

End of CBF/ABC partnership leaves future of medical/retirement benefits in doubt

December 14, 2007

Posted: 12/14/07

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Baptists Today

ATLANTA (ABP)—A seven-year partnership between American Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which has allowed CBF-related churches to buy retirement and medical benefits, will end Dec. 31.

The end of the partnership is leaving some church leaders confused about the future of their benefits. The arrangement is between CBF's seven-year-old Church Benefits Board and the 96-year-old Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board of the American Baptist Churches.

“Churches are getting flooded with letters from both groups—much of it contradictory, by the way—and everybody is pressing for a decision here at

one of the busiest times of the year," said one pastor, who asked not to be named.

The partnership broke down when MMBB—as the American Baptist agency is known—proposed a contract extension with significant changes. The proposal would essentially have cut out the need for the Church Benefits Board as the point of contact for CBF-related participants, and CBF leaders rejected the terms mandated in the proposed agreement.

But, while the end of the benefits partnership has caused some consternation, leaders for both faith groups say it will not threaten their close working relationship.

Currently, CBF has 1,100 participants in the MMBB benefits program, representing 6.6 percent of total MMBB enrollment.

Both MMBB and the Church Benefits Board are urging enrollees to decide by Dec. 15 which organization will retain their business. That deadline has frustrated some participants, who say too little information has been provided about the medical-insurance options the Church Benefits Board will offer.

But MMBB leaders say decisions about where church employees invest retirement funds and buy health insurance can be determined after the first of the year.

Sumner Grant, MMBB executive director, said he sent a letter and response card to current plan participants in November explaining their three options—Continue with MMBB and receive the same benefits, leave MMBB and sign up for the new Church Benefits Board plan, or go with the new CBF plan for new investments, but leave assets already accumulated to be managed by MMBB.

If no response is made, Grant said, participants will remain in the current

MMBB plan and participants' employers will still be billed for benefit payments. "Obviously, if the bill is paid they will continue as members. If it is not, their membership will lapse."

So far, most who have responded have chosen to leave MMBB.

Jim Keegan, marketing and service director of the New York-based MMBB, said of the first 101 response forms received from CBF participants, 45 elected to leave MMBB services. Another 13 decided to discontinue retirement contributions but leave current assets to be managed by MMBB, while 43 chose to stay with MMBB and continue contributions.

Meanwhile, the Church Benefits Board, headed by Gary Skeen, has negotiated contracts with new providers and is promoting its benefits programs as more flexible than those of MMBB.

According to the CBB website, the new provider for medical insurance is Educator Resources, a division of World Insurance Association. It specializes in employee benefits for private schools and churches. Retirement benefits will be offered through StanCorp Financial Group.

"CBB has identified outstanding new partners to provide high-quality medical, life and disability insurance and excellent retirement benefits to CBB clients," according to a statement on the group's website. "The new packages of benefits are not only competitive, but provide much more flexibility."

One stated advantage is that CBB will no longer require clients to participate in the retirement plan in order to receive medical insurance.

But some CBF-related church leaders said that, after shifting employee benefits from the Southern Baptist Convention's benefits agency in recent years, they are not eager to repeat that process. It's especially daunting, they noted, during the busy holiday season.

Daniel Vestal, CBF executive coordinator, said the breakup “was not our timetable” and that churches can still take their time in deciding where to buy their benefits.

Leaders of the MMBB, founded in 1911, also want to continue serving CBF-related church employees.

“CBF members of MMBB are, in truth, MMBB members,” said Grant. “They remain members for as long as they make premium payments to our plans. They are not in danger of losing any benefits as long as their employers continue to make payments.”

Both MMBB and CBF leaders have expressed appreciation for the earlier cooperative efforts in providing benefits to church-related employees. And they insist this is not a breakdown of the increasing cooperation between ABC and CBF reflected in church starts, dual missionary appointments and a shared national meeting this past summer.

“I think our partnership with American Baptists and other Baptists is going to continue and grow even stronger,” said Vestal, noting he had met again recently with ABC General Secretary Roy Medley and Progressive National Baptist Convention head Tyrone Pitts to discuss cooperative efforts.

Still, the breakup is not welcome news to those who are being forced to make an unexpected choice between benefits providers.

“I don’t know how many people this is affecting, but I would think there would be a lot of people wondering what they should do,” said one pastor affected by the sudden end to the partnership.

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