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Obscure laymen with a cause gain influence in churches

By Mark Wingfield
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Roger Moran insists he did not set out to influence anybody in Texas about anything.

Although he is the author of a series of pamphlets and central figure in a video that have circulated through Texas Baptists churches over the last year--as part of a larger campaign to raise concerns about the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist General Convention of Texas--Texas never was on his mind, said the 43-year-old businessman.

"I certainly didn't intend for all our stuff to go to Texas," Moran said in an interview. But if advocates of the conservative cause in Texas find his research helpful, he's happy for them to use it wherever they deem appropriate, he added.

His focus always has been and remains on keeping the Missouri Baptist Convention closely aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention and completely free of association with the Fellowship, he said. In addition to serving as research director for a group called Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association, he leads a political effort called Project 1000. The latter is credited with giving conservatives the upper hand in presidential elections at Missouri Baptist Convention annual meetings the last two years.

Those who agree with his cause view him as a grassroots hero. Those who disagree with his cause view him as a stirrer of dissent and a less-than-truthful historian.

Moran thrives on "guilt by association," charged Doyle Sager, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo., and chairman of Mainstream Missouri Baptists, a group formed to counter Moran and Project 1000.

"There's an appeal to fear in Missouri," Sager said. "There's a lumping, a very irresponsible, very unbiblical lumping together that if you don't agree with the laymen's group on certain issues, then you must by definition be their enemy on every other issue."

"Roger Moran's material lacks any semblance of integrity," echoed Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and one of Moran's targets. "It is classic guilt by association."

Kerry Messer, president of Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association, defends Moran's work and the mission of the association. He thinks the close-knit community of Baptist pastors has created an environment where people judge accusations on the basis of their opinions of individuals rather than the facts.

"People need to quit taking sides before they know the issues," he said.

Moran's work through Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association has spread nationwide because of his forceful attacks on national entities such as CBF, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

But the door into Texas has been widened by formation of a new state Baptist convention for conservatives disenchanted with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Moran's literature frequently has been distributed statewide by pastors and other individuals encouraging churches to align with the new state convention.

Bill Streich, a layman from First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, subsequently formed a group called Texas Baptist Laymen's Association, which distributes Moran's research documents along with additional Texas-specific information.

"Nobody knew who I was until recently, and nobody cared," Moran said. But now the welder from Winfield, Mo., is becoming a significant influence in churches where his literature is distributed or where he speaks in person--churches in Texas that many times hang in the balance between remaining with the BGCT or jumping to the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

Who is Roger Moran?

Moran is a layman who talks in humble tones about his dislike for the limelight. He's not the kind who wants to rub elbows with people of power or position, he said; he's just a common layman with some serious concerns about moral issues.

He is a father to six children, including a set of 18-month-old twins, and he and his wife are hoping to adopt three more children soon. He owns a steel manufacturing company that does business under the name Brooks Brothers Trailers.

His introduction to Baptist politics began in 1989, he said, when he became concerned that the Missouri Baptist Convention was listing a Holiday Inn as an alternative housing site for its annual meeting, which was being held at a hotel across the street. Some Baptists were participating in a boycott of Holiday Inn at the time because the hotel chain made available adult cable programming in its guest rooms.



ROGER MORAN

At the convention, he sat in on various committee meetings and listened to the floor debate. He soon found additional concerns about the state convention, particularly its relationship with Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a Washington-based religious liberty agency.

Moran objected to the Baptist convention having any relation to Americans United because he perceives its view of church-state separation to be counter to what the most conservative Baptists desire--and because he believes the agency's executive director holds liberal positions on issues such as homosexuality and abortion.

At the 1990 state convention, Moran made a motion to defund Americans United from the state mission offering, where it was slated to get \$3,000. "Big, well-respected guys in the

Missouri Baptist Convention stood up and spoke against it, and my motion failed," he recalled.

What actually happened, according to convention minutes, was Moran attempted to amend the budget after it already had been considered, and his motion asking messengers to reconsider failed.

He went home and began to do extensive research on Americans United and other affiliations and individuals, he said. Realizing he never would have the time to make his detailed case on the convention floor, he published a pamphlet outlining his concerns. That pamphlet was distributed to convention messengers the next year.

The plan worked. That year, when he made a similar motion to defund Americans United, he prevailed.

Laymen's Association formed

That same year, he and fellow conservative activist Messer formed Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association. Messer is a lobbyist and moral concerns educator who spends most of his time speaking in churches or campaigning against issues such as alcohol, gambling and pornography.

He describes himself as a former blue-collar worker who felt called to full-time ministry after getting fired from his secular job. He formed a "faith-based" ministry called Missouri Family Network.

"I began researching what I had been taught all my life about what was right and what was wrong, because I wondered why sometimes Baptists were on other sides of the issues," Messer said.

In this search, he met Moran, who was crusading against the adult video business in his county. "We developed a great personal relationship," Messer said.

In addition to Moran and Messer, three others serve on the board of directors for the laymen's association, Moran said. They are Richard Stone, a layman also from Winfield who works for Moran; Cindy Province, a laywoman from the St. Louis area; and Ronald Turnbull, a layman from northern Missouri.

Bouyed by their success with the Americans United vote, they began tackling other issues, most notably what they perceived as infiltration into the state convention by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and a lessening of relations with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Moran continued to research and document what he believed to be curious associations between individuals affiliated with the Fellowship and the Baptist Joint Committee to far-left causes. He published these findings, without any rebuttal, in fliers. And then the laymen's association produced its first video of Moran making an extensive presentation of his findings to a local church.

The reason for the video, Moran explained, was his wife was pregnant and confined to bed rest, and he simply couldn't make the number of personal appearances needed to advance the association's cause.

Besides, he said, he doesn't relish speaking engagements. "I'm just about loaded up with all I can do. I've got six kids, a business. I really like the research."

Seeing the video for the first time was a bit unnerving, he said. "That was the first time I had ever seen myself on video."

But he approved distribution of the video, he said, because "the material is accurate."

Initially, a church in Missouri duplicated the videos. But as demand grew, a production company was employed to make larger quantities, he said.

Funding for all these projects comes from a few Missouri churches, himself and another board member, Moran said. "We spend very little. ... I kick in whatever's necessary myself. One of our board members kicks in. We give people permission to duplicate whatever they want."

Moderate Baptists in Missouri say they suspect Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association is getting funding and support from some out-of-state source, perhaps even indirectly from an SBC agency. Moran denies this is true, saying the only out-of-state money the association receives is payment for literature and videos ordered.

Messer likewise denies any out-of-state or SBC-related funding.

The funding has been "our own," Messer said, explaining that each board member has contributed. "The vast majority of it over the last nine, 10 years has come out of our own pockets."

Personal life criticized

As Moran's work gained influence, criticism of his research and reporting methods mounted. And so did criticism of his standing to accuse anyone else of immoral behavior.

Critics pointed out Moran is twice divorced and currently married to his third wife, that he has been party to at least 11 civil lawsuits, including several for failure to pay employment taxes.

His critics also have pointed out Moran appears to have been a member of either four or five Baptist churches over the last nine years, even though he has lived and worked in the same rural region the whole time.

At the 1991 Missouri Baptist Convention, he was listed as a messenger from New Salem Baptist Church in Winfield, Mo.; at the 1993 convention, he was a messenger from Sulphur Lick Baptist Church in Troy, Mo.; at the 1996 convention, he was a messenger from First Baptist Church of O'Fallon, Mo.; and at the 1999 convention, he was a messenger from First Baptist Church of Troy, Mo., although his membership apparently was at one of First Baptist's missions, Ridge Road Baptist Mission. Missouri Baptist Convention bylaws do not allow a mission church to send messengers to the annual meeting.

When asked about his personal life last summer by Word & Way, the weekly newspaper of the Missouri Baptist Convention, Moran acknowledged his record is not stellar. He reiterated that explanation in a recent interview with the Baptist Standard.

"I certainly understand people who believe a guy who's been married three times is pathetic, and it is," he said. "I don't have a problem with people who find me repulsive."

But most of the personal issues his critics cite happened before the day in May 1982 when he fully committed his life to Jesus Christ, he said. "I think I was saved when I was 12 or 13 years old, but I didn't live like it. ... I was a heathen."

At the point he reached personal bottom, he already was divorced once, and his second marriage was on the skids, he said. "I did my best to make that second marriage work, but it was too late. The damage I had done before was too much."

Ten years after his second divorce, he married again and has remained married to the same woman the last seven years. He is a different person today than he was before 1982, he said.

"From that point forward in my life, I repented. I don't think I've missed maybe one or two Sundays since then. I don't miss church. I love it."

The impression that he has been a church-hopper also is misleading, Moran said.

After having been a longtime member at New Salem Baptist Church in Winfield, he and others left that congregation through a series of splits, he said. "We left and went to another church for two years to help a dead church. We taught Sunday School and helped get that church going. Then we went to First Baptist Church of O'Fallon."

He recently left the O'Fallon congregation, he said, because he and his family have bought a farm 30 miles away from his previous residence and an hour's drive away from O'Fallon.

Leading Missouri moderates privately dispute that explanation, claiming Moran had a falling out with O'Fallon Pastor Gary Taylor because Taylor, a conservative, was too conciliatory in his appointments as president of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

Any attempt to portray a rift between him and Taylor is uninformed, Moran said. "There is no rift whatsoever between him and me."



A SAMPLING of items published or written by Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association and Texas Baptist Laymen's Association.

things like 'we don't choose our sexual orientation, we awaken to it.'"

Further, Moran said, he has been forced to account for "everything I've done in the last 20 years," while "CBF has never yet given account for anything."

"Moran's defense of his behavior speaks for itself," Fellowship Coordinator Daniel Vestal said. "He knows full well that CBF is not a convention that issues resolutions or proclamations about moral issues. Yet he would label our participating churches, our missionaries, our partner organizations and tens of thousands of Baptist Christians with a single, unattributed, inflammatory statement about sexual orientation."

"That's like taking something a Sunday School teacher said at a PTA meeting on an emotionally charged, politicized issue and then launching a campaign implying that a single comment from one individual in an unrelated context somehow represents the official view of

Guilt by association?

Critics of Moran's research often claim he peddles guilt by association, that the concerns he raises are based on little more than Person A serving on a board with Person B, who happens to support homosexual rights, and therefore Person A must support homosexual rights.

Using the same logic, these critics contend, one could accuse the SBC of endorsing divorce and litigiousness because Moran now serves on the SBC Executive Committee.

While he understands why people would make such a comparison, Moran said, he believes there is a difference.

"The difference is on May 1, 1982, I repented of what I was and what I had done," he said. "I have never as a Christian advocated divorce, never have advocated any of the things I have done. But CBF and the groups we have been raising concerns about have gone around and said

that member's church," Vestal added. "This kind of modus operandi would be reprehensible even in the world of hardball secular politics."

And turning the tables to indict the SBC by its implicit affirmation of Moran is a valid criticism, Vestal said.

"Moran is an elected leader of the Southern Baptist Convention. Can you imagine the headlines if an SBC leader were to launch these kinds of vitriolic attacks against Methodist Christians or Presbyterian Christians?" Vestal asked. "I think there would be a proverbial stampede as convention leaders tried to distance themselves from this kind of behavior. Yet the reckless assault by Moran and others on the people and churches of the Fellowship continues unabated."

Who's running things?

By his own account, Moran has no formal theological training and until he recommitted his life to Christ in 1982 could barely read.

"When the Lord finally beat me down, I spent the next three years doing nothing but learning to read on the King James Version" of the Bible, he said.

Soon after, he was asked to become chairman of the moral concerns committee for the Baptist association in his area. "At that time, I didn't even know what abortion was," he said. "I was a welder. But I accepted that position and started studying."

He went to a national meeting of communists and took notes, and he went to a national meeting of humanists and took notes, he said. "I don't like to take somebody else's word for what something is."

As his interest in religious, moral and political affairs grew, he started building files, he said. "We get little tidbits of information from people. A lot of times you just kind of follow the leads. ... When you put all those things together, you begin to get a picture."

He laughs at the sometimes unspoken question of some of his critics that perhaps he is not the author of the research bearing his name but is merely a conduit for someone else's work. When people ask, "Who's behind what you're doing?" he said, it makes him wonder if they're really thinking, "We've got this dumb old layman over there, and there's no way he could know this."

The Texas connection

Moran said he was surprised when leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Texas started criticizing his research and when the BGCT Executive Board formed the Committee on Baptist Integrity to rebut his claims.

He believes CBF Coordinator Vestal, a former Texas pastor, was "trying to turn Texas people against me."

After he read about the BGCT forming its so-called "slander committee," Moran went back and watched his video presentations again to see what he had said about Texas Baptists.

"I found I said the word 'Texas' one time," he explained. He admitted also, though, that his printed literature made reference to several Texas Baptist leaders. And he knows, he acknowledged, that his accusations against the Fellowship have been used by some in Texas to

build a case against the BGCT because it allows churches to send money through the state convention to the Fellowship.

"I never had any intention of dealing with Texas," Moran said. "For them to come back and say I was going after Texas is unfair. Our concern was specifically about the growing influence of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in the Missouri Baptist Convention."

A new alliance

Moran, who off the top of his head recalls quotes made by moderate Baptist leaders 15 years ago, said he can't recall who introduced him to Bill Streich. It was some mutual friend who said the two ought to get together because they shared a lot in common and had a similar mission, he said.

Streich said he contacted Moran directly after learning about his research.

Streich is no newcomer to Baptist political fights. As a trustee of the SBC Home Mission Board (and now a trustee of the North American Mission Board), he led a protracted and successful fight against SBC participation in an ecumenical conference on reconciliation in England in 1997.

He runs a retail and wholesale mass merchandising business in Wichita Falls and has been a deacon at First Baptist Church since 1981. A graduate of Baylor University, he is married and the father of four children.



BILL STREICH

Influential figures in his spiritual life, he said, have been former Wichita Falls pastors James Landes, Landrum Leavell, Bill Pinson and Morris Chapman. Both Landes and Pinson later became executive directors of the BGCT. Chapman, a leader in the SBC's conservative movement, now is president of the SBC Executive Committee in Nashville.

Streich said he became concerned about denominational issues in March 1980, the year after Chapman came to First Baptist Church as pastor and a year after the conservative movement began its quest to control the SBC presidency.

In the current Texas context, Streich said he affirms the work of the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

"I personally support efforts to reach Texas for Christ by those who desire to hold tenaciously, unapologetically and unashamedly to the belief in the inerrancy of Scripture," he said. "A convention which holds to such standards within its agencies and institutions has my support. Those who believe in the priesthood of the believer but refuse to use the concept to justify theological, social and moral liberalism also have my support.

"The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention clearly falls within those parameters."

According to multiple sources with firsthand knowledge of the Wichita Falls church, not everyone there has been enthusiastic about Streich's outspoken role in Texas Baptist and Southern Baptist politics.

Pastor Robert Jeffress confirmed that some in the church applaud Streich's efforts while others do not.

"It's not an issue," Jeffress said. "We have determined our church is big enough to include members who may have differing opinions about what is happening in the BGCT. Bill has been very forthright in saying his actions do not represent the church."

First Baptist remains affiliated with the BGCT, although members are given "the option of designating Cooperative Program money any way they would like to, not including to CBF," Jeffress said. That means they may give through the BGCT, SBTC or directly to the SBC.

Asked about what support he has received from his church, Streich replied that the church "has a very specific purpose which does not include the purpose of Texas Baptist Laymen's Association, nor should it. Therefore, it has never been a question as to whether or not it should support our efforts."

Streich vs. Strickland

Streich took aim at Strickland and the Texas Christian Life Commission in 1998 when First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls and Jeffress came under fire from Americans United. AU Executive Director Barry Lynn roundly criticized Jeffress for leading a campaign to have two pro-homosexual books removed from the public library, even making comments about the campaign from the pulpit.

Streich claimed Strickland and the Texas CLC failed to defend Jeffress and First Baptist Church, thereby putting the BGCT office in league with homosexual rights supporters.

Strickland said Streich's accusations on this count are dead wrong.

"I supported the pastor," Strickland said. "I indicated that what the pastor had done was appropriate and wrote him to that effect. The only thing I did not agree to was driving to Wichita Falls to have a press conference."

The spillover from this dispute was in part behind the controversy when Strickland spoke to five classes at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary last fall. In at least one of the classes, where Strickland spoke on the topic of how to keep your church out of court, a question was raised about First Baptist of Wichita Falls and the book incident.

By the account of Strickland and the professors in whose classes he spoke, Strickland said nothing negative about First Baptist Church or Jeffress. In fact, Strickland said, he took the opportunity to commend Jeffress for taking a stand for his beliefs in a proper and legal manner.

Yet soon after Strickland's lectures, three seminary professors were told to distribute to students a response from Streich. That response consisted of anti-BGCT and anti-CBF literature from Texas Baptist Laymen's Association and Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association.

Texas Baptist Laymen's Association

Streich said his Texas association was named after the Missouri association for two reasons--"our agreement that Southern Baptists have a right to know where their Cooperative Program dollars are going, and our common commitment to providing relevant information to pastors that will not be found in regularly distributed Baptist publications."

There is no formal relationship between the Missouri group and the Texas group, Streich said, although "both groups share research material."

The Texas association is a "loose-knit group that is committed to providing relevant, objective and reliable information to Texas Baptist pastors," Streich said.

He declined to identify other participants in the association, identifying them only as "laymen and pastors primarily in Texas who have provided information, prayer support, encouragement and/or financial support."

Funding for Texas Baptist Laymen's Association all comes from within Texas, Streich said. "I have personally funded the efforts to a large degree. The entire balance has been funded (including donated services) strictly by laymen in Texas with the exception of the help of Northside Baptist Church in Mineral Wells pastored by Scott Copeland. We have received no convention, no out-of-state, nor any Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association funding."

Moran said Streich pays for all the Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association literature he gets for distribution in Texas.

And Streich believes that material is worth buying. It is accurate, well-researched and reliable, he said.

Streich said he has "required all primary source documentation from Moran before distributing his material. Without fail, Moran has provided every source document he uses."

Moran's research is presented "in context" and "in a way that leads to logical, accurate conclusions," Streich said.

The reason for the Texas association's existence, he said, is concern about accommodation of liberalism by the BGCT.

"Texas Baptist Laymen's Association's major concerns about the BGCT revolve around its leaders' increasing willingness to tolerate, accommodate and/or embrace theological, social and moral liberalism," he said. The association "believes that such a position leads to error in application regarding church-state issues, missions, theological education, family ministries" and other areas.

It is not the association's goal to bring about change directly so much as it is to educate laypeople, Streich said.

"Once Texas Baptists are aware of the concerns we have raised, they become accountable to God. Our job is not to convict them, but to present the truth about what should concern all Texas Baptists."

Criticism of his tactics and literature won't stop him from proceeding, Streich intimated when asked what lies ahead.

"Stay tuned," he said. "There is more to come."