

\*\*\*\*\*

# ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

\*\*\*\*\*

July 15, 2000

(08-71)

## **ABC-USA proposes changes to focus on mission, churches**

VALLEY FORGE, Pa. (ABP) -- Leaders of the American Baptist Churches USA are proposing changes to the denomination's governing structure that aim to encourage greater missional empowerment and broader involvement of affiliated churches.

The ABC General Board considered the proposal during its June session, although details are still being worked out, according to ABC General Secretary Roy Medley. The proposal must be approved at the denomination's biennial meeting in 2009 before the changes are adopted.

The proposal reduces the size of the General Board from its current 109 members to 31. It also allows the entity's national and international mission boards to choose their members from outside the General Board. Under its current structure, the General Board is composed of regional representatives, with each of the 33 ABC regions determining its own method for electing those delegates. Each mission board's trustees are drawn from the General Board's membership.

The new proposal would create a General Board of 18 regional representatives, the general secretary, the treasurer and the four denominational officers -- president, vice president, budget-review officer and past president. The remaining seats would remain open for individuals possessing specific passions and skills the board needs. "The mission boards will have a process to choose from among American Baptist churches the people with the skills they need and still retain geographic diversity," Medley explained.

The proposal calls for the General Board to be renamed the Board of General Ministries. Representatives from the regions would be chosen on a rotating basis. "Not every region would be represented but each would be guaranteed of representation within a cycle," he said. "No region would succeed itself as long as a region remained unrepresented." "The Board of General Ministries would have the same purpose and goals as the General Board -- the overview and over-care of the denomination as a whole," Medley said.

The biennial meeting would become the ABC Mission Summit, with less focus on "public statements," he said, and more emphasis on education related to missional response. "We want to find ways ... to hear from our people" and the challenges their ministries face locally, nationally and internationally, he said. If the proposal is adopted, a "Mission Table" meeting would be established to concentrate on those issues. "The Mission Table would meet after the Biennial and be a missional think-tank for the denomination," Medley said.

The Mission Table would include representatives from ABC's mission boards, seminaries, other affiliated agencies, local churches and ABC-USA staff. Members would consider how to assist local churches, how to coordinate and how to network around common concerns and issues, he added.

Mission Table members would end their session with recommendations and networking opportunities. "We're still thinking this through," Medley said.

In addition, the proposal calls for gathering a central database of ABC individuals to collect names of potential leaders and board members. "We have not had a centralized system of holding on to names of people with leadership skills," he noted. The General Board will accept proposals for amendments to the plan for 60 days and will be able to suggest modifications. The denomination's General Executive Committee will consider possible changes to the bylaws at its September meeting.

## **Prosecutor asks international court to charge al-Bashir with genocide**

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (ABP) -- In what would become the world's first prosecution of a sitting head of state for crimes against humanity, the International Criminal Court's head prosecutor is asking that Sudan's leader be charged with genocide. Luis Moreno-Ocampo, an Argentinian who serves as the Netherlands-based court's chief prosecuting attorney, asked a three-judge panel July 14 to indict President Omar al-Bashir for war crimes in Sudan's Darfur region.

The indictment request, which caps a three-year-long investigation, includes three counts of genocide, five counts of crimes against humanity and two counts of murder. The evidence against the Sudanese leader "shows that al-Bashir

masterminded and implemented a plan to destroy in substantial part the Fur, Masalit and Zaghawa groups [of Darfur], on account of their ethnicity," said a statement from the ICC. "Members of the three groups, historically influential in Darfur, were challenging the marginalization of the province; they engaged in a rebellion. Al-Bashir failed to defeat the armed movements, so he went after the people."

Since 2003, government-supported Arab militias in western Sudan have been driving members of black African tribes from their homes into refugee camps scattered across the region and in neighboring Chad. According to U.N. estimates, more than 1 million people have been displaced from their homes as a result, and untold thousands have died from violence at the hands of militias as well as disease and hunger resulting from being forced into refugee camps.

Sudanese leaders have responded little to international pressure and repeated calls from the United Nations and other organizations to restrain the Arab militias, known collectively as the Janjaweed. Moreno-Ocampo's investigation began after the U.N. Security Council referred the situation to the International Criminal Court in 2005. The ICC, created by a 2002 treaty known as the Rome Statute, currently has 106 participating nations. However, Sudan has refused to sign on to the accord. ICC rules state that the body can only prosecute a crime in a nation that is not a party to the Rome Statute after a U.N. referral.

The United States has also refused to agree to the Rome Statute, fearing that its military or diplomatic personnel could face politically motivated charges in some nations around the world. Many Christian groups, ranging across the U.S. ideological spectrum, have taken on the Darfur genocide as a cause. Although some conservative groups have opposed U.S. participation in the ICC, at least one conservative group commended the court's latest move July 14.

We are grateful for Luis Moreno-Ocampo's courage and moral clarity. The world has treated the regime in Khartoum and the victims of its genocidal jihad with moral equivalence for too long," said Faith McDonell, director of religious-liberty programs for the Washington-based Institute on Religion and Democracy. "At last the ICC's chief prosecutor has, in no uncertain terms, laid the blame at the feet where it belongs."

But some have cautioned that the move -- likely to have little or no positive effect on the situation in Darfur -- could end up creating more problems. "China expresses grave concern and misgivings about the International Criminal Court prosecutor's indictment of the Sudanese leader," said Liu Jianchao, spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry, according to the British newspaper The Telegraph. "The ICC's actions must be beneficial to the stability of the Darfur region and the appropriate settlement of the issue, not the contrary."

China has been Sudan's chief international backer. While its leaders have claimed that they are pressuring al-Bashir to end the atrocities in Darfur, China has been the main obstacle to unified international efforts against the genocide.<br

### **In Run-up to Beijing Olympics, China increasing persecution of Christians**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- While China appears to be making some religious-liberty concessions on the eve of the Olympics, critics in the United States say Chinese persecution of Christians in the country is on the rise. China is on the U.S. State Department's list of "Countries of Particular Concern" as one of the world's worst persecutors of religious freedom.

American experts on religious-liberty conditions in China said that, in recent weeks, there has been a significant Chinese crackdown on many dissenting groups -- including Christians in churches not officially registered with or sanctioned by the government. That, the China-watchers said, has resulted in many new arrests. Chinese officials have also reportedly been cracking down on other dissenting groups, such as human-rights activists and Tibetan independence advocates.

Daniel Burton, staff writer at the China Aid Association, said Chinese officials kicked more missionaries out of the country last year than in all of the previous 59 years of communist control. The persecution is taking place, he said, under the internal government code name "Typhoon No. 5." Some of the missionaries ordered to leave had been there for 20 years. "We are seeing an increase in persecution across the board," Burton said. "All foreigners [in China for the games] are going to be closely watched."

Burton's group, founded in 2002, keeps track of Chinese persecution of religious groups -- particularly Christians in China's thousands of unregistered churches. In April 2007, the Chinese Ministry of Public Security issued a general nationwide order urging strict "background checks" on those who apply to participate in the Olympic Games. They banned 43 types of people in 11 categories, Burton said.

The categories focus on those the government considers "antagonistic elements," he noted. That includes "religious extremists and religious infiltrators." Sarah Cook, an Asia researcher for the foreign-policy group Freedom House,

said China's ruling Communist Party doesn't want to take chances that the games will become a platform for critics of Chinese policies. The recent increase in arrests of dissenting Christians and other groups is intended to reduce that risk, she said.

"It is much more subtle now," Cook said of the current tactics versus earlier waves of persecution. Officials simply go to offenders' doors individually, arrest them and take them away. The offenders are sent to detention centers or labor camps. Cook said many average Chinese are not even aware that such crackdowns are taking place.

However, China is making some concessions to Christians on the eve of the games. Olympic Edition Bibles, printed by the state-sanctioned China Christian Council and its sister organization, the Three Self Patriotic Movement, will be "Chinese-English bilingual and contain the four Gospels with the logos of the Beijing Olympic Games both in the cover and the back," according to an e-mail from Ou Enlin, of the International Relations department of the CCC/TSPM. The two organizations represent officially registered Chinese churches.

He said the addresses of state-sanctioned churches in Beijing will be listed on the last page of each of the Bibles. The Bibles will be available free of charge at the churches and in the athletes' housing quarters. Despite such measures, Nina Shea, director of religious freedom at the Hudson Institute, believes the rest of the world's Christians need to speak out against Chinese persecution. "I'm in favor of boycotting the opening ceremony to send a signal that China oppresses religious freedom," Shea said. She believes Americans should even boycott watching the opening on television. "I think the Chinese want to do business as usual," she said.

But, she added, "They are very sensitive to criticism." Shea said she holds little hope that any international criticism would lead to changes in Chinese policy -- which officially bans non-sanctioned churches -- but that it would send a signal to officials that the rest of the international community is taking note of their activities.

China campaigned to host the Olympics in order to gain international prestige, Shea noted. She believes Christians need to pray, but that they also need to do what they can as members of a democracy to communicate their concern to representatives in Congress. She said Christians should signal to China that many Americans don't see China as a full member of the international community and won't until it guarantees religious and political freedom to its people. Only then, Shea said, will China live up to its full potential as a global power.

So far, President Bush and most other international leaders have shown indications that they plan to attend the opening ceremonies, despite the calls for boycott. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, in a July 14 statement, urged Bush to take steps during his Chinese visit to draw attention to the nation's human-rights violations. The independent, bipartisan federal panel monitors religious-freedom conditions worldwide.

"The international community awarded China the 2008 summer games with the trust that Beijing would improve its protections of fundamental human rights, including the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief," said Felice Gaer, USCIRF chair. "The commission concludes that China has not lived up to its promises and continues to engage in serious violations of religious freedom."

### **Church observers ask: Where have all the good men gone?**

DALLAS (ABP) - It's not just your imagination. Men are disappearing from the church. According to the Barna Research Group, there are 11 million to 13 million more American women who are born again than there are born-again men. While nine out of 10 senior pastors are men, a majority of regular church attendees are women. Not only are women the majority of born-again American Christians, the Barna Group says, "women are the backbone of the Christian congregations in America."

Perhaps indicative of women's sense of spirituality, 41 percent of women said they have set specific spiritual goals that they hope to accomplish in the coming year or two. Only 29 percent of men have identified such spiritual goals.

"Women, more often than not, take the lead role in the spiritual life of the family," said George Barna, president of the research group. "Women typically emerge as the primary -- or only -- spiritual mentor and role model for family members. And that puts a tremendous burden on wives and mothers."

Pam Durso, associate executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, agrees that women do play a major role in families as spiritual mentors. "One aspect of that is that mothers generally are the ones who do the scheduling of events and the planning of activities, including church attendance and church-related programs."

But that's nothing new, Durso argues. Historically women have dominated the membership of Baptist churches. "Here is something to think about: Is 61 percent for female participation really a change for Baptists? Over the years, many Baptist churches have had a majority of female members," Durso said.

At First Baptist Church of America, in Providence, R.I. -- ; the premier Baptist congregation in the New World -- 59 percent of the members from 1730-1777 were women, Durso noted. From 1779-1799, that percentage dropped by only

1 percent to 58 percent. "So perhaps the question is not where have all the men gone, but is instead where have men been all these years?" Durso said.

David Murrow, author of *Why Men Hate Going to Church*, believes the way churches market themselves affects the demographics of their memberships. According to Murrow's Church for Men website, a typical congregation draws an adult crowd that's 61 percent female and 39 percent male.

"It's widely believed, and rarely spoken of, that men feel church is something for women, children and grandparents," Murrow said. "If a man becomes involved [with a church], then he is less manly." Murrow says this trend began during the Industrial Revolution in the 1840s. Harsh economic conditions drove men to seek jobs in mines, mills and factories. While men worked, families were left behind for longer periods of time. The only people to be found in congregations were women, children and older men. Women began to add socials like teas, quilting circles and potluck dinners.

"The able-bodied man all but disappeared from the church," Murrow said. Murrow mentions on his web site, [www.churchformen.com](http://www.churchformen.com), that many who have grown up in the church don't recognize the "feminine spirituality." But to the masculine mind, it's obvious as the steps in front of the door. "He may feel like Tom Sawyer in Aunt Polly's parlor. He must watch his language, mind his manners and be extra polite. It's hard for a man to be real in church because he must squeeze himself into this feminine religious mold," Murrow writes on the site. The tendency of targeting women has grown with the increased popularity of contemporary worship, Murrow added.

Hymns used to be tuned into the masculine heart by alluding to God as a mighty fortress, Murrow noted. Songs such as "Onward Christian Soldiers" spurred men in their faith. But now worship sounds like a Top-40 love song," Murrow said. "They are wonderful and biblical, but it's not the sentiment that will rally a bunch of men."

Romantic music is a response to the market of single women, Murrow added. "They provide a Jesus image who wants to steal away with them ... which doesn't appeal to men." "Are we going to allow the market to drive the church, or the Bible to drive the church?" Murrow suggests that there's nothing wrong with the gospel, just the way Christians present it. "We just need to change the culture container that we are delivering it in and should be willing to follow the example of churches who succeed in reaching men," he said.

A leading example is Christ Church of the Valley in Phoenix, Ariz. The church markets to men through the events promoted, down to the colors and design of the building. The church even changes the range of the worship songs so men can feel comfortable singing.

"Everything we do when it comes to marketing is geared toward men in the 25-45 range ... an underserved demographic in the church market today," said Michael Gray, communications coordinator of Christ Church of the Valley. The church offers activities like a motorcycle and sport groups. One of the groups is called The Edge. There men can rappel down cliffs, jump out of airplanes and bungee jump off bridges. The purpose is to cause men to take a step of faith and stretch their comfort zones. The ministry is a spiritually challenging group, not just physically challenging.

While the group focuses on adventurous activities, their ultimate goal is to lead people into an adventure with Jesus Christ. "The Edge helps get men plugged into the church and hanging out with other men, outside a church setting," Gray said. "It shows that we are men's men, and we don't just sit in shirt and tie on Sundays with our leather-bound Bible"

There is more than one way to present the gospel in a way that contemporary men will respond to, Murrow said. But it begins with the congregation understanding it must make an intentional effort to reach out to men. "People have to realize it's a problem. They need to wake up and look [at] how magnetic Jesus was to men. We have a 70-to-80 percent failure to boys. I don't think that's [God's] will."

### **Opinion: What the church can learn from tomatoes**

By Beth Newman

(ABP) -- On a recent Sunday, the gospel lesson in our church was Matthew's account of the parable of the sower and, more significantly, the different soils into which the seed is cast. A little reflection of the fate of the seeds has led me to the topic of tomatoes and the church. "There's only two things that money can't buy," sings songsmith and guitar-maker Guy Clark, "and that's true love and homegrown tomatoes." I've always known this, at least on an intellectual level, but it has become intensely real since our move to Virginia.

For those of you who may not know it, tomatoes are something of an obsession in the eastern end of Hanover County, Va. There is active and energetic competition to produce the first ripe one each year, with appropriate publicity for the winner. The Tomato Festival hosted well over 40,000 visitors this year. There is even a proverbial expression of praise: "Sweeter than a Hanover tomato."

Of course, I can't give my word that everything claimed for the Hanover tomato is true, but there is one story about which I have direct, personal experience. A few years ago, my husband took some tomato plants to some friends in Alabama (this was a local favorite, not available down there). Later that summer we visited the same friends, this time carrying the produce from our own garden. "I don't get it," our friend said. "It's the same tomato, but yours tastes better than ours." The only difference that we could think of was the dirt that they'd been grown in.

Returning to Matthew, remember that Jesus speaks of the importance of the soil into which the seed falls. It never ceases to amaze me when I hear some of my students, who are studying for the ministry, denigrate the church. The only thing more amazing is when pastors of churches do the same thing.

One typical comment, spoken, I fear, only half in jest, is: "Letting the church define your essence is the path to insanity." My only response is that if the church doesn't define your essence, what will? It might be the career one follows or the "lifestyle" one chooses to adopt. On a more crude level, it might be the nation of which one is a citizen or the color of one's skin. In any case, this much is true: You are being formed and defined by forces much more powerful than you. I don't mean exactly that biology is destiny, but the dirt you're grown in will determine your essence whether you like it or not.

A seed will die sitting in the hot sun. So, also, humans need some sort of soil. The parable is about what kind of soil. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus relates the soil to the Word: "But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit ..." (13:23). This is not the static word an individual reads off a page but the living Word we both hear and digest.

Augustine said about corporate worship, specifically the Lord's Supper: We do not so much digest it as this heavenly food digests us, giving us a share in resurrection life. The same can be said about the spoken Word. It nourishes and forms us to be Christ's body, to participate in the life of Christ.

True, the church is far from perfect. Anyone who has spent time with any particular body of believers is well aware of this. The church is full of sinners. And yet the miracle of God's grace is that the church is also the place we learn to name and confess our sins. It is where we learn to practice forgiveness. It is where we learn to receive and extend the grace of Christ to strangers, and even enemies.  
"Being in Christ" means being in the church, the soil where God gives us together the grace to produce fruit for all peoples.

-- Beth Newman is professor of theology and ethics at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.

\*\*\*\*\*