



BAPTIST PRESS

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE

SBC Executive Committee

901 Commerce #750

Nashville, Tennessee 37203

(615) 244-2351

Alvin C. Shackelford, Director

Dan Martin, News Editor

Marv Knox, 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, 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

January 4, 1988

88-1

Amidst New Controversy,
CLC, PAC Members Polled

By Dan Martin

NASHVILLE (BP)--Amidst renewed controversy, ballots have been sent to members of the Southern Baptist Convention Christian Life Commission and SBC Public Affairs Committee asking whether they favor a merger between the two organizations.

The proposal for the merger came out of a meeting Dec. 12, between the three trustee officers of the CLC, the convention's Nashville-based moral concerns agency, and four members of the PAC, a standing committee which, under its program statement, relates to the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, a Washington-based religious liberty/separation of church and state coalition of nine Baptist bodies in the United States and Canada.

The talk between the two groups resulted in a proposal which would merge the assignment of the PAC into that of the CLC; expand the 31-member CLC board to include the 12 at-large PAC members; dissolve the PAC; ultimately sever ties between the Southern Baptist Convention and the BJCPA, and affirm cooperation with other Baptist denominations and other groups ... and "strongly encourage the expanded CLC to work closely with the BJCPA whenever possible and advisable ..."

On Oct. 6, 1987, the PAC voted 8-4 to request the SBC to "dissolve its institutional and financial ties" with the BJCPA and to allocate the \$485,200 designated for the work of the BJCPA to fund and staff the PAC "as an agency" of the SBC.

Prior to the Dec. 12 meeting, the CLC had not discussed the question of a merger, although the six members of the commission's executive committee had been informed of the Oct. 6 action.

On Dec. 28, a letter and copy of the proposal were mailed to each of the 18 members of the PAC by Harold C. Bennett, president-treasurer of the SBC Executive Committee. The packet included a ballot on which the members were to vote whether or not they favor the merger plan. The card was to be returned to Bennett at the Executive Committee in Nashville.

Bennett, who is staff to the PAC, a standing committee, said he was sending the material to PAC members at the request of PAC Chairman Samuel T. Currin "for consideration and action."

On Dec. 22, the 31 members of the CLC were mailed a letter and copy of the proposal by Fred Lackey, pastor of First Baptist Church of Athens, Ala., and chairman of the CLC. The packet included a card upon which CLC members were to register their vote, with instructions the card be returned to Lackey at his church.

Almost immediately, controversy erupted anew:

-- N. Larry Baker, executive director of the CLC, expressed his "dismay at this action" and called on Lackey "to halt this improper and illegal course of action." He also said the action taken by the officers "contradicts and violates the commission's bylaws."

Baker, who has been under fire since his election to head the commission in January 1987 and was sustained in his job on a 15-15 vote in September, returned to Nashville Dec. 30, cutting short a vacation after he was informed of the action.

"The course of action was one taken independently of me, one that was taken without my consultation, input or counsel," Baker wrote to Lackey. "I did not receive a copy of the letter to the commissioners but learned of it through phone calls from other commissioners."

--more--

-- Lloyd Elder, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board and an ex officio member of the PAC, protested the merger talks in a letter to PAC Chairman Sam Currin of Raleigh, N.C., which was circulated to all of the members of the committee. Elder told Currin he wished "to register ... my deepest concern that this conversation was held by members of the PAC without the knowledge of the total PAC"

Elder urged PAC members "to vote 'no' to such a proposal and ask rather that it be placed on the agenda of our next meeting." He asked, "Are we being asked to vote to pursue this CLC/PAC merger without even opportunity for careful and prayerful consideration as a total, responsible committee?"

(See following story on statements by Baker and Elder.)

-- The two immediate past chairmen of the CLC -- Lynn P. Clayton of Alexandria, La., and Charles Wade of Arlington, Texas, immediately issued statements decrying the action of the officers and the poll of members.

Clayton, editor of the Baptist Message, newsjournal of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, said he finds the action "incredible," and added, "I think it is a tragedy that the commission responsible for moral and ethical concerns should be conducted in such an unethical manner."

He added: "Officers (of the CLC) as a body have no standing by themselves, according to the CLC bylaws. We do have an executive committee of six members, but apparently they haven't been involved in any of this." Clayton said the officers do not have the right to take any action.

Clayton added, "It looks to me like there are some people trying to divide up the inheritance before there has been a death."

Wade, pastor of First Baptist Church of Arlington, Texas, and chairman of the search committee that brought Baker to head the commission, said the CLC has responsibility for six areas and does not need "to take on religious liberty and church state issues, especially when we have this very able and respected BJCPA tending to those matters."

He said, "Recent state conventions have demonstrated clearly that most Baptists have genuine confidence in and appreciation for the BJCPA."

He added the "CLC does not need to be put in the position of rescuing the committee that has seriously embarrassed itself and all Southern Baptists in the last few months," and claimed the PAC "showed abysmal ignorance of Baptist polity and traditions" in their endorsement of Robert H. Bork to be a justice on the U.S. Supreme Court.

-- The CLC's Nashville attorney, James P. Guenther, told Baptist Press the mail ballot may be illegal under the newly-enacted Tennessee Non-Profit Corporation Act: "Under the act, the commission can dispense with a meeting and vote on a matter by mail, but only if every member of the commission agrees to do so. My understanding is that there are some members of the commission who are not willing to deal with a matter of this substance by a mail ballot and therefore if even a single member of the CLC objects to a ballot by mail, it cannot be taken."

Guenther said arguments that the CLC has taken mail ballots before "are irrelevant and have nothing to do with what is proper now" under the new law, which was enacted in 1987.

The attorney, who also serves as counsel to the Southern Baptist Convention and to its Executive Committee, said the PAC does not come under the new law, since it is a committee, not a corporation, and is a part of the SBC, which is a Georgia corporation.

In his letter of Dec. 22, Lackey wrote to CLC members: "The chairman, vice chairman and secretary of the Christian Life Commission met with the Southern Baptist Public Affairs Executive Committee concerning bringing the Public Affairs Committee into the program assignment of the Christian Life Commission rather than their becoming a Southern Baptist Committee Agency (sic).

"This seems to be a very wise move, since it would save the Southern Baptist Convention thousands of dollars each year, better facilitate communication and eliminate any 'turf-battling' or overlapping of program assignment."

The proposal, which is included in Lackey's letter, includes a statement expressing appreciation to the SBC Executive Committee for its study of the relationship between the SBC and the BJCPA and says: "We therefore request that the Executive Committee of the SBC undertake a study of the possibility and advisability to:

"1) expand the program statement of the CLC to include the current responsibilities of both the PAC of the SBC and the BJCPA. 2) Dissolve the PAC of the SBC. 3) Expand the trustee membership of the CLC by 12 at-large spaces to include as at-large members the then current members of the PAC of the SBC who would not be disqualified by virtue of being heads of other SBC agencies. 4) It is understood that the implementation of the above would dissolve formal organizational and financial ties with the BJCPA. 5) Affirm cooperation with other Baptist denominations and others of good will and strongly encourage the expanded CLC (especially through its expanded Washington office) to work closely with, and in concert when advisable and possible, with the BJCPA and others on religious liberty and church-state issues."

The proposal also notes that, if passed, the proposal "will supersede the resolution" passed by the PAC at its Oct. 6 meeting.

Lackey told Baptist Press the ballot "is a binding vote in that we are asking the members to vote whether or not they think that this would be a good route to suggest to the Executive Committee to take. We do not intend to go ahead of or to do the work of the Executive Committee. This is just to express to them the feelings of the CLC."

He said: "If the majority votes 'yes,' then we will simply pass this on to the Executive Committee and they will know how we stand. They can take it from there, but we simply want them to know how the CLC feels about this proposal by taking this poll vote."

Lackey was asked if the merger proposal says there is no possibility of reconciliation between the PAC and the BJCPA.

"I don't know," he said. "If they do reconcile, that is all right, but what I am interested in is that if the Public Affairs Committee is not going to continue to operate as it does now, as part of the Baptist Joint Committee, then we need a program statement to cover the First Amendment, religious liberty and separation of church and state. I feel this could be facilitated by this proposal."

He added the matter of the merger "most likely" will be discussed when the CLC's Executive Committee meets in Nashville in January.

--30--

Three SBC Agency Chiefs
Criticize CLC-PAC Merger

Baptist Press
1/4/88

NASHVILLE (BP)--Three agency executives -- including the two most directly involved -- have criticized the possibility of a merger between the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and the SBC Public Affairs Committee.

The possibility of a merger between the convention's moral concerns agency and the PAC, a standing committee whose primary responsibility has been to represent the SBC on the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, arose during a Dec. 12, unofficial meeting between the three trustee officers of the CLC and four members of the PAC.

On Oct. 6, 1987, the PAC voted 8-4 that the SBC "dissolve its institutional and financial ties" with the BJCPA and move toward establishing the 18-member PAC as a separate agency of the convention.

On Dec. 28, the 18 members of the PAC were mailed packets of information and asked to vote on whether they favored the merger. On Dec. 22, Fred Lackey, chairman of the CLC and pastor of First Baptist Church of Athens, Ala., mailed packets and ballots to the 31 members of the CLC.

The action set off renewed controversy. N. Larry Baker, executive director of the CLC; Lloyd Elder, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, and an ex-officio member of the PAC; and James M. Dunn, executive director of the BJCPA, all strongly criticized the action.

--more--

Baker, who returned early from a holiday vacation, sent an overnight letter to Lackey calling on the chairman to "halt this improper and illegal course of action." Baker said he mailed the material to Lackey after the chairman failed to return his telephone calls.

Elder mailed a four-page letter to PAC Chairman Samuel T. Currin of Raleigh, N.C., Dec. 22, registering his "deepest concern" about the Dec. 12 meeting. On Dec. 28, he mailed the letter to all members of the PAC and urged them to vote against the proposal until a full meeting of the committee could be held to "give prayerful and careful consideration (to the proposal) as a total, responsible committee."

Dunn, who acknowledged he was "neither invited to nor even informed of the meeting," even though the program statement of the PAC says the staff of the BJCPA is to function as the staff of the PAC, called the proposal for a merger an "outrageous violation of the well established procedures by which Southern Baptists have directed and funded their agencies through the years."

Dunn said the proposal "ignores the responsibilities of the program stewards who have been elected to the CLC and the BJCPA" and "violates the program statements of both agencies."

"This demonstrates a remarkable shortsightedness concerning the long-term effectiveness of the Baptist witness in both Christian social ethics and religious liberty."

Dunn added: "Once again, those with a loaded political agenda have demonstrated their willingness to defy the repeated action of the Southern Baptist Convention in its national gatherings, as messengers have repeatedly voted to continue support for the budget and program of the BJCPA. In 1984, 1986 and again in 1987, the SBC resoundingly reaffirmed its support for the BJCPA, its work, its historical program assignment and its jointness with other Baptists."

In his letter to Lackey, Baker spelled out six ways in which the action polling CLC members "is out of order."

"First, the three officers do not have the authority to take such action.

"Second, no motion was made during the Dec. 12 meeting and, therefore, the recommendation to the CLC board has no standing although it is couched in the language of an official vote.

"Third, to ask for a vote on any issue by mail ballot is illegal according to our bylaws.

"Fourth, the ... proposal was set forth in a meeting which, according to Fred Lackey's statements to me prior to the meeting and to the participants during the session, was not an official meeting. Thus, the meeting was one in which no formal action would be taken and from which no formal action could be initiated.

"Fifth, the action was initiated prior to additional discussion concerning the matter by Harold C. Bennett with the chairman and the executive director of the commission and without any involvement by the executive committee of the commission or the full board.

"Sixth, the course of action was one taken independently of me as executive director, one that was taken without my consultation, input or counsel. Indeed, as executive director, I did not receive a copy of the letter to commissioners but learned of it through phone calls from other commissioners.

"Yet, as executive director, I am responsible, according to bylaw and job description, for the 'coordination of the corporation's affairs' and I am 'to give general leadership to the commission's program of work.'"

Baptist Press asked Elder for his reaction to the question of a merger and of the mail ballot. He said he had expressed his opinion in the letter to Currin and the separate letter to PAC members, and made the letter available to the news service.

In a letter to PAC members, Elder urged them to vote against the proposal "and ask rather that it be placed on the agenda of our next meeting."

He said he is "dismayed by the call for a 'poll vote.' Are we being asked to vote to pursue this CLC/PAC merger without even opportunity for careful and prayerful consideration as a total, responsible committee. Would that not be like asking members of a local Baptist congregation to pursue merging with another Baptist church with never the opportunity for democratic process to unfold?"

In his letter to Currin, Elder questioned whether the talks D-12 were something "that every member should have known about before we read it in the Baptist Press release?"

Elder told Currin he had several major concerns about the proposal.

"Not all members of the Public Affairs Committee have grave concerns about our relationship to the Baptist Joint Committee," he wrote. "It continues to be my judgment that if the new members of our committee had given the BJCPA more time for communication and understanding, you would have found members of that committee to be committed Christians, fellow Baptists and worthy of your trust and continued relationship.

"Only eight of the 17-member committee voted for the action to pursue dissolution institutionally and financially from the BJCPA," Elder wrote. "That is hardly a groundswell of Southern Baptist support for dissolving 50 years of significant relationship in behalf of religious liberty and separation of church and state."

He also asked for clarification about who originated the meeting between the CLC trustee officers and the four PAC members. "It seems that I hear two reports," he said.

Elder also asked Currin if he "or the officers of the PAC have given appropriate consideration to the significant concerns of Southern Baptists as they went to their state conventions." He said that while it might be said state conventions "have no impact" on the SBC and its PAC, "however, it might also be said that Southern Baptists as they respond to issues in the state conventions are closer to the grassroots than are the eight members who voted for dissolving our ties" with the BJCPA.

The executive told Currin: "We need to slow our pace down until we get together at our next meeting and we are able to assess where we are in the work assigned to us by the convention."

Elder also alluded to a frequent criticism by those who wish to sever ties between the SBC and BJCPA that the Washington agency is not "accountable" to Southern Baptists because Southern Baptists do not "control" the agency.

"Please keep in mind that throughout Southern Baptist life there are literally dozens of areas where Baptists work together establishing accountability without having direct control. This has been true of our relationship to the Baptist Joint Committee for 50 years," Elder wrote.

He added: "The sudden change has not been in our relationship to the Baptist Joint Committee, but in the expectation of some of our committee members that accountability is to be expressed in direct control rather than in dependable, trusting relationships."

He said that for himself, he will continue to: stand for continued institutional and financial ties between the SBC and the BJCPA; urge that financial support from the SBC to the BJCPA "be sent directly to the BJCPA;" plead that the PAC remain a committee and not become an institution or agency;

Affirm the total report of the special study committee which "affirms both our involvement in continued jointness ... and our identity as a public affairs committee to speak on those occasions that may be an exception to our jointness;" respect the staff leadership of James Dunn and those who work for him; and "to resist the concept of a PAC/CLC merger at this time of such confusion and unresolved issues."

Elder said that while he has "from time to time" had disagreement with Dunn, "I have found him to be a man of integrity, of superior ability in the area of his leadership and one who will serve the Public Affairs Committee very ably if we give him the chance."

He also noted, "Our relationship to the BJCPA has been so far-reaching and significant through the years that I regret it is being challenged so repeatedly and with so little substantive report."

He pleaded that the PAC go back to the report adopted at the 1987 annual meeting in St. Louis, which urged continued jointness. Elder asked that the PAC "act upon it for a two- or three-year period until some of the present misunderstandings evaporate."