
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

June 6, 2008

(8-57)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- IMB supporters release statement opposing missionary guidelines
- Polygamist sect's children sing, write poems to thank Baptists
- Arkansas Baptist school falls short of World Series crown
- Opinion: Obama's historic breakthrough

IMB supporters release statement opposing missionary guidelines

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- A group of current and former missionaries, former mission-board trustees and pastors is calling for the Southern Baptist Convention International Mission Board to reverse controversial guidelines for missionaries enacted in 2005.

The guidelines prohibit the appointment of any candidate who acknowledges using a "private prayer language," a practice IMB President Jerry Rankin has espoused. They also require candidates to be baptized in a Southern Baptist church, discounting even believer's baptism by immersion in another evangelical church.

"We express our concern over the restrictions that have been put in place in the form of additional 'guidelines' concerning a missionary candidate's private prayer life and baptism," said a statement from the group released June 2. There were initially 37 signatories to the statement. "Our conviction is that these guidelines stray far beyond the parameters set forth by our denominational confession of faith, the Baptist Faith and Message."

The statement said those restrictions amount to "intrusive scrutiny into the sanctity of the personal prayer closet" and "dictating to local churches what constitutes a legitimate Christian baptism."

The result of adopting the guidelines -- with no evidence they were needed -- was that "otherwise worthy candidates" for missionary service are unnecessarily rejected and "valuable, faithful IMB personnel" are leaving the field at a time when the overseas missions harvest is greater than ever, the statement said.

Allan Blume, the president of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention's board and pastor of Mount Vernon Baptist Church in Boone, N.C., and his wife, Pam, are listed as contacts for the group. Pam Blume is a former IMB trustee.

Steve Hardy, associate pastor for missions at Calvary Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C., and a member of the BSC Executive Committee, is also listed as a contact person. He is also a former IMB trustee.

Allan Blume said the guidelines go beyond the Baptist Faith and Message and are extra-biblical. They are keeping "dozens" of potential missionaries from applying for service and killing morale on the field, he said. Blume said the restrictions initiated by IMB trustees in 2005 are distinct signs of "Landmarkism" -- a theological strain in Baptist life that firmly rejects ecumenism -- the in IMB trustee leadership. He also said the policies reverse the appropriate relationship between Southern Baptist churches and the agencies they support with their giving.

While IMB trustees say the candidate simply has to be baptized again, Blume said such a requirement "trivializes" baptism. "We know of dozens" of candidates who would be required to undergo such a re-baptism, said Blume, who helped draft and distribute a news release and letter asking the IMB to reconsider the policies. "We know as many are not considering applying because of these guidelines.

Mount Vernon Baptist Church is among the top 50 churches nationally in giving to the SBC's Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions and one year led the nation in per-capita gifts. Current IMB trustee Donna Nealy is a member of Mount Vernon but has not participated in the discussion, adhering to a gag order that trustees imposed on themselves regarding disagreement with board policies.

"We are appealing as gently as we know how" for the IMB to reverse these guidelines, said Blume, whose church has sent a dozen missionaries through the agency, and who personally knows 100 other IMB personnel. The church frequently sends missions teams to work with international missionaries. "Not one [missionary] has said these guidelines are inconsequential to a sinking morale on the field," Blume said.

While former IMB regional representative Rodney Hammer's recent resignation was one trigger for the petition by several dozen pastors and former IMB trustees, he is not the focus of the action and is not mentioned by name.

Blume emphasized, as do the documents, his support for the IMB and for the missionaries it supports. Although Blume said he does not personally practice a private prayer language, he is concerned that by adopting and dictating policies that are extra-biblical and beyond the scope of the denomination's doctrinal statement, the IMB has reversed its appropriate relationship to the churches. The IMB should adhere to the standards of the churches that send missionaries and not refuse candidates based on guidelines the churches did not adopt, he said.

The group said their opposition to the guidelines should not be read as a lack of support for IMB missionaries, staff or administration. They "commend the obedience and commitment to God's call of the more than 5,000 dedicated brothers and sisters who have been appointed, sent, and supported by Southern Baptists to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth" and declare that they "enthusiastically support our IMB missionaries through their praying, giving, and going."

The group calls on Southern Baptists to "hold the entities of the SBC accountable to the direction of the convention's churches, not the churches to the sentiments of their entities" and "strongly urge[s] Southern Baptists to seek the removal of these controversial and superfluous guidelines from use in the candidate approval process."

The group has created a website, imbchange.info, to "encourage appropriate principles and guidelines for missionary service through the International Mission Board of the SBC." The statement is posted there.

IMB spokespeople, contacted for a response to the statement June 5, were not immediately available.

Polygamist sect's children sing, write poems to thank Baptists

GONZALES, Texas (ABP) -- Children seized from a polygamist sect's compound and temporarily entrusted to a Texas Baptist child-care agency bid farewell to their former caretakers May 31 with poetry, song and strong emotion.

In anticipation of a court ruling that would allow them to return to their parents, 72 children from the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints compound came up with an entire program to thank workers at the Baptist Child and Family Services Youth Ranch in Gonzales County, Texas. They had been in the organization's care since the early days of April, when state authorities began taking children from the FLDS outpost.

The children lined up all the rocking chairs they could find on the Youth Ranch campus and asked the BCFS workers who had cared for them for weeks to be seated.

The aftermath left the BCFS staffers in tears.

A poem, written on a large piece of poster board and decorated with hand-drawn flowers began:

"Just a brief note, but sincere from the heart/We wanted to tell you, at least a small part/How much we appreciate your efforts at "boot camp"/To put up with and care for this motherless bunch."

The poem's conclusion read:

"So we'll just close this little rhyme and say with great zest/'Thank You' to everyone wearing the name/'BCFS!'"

In-between, the children mentioned many of the organization's workers by name and thanked them for specific actions. The children also gave out individual notes and performed songs they had composed for the occasion.

"They just overwhelmed us with all of this -- in a good way," said Asennet Segura, the BCFS director of residential services. "It was so real. Most of them signed the back of the poster with the poem on it..."

That simple gesture by the FLDS children, Segura said, "showed real trust, since they are wary of signing anything."

BCFS President Kevin Dinnin said the agency received "literally hundreds" of registered letters from FLDS parents back at the sect's Yearning For Zion Ranch in Eldorado, Texas. The letters contained requests on how they wanted the care for their children structured -- regarding everything from medications to education. "We complied with all of those requests, except one -- that FLDS elders be allowed to conduct religious services," he said. Dinnin noted that the request was denied not by BCFS officials, but by state authorities.

In so doing, BCFS was just following its own advice. Before the children were transferred from San Angelo -- a city near Eldorado where many of the children were first taken -- to group child-care facilities across the state, BCFS Chief Operating Officer Nanci Gibbons and BCFS Staff Psychologist Richard Brake wrote a "Model of Care" manual. It went everywhere the FLDS children did.

"Basically, we said child-care workers should not try to turn them into 'little Americans,' and that meant following the wishes of their parents and the tenets of their religion in every way possible," she explained. "That meant, among other things, no Internet [access], no television, maintaining their regular dress" -- the sect's adherents dress in simple, hand-made clothing reflecting the 19th-century origins of the group's faith -- "and honoring their dietary choices."

Brake, the staff psychologist, agreed. "We tried our best, and the staff and leaders did a great job in a difficult circumstance," he said. "I think many staff were able to connect individually with some of the kids and probably broke down some stereotypes on both sides. We struck a good balance between learning as much as we could about them to best serve them and meet their needs, while also being aware of the many similarities between this situation and other

children in [our] care, thus utilizing our skills and expertise.”

The agency, which is affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, also coordinated the statewide process of returning all of the 400-plus children to their FLDS caregivers, pursuant to the court order. “Originally, we were going to bus everyone back to San Angelo, but the FLDS attorneys were granted a request that parents be allowed to pick the children up, so we put that process together,” Dinnin said.

“Some people didn’t understand that BCFS’s role was just to care for the children when they were in need of care,” he said. “We didn’t play a role in the removal or any of the court hearings. We just took care of the children while the legal aspects were being sorted out. But when the children at the Youth Ranch expressed appreciation for how BCFS treated them, we knew the people who most needed to understand our hearts did just that.”

State authorities initially seized all of the children on the compound because of allegations that underage girls had been taken as wives by much older FLDS men. While evidence that many young girls had recently given birth surfaced, the Texas Supreme Court ruled May 29 that the state did not have sufficient reason to hold all of the children because of its suspicions about the sect’s religious practices. A lower court then ordered the children returned to their FLDS parents or caregivers.

Many in the Texas and national media have criticized the ruling, while others initially criticized the state for overreacting by taking custody of all the sect’s children.

But that wasn’t the topic of conversation as the FLDS children bid farewell to their BCFS caregivers. As one 13-year-old girl who was cared for there wrote, “Heavenly Father will bless those who bless his children.”

Arkansas Baptist school falls short of World Series crown

SAUGET, Ill. (ABP) -- An Arkansas Baptist college’s baseball team fell just barely short of claiming the NCAA Division II crown May 31.

The Ouachita Baptist University Tigers couldn’t overcome a five-run lead built up by the top-ranked Mount Olive College Trojans in the first inning of the final game. They outscored the North Carolina school 2-1 in the rest of the game, ending with a 6-2 loss.

Ouachita ended the season with a 51-16 record, marking the greatest number of wins in the program’s history. It was also head coach Scott Norwood’s last game with the Tigers. He is moving to the top coaching post at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Norwood, who has an overall record of 289-140, ended his four years at OBU with a 158-77 record. “What a great run these kids have given me and themselves,” Norwood said, according to a Ouachita press release. “We are proud of them and proud of how far they came and what they’ve accomplished.”

In the final game, Mount Olive (58-6) took advantage of a Tiger error in the top of the first inning to grab its initial 5-0 lead. They added another run in the fifth inning.

The Tigers attempted a rally in the bottom of the eighth, scoring twice off Trojans starting pitcher Casey Hodges. OBU’s Blake Lockwood hit a double to center field to lead off the inning, scoring when Justin Pennell reached on an error. Pennell then scored on Jim Streicher’s double to center field. But it wasn’t enough to carry the day.

OBU senior pitcher Steve Smith was named the series’ most valuable player and to the All-Tournament Team. Ouachita players joining Smith in All-Tournament honors were Pennell, Streicher and Destan Makonnen.

GCS Ballpark in Saugat, Ill., home of the minor-league Gateway Grizzlies, hosted the series.

Opinion: Obama's historic breakthrough

By David Gushee(ABP) -- The Democratic primaries are finally over, as Barack Obama has barely edged out Hillary Clinton for the nomination. This is an upset of epic proportions. It was unimaginable 18 months ago.

The Illinois senator’s victory over his colleague from New York represents a staggering change in American political life. It also has considerable implications for Christians and the life of the church.

For those of us who care about the journey of race relations in this country, Obama’s victory is one of the most significant events in American history. It has taken just one generation to go from legislation guaranteeing blacks the right to vote to a major party’s nomination of an African-American for the highest office in the land. We have gone from a nation that only 40 years ago overturned bans on mixed-race marriages to a nation that has nominated the child of such a marriage for the presidency of the United States.

Remember affirmative action? Obama’s victory marks a cathartic healing of that divisive debate because he won the nomination fair and square, playing by the same rules as his all-white competition. He built the best campaign organization, raised the most money, executed the most effective strategy, and then hung on for dear life as the race tightened near the end. Good education and considerable drive and ability gave Obama the tools he needed to compete on a level playing field. He did the rest.

Whatever one may think about their respective strengths and weaknesses, Obama's victory over Clinton helps to avert the possibility of family dynasties coming to dominate American politics. Bush-Clinton-Bush-Clinton ... this would have signaled a dangerous calcification in our politics and a loss of that cleansing dynamism characteristic of a nation where anyone with drive and talent can aspire to be whatever they want to be. Just as Bill Clinton came out of nowhere to become president in 1992, so did Barack Obama come out of nowhere in this election. This is just as it should be.

There is a logic of gradual inclusion that seems to unfold in American democracy. Martin Luther King pointed to it in 1963 when he said that it was time for America to live up to the promise of its creed, "all men are created equal." The all-white, all-male founders of this nation unleashed a force for inclusion that even they could not anticipate.

Many of these same lessons have been learned related to Hillary Clinton's candidacy. The great successes of her campaign mark the same kind of victory for women that Obama's represents for people of color -- and that both represent for a more inclusive nation. She certainly had name-recognition advantages over Obama. But she also ran a formidable campaign and may yet one day become president of the United States. That great symbol of American power -- the White House -- may for the first time in our history be something other than the White Male House. Speaking as a white male, I think this is a very good thing.

Does this mean anything for the church? I think it does. I can't help but contrast the victory of Barack Obama and the near-victory of Hillary Clinton with the absence of blacks and women from leadership in most historically white Baptist and/or evangelical churches. Our majority-white nation may elect a black man president, but how many majority-white churches would consider electing a black man as pastor -- or associate pastor?

Someone said to me recently that the church loses its credibility when the quality of its moral practice falls behind that of the broader culture. We fancy ourselves as the moral leaders of society, but so often are the most socially retrograde force in the nation. At a time when doors are being pried open to greater inclusiveness (and therefore greater social justice) and greater respect for the immeasurable worth of every human person, the church often lags behind.

Sometimes we are known for what and who we are against, as in crusades against basic homosexual rights. Other times we articulate a commitment to an inclusive vision, as on issues of race and gender, but make little actual progress in sharing power and leadership with people outside the white-guys club.

To the extent that the church continues to lag behind the culture in treating every human being as the sacred gift of God that they are, we ourselves will be left behind as an irrelevant vestige of a previous age.

-- David Gushee is distinguished university professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University. His latest book is titled, *The Future of Faith in American Politics: The Public Witness of the Evangelical Center*.
