professor of inter-cultural studies and Christian education at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in San Francisco, agreed, noting, "Many students do not know what these groups have gone through and where these walls still exist today. We must instruct them in the strategies that can tear down these walls."

Frost said Southern Baptists need to develop a prayer base in local communities which reaches over cultural, socioeconomic and racial lines.

"If it is going to happen (reconciliation), it is going to happen as people pray together. So many walls have been broken down in our community of Youngstown by people praying together," Frost said. "There is clearly something about praying together in which hearts and souls are bonded and aid people in working through other issues."

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The task force expressed agreement with Gainey's work in multi-cultural ministry instruction he is pioneering at Golden Gate. As part of the student's objectives at the seminary, they are taught how to be effective in a diverse setting and the importance of having sensitivity and appropriate skills in a cross-cultural ministry.

"A lot of why we are not successful in this area is because we don't have cross-cultural skills," noted Gainey, adding a lack of cross-cultural understanding and cross-cultural sensitivities blunt an otherwise well-intentioned ministry. Gainey, an African-American, was elected as the task force's vice chairman during the meeting.

Frost said the majority community needs to be careful about the roadblocks it unintentionally erects when it publishes pictures of Jesus and other biblical characters: "I'm not into Jesus with an afro and I'm not into Jesus with blue eyes and blond hair; I think both are wrong. We have to find ways to not be offensive."

The group agreed implementation of the Covenant for a New Century, the planned restructure of the SBC to be presented to the convention this June for a second vote, will do nothing to derail existing programs to minister to racial and ethnic minorities.

"Thirty or forty years from now, people will come back and take a look at what we are doing here," said Bill Summers of the SBC Historical Commission. "We may make history or simply be a dot in history. It's up to us."

Others at the task force meeting: Danny Akin, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Barbara Conner, Stewardship Commission; Tim Fields, Education Commission; Mark Foley, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary; Dan Heimbach, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; Don Kammerdiener, Foreign Mission Board; Gary Ledbetter, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Michael Thurman, Home Mission Board; Bill Merrell, Executive Committee; Elias Pantoja, Annuity Board; Dan Sanchez, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Mike Day, Brotherhood Commission; Russell Begaye, Home Mission Board.

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Students turn Yemen trip
into busy time of ministry

Baptist Press
5/29/96

IBB, Yemen (BP)--Fourteen Southern Baptist high school students who spent 10 days in Yemen during April accomplished enough to make adult Christians envious.

The youth are boarding students at a school in southern Germany. Parents of five of them are Southern Baptist representatives in Yemen working in the Jibla Baptist Hospital there. Parents of the others serve with other Christian organizations in Europe.

Consider that in just 10 days the students:

-- performed two gospel concerts in the Ibb Cultural Center attended by more than 1,000 Muslim Yemenis,

-- held a gospel concert and recreation time with Muslim orphans who are ministered to by the Jibla International Fellowship, a congregation of Baptist representatives that meets on the grounds of the Jibla Baptist Hospital in nearby Jibla;

-- held a gospel concert for about 40 international Christians in Sanaa, the capital city;

-- prepared more than 200 wooden cars in the name of Jibla Baptist Hospital to be given to children who come there;

-- prepared four murals, including some with biblical illustrations, which will be hung in the children's unit of the hospital;

-- taught Vacation Bible School to the children of expatriate workers at the hospital.

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-- were invited into the homes of many Yemenis. (Since then, the youth have collected \$400 to send to one family they visited whose father and son were accidentally shot and killed shortly after the visit.)

"The purpose of this trip was to give the youth a taste of working and sharing with cultures within the 10-40 window," said Beverly Thomas, Southern Baptist representative in Yemen. The term "10-40 window" refers to a band of countries stretching around the world in which people have very limited opportunities to hear the Christian gospel.

The gospel concerts presented by the young people were well received by Yemenis and prompted many questions, which were referred to the staff of the hospital, Thomas said. Some students said they also were changed as they met for the first time orphaned children who have very little to eat and have little chance of getting a proper education, she said.

Southern Baptist workers in many parts of the world send their children to boarding schools because of local conditions where they serve. The Christian boarding school in southern Germany has been a favored school of Southern Baptist workers for years. Student teams also went to Bosnia and Russia this year.

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COMMENTARY

Communism II: Return
of the living dead

By Erich Bridges

Baptist Press
5/29/96

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Reports of the death of communism, it would seem, have been greatly exaggerated.

Remember the joy that swept East and West when the Berlin Wall fell in 1989? As if some latter-day Joshua were marching around a Red Jericho, other walls came crashing down in quick succession: Communist dictatorships crumpled in a hail of bullets in Romania and succumbed peacefully in Czechoslovakia. In 1990 came free elections in Hungary, Bulgaria and Poland. East and West Germany reunited.

The mighty Soviet Union itself dissolved in 1991, ending a seven-decade nightmare. Its republics became sovereign nations once again.

Communism was as dead and unmourned as the mummy in Lenin's Tomb, Western politicians declared, never to rise again. Liberty and democracy would sweep the entire region, they predicted. Religious freedom would enable Christians -- aided by a flood of incoming missionaries -- to spread the gospel everywhere.

Not so fast.

Five years later, the corpse of communism is still staggering around, like one of those zombies in a low-budget horror movie. Across Eastern Europe, communists are returning to power -- this time by popular election. In some nations of the region they never lost power. Elsewhere they may have changed their party name or hired image consultants for public relations purposes, but their agenda remains essentially unchanged.

Even where explicitly communist parties remain out of power or even outlawed, vast networks of old-line bureaucrats retain their influence. This is the "old boy" network of the former Soviet sphere. And, of course, happy talk about the "death" of communism overlooks the fact that it remains very much alive -- if not well -- in China, North Korea, Vietnam and Cuba. China alone rules one-fifth of humanity.

In Russia, the communists became the largest party in the parliament in last December's parliamentary elections. In March they joined Russian nationalist legislators to vote overwhelmingly for the restoration of the Soviet Union. Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who has far more power than the parliament, immediately condemned and rejected the resolution.

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But at this writing, communist presidential contender Gennady Zyuganov is running even with Yeltsin in the national election scheduled for June 16. Yeltsin, himself a former communist like virtually every other politician on the Russian scene, has portrayed the election as a choice between progress and a return to communist totalitarianism.

"Do I really look that scary?" responds Zyuganov in interviews. Compared to Stalin, maybe not. A smooth communicator in the style of other "new" communists, Zyuganov insists there is no going back to the bad old days of repression and terror.

The Russian Communist Party also has eliminated atheism as a requirement for membership. Like Yeltsin, Zyuganov has made overtures to the Russian Orthodox Church, and he now proclaims that Jesus Christ was "the first communist" because of Jesus' stand for social justice.

"It is true the Zyuganov program makes obeisance to such democratic principles as ... freedom of opinion, religion and information," reports TIME magazine. "But the former Soviet constitution contained similar guarantees, all of which were ignored or defined out of existence."

Why are so many Russians and Eastern Europeans so recently freed from communist tyranny turning back to their old rulers? Perhaps for the same reason the children of Israel looked back to Egypt. Slavery sometimes seems preferable to the frightening freedom of the wilderness.

Communist state control at least provided many with jobs, food and shelter. A too-rapid plunge into market economics seems to have provided them with little beyond poverty, unemployment, crime and chaos. The communists promise a return to stability.

That stability could come at a price -- especially for the evangelical Christians of Eastern Europe. Evangelicals already face hostility and opposition from a number of regional governments and Orthodox church hierarchies -- sometimes working in tandem. If the communists regain the presidency in Russia, that opposition almost certainly will increase.

But believers in the former Soviet bloc have endured persecution, exile, imprisonment, even death in the past. They are prepared -- much more than many of us -- to face any future with faith and obedience.

Communism may not be dead -- yet. But it will never outlive the One who lives in his children.

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(BP) graphic (b&w, horizontal) and photo (b&w, horizontal) mailed 5/30/96 to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press. Color graphic and cutline available on SBCNet News Room.

Baptist pastor challenges
home educators in finances

Baptist Press
5/29/96

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Church people fall into two categories -- givers and takers -- according to a Southern Baptist pastor who challenged home educators at a conference to become "givers" in the model of Jesus.

John D. Morgan, pastor of Houston's Sagemont Baptist Church, was one of the featured speakers at the annual meeting of the Advanced Training Institute of America, one of the nation's largest programs for home educators, on the campus of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, May 20-24.

Speaking to an estimated 12,000 people, Morgan said Christians today have never learned to internalize how to experience the power of God in financial matters. Many believers, he added, refer to themselves as simply a sinner saved by grace when in reality every believer is the "child of the King."

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Morgan said many lifestyles of believers are never changed, especially in the area of personal finances. Using 2 Cor. 5:17, Morgan said the new creation should not mean a continuation of old lifestyles. The new creation should become a giver, not a taker, based on the perfect example of Jesus.

"You can divide the people of any church into two categories of people, givers and takers," Morgan said. All are born takers, with "me" as the focus in every aspect of life. The takers have a "bless me, bless me" attitude and usually want the blessing to come "before 12 on Sunday."

In contrast, Morgan said, givers will do anything to lighten the load so someone will "feel that Jesus just passed by."

Morgan said he has led his church to be unselfish in their giving to God so that they might experience the open windows of heaven referred to in Malachi 3.

Morgan said his desire was to create an individual sensitivity in his church family to the needs that God places before them so each person looks to God as the supplier of each need. It is not an easy task, Morgan explained, in a world where many see their employer or the government as a source of supply.

Using Daniel as his focus biblical character, Morgan outlined for the home educators how Godly character demonstrated in Daniel's life was a perfect example of a biblical giver. No matter what Daniel's circumstances were he never surrendered his convictions and he gave all the glory to his God, Morgan explained.

The four-day conference on the Tennessee campus was sponsored by the Advanced Training Institute International, a part of the Institute in Basic Life Principles, with headquarters in Oak Brook, Ill.

ATI is a "new" approach to education which focuses on establishing a Godly set of presuppositions in the student rather than on simply imparting information. Biblical truths form the basis for the ATI program, according to ATI literature.

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