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**Porter pressured
to quit SBC post**

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NASHVILLE (ABP)--Lee Porter reportedly is being pressured to quit his job as registration secretary of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Although neither Porter nor officials at the Baptist Sunday School Board will confirm the report, sources close to the Nashville-based publishing arm of the SBC say Porter has been given until Dec. 1 to announce he will not again seek election to the SBC post.

According to informed sources, Porter has been told that he cannot work for the SSB and be SBC registration secretary.

In mid-October, Porter, 61, was removed from his position as a design editor of adult Sunday school lesson materials and assigned to a non-editorial position.

The disciplinary action was taken "as a result of remarks made during the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in New Orleans," according to an official news release issued by the SSB's office of communications and distributed by Baptist Press Oct. 31.

The news release reported Porter "conducted a Wednesday afternoon session June 13 in New Orleans with a seminary class from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky."

It continued: "During the two-and-one-half hour dialogue session, held in the messenger registration area of the Louisiana Superdome, Porter made critical interpretations and personal comments on a wide range of issues in the 12-year SBC controversy."

Porter was reassigned, according to the official release, because he "violated the established parameters of the Baptist Sunday School Board for acceptable employee conduct. His use of inflammatory language has impacted his performance as an employee and the board's relationship with the Southern Baptist constituency."

The news release reported only that Porter had been reassigned as projects consultant in the Sunday School youth-adult department and that the 14-year employee had written a letter of apology to the administration and the board of trustees.

The release, however, did not deal with the reported instructions from administrators that Porter relinquish his post as SBC registration secretary.

Associated Baptist Press' sources were unclear whether the demand by administrators was for Porter to resign immediately or merely not to seek re-election when the SBC meets in Atlanta June 4-6, 1991.

If Porter resigns, the Executive Committee of the SBC may appoint an interim replacement when it meets in February 1991.

As registration secretary, Porter has been responsible for registering all credentialed messengers to the annual meeting and for overseeing the taking and tabulating of votes. Ruling fundamental-conservatives have been unhappy with Porter for several years, particularly since he differed with them over voting at the controversial 1985 annual meeting in Dallas.

He was re-elected at the 1990 annual meeting despite a challenge from Bob Mowrey of Nashville. The vote was 13,242 to 5,048.

Martin Bradley, another Sunday School Board employee, was unseated as recording secretary by David Atchison of Nashville, 9,206 to 8,044. The recording secretary post includes a seat on the Executive Committee; the registration secretary job does not.

Bradley reportedly became a target for defeat when he joined a minority report opposing cutting the budget funds from the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Both Porter and Bradley were elected to their jobs in 1977.

Board officials did not want to talk with ABP about Porter. President Lloyd Elder, whom a secretary said was going out of town, referred ABP's questions to the office of communications.

Gary Cook, vice president for church programs and services at the SSB, would not confirm or deny Porter has been told to resign as registration secretary or leave the board.

However, Cook told the (Tennessee) Baptist and Reflector the matter had been discussed with Porter. He also observed that Porter's role as an SBC officer "created the problem in the situation."

"As part of our whole discussion related to the incident we talked about his not running again," Cook said, but would not confirm whether Porter was instructed by board officials to announce he would not seek re-election.

One trustee, Larry Holly, a medical doctor from Beaumont, Texas, was surprised when asked about the reports Porter has been told to quit the SBC job.

"Didn't they (board officials) release the details of the disciplinary action to the press?" Holly asked, then quickly noted any information should come from the president (Elder).

Holly, who circulated letters in 1989 seeking the dismissal of President Elder, said he had written a number of letters about the Porter matter.

"I thought what he did warranted summary dismissal," Holly said, but added he "left the president the option of how he would handle it."

Holly said he does not expect the matter to come before the February 1991 meeting of SSB trustees, but added it could if it was proven that "Lee Porter talked to SBC Today."

SBC Today, an independent moderate-conservative publication, included in its October issue an editorial saying Porter had been told to quit as registration secretary.

The events leading to Porter's demotion and reported instructions to quit as registration secretary were ignited by an article in the Sept. 11, 1990 issue of the Indiana Baptist, written by Tammi Ledbetter, managing editor. Copies of the article were placed on the desks of members of the SBC Executive Committee during their Sept. 17-19 meeting.

In an editor's note, Ledbetter wrote that she had "wandered on the scene of Porter's delivery by chance while searching records for the location of an Indiana messenger." She said she observed another non-student taking notes on the lecture and remained to cover the meeting. Notes from both sources were later compared to provide the article, Ledbetter said.

ABP asked Ledbetter why it had taken three months to release the story.

"I could have thrown it together and gone to press at the convention," she said, "but in situations like this I like to take my time and verify the information."

She said she had cross-referenced her notes and those of an "Indiana student" and combined the Porter story with a larger "series on how the next generation of Southern Baptists are being educated about the convention and the controversy."

The series included stories about student groups, new approaches in Baptist Student Union, whether other seminaries offer similar classes, and articles on the actual seminary class.

She said some contacts were difficult to make in the summer, but that the articles were ready "in August."

They were held, however, until September because the Indiana editor did not want to "infringe on the agenda" of SSB trustees in August.

Ledbetter said she was "just being a good reporter" when she passed by and heard Porter briefing the class. "He made some remarks of interest to Indiana since they were about Mark (Coppenger, the state executive director)."

She maintained she has "no personal vendetta" against Porter in writing the story and said she was unaware of reports Porter has been told to quit his SBC job.