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October 1, 2003

Posted: 10/1/03

Houston Baptist University forges new link to SBTC, keeps ties to BGCT

By Mark Wingfield

Managing Editor

HOUSTON-Trustees of Houston Baptist University have affirmed a fraternal relationship with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention while reaffirming their desire to maintain its relationship with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The Sept. 23 vote to enter into a relationship with the SBTC was described by board Chairman Mark Denison as "overwhelming." But the vote prompted one Houston-area pastor to resign from the board because of the new direction.

Pete Freeman, pastor of First Baptist Church of The Woodlands, wrote to HBU President Doug Hodo the next day, explaining he believes the agreement with the SBTC "is a breach of both the intent and integrity of the previously adopted covenant/agreement" with the BGCT.

That agreement, adopted in 2001, was intended to patch up difficulties between the BGCT and HBU after HBU trustees unilaterally revoked the right of the BGCT to name the university's board. After months of negotiation, the BGCT conceded to allow the university to name 75 percent

of its board, and HBU pledged to maintain a "unique affiliation" with the BGCT.

The 2001 document, which was approved by both the BGCT Executive Board and HBU trustees, states: "HBU agrees to maintain a unique affiliation with the BGCT by not affiliating or establishing a formal relationship with other denominations, conventions or religious entities."

When the new agreement was reached in 2001, the BGCT restored most of the funding withheld from HBU after the unilateral charter change.

This year, the BGCT budgeted \$125,000 for campus religious activities, \$120,000 for minority and ethnic scholarships and emphases, \$180,000 for ministerial student tuition support and \$492,000 as HBU's share of funding divided proportionately between the eight universities affiliated with the BGCT.

A basic block grant of about \$600,000 the BGCT previously provided to HBU has not been restored.

A Southern Baptists of Texas Convention news release said the SBTC will not budget any financial support for the university or seek any control of the university's governance. Currently, the only educational institution budgeted for direct financial support from the SBTC is Criswell College in Dallas, which is listed as an "affiliated" school rather than a fraternal partner.

The SBTC split from the BGCT in 1998. Its stated purpose is to work more closely with the Southern Baptist Convention, whose theology and politics have moved sharply to the right during the past 25 years. The SBTC gives 51 percent of its undesignated receipts to the SBC. Its stated intent has been not to create institutions.

However, the SBTC previously approached 23 BGCT institutions, asking

about the possibility of creating formal relationships. The SBTC acknowledged it would require support for the SBC's doctrinal statement, the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, and the institutions declined or did not respond.

In February, Texas Baptist Men voted to reaffirm its unique relationship with the BGCT but agreed to "officially work" with the SBTC, its associations and churches. That agreement allows the men's organization to involve men from churches affiliated with both conventions, but it does not mention the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message.

The agreement between HBU and the SBTC appears similar to the situation with Texas Baptist Men, except that HBU trustees had adopted the 2001 agreement with the BGCT unlike anything adopted between the BGCT and Texas Baptist Men.

A statement adopted by the HBU board in open session Sept. 23 declares that the SBTC's requirements for fraternal relationship "are in agreement with the biblical concepts outlined in" the preamble to the university's constitution. It then affirms the "unique affiliation and relationship" with the BGCT while also affirming a "fraternal relationship with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, with a desire to cooperate in appropriate ways in the work of the kingdom of God in Texas."

Entities that establish fraternal relationships with the SBTC are not required to affirm the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message. They are, however, required to affirm "the supernatural character of the biblical miracles which occurred as factual events in time and space," "the historical accuracy of biblical narratives" that occurred "precisely as the text of Scripture indicates" and "the actual authorship of biblical writings as attributed by Scripture itself."

The board statement notes HBU "desires to have avenues open to it to

reach out to all Texas Baptists and likewise for all Texas Baptists to reach out to Houston Baptist University."

Denison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Gainesville, reiterated that point: "It is a good decision. We're responding to the current landscape, which we didn't create but to which we must respond. ... We must respond to all Baptists in the state of Texas."

No official count was recorded on the show-of-hands vote, but Denison reported the resolution "was overwhelmingly approved."

Freeman said he and two others voted against it.

From Freeman's perspective, adopting the fraternal relationship with the SBTC violates the pledge made by HBU trustees to the BGCT in 2001. That pledge, he noted, says HBU will adopt no "formal relationship" with any other convention.

He said he told the board: "If this is not a formal relationship, why is this a multiple-page document and why are we spending so much time talking about it? It is a formal relationship."

Jim Richards, executive director of the SBTC, commended the new link with HBU as a natural occurrence.

The SBTC "is comprised of churches that had a part in building Houston Baptist University," he said. "Students who are members of SBTC churches attend HBU. It is only natural for an educational institution and a convention with compatible views on the nature of Scripture and Baptist distinctives to work together."

Charles Wade, executive director of the BGCT, neither commended nor criticized the decision.

"The BGCT has enjoyed and appreciates Houston Baptist University's

unique relationship with us, by which Texas Baptists give financial support to the university and share in the election of its trustees," he said. "We recognize and affirm the university's desire to serve all the Baptists in Texas and beyond, while at the same time maintaining its historic partnership with the BGCT."

Freeman, however, cited lack of support for his concerns from the BGCT as a reason for his resignation from the HBU board. In his resignation letter, he explained: "My disappointment with the support I have received from the BGCT on this matter has rendered me less effective as a trustee of both the BGCT and HBU."

Freeman was among the one-fourth of HBU's board elected by the BGCT. In an interview, he said he did not wish to elaborate on his concerns with the BGCT. Wade said he regrets Freeman resigned.

Freeman also cited as a reason for his resignation another action taken by HBU trustees Sept. 23. "I cannot in good conscience abide by the confidentiality policy agreed upon at yesterday's board meeting," he wrote Hodo. "It conflicts with my personal understanding of Baptist policy concerning the regular meetings (non-executive sessions) of Baptist boards."

More information on that policy was not available, since it reportedly was adopted in a closed session. Freeman said he could not characterize the action further because of the restrictions imposed, other than to say that "too much Baptist business is done in secret."

Denison addressed members of the BGCT Executive Board Sept. 30 to explain the university's recent action.

"We do very strongly affirm our 40-year relationship with the BGCT," Denison said, calling it a "wonderful relationship."

The decision to relate to the SBTC opens the door for HBU to have continuing dialogue with churches that have left the BGCT and joined the SBTC, he said, re-emphasizing the desire to relate to all segments of Texas Baptist life.

As further evidence of that desire, he reported the HBU has appointed a denominational relationships committee that is exploring ways to relate to "all Baptists beyond these two conventions."

That could extend to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and others, he said, explaining that HBU representatives already have had two meetings with CBF officials.

Keith Bruce, director of institutional ministries for the BGCT, commended Denison to the Executive Board, saying he has been "very, very gracious" to keep Bruce and Wade informed.

The Christian Education Coordinating Board has not met since HBU's latest action and therefore has not been able to respond to it, Bruce said.

With additional reporting by Editor Marv Knox

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.