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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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80-70

SBC President's Role Must  
Not Diminish, Dehoney Says

By James Lee Young

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Southern Baptists must always resist any effort to diminish the role or prestige of the denomination's president, or to make the position honorary or parliamentary in nature, says a Louisville pastor who served two years in that role.

The Southern Baptist Convention president is one of the few leaders elected directly by the convention. And through him "the convention can express its moods and needs as they change, evolve, or react to the contemporary situation," said Wayne Dehoney, SBC president 1964-66.

The SBC president "comes into the denominational structure with a real sense of 'mandate' from the churches and the people," the pastor of Walnut Street Baptist Church, Louisville, told participants in the joint annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Historical Commission and Society.

"While he has no defined authority over the agencies and their leadership, the president as the voice of the convention must be reckoned with by agency leadership," Dehoney told the gathering at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

It takes the SBC president a year to find "the handle" and a second year for him to give effective leadership, so allowance for a second term is "imperative," Dehoney declared. SBC presidents traditionally have been elected for two terms in recent years, unless they choose to not serve another year, for whatever reason.

Dehoney said that as convention moderator, the SBC president must have quick perception and take firm action or "the chair can plunge a convention into disorder and unwholesome debate that will be picked up and headlined by the mass media, regardless of the action taken..."

"The president must act decisively but with fairness and sympathy toward individual messengers seeking to be heard," Dehoney added.

In response to a question, Dehoney said that the SBC president "could abuse his appointive powers, and there are those who have been concerned about it. You can't strip that authority from the president, but a man who doesn't handle it with integrity will subject himself to nominations from the floor."

The SBC president appoints the SBC resolutions committee, the SBC committee on committees (which names the committee on boards) and the SBC credentials committee.

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In effect, Dehoney observed, "There are two conventions, and the (SBC) president's role and authority differ as he relates to each of them."

The two, he said, consist of the annual meeting of messengers from the churches "who convene to deliberate and act on matters germane to the business of the convention. The president is the elected moderator of this convention.

"Yet there is another Southern Baptist Convention--a group of boards and agencies organized to carry on certain activities as defined by program statements." SBC messengers elect trustees and board members to the agencies, who are, in turn, thought of also as "the leaders of the denomination," Dehoney said. The SBC president is an ex-officio member of some agency boards and has no direct responsibility or authority over the agencies, their programs or personnel, Dehoney said.

Dehoney said the president is important to Southern Baptists mostly because of the unique balance of power and influence between agency leadership and the convention's main elected official (besides two vice presidents, a treasurer and recording and registration secretaries). He called that balance "one of the significant keys to the secret of our unity and dynamic vitality" as a convention.

The "controlled trustee process...gives continuity and professionalism to the work of our agencies," which gives qualified, experienced leadership for the ongoing work of Southern Baptists, Dehoney said. But the grassroots of the churches, through the messengers, have direct access to the structures through electing a president, he added. This, he said, helps to keep the agencies from becoming a "hidden hierarchy" or "ecclesiastical structure."

While it is difficult for the media or other outsiders to understand what really happens at a Southern Baptist Convention session, it is also hard for them to understand the role of the SBC president, Dehoney continued. "He cannot speak for the convention or any agency. He cannot speak for any other Baptist. He speaks only for himself," said Dehoney, who credited Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist news service, with doing much to help the media overcome many misconceptions of Southern Baptists.

While the Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference "may appear to provide some advantage for the election of the president," Dehoney said, "it provides absolutely no experience or background" for the office.

He said of 28 Pastors' Conference presidents, eight also became SBC president, five with an interval in between. Dehoney went directly to the SBC presidency from the Pastors' Conference post, as did M.E. Dodd in 1934 and Jaroy Weber in 1973. The others were C.C. Warren, elected two years later; current president Adrian Rogers, elected three years later; Ramsey Pollard, elected four years later; Carl Bates, eight years later; and Herschel Hobbs, 10 years later.

Dehoney pointed out that the Pastors' Conference is independent of the SBC and derives no financial support or leadership direction from the convention structure.

Rogers Keynotes Evangelical  
Washington for Jesus Rally

By Stan Hastey

WASHINGTON (BP)--Southern Baptist Convention President Adrian Rogers and four other prominent Southern Baptists joined dozens of evangelical spokesmen in calling the nation to repentance during the "Washington for Jesus" rally on the mall.

Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tenn., delivered the keynote address to a throng of evangelicals and charismatics estimated at its peak by U.S. park police at 200,000.

After offering a prayer for the release of 53 Americans held hostage in Tehran, Iran, Rogers began his sermon by declaring that "once proud America has become the laughingstock of the world. It seems as though God has turned his face from us."

The Memphis pastor warned that in his view America, "born in Philadelphia in 1776, must be reborn or else join the graveyard of nations." He identified pride as the nation's chief sin, saying, "It is time for God's people to lay their faces in the dust."

Avoiding overtly political themes, Rogers dealt instead with repentance and revival in the church. "It's not the sins of the world holding back revival," he went on, "it's the sins of the saints."

"We are not here to point fingers at the government," Rogers declared.

Other Southern Baptists who spoke during the dawn-to-dusk gathering were Jimmy Draper, pastor of First Baptist Church, Euless, Texas, and president of the Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference; Buckner Fanning, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, San Antonio; Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church, Atlanta; and James Robison, evangelist from Hurst, Texas. All were also listed as official sponsors of the April 29 event.

Other speakers at the controversial gathering, conceived more than a year and a half ago by Virginia Beach pastor John Gimenez, did not, however, avoid politics.

Program co-chairman Bill Bright, founder and president of Campus Crusade for Christ International, told the throng that he agreed to lend his name to the rally only after receiving assurances that its purpose was non-political. "I wanted to be sure it was not a political gathering," he said.

Throughout the day, the non-political disclaimers continued, reflecting the sensitivity of rally organizers to charges from mainline denominational leaders that the hidden agenda for the mass meeting was right-wing political causes.

The criticism came after release several weeks before the rally of a "Declaration of Christian Principles" enumerating alleged sins of the government. Rally participants had also been asked to come to Washington a day early to lobby members of Congress on a variety of right-wing political issues.

Both objectives were dropped. Yet criticism of the events persisted in large part because many of the leaders and featured speakers have been identified in recent months with right-wing political organizations and causes.

Bright recited a litany of evils he said have been visited on the nation since the Supreme Court prayer and Bible reading decisions of 1962 and 1963.

Claiming that "there's no place for God in the schools," he said the decisions marked the beginning of a "series of plagues" on the U.S., including the assassination of John F. Kennedy, racial conflict, the Vietnam war, Watergate, the increasing divorce rate, the rise in teen-age pregnancies, venereal disease, drug addiction and the present economic crisis.

The worst is yet to come, Bright warned, declaring that the United States is about to be overcome militarily by the Soviet Union. "Unless we repent...we can expect to be destroyed," he said.

Bright and fellow co-chairman Pat Robertson, president of the Christian Broadcasting Network, repeatedly equated America with Israel of Old Testament times, saying that the nation must repent if she expects to be saved.

"This is God's land," Robertson said. "This land belongs to God Almighty. We are here to reassert his lordship. It's Christ or chaos. This nation is in the balance."

Like most of the speakers during the marathon 12-hour rally, Robertson disclaimed interest in raising political issues. "God didn't call us to be critics; he called us to be intercessors. We're not here to tear up our nation but to pray for it."

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Wood Signs Statement On  
Use of 'Christian' Label

By Larry Chesser

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WASHINGTON (BP)--A Baptist executive joined 18 other religious leaders in signing an interfaith statement challenging any attempt to label positions on political issues as "Christian" or "un-Christian."

James E. Wood Jr., executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, signed the statement along with other Protestant, Catholic and Jewish leaders. The timing of the statement's release coincided with the Washington for Jesus Rally sponsored by a coalition of independent, conservative church leaders.

Though the rally sponsors, including chairman John Gimenez of Virginia Beach, Va., disavowed any political goals or methods, several speakers during the all-day program made references to such sensitive political issues as abortion, prayer in schools and military preparedness.

Recognizing the fact of pluralism within the United States and the need for freedom within the political process, the interfaith statement said, "It is unnecessary and wrong for any religious group or individual to seek to 'Christianize' the government or to label political views of members of Congress as 'Christian' or 'religious.'"

The statement further declared, "It is arrogant to assert that one's position on a political issue is 'Christian,' and that all others are 'un-Christian,' 'secular humanist,' 'immoral,' or 'sinful.'"

Signers of the statement are members of the Washington Inter-Religious Staff Council, an organization of government liaison offices in Washington representing national religious organizations.

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Missions, Evangelism  
Volunteers Discussed

By Dan Martin

ATLANTA (BP)--More than 200 religious educators and "brokers" of evangelism from across the nation discussed recruiting and training of volunteers in missions evangelism during three days of intensive meetings in Atlanta.

They were part of "scaled down" Mission U.S. '80s, cancelled after economic uncertainties prevented many persons from attending.

The meetings, sponsored by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, centered on the needs of the nation and the increased importance of volunteers to accomplish the Bold Mission Thrust goals to "evangelize and congregationalize" the nation and the world by the year 2000 AD.

"Bold Mission Thrust is more than a slogan," Robert E. Bingham, director of the board's services section, told educators. "It's a quality of life, and you have to either accept it or reject it."

Ken Lyle, a former home missionary and now pastor of Atlanta's Tabernacle Baptist Church, told the participants: "It's a tremendous task we have set before us. We (Southern Baptists) have proclaimed that in 20 years, we're going to reach the world. The time is shrinking, shrinking, shrinking and the need is growing, growing, growing."

Lyle added that if the task is to be completed, Southern Baptists must keep from being "caught in the mud of mechanical religiosity," and be willing to go, even to be martyrs, if necessary.

Ron Lewis, a church growth specialist with the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, told participants: "We must get our priorities straight. There are people who spend \$400 on a mission project and \$2,700 to fix the icemaker in the fellowship hall."

He chided Southern Baptists for a "non-growth mentality. In 1947 when the U.S. population was 143 million, we baptized 334,000. In 1978, when the population had grown to 218 million, we baptized only 336,000."

He called on denominational leaders to "train people how to engage in guerrilla warfare against the world and how to relate to people who are different."

Other speakers, such as Reid Hardin and C.B. Hogue of the Home Mission Board's evangelism section, predicted significant advances in reaching the nation and the world during the 1980s, which Hardin called the "decade of commitment."

Hardin, who heads the evangelism support department, called on evangelism leaders to help recruit 1,000 "brokers" of evangelism by 1981. "A broker is an agent who buys or sells for another on a commission basis without having title to the property," he said. "The property we have is the good news, the gospel" of Jesus Christ.

Hogue, director of the evangelism section, urged leaders to involve volunteers and laypersons more in the effort. "We must become more than a force of hired mercenaries and become one of those conscripted by commitment."

Lon Day, associated with the Day Companies of Atlanta, the nation's sixth largest of lodging chains, called on laypersons to finance and to do the work of evangelism and missions.

"God has given every person a ministry, although it's not necessarily the pastorate," he said. "Ninety-nine percent of the people in church are ministers; only one percent are pastors."

Both the religious educators and evangelism leaders were called on to recruit and train volunteers for the work of evangelism, ministry and missions.

As the evangelism section concluded, participants were asked to make a commitment to "broker" evangelism by recruiting others as witnesses and by telling the good news themselves.