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Keith Parks to retire from FMB
over differences with trustees

By Greg Warner

BEDFORD, Texas (ABP) -- Keith Parks said March 20 he will leave the presidency of the Foreign Mission Board in October because of his concerns about the agency's direction and his freedom to lead it.

"There are some basic philosophical differences between me and the trustees," Parks told reporters. "I do not feel I exert the kind of leadership expected by some of the trustees."

Parks, who will turn 65 in October, made his announcement after 13 hours of intense, closed-door dialogue with trustees at a Dallas-Fort Worth hotel. In a prepared statement, trustees said they "emphatically urged" Parks to stay but they respected "his perception of God's leadership" in leaving.

Both Parks and trustees said the president was not pressured to leave the post he has held since 1980. In fact, several trustees said board members had resolved their differences with Parks during the two-day "spiritual retreat" and were surprised and disappointed in his decision.

"I thought we had a breakthrough," said trustee Joel Gregory, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas. Gregory said 10 central issues were discussed and resolved to everyone's satisfaction, leaving no "insurmountable obstacle" to Parks' staying. "The discussion was a contradiction of his decision," Gregory told reporters.

Parks agreed there was general agreement on the 10 issues, which were the distillation of the first day's dialogue. But he said he was not convinced trustees would grant him the authority needed to continue in the job.

"I just didn't feel that I could exercise the kind of constructive, positive leadership that is needed," Parks told Associated Baptist Press. "That is part of the decision."

Parks said he and trustees differ on the role the FMB president should play. Although trustees assured him they want him as president, he said, "the perception of what that means was different on their part and on mine." For instance, he said, trustees expect him to exercise more control over the actions of missionaries and staff members than he is willing to do.

It is unclear what effect Parks' unexpected retirement will have on the FMB's 3,900 missionaries or the Southern Baptist Convention as a whole,

which is already deeply divided. In recent years, fundamental-conservatives have gained control of the convention and its agencies, including the FMB, which is based in Richmond, Va.

Parks is at least the fourth chief executive in five years to leave one of the SBC's 21 agencies in a dispute with fundamental-conservative trustees.

In a press conference after the two-day retreat, Parks was not specific about his differences with trustees. But he said the concerns he expressed in a stern speech to trustees in February still apply and influenced his decision to leave.

In his February speech, which prompted the March 19-20 retreat, Parks accused trustees of undermining his leadership and exerting undue influence in the selection of staff and missionaries.

Parks said he "seriously considered" announcing his retirement in the February session but he "had a little uncertainty" at the time.

Instead he asked trustees in February either to grant him "the option of exerting positive leadership" as president or "to move as quickly as possible to change leadership."

At the time, he warned trustees that Southern Baptists' foreign mission work, which largely had escaped the effects of more than a decade of denominational controversy, had begun to suffer damage, bringing "change and crisis to our world mission program."

He said there had been a "drastic shift" in trustees' mission philosophy, with fundamental-conservative trustees now "expecting theological conformity from those who receive Southern Baptist money."

Although Parks told trustees last year he needed to stay at the FMB until 1995 in order to implement the agency's ambitious plan for global outreach, he said March 20 that trustees found "no apparent way to make a clear commitment through '95."

"There has not come the sense of certainty that what I felt needed to be done could be carried out," he told reporters.

"The ability of the (trustee) group to firmly say, 'We're going to affirm you till '95' -- for a variety of reasons, that wasn't said," Parks told ABP. Parks said one trustee asked colleagues to grant such an affirmation, but the trustees declined because they were not conducting an official business session and because there was no precedent for a long-term contract.

Although trustees affirmed his leadership for the present, Parks said, there was no guarantee the issue wouldn't surface later. "It seemed to be an open-ended matter that would be asked again and again."

Lacking long-term assurance, he said, it was better to announce a retirement date than to leave the question of his tenure unanswered.

"To resolve the continuing uncertainty among missionaries and Baptists, it is better to make the move as soon as possible," he said. Not to announce, he added, "would have strung out the indefiniteness of my tenure."

Trustee chairman Bill Hancock, pastor of Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., acknowledged there are philosophical differences between Parks and trustees, as there would be with any administrator. "In the last few months we've grappled with those philosophical differences," he said. "We were prepared...to move on and work with those differences."

The question of Parks' leadership and tenure has grown out of a

dispute over FMB work in Europe. Trustees ignited an international controversy last October when they withdrew FMB funding of a European Baptist seminary they said was "liberal."

Although Baptists on both continents protested the decision, trustees refused in December to restore funding to the Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland, which is owned by the European Baptist Federation but was founded by the FMB and is still staffed mostly by missionaries.

The FMB's top two administrators for Europe resigned in protest in January.

Both Parks and Hancock expressed concern about the effect Parks' retirement would have on the 3,900 missionaries serving in 122 countries.

Hancock called on the missionaries to "rely on the Lord" to affirm their service with the FMB. He said the FMB remains committed to the same mission principles under which those missionaries were appointed. "I believe that these 3,900 people responded to God's call and put their trust in the board...on the basis of those principles," he said.

Parks said he is concerned about the missionaries but predictions that many would now leave the field are exaggerated. "There may be some fallout," he said, "but I don't think this decision will have the repercussions that some have surmised." He predicted his retirement would not change the trustees' relationship with the missionaries, at least for now.

Trustee Gregory said missionaries would not be required to sign a statement of faith, as some had feared.

Parks, a 38-year veteran of Southern Baptist foreign missions, said he has no specific plans for the future, although he expects "to continue to be involved" in missions. "My concern for the lost people of the world is not diminished with this decision," he said.

Some Baptists have speculated Parks might become involved in the new foreign mission effort launched by the moderate-conservative Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Parks said the issue of his potential involvement with the Fellowship was discussed in the closed-door meeting but only briefly. He said he was not asked and did not promise not to be involved.

Trustees said they will begin the search process for a new chief executive during their regular meeting in April.

The March 19-20 closed-door session was attended by 78 of the 88 trustees and 12 FMB staff members. Trustees scheduled the meeting in Bedford, Texas, near the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, in part to avoid coverage by the Richmond media.
