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Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

**Was Southern compromise
a miracle or mistake?**

By Mary Knox

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's new "covenant renewal" document, adopted April 8 by trustees, prompted a range of reactions.

On the one hand, it steps back from a rigid faculty-employment policy adopted by trustees last fall. That policy tied employment and advancement to adherence to the 1987 Southern Baptist Peace Committee report's specific examples of what it means to believe in Scripture.

On the other hand, it extracts from faculty a pledge to work to make the Louisville, Ky., seminary more conservative.

The covenant — approved by trustees 49-7 last week after ratification by faculty 38-5 — strikes a compromise.

"It's a bright light for the future," seminary President Roy Honeycutt told reporters. He cited unique cooperation between trustees and faculty.

"It's an historic document for the seminary and Southern Baptists," he added. "This is the first time in the 10 years of the (SBC theological/political) controversy that principals have gotten together and said, 'We need to sit down and work together to reverse the disintegration of an entity.' And I feel greatly encouraged by it."

Trustees expressed divided opinions on the value of the covenant.

"We have done the very best job we could in representing you," trustee Wayne Allen, a pastor from Memphis, Tenn., and a member of the committee that drafted the document, told his colleagues.

"We bent far more than we wanted to bend, and the faculty said they bent far more than they wanted to bend. Until the last night, we did not know if we could reach out and touch."

Morris Denman Jr., a pastor from Lynn Haven, Fla., expressed doubts about how the document would work, particularly its objective of attaining a "balanced" faculty.

"The real issue of balance is something somebody in the future is going to have to deal with," Allen responded. "We're trying to get over a problem and an impasse, understanding we may be putting off some problems for a few years. Hopefully, our relationship will have grown and trust developed so that we can deal with those problems then."

But Delton Beall, a pastor from Forest City, Ark., attending his first trustee meeting, expressed reservations about postponing some solutions.

"I have a problem with this board putting a screen door on a submarine and expecting me to fix the leak in three or four years," he said. "If it's painful today, it will be painful tomorrow."

"Under the circumstances, the document is a masterpiece," contended Gene Russell, a pastor from San Antonio, Texas. "It's not perfect, but if we do not pass it now, we are in for serious consequences."

After the vote, faculty leader Bill J. Leonard said the covenant offers the seminary community a break in tension.

"This gives us a respite from the crisis atmosphere that has been present on this campus," said Leonard, a church history professor and president of the seminary Faculty Association.

"We have said all along," Leonard added, "that the use of the Peace Committee document is a violation of contracts, charter and the Abstract of Principles."

"The covenant gives us a much broader base by which faculty and trustees can work together in securing new faculty. Also, the covenant is not required of existing tenured faculty. That was a major concern of ours regarding the Peace Committee document."

The covenant also allows the seminary to recruit faculty from a larger group of evangelical scholars than the Peace Committee document allowed, he added.

"This dialogue between faculty and trustees is a first at Southern Seminary, and overall we are

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hopeful," Leonard said. "We are not euphoric. It is a compromise for both groups. But it is a compromise that keeps us from losing everything."

Adoption of the covenant, however, did not keep trustees from applying other tests to faculty candidates who were hired later in the board's April meeting.

Trustees applied the Peace Committee's "findings," as well as other unofficial standards, to eight faculty candidates. All eight were later elected by trustees.

The academic personnel committee asked all five candidates for new tenured or tenurable positions their views on four "findings" in the 1987 Southern Baptist Peace Committee report: the reality of Adam and Eve, the truthfulness of the Bible's accounts of history and miracles, and the validity of the Bible's descriptions of its authors.

Those four questions had been part of guidelines for faculty employment adopted by trustees last fall but set aside in favor of the "covenant renewal" between trustees and faculty. Trustees noted when they adopted the covenant that they still would ask the four questions of faculty candidates.

In addition, three nominees — two to pastoral care and one to social work — were asked their views on homosexuality. Two of them were asked their views on abortion.

All five candidates who were asked any of the theology, homosexuality and abortion questions gave satisfactory answers, according to members of the trustees' academic personnel committee.

Some trustees protested that five of the eight nominees are members of Louisville churches that designate some of their missions funds around the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptists' unified budget.

All eight nominees were elected by voice votes, with only one dissenting vote cast for one professor.

Following the election, some observers questioned if the unofficial criteria violated the new trustee/faculty covenant.

"Yes and no," answered Larry McSwain, dean of the school of theology. "It was clear in adopting the covenant that there was a formal agreement — noted in the minutes of the meeting — that trustees still would be free to raise any questions. The covenant is a formal agreement, but it is not exclusive."

A true test will come the first time a candidate answers a question unsatisfactorily, said Provost Willis Bennett. "When they get a question they don't accept, what will happen?" he asked.

In other business, trustees:

- Rescinded a year-old policy mandating that students be allowed to tape-record class lectures. The new policy encourages the "principle of openness and disclosure" but leaves to administration and faculty the responsibility to decide "appropriate methods of transcribing classroom lectures."

- Declined to amend the school's charter in order to relinquish their right to remove fellow trustees. The Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee had asked the seminary trustees to give up that right. Southern is the only SBC seminary with that provision in its charter. Southern trustees, however, maintained that right helps preserve the integrity of the trustee board.

- Voted to give the 1991 E.Y. Mullins Denominational Service Award — the school's highest honor — to Ralph and Lynda Bethea, missionaries to Kenya. They were beaten in a roadside robbery in the African nation last month, and she died of her wounds. He earned master of divinity and doctor of philosophy degrees from the seminary.

- Passed a resolution calling for trustees, faculty and administrators to oppose diversion of funds from the Cooperative Program and to seek additional means of support for the seminary.

- Approved a \$16.4 million 1991-92 budget, including a 3 percent cost-of-living increase for faculty and staff.