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Rival Mo. conservative groups agree to 'peace committee'

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Seven members of rival conservative groups in the Missouri Baptist Convention will go to mediation in an effort to bring about peace within the battle-torn statewide group.

The MBC Executive Board voted on April 15 to create a "peace committee" that will submit to Christian mediation through Peacemaker Ministries. The Billings, Mont., organization focuses on Bible-based conflict resolution. The committee makeup and its methodology were proposed by Executive Board member Jody Shelenhamer, a layman from First Baptist Church of Bolivar, Mo., according to MBC president Gerald Davidson.

Shelenhamer proposed four members who have been associated with the Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association (MBLA). Three others represented a group called Save Our Convention (SOC), which has criticized what it calls an inordinate amount of control in convention life by a small group of MLBA adherents. The Laymen's Association led a successful effort in the late 1990s to wrest control of the convention from the moderates that had dominated its leadership. However, SOC supporters -- many of whom were foot soldiers in the association's battle against moderates -- have taken issue with their former allies on a handful of issues in the past year.

Save Our Convention successfully swept officer elections during last fall's MBC annual meeting. That is proof, they say, that rank-and-file Missouri Baptists have grown weary of intra-conservative dissension and of what they say is a tightening of trustee representation on boards and agencies. All seven members of the committee are men.

The four closely identified with the current Laymen's Association leadership include Roger Moran, the organization's founder and research director; Jay Scribner, retired pastor of First Baptist Church of Branson, Mo; Jeff White, pastor of South Creek Church in Springfield, Mo.; and Jeff Purvis, pastor of First Baptist Church of Herculaneum-Peveley, Mo.

The Save Our Convention representatives are John Marshall, pastor of Second Baptist Church of Springfield and the current MBC second vice president; Bruce McCoy, pastor of Canaan Baptist Church in St. Louis and current first vice president; and Wesley Hammond, pastor of First Baptist Church of Paris, Mo.

Two weeks prior to the Executive Board meeting, MBLA supporter Kent Cochran, a member of Calvary Baptist Church in Republic, Mo., proposed a similar committee, modeled after the 1985 Southern Baptist Convention Peace Committee. Cochran's proposal, which he mailed to every member of the Executive Board, called for a committee to "research the perceptions, activities, expectations, history, present and future of Missouri Baptists focusing particularly on the three issues of: theology, methodology, political activity and any related matters that involve Missouri Baptist life."

"I'm hopeful that it will work," Davidson told Associated Baptist Press. But the effort will have to be more successful than the SBC peace committee, which resulted in one side winning and the other withdrawing from the SBC, he said.

Davidson, the retired pastor of First Baptist Church of Arnold, Mo., was himself once a supporter of the Laymen's Association's efforts to drive moderates out of MBC leadership. But he became one of Save Our Convention's organizers last year, and he said he believes the solution to the impasse between Missouri conservatives is not complex. "We don't have any big differences except in turning loose and letting Missouri Baptists make Missouri Baptist decisions they think are under the leadership of the Holy Spirit," he said. "People have to say, 'Hey, we're going to have to quit fighting,'" Davidson continued. "I'm tired of all the bickering, fussing and fighting. But, he added, "I am strongly opposed to a handful...taking control" of the convention -- a situation Davidson pledged to continue working against. As far as he is concerned, Davidson said, MBLA may continue to distribute statements critical of SOC, hold regional rallies and maintain its "Right to Know" website during the peace committee process. And if SOC organizers choose to reactivate their organization, they could do the same. He said there is no timetable for completion of the committee's work.

The SBC Peace Committee was launched in 1985, submitted its final report in 1987 and asked the Southern Baptist Convention to extend it another three years to monitor response to its recommendations. But many moderates protested the committee's final report, which they said was unfairly weighted toward conservatives. Most of them eventually left the SBC for moderate organizations, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Alliance of Baptists and the historic state conventions in Texas and Virginia.

N.C. college receives donation of 1686 Luther Bible translation

MARS HILL, N.C. (ABP) -- Across the centuries, across the ocean, through bombings and world wars, a sacred bit of history has emerged from the distant past to find a home at Mars Hill College. The North Carolina Baptist school has

received a 1686 copy of Martin Luther's Bible translation. It was donated by Elfriede Ludwig Wilde, a resident of Texarkana, Texas, and former resident of Hendersonville, N.C.

She gave the rare book in memory of her late husband, Harold Wilde, and in honor of the Wilde family of Western North Carolina, where Mars Hill is located. Elfriede Wilde has been in possession of the Bible since 1967. "The time has come for this Bible to find a new and permanent home, Mars Hill College," she said, in presenting the gift. "So I am passing on to you as a gift this special book that the Lord has protected again and again for 321 years."

It is unknown how many copies of the translation still exist. But other aspects of the volume make it valuable, including its sheer size, its ornate drawings, its thick leather binding, and the brass moldings on its cover.

Although the Bible was passed down to Wilde through her family, her husband's ancestry is closely tied to Mars Hill and its environs. Harold Wilde's family has been present in western North Carolina since the late 1700s. The Wilde family was involved in the college's early activities, and was closely tied through marriage to the school's founding Sams family.

Genealogy connected Elfriede Wilde to the school more recently, when she met Darryl Norton, Mars Hill's director of auxiliary services, as part of his personal genealogical research. It was through their friendship that she came to the conclusion that the school and the book would be a good fit for each other. Knowing the history of the college and its Baptist heritage, she decided that the gift of the Bible would be a proper way to honor her deceased husband and his family.

The receipt of such a valuable gift carries with it a solemn duty, according to Mars Hill President Dan Lunsford. "There is every reason to believe that this Bible could have been destroyed many times in the three centuries since its publication," Lunsford said. "The fact that it has now come to us at Mars Hill College means that we are the custodians of a rare treasure. We therefore owe a duty to those people through whose hands this Bible has passed, to preserve it for all the people of the present and the future who will learn from its pages."

Believing that God intended the Bible to be accessible to the masses, Martin Luther translated it into vernacular German in the 15th century. The translation was first printed by Johann Andreas Endters, a publishing house in Nuremberg, Germany.

According to Elfriede Wilde, nobody knows who the first owner of this Bible was. It was most likely a nobleman or wealthy merchant, because the average citizen in those days could not afford to own a book, even if he or she could read. By the 1930s, the Bible had made its way to a suburb of Stuttgart, Germany, where it belonged to a good friend of Wilde's grandfather, known only as Mr. Neff. Her grandfather, Adolf Ludwig, also had an ancient Bible, printed only a few years later than Neff's copy.

Wilde said her father and Neff compared their Bibles often and found that, though the translation of the text was the same, the Bibles had different features. For example, Neff's Bible had an indexed drawing of the city of Jerusalem. It also contained elaborate drawings of several Old Testament characters, including Moses and Elijah, with notations that the drawings were reproduced from "ancient libraries." One of the most striking features of Neff's Bible, however, was an unusual and detailed drawing of Noah's Ark by artist Joseph Fuerttenbach. With the drawing is a description of the ark written by Martin Luther.

During the World War II bombings of Stuttgart, more than 60 percent of the city was destroyed, but Neff's house was spared. Even after the Ludwigs moved to the country, they kept in touch with Neff. Occasionally they made the arduous journey into town -- by train, by bus and on foot -- to see their friend. Under the regime of Adolf Hitler, many of Germany's religious artifacts were destroyed, but Neff's Bible was spared. When Neff died, Ludwig inquired about his friend's Bible. Like many young Germans following the war, the Neffs' only son had renounced his Lutheran faith. He said Ludwig should get the book if he wanted it because he planned to destroy it.

Despite their war-induced state of malnutrition, Wilde's grandparents carried the large Bible back home -- by train, by bus and on foot. According to Wilde, Ludwig told her that he wanted her to have the Bible after his death. But there was a stipulation. "I had to promise that I would never sell the Bible for profit," she said. "If I ever should decide to sell it, the money would have to go to the Lord. Even though I encountered hard times in my life, I kept the promise."

When her grandfather died in 1967, Wilde was living in America, and circumstances prevented her from attending the funeral. Still, her father and a friend in Germany remembered Ludwig's wish for Wilde to have the Bible. They tried to mail it to the United States, but the postmaster refused to accept it, saying that the post office could not insure so valuable an item. Wilde's friend wrote to her, describing the trouble with transporting the Bible. At that point, Wilde assumed the family would donate the Bible to a church in Germany.

About three months later, a large, plain box arrived on Wilde's doorstep with a German customs declaration stating the box contained "old books." It was her grandfather's Bible, which had traveled, at book rate, by ship from Germany, then over land to Arkansas. There was no indication on the package of insurance or its valuable contents.

Mars Hill officials are currently having the Bible restored. The process is scheduled to be completed in late September or early October.

Wilde said that she and her family made the decision to donate the Bible to Mars Hill College, in part, because they wanted it to be protected. Her wish is also that religion and history students may use the Bible for scholarly research.

Most importantly, Wilde said, she feels that her gift was divinely directed. She believes that, in giving the Bible to Mars Hill, she has followed the leading of God and that she has kept the promise made so many years ago to her grandfather. "This is what he would have wanted, for this Bible to be kept in a place where it would be honored," she said. "This Bible has been through so many tribulations, but wherever it has been, it has seemed that there was a protection around it," she said. "Now, I wish for that protection to rest on Mars Hill College."

Sudanese Baptists reunite after years-long division

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP) -- After years of division precipitated by one of history's deadliest civil wars, Sudanese Baptists have finally -- like their nation -- reunited. The reunification of the Sudan Interior Church North and the Sudan Interior Church South took place during a series of meetings April 1-5, in the southern Sudanese city of Renk, according to a Baptist World Alliance news release. The occasion was one of "jubilation and praises to God for his goodness," said Ramadan Chan, who was elected by the reunified denomination as general secretary.

According to BWA, there are about 45,000 baptized believers and 225 churches in the reunited denomination. The BWA release said the northern church is growing quickly, expanding from 15,000 baptized believers in 2000 to 21,000 in 2007. The reunion meeting culminated a process begun with a series of talks a year earlier. Sudanese Baptist leaders had long hoped to recombine the separate conventions. They insist the division was borne of administrative necessity, after thousands of Christians were displaced from the north as a result of the 12-year-long Second Sudanese Civil War.

The war pitted the mainly Arab and Muslim north of the vast nation against the mainly Christian and animist ethnic blacks of the south. It took an estimated 2 million lives and caused about 4 million more Sudanese to be displaced between 1983 and 2005. The displaced included many Baptists, and many of them formed churches in Kenyan and Ethiopian camps for Sudanese refugees. "The scattering of the church necessitated the development of a second administrative center based in Nairobi, Kenya," said Elijah Brown, a Texas Baptist who has studied Sudanese Christians and sits on BWA's freedom and justice commission.

The establishment of the Sudan Interior Church South "was a pragmatic attempt to minister to a dispersed church divided by warring factions," Brown said. He has submitted to the University of Edinburgh a doctoral thesis on the role of the Sudanese church in the war.

BWA, the worldwide umbrella group for national and regional Baptist denominations, accepted the Sudan Interior Church as a whole as a member body in 2000, even though the two branches had not been officially reunited. BWA officials have paid close attention to Sudan during its war years and after, which have included repeated accusations that the Arab-dominated government in the north has oppressed Sudanese people of non-Muslim religions. In recent years, international human-rights groups and Western governments have denounced Sudan for supporting genocidal Arab gangs carrying out a campaign of extermination of ethnic blacks in the Darfur region of western Sudan.

Opinion: Discipleship and the 'outside world'

By Beth Newman

(ABP) -- Quite by coincidence, I had just finished reading Carolyn Jessup's *Escape* when the news stories broke about the raids on the Texas ranch of the Fundamentalist Church of Latter Day Saints. The "escape" of the book's title is from an abusive, polygamous marriage. Yet there was for me an unexpected coda to Jessup's story. Her eldest daughter, on turning 18, returned to her father and the Fundamentalist Mormon Church.

The FLDS makes an easy target. If the reports of child abuse are true, then of course the state has an overriding interest in intervention. But it seems to be a routine part of every discussion of the Texas situation to observe that among the sins, real or imagined, of that ranch was its prohibition of contact between the Mormons who lived there and something called the "outside world."

That division is a particularly tricky one, and believers in any faith would do well to pause over it for a moment.

In a column published a couple of years ago, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, wondered whether children might not possess the right to be exposed to varying points of view, a right presumably denied to them by fundamentalist parents. That is, the public good requires that each of us be prepared to participate fully within the rules of a secular, pluralist society. According to Thistlethwaite's logic, aren't such children victims of child abuse?

To cite a less academic but more contemporary source, comedian Bill Maher recently wondered why the Texas pedophiles were being prosecuted while Pope Benedict was being lionized. After all, he observed, child abuse was much more widespread with the Catholic church than among a few hundred misguided Texans.

This is the issue for me. Progressives, such as Maher and Thistlethwaite, and fundamentalists are offended by the same thing: that there are people who think differently than they do.

Here let me return to the example of Carolyn Jessup's daughter. It may well be that this young woman is continuing to live out the results of a life of abuse. She may be so broken by her experiences that she cannot understand her own self-interests. Or it may be that she has decided the life lived out by the Fundamentalist Mormon Church is in fact the life that most faithfully reflects the call of God. From the outside, how can any of us know?

It is not difficult, however, for even the most mainline of current denominations to look back and discover when it was maligned by slander. It is even easier to discover when our churches were guilty of real crimes; remember where the "Southern" part of the Southern Baptist name came from.

All in all, the difficulties of the Christian churches have not been that we were not open to the outside world, but that we accommodated ourselves far too well.

With this in mind, I think we, as Christians, need to see the Fundamentalist Mormons -- alien as they might seem to be to us -- as our brothers and sisters in Christ. While the teachings of Joseph Smith are heretical (or not fully scriptural), heresy nonetheless belongs in some sense in the Christian tradition. Polygamous Mormons in particular raise the question of what constitutes Christian marriage.

Lest we see them as too “other” in their practice, some ethicists today have observed that we are living in a culture that increasingly practices “serial polygamy.”

The Christian reason for monogamy is that we are to be faithful to our spouse as God is faithful to the church, the one body of Christ. Thus, monogamous marriage is directly linked to the oneness of the church.

Of course, one might readily observe that God seems more like a polygamist today: having many, many churches. And some theologians have gone so far as to compare the crucifixion to child abuse. Such “polygamy,” however, has more to do with our adultery and idolatry than with God’s desire to have many partners. In the book of Hosea, the faithless wife (Israel) is restored when God says: “And in that day, says the Lord, you will call me, ‘My husband,’ and no longer will you call me, ‘My Baal.’ For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more” (Hosea 2:1-17).

Our faithlessness cannot defeat the faithfulness of God. This fact is most fully displayed in the crucifixion, which is not an angry Father punishing his Son, but God’s own willingness to enter, heal and defeat our brokenness and sin “from the inside.” This astounding gift frees us to live more faithfully as Christ’s body for the world.

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