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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE
SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #75C
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2355
Wilmer C. Fields, Director
Dan Martin, News Editor
Craig Bird, Feature Editor

BUREAUS

ATLANTA Jim Newton, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W. Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 873-4041
DALLAS Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 511 N. Akard, Dallas, Texas 75201-3355, Telephone (214) 720-0550
NASHVILLE (Baptist Sunday School Board) Lloyd T. Householder, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300
RICHMOND (Foreign) Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151
WASHINGTON Stan L. Hastey, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226

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Peace Committee Discusses
Politics, Parliamentarian

By Dan Martin

DALLAS (BP)--Politics in the Southern Baptist Convention occupied the attention of the convention's Peace Committee as the 22-member group held its fourth session Jan. 20-21.

"Our agenda was focussed almost entirely--although not exclusively--on political matters in our convention," said Charles Fuller of Roanoke, Va., committee chairman.

Fuller said the first three meetings had considered the theological dimension of the controversy which has rocked the denomination for more than seven years. At the inception of the convention-elected committee, Fuller said the group would concentrate on theological matters first, because members believe other problems stem from a "theological root."

Following the Dallas meeting, Fuller said he is "encouraged" by the progress toward a solution to the controversy which threatens to split the 14.4-million member SBC, although he did not specify what shape any possible solution would take.

"We have not reached a breakthrough," Fuller said, "but I am encouraged about the potential for one. We may be approaching some significant areas where all sides can come together and honor our diversity while not dishonoring our convictions."

During its two day session, the committee declined to take official action concerning possible candidates for the SBC presidency. Two men widely considered as the frontrunners to become SBC president--Adrian Rogers of Memphis, Tenn., and Winfred Moore of Amarillo, Texas-- are members of the Peace Committee. A third member--Ed Young of Houston--has been mentioned in past years as a potential president.

Prior to the meeting, it was widely speculated the committee would ask the two key candidates--Rogers and Moore--to withdraw their names from consideration, and that the body would seek to find a compromise or peace candidate to lead the convention.

The body, however, decided it is "not our role to determine who should or should not be president of the Southern Baptist Convention," Fuller said. "We did not feel we should be involved in that politicization."

The committee also discussed the involvement of other Peace Committee members in the political process, including addressing partisan rallies and writing articles. Many persons have questioned the propriety of committee members being so actively involved, Fuller said.

He added: "We reaffirmed the statement we adopted during the first meeting in August and in reaffirming that, we addressed the fact Peace Committee members should not be dealt with in any other way than any other Southern Baptist is, with the exception that we have the responsibilities of leadership and example."

Fuller said the committee "admonished each other" about overt political activities "but was hesitant about adopting any action which would appear to be muzzling a Peace Committee member from his or her natural involvement which someone with convictions and ideas has the right to have. We just asked the members to take part in the political activity with judgment and with a sense of responsibility.

The August statement quotes the official action taken by the SBC Nashville, Tennessee committee was created. That action calls on Southern Baptists "to exercise restraint, to refrain from divisive action and comments and to reflect Christian love...."

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
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Nashville, Tennessee

In regard to convention politics, Fuller said: "More than once, I have told the Peace Committee that if I had my way, I would depoliticize the entire committee. Other members have shared the sentiment. As a committee we have discussed the feasibility of a convention-wide moratorium on denominational politics.

"But such a thing is next to impossible if we respect the Baptist view of personal liberty. The Peace Committee acknowledged the fact that Southern Baptist politics have been an ongoing reality for years. We feel our need is to reject bad politics and to seek a more wholesome version of politics."

The committee also appointed a subcommittee to consider establishing guidelines for the appointment of a parliamentarian or parliamentarians for the annual sessions.

"Southern Baptists have no constitutional provision for a parliamentarian," Fuller said. "Nor do we have guidelines for the selection of a parliamentarian or parliamentarians. Historically, it has been the option of the president if and when he used a parliamentarian.

"In dealing with this issue, the Peace Committee is not placing its focus on the past, but upon what shall be our course in the future. We feel there is a need for some definite guidelines in the selection of convention parliamentarians, although there have been none."

Fuller appointed William Poe, an attorney from Charlotte, N.C., to chair a subcommittee to devise guidelines relating to the appointment of an "impartial, qualified parliamentarian or parliamentarians" at the annual meeting of the convention. Also named to the subcommittee are Jerry Vines of Jacksonville, Fla., and Christine Gregory of Danville, Va.

The issue of the parliamentarian arose during the 1985 annual meeting of the convention, when SBC President Charles F. Stanley ruled out of order efforts to amend the report of the Committee on Committees which named members of the 1986 Committee on Boards, Commissions and Standing Committees, which nominates trustees to serve on the 20 national SBC agencies.

A suit has been filed in federal court in Atlanta against the SBC and its Executive Committee by three laypersons seeking to have the ruling and election set aside.

Fuller said the Peace Committee "made it very plain it did not want to be perceived as attempting to focus on what had taken place in the past, although a considerable amount of correspondence has been sent to the committee regarding the Dallas convention. We are focussing on what we feel are appropriate recommendations about the role of the parliamentarian and guidelines for the selection."

The committee also heard preliminary reports from the five subcommittees appointed in December to visit 11 SBC agencies: the six seminaries, the Home Mission Board, Foreign Mission Board, Baptist Sunday School Board, Historical Commission and Christian Life Commission.

The subcommittees are in the process of making the visits, Fuller said.

"Regardless of how the subcommittee visits...are perceived, they are not designed as miniature inquisitions. They are honest attempts to dialogue with denominational leaders about issues which Southern Baptists have asked the committee to analyze. It was in an attempt to avoid--undescored--the atmosphere of an interrogation that we suggested our visits to the agencies rather than asking their leaders to come to us. We have every intention of respecting the trustee structure and process," Fuller said.

The committee will hear final reports from the five subcommittees on the visits during their next meeting in Atlanta, Feb. 24-25.

Fuller said he is encouraged by the progress of the committee. "It is very difficult to communicate to the convention at large the progress this committee has made in its development. It has taken this long and this many meetings to come to the point where a dynamic has emerged. We're now at the point where we are attempting to find some ways to maintain our convictions while at the same time honoring our diversity. This meeting has ended on a higher note than the others," he said.

Convention/Institution Dilemma:
Accept Liability Or Lose Control

By Lonnie Wilkey

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Two recent actions have focused attention on control of institutions--particularly colleges and universities--by Baptist state conventions.

Trustees of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., at their December meeting, in essence, severed ties with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina when they voted to elect all their successors, creating a self-perpetuating board which would not need approval from the state convention.

The Wake Forest action came after messengers to the state convention's annual meeting approved a new covenant relationship with the 152-year old Baptist school, but declined to give the two-thirds majority necessary to change language in the convention's constitution to accommodate the new provisions.

Although some North Carolina Baptists question the legality of the trustee's action, the fact they altered the university's relationship with the state convention has caused Baptist leaders throughout the Southern Baptist Convention to ask: "Can trustees sever an institution's ties with its sponsoring state convention?"

In January a 34-member Constitutional Review Committee of the Baptist General Convention of Texas met to discuss major concerns, primarily that of relinquishing control of its schools to avoid ascending liability--a situation where the convention could be held legally and financially responsible for actions on the college campus--or maintaining control and assuming liability.

The committee was formed as a result of the BGCT's annual meeting in November when a proposed slate of changes to the convention's constitution and bylaws was approved by a majority vote but failed to gain the required two-thirds majority for passage.

Five of the changes dealt with terminology--substituting the words "affiliated with" for "owned and controlled by" which some Texas Baptists felt would safeguard the convention from ascending liability.

Some messengers, however, spoke against the proposal, fearing it would make it easier for an institution to pull away from the convention. The Wake Forest University trustee action, even though it had nothing to do with ascending liability, caused additional concern.

One Southern Baptist education leader feels strongly the change in terminology would make no difference in court. Arthur L. Walker Jr., executive director of the SBC Education Commission, told Baptist Press he believes if the situation of ascending liability went to court, the court would hold "affiliated with" meant the same thing as "owned and controlled by."

As a result, Walker said, Baptist state conventions should accept they must assume responsibility for their institutions.

The opportunity for human beings to participate in the spread of the gospel, he said, carries with it the burden of liability which might result from human action and even human error in the course of witnessing.

"I do not know of any church which would close its doors because it could be held liable for injuries occurred by people who might come to the church to hear the gospel.

"State conventions must accept the fact Baptist schools are avenues for interpreting the gospel and helping students to come to understand the demands which the gospel has on society and its thinking," he said.

Walker noted the problem of ascending liability always has been present, but only recently has it become an item of major concern. He cited the growth in litigation as one reason, observing, there are more lawsuits today than ever before.

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Walker said an even more important factor is charitable institutions are not exempt from prosecution today. It used to be, he reflected, courts would throw out cases against religious bodies. Now they are willing to hear such cases and they often are sympathetic with the injured party, he added.

As for Baptist schools pulling away from the state conventions if given the chance, Walker said most Baptist colleges would not do so because they want and need the denominational tie.

Current Civil Rights legislation in Congress makes it advantageous for colleges and universities to be affiliated with a religious denomination, Walker suggested. Schools which can show religious connections, he continued, can be exempt from some aspects of civil rights concerns.

For example, in Title IX of the Higher Education Act of 1975, Walker said Baptist colleges can contend they do not have to offer abortion counseling, birth control counseling or coed dormitories because of religious convictions.

Baptist colleges are fortunate in this respect because they can show close ties with a denomination. "There are many evangelical Christian institutions that are envious of the privileges and status of colleges closely related to conventions or groups of churches," he said.

Walker is sympathetic with state convention executive directors who are concerned about ascending liability. He encouraged safeguards be placed wherever possible to protect against ascending liability.

The best safeguard, he said, is getting institutional trustees to adequately understand their responsibility for establishing policies for the institution and to assume the responsibility that has been given in their election.

The SBC agency head warned, however, not to push institutions to the point where they could not call themselves "Baptist."

"Southern Baptists must remember our colleges provide the opportunity for study and the transmission of truth within a Christian world view. We need this influence in our society," he said.

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Florida Association
Asks Suit Withdrawal

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MILTON, Fla. (BP)—Twenty-two churches of the Santa Rosa Baptist Association in Florida's panhandle have asked the plaintiffs in the federal lawsuit pending against the Southern Baptist Convention to withdraw their suit from "worldly" courts of law.

By a unanimous vote Jan. 6, the association approved a letter be sent to Robert and Julia Crowder of Birmingham, Ala., who, with Henry C. Cooper of Windsor, Mo., have filed suit to reverse last June's election of the SBC Committee on Boards, Commissions and Standing Committees.

Crowder told the Florida Baptist Witness the action is the only opposition from a Baptist association of which he has received notification.

The letter expresses "dismay that you as Christian brethern would resort to 'worldly' courts to resolve polity and procedural differences that occur among us Baptists from time to time."

Citing first 1 Corinthians 6:1-8, the letter charges the lawsuit is unscriptural.

"When you go into court with this matter," it continues, "you are embroiling every other brother and sister in every church in the Southern Baptist Convention in your differences and causing added, unnecessary polarization among churches."

The letter is signed by Earnest S. Owens Jr., association director of missions; Joe Gwyn, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church, Pace, Fla., and moderator of the association, and Janet Alford, associational clerk.

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Owens said the idea for the letter "had been talked about among the brethren for some time." The motion was offered at the Jan. 6 meetings by Joe Bamberg, pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church, Milton, and received no opposition.

"We did not see any other action taken by any group concerning the scriptural admonitions (against lawsuits involving Christians)," Owens said.

"A number of people have been asking us why we couldn't settle our problems without going to court," he said. "We don't believe the Crowders have tried to do that."

Of the 32 churches and missions in the Santa Rosa association, 22 were represented at the Jan. 6 meeting for the unanimous vote, Owens said.

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Conference Calls
For Peace Making

By David Wilkinson

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. (BP)—Christians searching for ways to work for peace in a nuclear age were challenged at a conference on peace with justice to turn their homes and churches into "workshops for reconciliation."

E. Glenn Hinson, professor of church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., urged fellow Southern Baptists "to practice peacemaking where we are." To be effective advocates for peace, "we must know the God of peace and the peace of God ourselves," he said. "We can't offer the world something we don't have."

Hinson and other speakers offered suggestions for peacemaking during the two-day meeting at Charlotte's Providence Baptist Church. Approximately 135 pastors, educators and lay leaders attended the regional conference sponsored by the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Hinson emphasized that Christians who are concerned about peace must face "the fear factor" which often undermines peacemaking efforts. Fear has caused "irrational things to happen in defense of nuclear arms proliferation or in defense of things we as a nation have done (militarily) in the past," he said.

Fear also "can cause us to be subject to manipulation," Hinson added. Both religious and secular leaders frequently employ intimidation to try to control other groups or individuals, he said. The Bible, he stressed, teaches that "it is only love that can cast out fear. The question is whether we and our churches are really putting people in touch with the source.

Hinson cautioned peace activists to "choose the path of humility," recognizing "none of us really has the answer" to complex issues related to peace. Even the Bible, he said, does not offer "an easy path or a simple solution" to questions about war and peace. He added that prayer—"our response to God who is always seeking us"—is "not just peripheral but essential" to the task of peacemaking.

Jim Hug of the Center of Concern, a Catholic think tank on social and economic issues in Washington, said, "It is time for us to wake up and admit we are doing something terribly wrong." While "billions and now trillions of dollars" are poured into the Pentagon and the military-related industry, 33 million people—one out of every seven persons—are living in poverty, he noted.

The strategy of "peace through strength," Hug said, requires a tremendous industrial infrastructure dedicated to military production. He claimed this commitment to arms production is inflationary, produces goods that are not productive for society, drains talent from society that could be used to help meet other areas of human need and produces fewer jobs for less people than other forms of industry.

"As we build up our military capabilities, we are actually waging war on our women and children, the poor and the powerless, the very people with whom Jesus identified most," he said.

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LENN MAY
HISTORICAL COMMISSION
901 COMMERCE
NASHVILLE, TN 37203

901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203

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