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SBC appeals to homosexuals to become heterosexual

By Greg Warner

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PHOENIX (ABP)-The Southern Baptist Convention wants its churches to begin "ministries of compassion" to homosexuals to encourage them to abandon the gay lifestyle.

The SBC's Task Force on Ministry to Homosexuals, which reported its findings to the annual convention in Phoenix, said it identified 40 to 50 Southern Baptist churches that already have "intentional" ministries to homosexuals and speculated that perhaps thousands of other SBC churches minister to gays and lesbians in informal ways.

Richard Land
(left),
president of
the SBC
Ethics &
Religious
Liberty
Commission,
listens as
Jimmy
Draper,
president of
LifeWay
Christian
Resources,
explains a
new SBC
initiative to
encourage
homosexuals
to become
heterosexual.
(Kent
Harville/BP
Photo)

Likewise, many resources already exist to help homosexuals and churches that want to minister to them, task force members said. Several websites have been established to link interested Baptists to resources.

Jimmy Draper, a task force member, said the initiative is a first step.

“We have not strategized a new program,” said Draper, president of Lifeway Christian Resources. “We are trying to get churches to get a heart for this, and the resources are there if they will do that.”

Although the task force is encouraging Southern Baptists to reach out to homosexuals with compassion and grace, members concede the new initiative will not likely silence critics who accuse the SBC of gay bashing because of its insistence that homosexuality is a sin. Protesters from Soulforce, a pro-gay group, rallied outside the Phoenix Civic Center earlier during the convention, as they have in past years.

“My guess is they will continue to say we are anti-gay because we ... say that the lifestyle they are living is inconsistent with the gospel,” said Richard Land, a task force member and president of the SBC Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

“I know that some of the critics have said ... you have to accept their lifestyle to accept them,” Land added. “That's intolerant of them. That's intolerance. They're saying we have to deny our faith in order to meet their standard of acceptance. We can accept them and not accept their lifestyle, in the same way we accept alcoholics ... and heterosexual philanderers.”

Task force members insist gays can abandon homosexuality by the power of God. Messengers to the convention agreed, adopting a resolution emphasizing the power of God to “transform” homosexuals.

Task force member Bob Stith said Mel White, Soulforce leader and former Southern Baptist, “doesn't want to allow people to choose” to leave homosexuality. “We believe people should have the right to chose to change,” said Stith, pastor of Carroll Baptist Church in Southlake.

But Brenda Moulton, coordinator of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, responded in an interview that programs to help homosexuals leave the lifestyle “are hurtful to the gay individual.”

“If one believes that sexual orientation or gender orientation is part of the diversity of God's creation, then to try to change that would be hurtful,” she said. “To change that would be comparable to trying to change eye color or skin color.”

According to Moulton, the American Psychological Association says “ex-gay reparative therapies,” such as those proposed by the task force, not only can be harmful but don't work. Moulton said she herself tried to change her homosexual orientation.

“I didn't feel as close to God as I did when I finally came to terms with my sexuality and accepted it as part of God's creation,” she said. “I felt like a whole person instead of a person who had been trying to split myself into two pieces.”

Land, who served as pastor of a church near the French Quarter in New Orleans in the 1970s, said “a third to a half” of the church's members were former homosexuals, indicating the switch can be made.

“It is hard to leave this lifestyle,” he acknowledged. “I became aware it is much more difficult to do outside of Christ.

“I can think of no crueler joke that has been played by the devil than to have this lifestyle described as a 'gay' lifestyle,” he added, “because I have found it to be one of the loneliest, one of the saddest, lifestyles that I've had the misfortune to observe. I felt nothing but compassion and sadness for people who found themselves in this lifestyle.”

Tim Wilkins, another task force member, is a former homosexual who said God's power enabled him to abandon homosexuality. “I did not consciously choose to have same-sex attraction, but I did choose to give in to it,” said Wilkins, founding director of Cross Ministry, a North Carolina-based Christian ministry to homosexuals.

When he was gay, Wilkins said, if someone had suggested he would one day be married, he would have laughed. After deciding to leave the homosexual lifestyle as a matter of Christian obedience, he said, he later experienced “a dramatic change” at age 33 and developed an attraction to women. He now has a wife and two daughters.

“There is no such thing as a gay Christian,” Wilkins said.

However, at least one task force member disagreed with that assertion.

“Neither I nor the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission believe it is impossible to be a homosexual and a Christian,” Land said. But as with Christian racists, Land said, it is impossible to be gay and live a life consistent with the gospel.

Task force members tried to distance Southern Baptists from anti-gay groups that preach hate. “That is nauseating to me,” said Draper, who suggested Southern Baptists should apologize to gays who have been the targets of hate.

Wilkins said loving homosexuals does not require affirming their practices. “I love homosexuals more now than when I was one,” he said, but he added, “The highest form of love does not withhold the truth.”

Task force members said Southern Baptists will have to overcome much fear and misunderstanding of gays in order to minister to them. They should treat gays just like other people in need of salvation, members advised.

“What we're really calling our churches to do is practice lifestyle-blind evangelism ... to homosexuals, to any group,” Land said.

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.