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By Greg Warner

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NASHVILLE (ABP)-Despite pleas from Baptists around the world, there appears little chance Southern Baptist leaders will reverse or delay their plan to withdraw the Southern Baptist Convention from the Baptist World Alliance, the 99-year-old international fellowship it helped create.

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee and chair of the study committee that proposed the break, declined to predict if the nine-member committee would reconsider.

"I will raise the matter for discussion in a conference call with the committee within the next two weeks," he told Associated Baptist Press in an e-mail interview Jan. 15. But, Chapman added, "the position we have taken makes it very difficult to consider delaying or withdrawing the proposal. "

In several e-mails to overseas BWA leaders, Chapman reiterated the

committee's intention to use the money the SBC sends to the BWA-until recently, \$450,000-to form an SBC-led alternative organization that would be run by the Executive Committee.

Several other study committee members-including denominational executives Paige Patterson and Jimmy Draper-could not be reached for comment. The committee's proposal will be presented to the SBC Executive Committee in February and, if approved, to the Southern Baptist Convention in June.

International response

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The study committee's mid-December proposal sparked immediate objections from Baptists on six continents, including leaders from Indonesia, Australia, South Africa, Chile, Sri Lanka, Romania, Russia and Norway.

Chapman acknowledged the criticism, as well as some support, but said the committee will not respond hastily.

“I need to wait long enough to give opportunity for most of those who are inclined to write to do so, in order that any evaluation the committee may make will be based upon a good cross-section of responders,” he told ABP.

“I feel obligated to keep the whole matter as low-key as possible. This means I may have to live with the public criticisms of Southern Baptist leadership until we have something to say that is well thought out before release.”

World Baptist leaders are protesting both the SBC's planned pullout and the allegations of liberalism the SBC says justifies the move.

“We declare unacceptable the allegation of liberalism made by the committee,” said Latin American Baptist leaders in one of the strongest statements.

“We deplore the recommendation of this committee,” the statement continued, “and we urge strongly the Executive Committee and the assembly of the SBC to reject this recommendation outright, so that this great organization may remain as a member of the BWA and may continue supporting its funding.”

The official statement was signed by seven Latin American leaders from four countries, including Fausto Aguiar de Vasconcelos of Brazil, president of the Union of Baptists in Latin America, and two BWA vice presidents.

A similar statement was issued by another of the six regional BWA groups, the European Baptist Federation, which covers Europe and the Middle East. The EBF executive committee pleaded with Southern Baptists to maintain the unity of worldwide Baptists.

“Do we realize how much our witness to the world will be harmed when we try to explain that we are different groups of Baptists who cannot work together?” the European leaders asked. “One of the biggest tragedies of contemporary Christianity is division.”

Baptists in Italy said the worldwide Baptist fellowship had been wounded and “enfeebled” by the SBC action, which was “made on the basis of false motivations and pretexts.”

The union's executive committee blamed the action on “fundamentalism, with its tendency towards intolerance and sectarianism.” That tendency “is the antithesis of our own Baptist tradition,” which owes much to the influence of Southern Baptist missionaries, the Italians said.

In a separate letter to Chapman, Branko Lovrec, a BWA vice president from Europe and former president of the Baptist Union of Croatia, said: “We are trying to develop Christian relationship with the similar evangelical(s) and other Christians in the specific countries and worldwide, and all of a sudden such news has been like a bomb. ... I will devote my time to prayer that God can intervene and settle the matter so that we may not be ashamed before the unbelieving world, who will only rejoice in our separation.”

SBC leadership responds

Chapman, in his response to Lovrec, said the intention of the SBC proposal is not to sever relationships with Baptists worldwide but to relate to them directly, not through the BWA.

“While Southern Baptists certainly believe one of our objectives should be to promote unity in the body, we also wish to concentrate upon other matters critical to the spiritual well-being of every nation in the world, including our own,” the SBC leader said.

Chapman said the need for worldwide evangelism is paramount.

“Our heart's desire is to allocate the funding that has been going to the BWA for the purpose of coordinating conferences in other countries, if and when the Lord should guide other Baptist leaders to invite us,” Chapman wrote.

“In our missions, publishing and seminary education organizations, we have a host of people who are trained to lead conferences on a variety of topics, including Bible study, evangelism, church growth, etc.”

In his interview with ABP, Chapman said “no contingency plans were discussed” when the committee adopted its proposal.

“The SBC/BWA Study Committee did not decide to recommend withdrawal from the BWA as a tactic to reach an unstated goal of pressing for change in the BWA,” he explained.

“The recommendation is an honest expression of the conclusions reached unanimously by the committee. The last thing we would want is to be perceived as having decided upon the recommendation as a means of generating discussion and concessions.

“The committee members made a decision based upon over five years of appealing in various ways to BWA staff to hear our concerns,” he continued. “They listened but did not hear. We felt we had no other alternative, lest we become a problem for the organization and its staff, which is something we did not want to happen. As a result, the position we have taken makes it very difficult to consider delaying or withdrawing the proposal.”

New network proposed

The proposal from the SBC study committee suggests creating a new

worldwide network of “conservative evangelical Christians.”

Some of the more conservative Baptist bodies around the world already have expressed interest in the new SBC-led organization, the committee said, raising the possibility of two competing worldwide organizations of Baptists.

But Latin America Baptists, a traditionally conservative group that said they consider themselves the “younger brothers of the SBC” because of the evangelistic work of Southern Baptist missionaries, said they want nothing to do with the new organization.

“We take the liberty of pointing out to our older brothers that, not only are we unwilling—under any circumstances—to go along with their efforts to create a new, parallel organization to the BWA,” the leaders said. “But, furthermore, we categorically reject the possibility.”

The Latin leaders also denounced charges of liberalism against BWA, which they called “a Christ-centered and Bible-centered organization.”

Allegations refuted

The report from the SBC study committee, which was drafted by Paige Patterson, accused the Baptist World Alliance of “advocating aberrant and dangerous theologies”—specifically, questioning biblical inerrancy, promoting women as pastors, and downplaying the doctrine of salvation only through Jesus.

The report also accused an unnamed German theologian of denying the Great Commission, Jesus' command to make disciples of all people, during a 1997 BWA-related meeting.

Ian Chapman, chair of the BWA theological education work group that organized the meeting, said that accusation “is totally false.”

“I am also saddened by the untrue statements that the (study committee) has leveled against the BWA to justify the SBC leaving,” Ian Chapman said in a statement.

“Over the past 10 years, I have served as the chair of the theological education work group and the doctrine and interchurch cooperation commission. Not once during these years have I heard a central doctrine of the Christian faith challenged.

“Never have I heard anyone deny the deity of Christ, the authority and inspiration of Scripture, personal salvation through Christ or Christ's atoning work on the cross.

“The charge of 'liberalism' leveled against the BWA is totally without foundation.”

Denton Lotz, BWA general secretary, agreed the organization—which counts 43 million Baptists worldwide—is not liberal.

“Actually, scholars have shown just the opposite, that the BWA has been more evangelical than ever,” he said in an editorial on the BWA website.

Meanwhile, several BWA leaders—including president Billy Kim of South Korea—insist the SBC's planned pullout is in response not to the BWA's theological stance but its granting of membership to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The CBF, which broke away from the SBC in 1991 after battling similar Southern Baptist charges of liberalism, was admitted to the BWA in 2003 after a three-year process and over the objections of Southern Baptist representatives.

“Yet the CBF is not mentioned in the SBC document outlining why they are proposing withdrawal,” added Lotz. “Suddenly many accusations are made

but CBF is not mentioned. And yet in Rio, SBC leaders came to us and said, 'If they (CBF) are in, we're out!'"

Despite the resounding support from leaders worldwide, Lotz told ABP no official action or protest from the Virginia-based organization is likely before the SBC Executive Committee meets Feb. 16.

The BWA's executive committee isn't set to meet until March, he said, and a special meeting is out of the question.

Both Lotz and Kim will speak at a rally in support of the Baptist World Alliance Jan. 27 at First Baptist Church in Plano. Feb. 1 is Baptist World Alliance Day on the denominational calendar.

Baptist World Aid defended

Leaders of BWA also responded to the SBC committee's accusation that Baptist World Aid, its relief and development arm, funds "questionable enterprises."

Robert Ricker, an American who has chaired the BWAid committee for five years, asked the SBC committee to explain the accusation.

"The projects are great needs, handled through Baptist churches, monitored for efficiency and effectiveness," Ricker said in a news release.

"Funds are dispersed under careful guidelines with high standards of accountability and with extremely low overhead.

"That any of our Baptist fellowships have unhappiness with BWAid is news to us," Ricker said, "and we are sorry we were not talked to about it, including by the many members of the SBC who have served over the years on our BWAid board and executive committee. Scripture asks us that we go direct, not through national and international mailings."

WMU reaction

National Woman's Missionary Union came out in support of the Baptist World Alliance Jan. 12, breaking ranks with the Southern Baptist leaders who want to withdraw SBC membership and funding.

Echoing the sentiment of other international Baptist groups, the WMU executive board issued a call for unity among the world's Baptists.

The WMU board addressed some observers' fear that an SBC-BWA split will divide Baptists worldwide into two competing camps, since the SBC has announced plans to start an alternative organization.

“As members of the body of Christ, we need each other—to pray for one another, to encourage one another, to learn from one another, and to stand together in one accord as a strong and bold witness to a lost world,” said Wanda Lee, WMU executive director-treasurer, who also serves on the BWA executive committee.

During a retreat near WMU's Birmingham headquarters, the group's executive committee affirmed the 93-year relationship between WMU and the BWA's women's department, which WMU helped form in 1911. Many of the leaders told how relationships built through the Baptist World Alliance changed their lives, according to a WMU news release.

In addition to unity and reconciliation, the WMU leaders encouraged prayer for Baptists “to have a strong, bold and credible witness; for wisdom, discernment and courage to do God's will; for a spirit of humility; for compassion for all people; and for comfort and relief for those who are persecuted for voicing their convictions,” the release said.

“It is through fellowship with Christ and other Christians that we experience personal growth and develop a deeper understanding of the needs around the world,” added Lee. “In the context of our missions task, it

is through this fellowship that we become more effective as we grow in our passion and a sense of urgency to be light in a dark world.”

With approximately 1 million members, Woman's Missionary Union is considered the world's largest Protestant women's mission organization.

The 116-year-old organization educates and involves women, men and children in Christian missions.

Although not under the control of the SBC, WMU raises much of the money Southern Baptists spend on missions. In 1993, WMU declined the SBC's request to surrender its auxiliary role and become an agency of the SBC.

In its statement of support for the Baptist World Alliance, WMU said it also will continue to promote and support the annual Baptist Women's World Day of Prayer offering, which provides the only funding for BWA's women's department.

Like WMU, approximately 40 Baptist unions worldwide have some form of women's organization that relates to BWA's women's department, which functions as an auxiliary to the BWA.

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