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SBC 'centrist' coalition
forms; coordinator named

By Dan Martin

DALLAS (BP)--About two dozen Southern Baptists from around the nation -- saying they represent the mainstream in the Southern Baptist Convention -- met in Dallas in mid-December to form what they call a "centrist" coalition.

The organization, to be called Baptists Committed to the Southern Baptist Convention, also hired a full-time "coordinator," David Currie of Paint Rock, Texas, to "get the movement underway in the states."

A news release issued by Currie after the Dec. 15-16 meeting said the group will "direct its message toward the 'broad center' of Southern Baptists who are disenchanted with the fundamentalist takeover of the convention and yet do not wish to abandon the convention or start a new denomination."

Winfred Moore, pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo, Texas, called the December meeting and will be chairman of the group. An executive committee will be named later, he said.

Moore, former first vice president of the SBC and twice candidate for president, said: "We are traditional, mainstream, conservative Southern Baptists who are deeply committed to this convention and its historic principles. These principles, which are our heritage and legacy, and which must be preserved if our convention is to survive, include the priesthood of the believer, the autonomy of the local church, the separation of church and state and cooperative missions.

"Surely Southern Baptists can stop fighting and unite under these principles which have historically defined us as a group.

"With contributions down, baptisms down and unity shattered, enough is enough. Southern Baptists want and deserve a group to lead us out of this despair, a group which is truly committed to all that Southern Baptists have been in the past and which has a vision of cooperative mission for the future which includes all Southern Baptists.

"We support the restoration of our convention, not its destruction."

Although the news release said the group formally organized at the December meeting, a group also calling itself Baptists Committed to the Southern Baptist Convention sent out a mass mailing to more than 34,000 Southern Baptist churches in advance of the 1988 annual meeting of the SBC.

The mailing included a 10-minute recorded cassette tape from Moore and a brochure produced by Baptists Committed to the Southern Baptist Convention. The mailing stirred controversy in the SBC because of various charges the brochure made against conservative leaders.

Paul Pressler, a Houston appeals court judge who was specifically mentioned in the brochure, responded to Baptists Committed by noting: "It appears to be a reorganization of the same people who for 10 years have been resisting a return to Biblical theology.

"Baptists need to be working together to promote the Cooperative Program, evangelism and missions, not starting new political organizations that will be divisive and counterproductive to the welfare of the convention."

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John Baugh, a Houston businessman who has been active in Laity For the Baptist Faith and Message, one of the founders of the coalition, said the name comes from "two things: first, Baptists Committed to the Southern Baptist Convention means we are Baptists committed to being a part of the SBC and assisting in causing it to be what it should become. Second, without any doubt, the people whom I know in that group are traditional, mainstream Southern Baptists."

Moore told Baptist Press that although he called the December meeting and invited the 25 or so participants, he was unable to attend because of a schedule conflict.

James Slatton, pastor of River Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., who chaired the two-day session, said: "This is an attempt to form a centrist coalition which stands as an alternative between the political right wing on one hand and just checking out of denominational participation on the other.

"We feel there are people who wish to rally to that alternative. We feel there is a need for an emphasis on the essentials of Baptists. We think the Baptist understanding of the priesthood of the believer is in jeopardy; that the democracy of the local congregation is being threatened by pastoral autocracy.

"Southern Baptists are now a large national body with many constituencies and subgroups. The attempt to exclude from denominational service any who will not kiss the frog of creedal conformity and cooperation with one political group is dividing and destroying the denomination."

Slatton, who declined to identify the other participants in the meeting, said Baptists Committed is "a coalition which includes fundamentalists, moderates and anybody who is willing to work together around a commitment to the faith that honors Baptist freedom."

He added: "Ten years ago zealous people -- give them credit for their sincerity -- thought they could save the Bible by attacking the denominational structure. What they did was not save the Bible but destroy our unity and our trust.

"I think a great deal of damage has been done. Our denomination is like the Titanic after it hit the iceberg. It will take a long time to determine how much; but we know there has been damage and there is a decided list to the old ship."

He said the new organization will be "issues oriented. We are going to preach the Baptist essentials. We are not candidate oriented. Our major agenda will be to campaign on the issues."

Potential candidates for the presidency of the SBC at the 1989 annual meeting in Las Vegas were not discussed, he said. "This (the organization) is not about candidates; it is about the issues which are at stake."

Moore said the new organization, however, will have a political dimension and the group will continue to try to elect a candidate "who will personify the centrist position of where I think the great majority of Southern Baptists are."

Richard Jackson, pastor of North Phoenix (Ariz.) Baptist Church, said he attended a small meeting of six people in advance of the larger meeting to discuss the issues but did not attend the organizational meeting.

"We talked about what they were going to talk about," Jackson said. "I went to the meeting because I want a place for loyal, committed Southern Baptists to belong.

"We are in an identity crisis. The ordinary Southern Baptist has nowhere to go. Either he is identified with the group in charge or he is called a liberal or a moderate. This group (Baptists Committed) is trying to provide a place for mainline Southern Baptists who believe the Bible is the Word of God and in our missions endeavor."

Randy Fields, a San Antonio, Texas, attorney and chairman of Laity For the Baptist Faith and Message, said the meeting was "similar to other meetings we have had a couple of times a year. It was an organizational meeting to reassess what has happened since San Antonio (site of the 1988 annual meeting of the SBC) and to gear up for Las Vegas."

"I see Baptists Committed as a loose cooperative effort between many groups. We are not a monolithic body, but various groups who do not agree on everything. We see ourselves as centrists, representing the mainstream."

Norman Cavender, a Claxton, Ga., businessman, said the meeting and organization "is an expression of all that has gone on before," and added he is encouraged because of "the new people who are beginning to get involved because they now believe we have a problem."

"I wish I could say I see profound change happening to bring us back to our roots, but I don't. There is incremental change. There is some new energy and new effort," he added.

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Currie to coordinate
'centrist' coalition

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DALLAS (BP)--David Currie, 36, a rancher and former Texas pastor has been hired to "coordinate" the newly-formed Baptists Committed to the Southern Baptist Convention.

Currie, who operates a 2,400-acre ranch near Paint Rock, Texas, said he will be "coordinator" and not "executive director" of the new group, formed during a meeting Dec. 15-16 in Dallas.

Winfred Moore, pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo, and chairman of Baptists Committed, said Currie "will be the field person working with the various states and people who are trying to get this movement underway in the states."

James Slatton, pastor of River Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., and one of the founders of the new organization, said Currie "will do essentially organizational support."

Moore told Baptist Press funding for Baptists Committed "will come from individual contributions."

Currie said there is "no sugar daddy" to fund the operation. "This is essentially a faith commitment for me. Contributions will come from individuals and churches."

He added that while he will "always be a rancher," he will be putting the majority of his efforts toward the new organization.

"I think you will see coming out of this organization an effort at some publications, some on a regular basis and others which will be educational about Baptist heritage and Baptist principles.

"I am convinced there is a sleeping giant out there ... people who are not part of the fundamentalist takeover and who do not want to start a new denomination. These are people who think the direction we are moving in now is contrary to our entire heritage."

Currie said he believes Baptists Committed is "broad enough to include people in the (Southern Baptist) Alliance (a moderate group) and fundamentalists."

The new coordinator is a graduate of Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas, and earned master of divinity and doctor of philosophy degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

He was coordinator of special projects for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission from 1976-78, and pastor in Mason, Texas, for two and a half years. He also worked for the Texas Department of Agriculture for four years and recently sought election as a state representative.

"As a lifelong Southern Baptist, I am excited to be involved in a work that I am hopeful will preserve our convention, its witness and its heritage," he said. "At the same time, I am saddened there is the need for such an organization.

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"It is a bittersweet feeling. I am pleased with the confidence shown in me, but at the same time think it is a shame our convention has gotten in such disarray that a group such as this is needed to lead us out of this."

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Baptist Laity Journal
to cease publication

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12/29/88

DALLAS (BP)--Baptist Laity Journal, the "editorial voice" of Laity for the Baptist Faith and Message, will cease regular publication Dec. 31, 1988, according to Randy Fields, chairman of the Texas-based Laity For.

The announcement came after formal organization of a new organization Dec. 15-16, in Dallas, called Baptists Committed to the Southern Baptist Convention.

Fields, a San Antonio attorney who participated in the organizational meeting of Baptists Committed, told Baptist Press: "Laity For will not cease to exist. It will continue to be a voice for disseminating what we feel is the proper information. In the past, Baptist Laity Journal has not been used for hard news; it has been an editorial piece.

"It has been a voice to counteract some of the other editorial material coming from the other side (of the SBC controversy)."

He said Laity Journal will cease to be published on "a regular basis, but we plan to publish under that name or a more representative name in the future. I anticipate it will be published at least once and maybe a couple of times prior to the SBC in Las Vegas (1989 annual meeting)."

Laity For also is closing its office in Dallas effective Dec. 31.

"J. Neil Rodgers (who has been the only staff member of Laity For) will no longer be associated with us as an employee of the group, nor will we have an office in Dallas," Fields said, adding the organization "may establish another office, eventually."

Baptist Press was unable to contact Rodgers, who has been employed by Laity For for the past three years.

On another matter, Fields commented Baptists Committed "has been discussing having an office of some kind in Nashville, and the possibility of having through that office a source of news dissemination. That is an alternative in the event Baptist Press is fully and completely taken over and dominated by ultra-fundamentalists."

He commented, however, that Baptist Press is continuing to operate "in a very credible manner, in my opinion."

Baptist Press, the news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, is part of the structure of the SBC Executive Committee, which has offices in Nashville.

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Parolee arrested
in missionary death

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SAN ANGELO, Texas (BP)--San Angelo police have charged a 35-year-old parolee from Houston with murder in the Nov. 9 strangulation death of Mrs. Ona Jones.

Jerry Don Faye, 35, was arrested Dec. 20 on a burglary warrant in an unrelated case but gave a voluntary statement about the death of Mrs. Jones. Faye is being held in Tom Green County Jail on charges of murder and burglary of two other habitations.

Mrs. Jones, 57, a retired Southern Baptist missionary who served 32 years in Zimbabwe, was found dead in her burning house at the Baptist Memorials Geriatric Center in San Angelo shortly before 3 a.m. Nov. 9. Her husband, Sam, was away attending a Bible conference at Alto Frio Encampment.

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At first it was thought she was a victim of the fire, but San Angelo fire investigators determined the blaze had been deliberately set and an autopsy revealed Mrs. Jones had been strangled to death.

Faye was arrested on a charge of burglary of a habitation following a Dec. 18 break-in of a house occupied by a 76-year-old woman, said Detective Robert Martinez, who had been investigating the Jones death.

Martinez said Faye told Detective Jerry Cornelius, who had arrested him on the burglary charge, about the Jones death. Faye is also accused of unlawfully entering the home of another 72-year-old woman.

Martinez said the murder charge would be reviewed by a grand jury in early January. Faye is being held in lieu of a \$450,000 bond.