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Baptist State Conventions
Boost Cooperative Program

By Craig Bird

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)-- Three Southern Baptist state conventions were organized this fall, joining 34 other conventions voluntarily affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Wyoming spun off from the Northern Plains Convention and Minnesota-Wisconsin and New England moved from fellowship status to full convention standing.

State convention meetings found Baptists addressing a wide variety of topics via resolutions and adopting budgets which reflected projected growth.

The 37 conventions adopted operating budgets for the coming year which totaled approximately \$305.5 million with several million dollars more approved in "challenge" sections above operating expenses.

The SBC's unified giving program, the Cooperative Program, got a big boost at the national level. Messengers in 22 states increased the percentage of state income to be sent to the national program, which underwrites worldwide mission and education efforts. Eleven states left their percentage contributions the same.

The only convention to cut its percentage was Northern Plains, which "reluctantly" stepped down from 17 percent to 10 percent when more than half of its income (but only a third of its overhead) was lost when Wyoming formed a separate convention. Even that cut will be made up since Wyoming will send 20 percent to the national level.

The ordination of women was the most widespread controversy in the 1983 state meetings.

Resolutions concerning the ordination of women as ministers were introduced in seven states but debated only in five. In Georgia the resolution was withdrawn and in Missouri the resolutions committee declined to report it out. In both cases "a desire for unity" was given as a reason.

North Carolina and South Carolina passed resolutions saying the issue was one for each local church to decide while Tennessee okayed a resolution supporting the role of women in Baptist life which did not take a stand of any kind on the issue of ordination. A majority of West Virginia messengers opposed the ordination of women but recognized the right of each local church to decide the matter for itself.

But in Illinois and Oklahoma debate was more strident.

In Oklahoma, an unsuccessful attempt was made to amend the convention's constitution to exclude messengers from churches which ordain women (or have charismatic practices).

Still messengers overwhelmingly backed a resolution which said the ordination of women as deacons and ministers "deviates from the accepted faith and practice (of Southern Baptists) and creates discord among our fellow churches." The resolution stopped short of demanding churches not engage in the practice but encouraged churches to refrain from the practice.

Later, messengers voted down resolutions "to recognize and honor the autonomy of the local church" and to "reaffirm support" for an article of the Oklahoma Baptist Convention constitution which forbids the convention to write creeds or exercise ecclesiastical control over the churches.

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The Illinois Baptist State Association, for the first time in its history, seated messengers from a church (Cornell Avenue Baptist Church in Chicago) with a woman pastor.

A move to bar Cornell's messengers because the church had "committed scriptural heresy" was ruled out of order by the convention president. Messengers then sustained his ruling, 509-189. With little opposition the convention approved a resolution which explained the action "does not reflect a statement of biblical interpretation, but (is) only a statement of the constitutionality of the seating of messengers."

Another adopted resolution said the messengers recognized the disagreement (over the ordination of women) "reflects honest differences of interpretations of the scripture" and encouraged Baptists to "demonstrate a spirit of conciliation as we all continue to seek a better understanding of God's Word."

Numerous conventions went on record urging the legal drinking age be raised to 21; opposing the Reagan administration's plan to send an official U.S. ambassador to the Vatican; commenting on international situations in Lebanon and Grenada, and opposing the spread of gambling and pornography.

South Carolina Baptists significantly altered the abortion policy of Baptist hospitals in that state by limiting abortions to situations of "documented" rape or incest or for preservation of the physical life of the mother. The earlier policy had allowed abortions to protect the mental health of the mother.

In Virginia, a resolution to request Virginia Baptist Hospital in Lynchburg r move the word "Baptist" from its name because of its abortion policy was turned back. Instead messengers adopted a strongly worded commendation of the institution.

The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, the focus of controversy for several years, came under attack in Alabama. After an hour long debate (which saw two Alabama members of the SBC Executive Committee on opposite sides of the issue), messengers asked that funding for the BJCPA be totally withdrawn.

The SBC provides 80 percent of the BJCPA budget. That funding is voted on, along with all other budget items, by messengers to the annual SBC meetings each June.

James Dunn, executive director of the agency, was the focus of much of the debate. The resolution noted Dunn's membership in People For the American Way, which it describes as an organization "some of whose founders and supporters espouse philosophies which are contrary to biblical principles and decency and morality."

Only two conventions, Northwest and Minnesota-Wisconsin, took positions on the issue of admitting Canadian churches into the SBC. Both are in favor.

Kansas-Nebraska and Nevada elected their first layman presidents while Louisiana elected only its second lay president in 23 years. Women vice presidents were elected in Arizona, Florida and Northwest.

Two other issues with long histories in Southern Baptist life surfaced. California messengers affirmed the "infallibility and authority of the Bible" but they declined, in a close vote, to add the word "inerrant" to the statement. Also, a Colorado church which accepts "alien immersion" (people baptized by churches other than Southern Baptist) was refused seating for its messengers.

However, most news reports from the conventions emphasized the tranquility of the meetings and the stress on growth through evangelism.

Orthodox Jewish Group
Wins Zoning Dispute

By Stan Hasteley

WASHINGTON (BP)--The U.S. Supreme Court has let stand lower court rulings permitting a group of Orthodox Jews in Evanston, Ill., to keep a house used for worship in a residential neighborhood.

At issue in the dispute between the Lubavitch Chabad House of Illinois and the city of Evanston was use of a two-story house in a section of the city zoned for residences. The religious group sought an exemption from the zoning law in order to use the residence for Sabbath and Jewish high holiday services, rabbinical counseling and offices and a library.

Because some Jewish observances practiced by the group require overnight stays, the request also sought permission for sleeping and kitchen facilities.

When the city council denied the necessary permit, the Jewish group went to court. It won twice, in a trial court and in a state appeals panel.

Attorneys for the group argued in a written legal brief to the Supreme Court the Illinois appellate court was right in concluding that while local zoning powers are broad, they are "not infinite." What should restrict absolute zoning authority, they maintained, are factors such as "reasonableness and scope," particularly when applied to religious groups.

The right of free exercise of religion, they concluded, "occupies the highest among First Amendment values."

In its unsuccessful effort to have the high court review the lower rulings, the city argued a long string of legal decisions gives municipalities the authority to restrict the location of houses of worship and religious organizations are not entitled to special consideration under zoning ordinances.

The lower courts' rulings setting aside the city's denial of permission, the argument continued, "in effect provides special preference to religious institutions" and "flies squarely in the face of the basic principle of First Amendment law that requires total neutrality on the part of the State in matters of religion." (83-325, Evanston v. Lubavitch Chabad House of Illinois).

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Southern Baptist Ethicist Stassen
Proposes 'Initiative' For Peace

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--A positive new ethic of transformative peacemaking initiatives is emerging around the world, and it "sprouts from Baptist soil," Glen Stassen told a Southern Baptist Theological Seminary audience in Louisville, Ky.

Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Seminary, offered a "distinctively Baptist" proposal for peacemaking which arises from biblical and Baptist roots.

He supported a "practical and preventative" peacemaking stance rather than "mere negative restraint from participation in war." Argument over participation in nuclear war comes too late, he emphasized, adding, "We need an ethic of transforming initiative."

The need is intensified because the planned buildup of "first-strike" weapons, such as the Pershing II and MX missiles, will push U.S. and Soviet governments to adopt "launch-on-warning" policies for firing their weapons, he said. This is alarming because the United States alone received 143 false warnings--which under a launch-on-warning policy would have triggered nuclear war--in one 18-month period, he noted.

"Like the Korean airliner 007, our whole world is straying into very great danger," Stassen warned. He then referred to the Apostle Paul's Epistle to the Romans, characterizing sin as "slavery, captivity, bondage--letting another power (besides God) reign over us."

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"We have become blinded by false perceptions and idolatrous trust," he added. "We all are in bondage. We all sin and go astray, people and governments alike. We are all captives of this process. We all need to have respect for each other."

Stassen said the first model for such transforming initiative is "God's delivering action in Christ." He explained "Christ shows us the nature of God--compassionate, delivering love, for even his enemies."

Another model comes from the teachings of Jesus, he added. For example, Jesus' commands to "turn the other cheek" and "go the second mile" were designed to help his followers bring about repentance and reconciliation.

"Jesus taught practical peacemaking," Stassen said. "We Baptists have a reputation for our literal interpretation of the Bible. Jesus' teachings are authoritative for us."

Jesus' example brings about peace because it takes into account the "good interests of the enemy" and seeks a way to serve the needs of all people, he explained.

Transforming initiatives, then, would be those which seek to provide the essential needs of everyone, he said. They would bring peace by eliminating the insecurities and depravations which push nations to war.

In addition to the example of God and the teachings of Jesus, Southern Baptists should be willing to take transforming initiatives because of their historic sense of realism, Stassen claimed. "From our Southern Baptist roots, we have a realistic outlook on the destructiveness of war," he explained. "We remember a war fought on our own soil."

Consequently, Southern Baptists, as much as any other people, should appreciate the necessity of preventing war and saving humanity from its destruction, he said.

"The reality is that both the United States and the Soviet Union have more than enough nuclear weapons to destroy each other thoroughly," Stassen claimed. "We are not weak in nuclear weapons, and the further reality is that arms control must be multilateral."

Baptists' doctrines of separation of church and state should "give us enough independent-mindedness" to urge peacemaking initiatives by reluctant governments, he said.

Stassen conceded it will take more than the efforts of Baptists to bring about world peace.

However, he noted the basis for such peacemaking initiative "sprouts from Baptist soil," challenging Baptists to lead the way to peace. "Let us be transformed by Christ rather than conformed to the world," he urged. "Let us follow Christ in transforming initiative."

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'Defensive' Nuclear Arms
Advocated By Baylor Trustee

By Karen Benson

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WACO, Texas (BP)--The United States cannot have peace as its "foremost aim," U.S. Rep. Jack Fields, D-Texas, told a Baylor University audience.

"If peace is our foremost aim, liberty must be secondary," he said. "I believe we can have both peace and liberty, but only if we maintain a position of strength."

Fields called for a "dramatic new direction" in the peace movement which would focus on a defensive nuclear arms system.

"We have within our grasp the technology to make nuclear weapons obsolete and end the arms race," Fields claimed. "After all, why would the Soviets continue a massive weapons buildup if the United States had the capability to destroy those weapons before they could impact our American soil?"

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Anti-nuclear defense systems are not science-fiction technology, Fields said. "In fact, some of the technology is already available. In the long run, an anti-nuclear defense system would employ a satellite-directed, non-nuclear, kinetic energy beam to shatter nuclear weapons in space before those missiles re-entered the earth's atmosphere."

Th "dramatic new direction" changes the emphasis of U.S. military weapons "from offensive capabilities to defending America," Fields said. "Surely, this is common ground where nuclear freeze advocates and defense-minded groups can unite to make America secure while drastically reducing the importance and thrust of offensive nuclear weapons.

"It is my hope liberals and conservatives alike will join in strongly advocating a nuclear defense system," Fields urged. "It is truly the hope for tomorrow."

Fields, a Southern Baptist, made his remarks during University Forum at Baylor University, his alma mater, where he is also a member of the Board of Trustees.

He also insisted the United States must continue to work for a verifiable arms control agreement. Thus far, the Soviets have refused on-site verification--"the only reliable verification method since our intelligence satellites cannot penetrate through roofs to detect violations," he said.

Fields prodded the students to seek intellectual and factual information about the peace issue. "I think we must be reminded that ours is the most JUST nation which the world has ever seen. Today, it has become popular to espouse the theory the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, are really the same...I cannot imagine a more ludicrous philosophy. The Soviet Union and the United States are not the same. We are two nations whose philosophies are diametrically opposed."

There is a "bitter incompatibility" between what the communists call "liberation" and what "liberation" means in a democratic society, Fields said. "To America, peace means freedom in an atmosphere devoid of war. To a Marxist-Leninist, peace means the absence of resistance to world communism."

Americans have become "lulled" to the nature of the Soviet Union, Fields charged. The Soviet Union is not a superpower in terms of economics, he said. "The Soviet Union's per capita gross national product is surpassed by 23 other nations, according to World Bank statistics. The Soviet Union is a superpower only by virtue of its military power, a power which is achieved at the expense of the Soviet citizenry."