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March 7, 2005

Posted: 3/7/05

'Other' Baptists in U.S. need a unifying identity, Currie says

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Associated Baptist Press

ATLANTA (ABP)—Southern Baptists account for roughly half of all U.S. Baptists—about 16 million people—and thus get most of the attention. The other half also represents a significant presence in America, but they lack a unifying identity, according to several of their leaders.

While Southern Baptists have cultivated their conservative, counter-cultural leadership role in America, there is still no consensus about what the “other” Baptists—including those who have left the Southern Baptist Convention—will be or do.

“We need to dream about something that will re-energize all of us,” said David Currie of Texas Baptists Committed, one of five Baptist leaders who participated on a panel in Atlanta to discuss “A New Day for Baptists.” The panel was part of the Feb. 25-26 annual convocation of the Mainstream Baptist Network, a loose national organization that has opposed the growing influence of Southern Baptists, particularly at the state-convention

level.

Whether called mainstream Baptists, moderate Baptists, or “free and faithful” Baptists, many of those non-fundamentalist Baptists in America feel inferior to the large and vocal Southern Baptist Convention. But they need not live in the shadow of the SBC, several speakers said.

“You are not the minority in North America,” said Alan Stanford, general secretary of the North American Baptist Fellowship, one of six regional groups related to the Baptist World Alliance.

Moderate Baptists and other non-SBC groups related to the Baptist World Alliance account for 17.9 million Baptists in the U.S. and Canada, Stanford said. “You are the majority in North America.”

He praised those Baptist groups who are looking to expand their international Baptist connections. “The future is to go global,” Stanford said.

“We are part of a bigger family than we realized we were,” echoed Charles Wade, executive director of the moderate Baptist General Convention of Texas, which recently was admitted into the NABF and is seeking its own membership in BWA since the withdrawal of Southern Baptists.

The Baptist General Association of Virginia is on an identical course. John Upton, BGAV executive director, told the Mainstream Baptist audience that moderate Baptists should act their size.

Upton recalled advice he received from renowned church consultant Lyle Schaller, who noted the relatively large size of the 420,000-member BGAV.

“‘You’re 8 percent of your state’s population,” Schaller reportedly said. “‘Why aren’t you acting that way? My fear is you’re going to shrink yourself to the size you think you are.’”

Stanford of the NABF said the Southern Baptist Convention's 2004 withdrawal of membership and financial support from the Baptist World Alliance has sparked renewed commitment to BWA from many of the 210 other member unions. "Now you have other groups around the world coming to say, 'We need to have a part,'" he said.

Although the NABF—the BWA's regional body for 16 Baptist conventions in the U.S. and Canada—has been less active than other BWA regions, Stanford said, it could become the framework for a movement of non-SBC Baptists.

Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, told the Mainstream gathering the NABF "provides a very, very hopeful sign for Baptists in North America" and "a great opportunity for collaboration." The Fellowship recently adopted a commitment to help revitalize the NABF as a way to link moderate Baptists together.

Vestal also encouraged Baptists to look beyond their own ranks and realize "the body of Christ is much richer and much fuller than anyone realizes." He praised the creation of Christian Churches Together— an interdenominational fellowship that includes evangelicals and Baptists, including CBF—which Vestal said represents "the first time Baptists have participated at a significant ecumenical table."

Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed and an organizer of the Mainstream Baptist Network, said moderate Baptists are ready for a new cause. After lamenting the lack of energy among moderate Baptists, he said, "I sense folks waiting to get excited about something."

Currie said he would like the legacy of the Mainstream Baptist Network and its predecessor, Baptists Committed, to be part of some larger, long-term Baptist movement or organization.

"I want to look back on something I poured my life into," he said. But he

indicated such a new mechanism would come from somewhere and someone else. "There's a piece of dirt calling my name," Currie said, referring to his Texas ranch. "I'm not the guy who can make that happen."

Currie also lamented the slow pace at which Baptist churches sympathetic with the moderate cause have redirected their funding to moderate organizations. "I just want the \$12 million that goes (from Baptist General Convention of Texas churches each year) to the Southern Baptist Convention to go to ya'll," he told the BGCT's Wade. "So much of God's money is being wasted that should be going to ya'll."

Vestal, after praising the "very important role" of the groups represented on the panel, said the Baptist future will not be defined by the fate of such organizations. "I can't discern what the Baptist future is," Vestal said, but it will be determined by local churches.

"To the degree that organizations understand that and help churches, I believe God will bless us and use us," he said.

In recent years, CBF has redefined its mission and structure around serving local churches. Vestal predicted local churches will define themselves by their mission, not abstract Baptist principles. But the mission of churches includes the spiritual formation of members and addressing the needs of the world's poor, he added.

The Mainstream annual meeting attracted 150 participants to Atlanta for speeches, panels and breakout sessions. A panel of local church leaders counseled participants on ways to lead congregations to reconsider their traditional ties to the Southern Baptist Convention.

During a banquet, six people were inducted into the Mainstream Baptist Network Hall of Fame, recognizing those who "championed and maintained Baptist heritage and principles in time of conflict."

They are Kirby Godsey, president of Mercer University in Macon, Ga.; Joe and Frances Jones of Huntsville, Ala., editors of the Alabama Mainstream newsletter; Phil Lineberger, pastor of Williams Trace Baptist Church in Sugar Land, Texas; Winfred Moore, Baylor University professor, retired pastor from Amarillo, and former moderate candidate for SBC president; Timothy Norman, director of congregational relationships at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond and an organizer of Virginia Baptists Committed; and Upton.

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