

AUG 19 1991.

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August 15, 1991

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Parks says new missions 'vision'
should delay his retirement

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- In a rousing address Aug. 14, Keith Parks, president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, challenged FMB trustees to accelerate worldwide evangelistic efforts during this decade.

The president also expressed his desire to lead those accelerated efforts by remaining at the helm of the FMB through 1995, three years after he turns 65. Any change in FMB leadership before that time would "jeopardize" those efforts, he warned.

Parks, speaking to trustees during their Aug. 12-14 meeting in Richmond, Va., said a recent "spiritual pilgrimage to the mountains" left him with a renewed sense of urgency for global evangelism in the 1990s.

As a result he said he formulated a series of missions initiatives that could set the framework for the board's activities in the final decade of Bold Mission Thrust, Southern Baptists' undertaking to share the gospel to every person on earth by A.D. 2000.

By stressing his desire to remain president until most elements of the initiative are in place -- probably in 1995 -- Parks brought the issue of his retirement into the public arena.

The missions executive, who will turn 64 in October, will observe his 68th birthday in 1995. Some FMB trustees have said privately that Parks, who has been an occasional target of criticism during the denomination's controversy, should retire at 65.

Parks said his missions initiative comes at a "critical point" in Southern Baptist life, when the denomination must either "surge ahead or level off and lose momentum."

Recent analyses by missions leaders indicate efforts must be intensified in the next few years if Southern Baptists hope to achieve Bold Mission Thrust goals, which were set in 1976.

Some of these goals have been met or will be soon, Parks told trustees. The board has exceeded its target of 10,000 volunteers. The

his leadership," Hancock added before calling the board to an extended period of prayer. "There will be opportunity for these visions to be placed in the appropriate arena, to discuss all matters related to this vision."

Most trustees appeared enthusiastic about renewed missions emphases but were surprised by Parks' reference to his tenure and reluctant to say much about it.

"I was inspired by Dr. Parks' comments," Paula Hemphill of Virginia Beach, Va., said later. "The 10 items he listed are the 10 things we need to do as Southern Baptists. ... Bold Mission Thrust needs to be adopted by the current generation of Southern Baptists. That takes a fresh vision."

"I definitely believe this (vision) is from God to Dr. Parks," she added. "He needs to help us make the transition in this just as he did in the non-residential missionary program."

Paige Patterson, a Dallas educator, said: "I want to think about (Parks' tenure) a little bit. My personal opinion doesn't really matter much. What does matter is that we all discern the will of God."

Business during the August trustee meeting was abbreviated as board members participated in a series of dialogue sessions with staff, an annual feature of FMB trustee meetings. Topics discussed ranged from organizational structure to Muslim evangelism.

Trustees took time out from the free-wheeling but non-controversial discussions to appoint and reappoint 42 mission workers, bringing the total Southern Baptist foreign mission force to 3,899 people in 121 countries.

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Court opinion threatens
religion, BJC attorney says

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- No religion in America is safe from the U. S. Supreme Court's ruling in Oregon v. Smith, a Baptist Joint Committee attorney told the American Bar Association Aug. 11.

BJC General Counsel Oliver Thomas called the court's recent Smith decision "one of the most draconian" decisions to come from the Supreme Court since the 1857 Dred Scott ruling determined that slaves were property.

Thomas addressed the ABA annual convention in Atlanta that celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights. Thomas is the first BJC staffer to address the ABA convention.

Thomas told the ABA the high court's April 1990 decision in Oregon v. Smith all but erased the First Amendment's guarantee of free exercise of religion. In the Smith decision, the court abandoned the "compelling state interest" test it formerly required government to meet before restricting religious liberty.

That test permitted government to restrict the First Amendment's guarantee of religious exercise only to further a compelling governmental interest and if the least restrictive means of safeguarding that interest had been employed.

The Smith decision stated that government need not justify burdens

121 countries to which mission workers are assigned is close to the goal of 125. And the current mission force of 3,899 is not far from the 5,000 the board hopes to achieve.

Other goals have not been met, however, including increases in the number of Baptist churches and church members overseas, Parks noted, although "we are gaining momentum in these areas."

Nevertheless, he warned, "it is clear that some of the expectations the Lord has for us will not be reached unless we intensify our efforts in the next two to three years."

"I believe God is calling us to move rapidly ahead in these next three to five years. I am convinced he is laying a climactic vision on us that we can share and seek to allow him to fulfill it through us," Parks said.

In order to do that, Parks called for:

- Regional meetings among board staff, missionaries and representatives of national Baptist bodies around the world to find improved ways to reach people with the gospel. One meeting already is planned in Latin America during 1992.

- A worldwide consultation in 1995, consisting of representatives from the regional meetings to coordinate plans for extensive worldwide evangelistic efforts in the final year of the decade. Similar consultations occurred in 1965, 1975 and 1985.

- At least 10,000 college students to begin cultural and language studies no later than 1995 as preparation for spending 1999 in evangelism around the world.

- At least 5,000 retired Baptist laypersons and church staff members to spend 1999 in world evangelism.

- Assistance to seminaries, universities and state conventions in preparing these volunteers for cross-cultural communication.

- Massive evangelistic training during 1997-98 to prepare for an end-of-the-decade witnessing thrust.

- Local associations to pray for at least one additional couple to enter missions service and to provide some funding for support.

- A determination of which countries, beyond those to which missionaries are already assigned, should have a Southern Baptist witness in the 21st century.

- Cooperation with other evangelical Christians to target every major people group with the gospel by A.D. 2000.

- Every Southern Baptist church to pray regularly for missionaries and world evangelization.

Parks said most elements of his missions initiative would have to be in place by 1995 in order for it to be implemented at the end of the decade. Stable leadership up to that point would increase the chances of success, he said.

"We must not lose momentum or change our basic direction or philosophy at this crucial point...", he said. "Frankly, I believe change in the present administrative leadership before 1995 would jeopardize most of what I see in this vision. After that, a transition could be made without hindering what we have prayed and worked so long to accomplish."

Following Parks' address, board chairman William Hancock of Louisville, Ky., urged trustees to exercise "spiritual discernment" as they reflected on Parks' words and avoid "human speculation."

"It's vitally important we know the will of God, his timing and

on religious practice unless the law itself is aimed at religion.

"Never mind that legislatures do not pass laws prohibiting Catholics from attending mass," Thomas said, "or Native Americans from eating peyote or Jewish schoolboys from wearing yarmulkes.... Never mind that the equal-protection clause already protected religious claimants from laws aimed at religion.

"With the stroke of a pen, our nation's first liberty was rendered a constitutional redundancy."

The court's majority described the First Amendment test as a "luxury" this nation can no longer afford, Thomas stated, noting Justice Antonin Scalia said that if minority religious groups suffer as a result, that is the "inevitable price of democracy."

"The 'inevitable price of democracy'?" Thomas asked. "I thought that's why we had a First Amendment -- as a check on democracy. Some values, including freedom of speech, religion, press and association, are so fundamental to American society that we placed them beyond the reach of legislative majorities.

"At least, that's what I thought."

Thomas said he was not surprised the Supreme Court denied religionists the right to use peyote in religious ceremonies -- the issue in the Smith case -- but added "no one had expected the court to eviscerate the First Amendment in the process."

The impact of Smith has been immediate and far reaching, Thomas said. The decision was used less than a week after it was handed down; it was cited to vacate a decision in Minnesota that protected rights of the Amish to use less offensive but equally effective warning devices on their horse-drawn carriages.

"Since then, Quakers, Hmongs, Baptists, Lutherans, Jews and Episcopalians have felt the brunt of this decision," Thomas said. "In time, every religion in America will suffer."

However, a bill introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives June 26 provides a solution, he said. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (H.R. 2797), which has more than 80 bipartisan co-sponsors, would restore the compelling-interest test, Thomas said.

Dozens of religious and civil-liberties groups back the bill, including the Baptist Joint Committee and Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"Ironically, the only opposition we have encountered is from within the religious community itself," said Thomas, who helped draft the bill and is chairman of a diverse coalition supporting it.

While some pro-life groups back the bill, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Missouri Synod Lutherans and the National Right To Life Committee refuse to support the bill unless it includes an amendment "to prohibit a woman from being able to make a religiously based argument for abortion," he said.

"Never mind that the issue is moot unless Roe v. Wade is overturned or that a woman has never been successful in making such an argument. ... Never mind that such an amendment would appear to violate the establishment clause and almost certainly would kill the bill. The opposition remains."

Thomas thanked the ABA for its endorsement of the bill that "sent a message to all Americans that religious liberty is not a luxury this nation no longer can afford; it is a freedom we cannot live without."

Texas Baptist committee
OKs Baylor compromise

By Toby Druin

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Texas Baptist committee assigned to resolve the dispute between the state Baptist convention and Baylor University has endorsed a compromise plan drafted by convention officers and the Baylor board of regents.

The proposal, approved Aug. 13, would give the BGCT direct election of 25 percent of the Baylor regents and offer assurances that the university will remain a Baptist-oriented institution.

Baylor would also, in electing the other 75 percent of its board, "be receptive to Texas Baptists and will give due and careful consideration to the suggestions of the BGCT."

The plan still must be approved by the Executive Board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas in September and by the state convention in November.

Also approved was a recommendation that the BGCT consider releasing from escrow Baylor's funds from the convention's 1990 budget (minus the expenses of the committee) and that 1991 funds for Baylor, which also have been held in escrow, be released if Baylor's board approves the new agreement.

Although the plan would restore Texas Baptist funding for Southern Baptists' largest university, that funding likely will be reduced because of other changes in the way the BGCT funds its affiliated colleges.

Under a plan adopted in 1989 and taking effect in 1992, a school will receive BGCT money in proportion to the number of "Baptist" things it does, such as sponsoring campus religious events, attracting Baptist students and ministerial students, and recruiting ethnic/minority students.

Tentative figures shown to the committee, but not for publication, indicated Baylor would face a sharp reduction in its current \$6 million-plus allocation under the new budgeting process.

On the issue of Baylor funding, committee members registered sharp differences during the meeting, which was held under background rules which prohibit direct quotes. Some argued funding should be designed to encourage students to attend schools that are "more Baptist" than Baylor. Others said such punitive measures would discourage Baylor from considering BGCT suggestions in the election of the its 75 percent of the regents.

The 25-person special committee, headed by Robert Naylor, was appointed last October to seek a solution to the problem caused last September when Baylor's trustees, citing fears of a fundamentalist takeover, amended the university charter to end convention control of the institution by creating a self-perpetuating board of regents.

Baylor's action, without the approval of the convention, prompted the BGCT to withhold funds from Baylor.

An earlier proposal from the special committee that asked Baylor to give the BGCT a role in electing 75 percent of the schools regents was rejected by Baylor.

Vestal tells Atlanta church
of possible move to Houston

By Jim Newton

ATLANTA (ABP)--Daniel Vestal, pastor of Dunwoody Baptist Church in Atlanta, who played a pivotal role in establishing the new Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, asked his congregation to pray for him as he considers a possible move to a Houston church.

Vestal, a native Texan, told the 3,800-member Dunwoody church during Sunday night services Aug. 11 he would be "preaching in view of a call" to become pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston on Sunday, Aug. 18.

A spokesperson for Tallowood later confirmed Vestal is scheduled to preach in view of a call on that date.

Vestal, an unsuccessful candidate for president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1989 and 1990, pointed out he was not resigning as pastor of Dunwoody Baptist Church, nor had he been called as pastor of the 5,500-member church in Houston.

Vestal was the first chairman of the interim steering committee for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which was organized in Atlanta in May of 1991. Vestal convened the first session of "The Fellowship" convocation in August 1990 and was active in organizing the group which many observers see as the forerunner to a new Baptist convention controlled by moderate-conservatives, who are disenchanted with fundamental-conservative control of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"I realize this is a bit unusual to do what I am doing today, but I wanted to be as honest with you as soon as I could," Vestal told Dunwoody members Aug. 11.

"I am sharing this with you because I love you and want you to pray for me," Vestal added. "The greatest desire of my life is to know and to do the will of God."

He added that he would not go to the Houston church if he were not seriously considering the move. "I began to feel several months ago that my ministry was coming to a conclusion here."

Vestal has been pastor of the Dunwoody church, located in an affluent suburb of Atlanta, for three years. "This church has been very special to me during a very difficult time in my life, and a very difficult time in the life of our denomination," he said.

At the conclusion of the Sunday night service, Vestal asked those who felt led to do so to kneel at the altar and pray for him and the church, and he called on three lay leaders to pray for him.

Before coming to Dunwoody, Vestal was pastor of the 7,800-member First Baptist Church of Midland, Texas.

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