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May 7, 1992

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Louisiana board moves to exclude churches that affirm homosexuality

By Lacy Thompson

ALEXANDRIA, La. (ABP) -- Louisiana Baptist leaders charged to the forefront of the homosexual issue May 5, approving a motion that would sever state convention ties with churches that endorse "the active practice of homosexuality."

Louisiana is the second state in which Baptists are considering such action. A proposal to exclude churches that affirm homosexuality from the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina is expected to come before that convention's general board May 19. Meanwhile, the Southern Baptist Executive Committee will recommend the national body take similar action in June.

The proposals come in the wake of recent controversial decisions by two North Carolina churches -- one to ordain a homosexual minister and the other to "bless" the union of a homosexual couple.

No Baptist churches in Louisiana have taken similar actions, but the motion approved May 5 would prevent any churches that do from sending messengers or making financial contributions to the state convention.

The proposal must still be approved by convention messengers in the fall. However, members of Louisiana Baptists' executive board made their feelings on the subject clear last week, becoming the first Baptist state board to take such a definitive action on the issue.

State board members also approved a strongly worded resolution, which urges fervent prayer for "our churches and government to know and do that which is right in the eyes of the Almighty God."

"We must do what God is leading us to do," said Tommy Middleton of Baton Rouge, La., during debate. "The need is there. And we have to send a clearly defined message that Southern Baptists and Louisiana Baptists have taken a stand without question and without compromise on this issue."

Both the motion and resolution were proposed by Bobby Swanner of West Monroe, La., and approved without opposition.

Swanner referred to a recent executive order issued by Louisiana Gov. Edwin Edwards which prohibits state agencies from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation in providing services, hiring employees and awarding contracts.

The nine-paragraph resolution registers alarm at the state government's "movement toward accepting and approving homosexual behavior." It calls homosexuality "a gross perversion and unquestioned sin" and says "unrepentant homosexuality is repeatedly condemned in Scripture."

The resolution expresses "deep and compassionate concern" for churches that are considering a move from traditional Southern Baptist theology on the issue.

Immediately after approval of the resolution, board members adopted the four-paragraph motion, which instructs the credentials committee at the fall convention not to seat messengers from churches that have "taken action affirming, approving or endorsing in any way the active practice of homosexuality, such actions to include but not limited to ordination, licensure, marriage and/or affirmation of homosexual relationships and practice as an acceptable 'alternate lifestyle.'"

The motion also instructs agencies of the state convention to return any donations from churches known to have taken affirmative action regarding homosexuality.

The executive board is expected to recommend changes to the convention's constitution or bylaws that would make sure its action is permanent.

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Raleigh association votes to oust
church that 'blessed' homosexuals

By Pamela Babcock

CARY, N.C. (ABP) -- Severing a 109-year-old relationship, the Raleigh Baptist Association voted overwhelmingly May 5 to oust Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., for blessing the union of two homosexual men in March.

The group's action was approved by nearly 80 percent of those voting in a closed-door meeting.

The resolution stated that the Raleigh church may regain its status only if it makes "the desired change of its beliefs and practices" by the association's meeting this fall.

Pullen's congregation earlier voted by a 2-to-1 margin to permit a church ceremony blessing the union of a gay member and his male partner. The decision, announced March 1, sparked intense opposition among Baptists in North Carolina and beyond.

The ouster by the local association brought an emotional reaction from Pullen's pastor. "The termination of a 109-year relationship is painful," said Mahan Siler. "I am not surprised by the outcome."

More than 800 Baptist messengers packed First Baptist Church of Cary, N.C., for the vote, which passed on a secret ballot, 568 to 144.

The decision angered many, but surprised few.

Charles McMillan, director of missions for the Raleigh Baptist Association, said he didn't vote but found the outcome "predictable."

"The consensus of Baptists in the area was expressed," McMillan said. "The fellowship is broken immediately."

The association has more than 100 member churches in Wake County. The ouster means that Pullen church members may not participate in the larger ministry by attending association meetings and mission and ministry programs.

News media were not allowed into the meeting, which several participants described as contentious. The association's decision not to let Pullen members present their reasons for the March 15 "blessing" ceremony prompted cries of "railroading."

Jack Porter of Raleigh, parliamentarian for the association, denied such charges. In a letter to the Biblical Recorder, newsjournal of North Carolina Baptists, Porter said the debate and decision were consistent with democratic rule and "gratifyingly free from acrimony."

"I must say that the truly loving thing (for Pullen) to do would have been to voluntarily withdraw from the association when early it became apparent that this was the desire of the overwhelming majority," Porter wrote.

The meeting was characterized by one Pullen member as "sort of like a long-tailed cat in a room with a bunch of rocking chairs."

Before the vote, members of the association adopted a statement on human sexuality, saying the blessing of a homosexual union in a Christian ceremony is "particularly offensive" because it gives approval "to that which has been specifically forbidden" in Scripture.

Debate was limited to an hour and a half and each speaker's comments were limited to three minutes. Several participants criticized the dearth of more discussion. Siler said he felt the decision was reached hastily and said he wished there would have been more "respectful debate."

"It took months for our congregation to come to their conclusion," Siler said.

Outside the meeting, some expressed concern that the highly volatile decision would strip area churches of their autonomy, long a bedrock of Baptist tradition.

"I stand with Pullen's decision to take an autonomous approach," said Jim Miller, a member of First Baptist Church in Raleigh. "I respect the fact that they made a stand."

Melissa Austin, associate pastor at Greystone Baptist Church in Raleigh, called it "a scary place for the Baptist world to be."

Siler said he did not know what the next step would be for Pullen. "As a church, we'll have to receive what actions happened and do what we think fits our vision of ministry," he said.

The general board of the Baptist Convention of North Carolina is expected to vote May 19 on a motion that would exclude Pullen and similar churches from the state convention as well.

After the associational vote, some at the meeting offered condolences and hugs to Siler.

"It's a very painful time for us," mission director McMillan said. Asked whether Pullen could regain status with the association, McMillan said, "There is opportunity for dialogue."

"I think the door is still open for us to talk."

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-- Pamela Babcock is staff writer for the Raleigh News and Observer. This story is reprinted with permission.

Sloan resigns commentary role
over 'partisan' choice for editor

By Ken Camp and Greg Warner

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Robert Sloan, one of eight consulting editors for the Sunday School Board's new inerrantist commentary, has resigned from his involvement in the commentary because, he said, the new nominee for general editor is "a partisan choice" with little Southern Baptist background.

Sloan said electing Ray Clendenen of Criswell College in Dallas as general editor of the 40-volume New American Commentary series "would promote

division rather than healing in the Southern Baptist Convention."

Clendenen is chairman of the Old Testament and Hebrew department at Criswell College, where fellow contributing editor Paige Patterson is president. He holds degrees from Dropsie College of Hebrew and Cognate Learning in Philadelphia, Dallas Theological Seminary and the University of Texas at Arlington.

Sloan, professor of New Testament at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, was a New Testament consulting editor for the commentary. He also was writing the volume on Romans.

Sloan resigned from both duties in a letter faxed to the board April 29. In the letter, he objected to Clendenen's nomination and to what he perceived as the unwillingness of the Sunday School Board administration to respond to concerns of consulting editors.

Clendenen would be the third person to serve as general editor of the inerrantist commentary, which was initiated by Sunday School Board trustees in 1987 after inerrantists complained their position was not adequately represented in the board's earlier Broadman Commentary series. Three volumes of the 40-volume commentary have been released.

If approved as general editor, Clendenen will succeed David Dockery, who will resign the Sunday School Board staff position to become dean of the school of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Aug. 1. Dockery replaced Michael Smith, who resigned in 1990 to accept a church pastorate.

Clendenen was recommended by Sunday School Board President James Draper and approved by the trustee executive committee April 23. The nomination was forwarded to the full trustee board for approval, with mail ballots due May 10.

Sloan said he discussed his concerns about the general editorship earlier in a conference call with Draper and three other consulting editors -- Curtis Vaughn of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Richard Melick of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, and Duane Garrett of Canadian Southern Baptist Seminary.

When Draper asked for reactions to his recommendation that Clendenen be nominated as general editor, Sloan said he questioned the wisdom of choosing an editor whose entire education was from non-Southern Baptist schools.

"The vision of all of us as consulting editors, going way back to 1987, was that the commentary would be built within the parameters of strong, biblical theology with writers who could subscribe to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," Sloan said.

"The stated purpose was, first, to provide a strong biblical, theological commentary for Southern Baptist pastors, teachers and students for years to come. Second, it was to showcase Baptist scholarship for the wider evangelical world.

"We all agreed that an underlying purpose was to provide a source of healing for the denomination. We would not pick people based on partisanship."

The choice of Clendenen would be perceived as partisan and contrary to the original vision of the commentary, would damage the commentary's image and would make it difficult to attract writers, Sloan continued.

After he told Draper he would have difficulty supporting his choice for general editor, Sloan said the other three consulting editors on the conference call "in different terms raised the same objections."

Draper assured the editors that Clendenen had the support of fellow consulting editors Patterson and Ken Mathews, associate professor at Beeson Divinity School at Samford University.

According to an April 24 Baptist Press story, Draper told his trustee executive committee that the consulting editors had agreed with Clendenen's nomination.

Sloan said he later learned that the general editorship already had been

offered verbally to Clendenen prior to that conference call with the consulting editors. Furthermore, a letter to the editors asking for further counsel on the choice was received the same day the trustee executive committee voted on Clendenen.

After the consulting editors expressed their desire that Dockery remain as general editor, Draper did recommend to the board's trustee executive committee that Dockery be named as one of two associate general editors.

Draper could not be reached for comment. Other board staff members who work on the commentary were unprepared to discuss the dispute over Clendenen's nomination.

Clendenen told Associated Baptist Press his position at Criswell College, an independent Baptist school, apparently was the basis for Sloan's charges of partisanship. Criswell President Paige Patterson has been a prominent leader of fundamental-conservatives in the 13-year Southern Baptist controversy.

Clendenen, a member of First Baptist Church of Dallas, discounted Patterson's role in his selection as editor. "I'm sure he had some input because all the consulting editors were consulted, but I don't believe that the initial recommendation came from him at all."

Clendenen, who is writing the commentary on Haggai and Malachi for the series, said he expects his election as editor and Sloan's resignation to have little effect on the success of the commentary series.

As for Sloan's suggestion that Clendenen does not represent Southern Baptist scholarship, Clendenen said: "It depends how you define Baptist scholarship. I am thoroughly a Baptist.... It would seem I would be somewhere in that area of Baptist scholarship."

Although Clendenen is not well known among Southern Baptists, Dockery said, "I think Ray is a good scholar and he can handle this job well."

Sloan's resignation will have no effect on the project, Dockery said, "other than we'll miss his skills." Dockery said he does not expect other writers or editors to resign.

Dockery acknowledged some observers will see the shift in editors -- from Smith to Dockery to Clendenen -- as an indication the commentary is "moving to the right" theologically. But he said, "From where I sit, nothing's changed."

"I have been assured by Dr. Draper that the original vision for the project is intact," he said, noting the commentary is intended to serve all Southern Baptists.

"I want to say how valuable Robert Sloan has been to this project from the beginning," Dockery added. "The quality of the New Testament series to this point owes a lot to the hand of Robert Sloan as a consulting editor.... I have confidence in Ray Clendenen, but also my heart bleeds over Robert Sloan's decision."

Sloan said he "agonized over the decision" to resign. "Broadman (the board's publishing arm) is doing an extensive, massive job of marketing the commentary, and it could certainly sell widely," he said. "But I had to make the decision as a matter of conscience."

Sloan said he has completed "a very rough draft" of his commentary on Romans through chapter 11 of the epistle. He plans to complete the commentary and seek another publisher.

"I've taught Romans, written about it and done extensive Romans research over the past several years. Really, Romans has been my life for the last several years, academically," he said.

Sloan, a graduate of Baylor, holds a master of divinity degree from Princeton Seminary and a doctorate from the University of Basel in Switzerland.

Evangelism, freedom linked,
Dunn tells Baptist conference

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Evangelism that overrides or ignores personal freedom is counterfeit, Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James Dunn told a Baptist gathering in Washington, D.C., May 5.

"If there is one tie that binds us Baptists together it is our conviction that one comes to Jesus Christ freely or one does not really come to Jesus Christ," he said. "One accepts the Christian faith voluntarily or not authentically."

Dunn's remarks were made at a luncheon during a national evangelism convocation sponsored by the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and co-sponsored by the American Baptist Evangelism Team, District of Columbia Baptist Convention and American Baptist Churches of the South.

Dunn told the audience that while growing up in Texas he was challenged to be a "soul winner." But, he said, that term does not appropriately describe authentic evangelism that targets whole persons.

"I've come to believe our concern is for more than 'souls' and our role is not exactly to be a 'winner.'" he said. "That 'winner' label sets up the evangelizer-evangelizee challenge."

An evangelistic focus on mere bodies with an emphasis on numbers is also inappropriate, he said. "A crowded (church) building is not necessarily a sign of effective evangelism," Dunn said.

"If you are just collecting bodies or seeking souls, that's bad news, not good news," he said.

Dunn criticized attempts to reduce evangelism to "three simple questions or four spiritual laws."

"All who have, in fact, been born again understand that the experience is more a birth than a true-false quiz," he said. "It's not like choosing a baked potato instead of french fries. We cannot objectify, depersonalize and sterilize the lively, dangerous, dynamic gospel transaction."

Approaches to evangelism that focus solely on the afterlife or earthly existence also are inadequate, he said.

"We have a message for the 'nasty now' as well as for the 'sweet bye and bye'.... If you are locked into heaven so much that you are of no earthly good or if there is no vision beyond the 1992 election this fall, that's bad news, not good news."

In the end, Dunn said, evangelism best occurs when "personally, energetically we find ourselves sharing our faith, because the essence of evangelism is sharing ourselves."

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-- By Larry Chesser

Religious freedom faces
change, say BJC attorneys

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- U.S. Supreme Court decisions in recent years are changing religious freedom in America -- and not for the better -- according to Baptist church-state specialists.

Baptist Joint Committee attorneys gave that assessment while speaking at separate forums.

Oliver Thomas, BJC general counsel, said the change could leave Americans' freedom of religion vulnerable to the whim of the majority.

Speaking May 4 to members of Associated Church Press, Thomas said if the court continues to erode First Amendment protections, some Americans will have only as much religious liberty as the majority will allow.

Thomas told the group of religion writers and editors that a 1990 court decision, Oregon Employment Division vs. Smith, has wreaked havoc on the free-exercise clause of the First Amendment. In the Smith decision, the court said that government no longer has to demonstrate a compelling state interest before it can restrict religious practice.

The high court dropped a "constitutional bombshell" virtually destroying the free-exercise clause, said Brent Walker, BJC associate general counsel, who spoke at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Ala., April 30-May 1.

"Conceding that their decision would operate to the detriment of minority religious practice, the court concluded that this was simply an 'unavoidable consequence of democratic government,'" Walker added.

In the two years since it was announced, the Smith decision has been applied in about 50 religious-liberty cases, Walker said, and religious claimants lost in nearly every instance.

Thomas said a notion that religion is a "quaint set of beliefs that you can take on and off like clothing" is one reason religious practice may not be receiving as much protection today.

"It (religion) matters to people," Thomas said. "It matters ultimately, and we should not gloss over that."

In the past, America's legal system has had flexibility, Thomas said, but today the Supreme Court deals with the country's "exploding pluralism by saying we are not going to accommodate you any more."

That philosophy is antithetical to the Bill of Rights, which was ratified as a check on democracy that acknowledged some values are so vital they must be insulated from the vagaries of the political process, Thomas said.

Thomas and Walker agreed the solution lies in the passage of a measure pending in the U.S. House of Representatives. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (H.R. 2797) would restore the pre-Smith protections for free exercise of religion.

The bill, backed by a broad-based coalition of more than 50 religious and civil-liberties organizations, has 180 House co-sponsors. RFRA is the "most significant legislation affecting religion in our lifetime," Thomas said.

But the free-exercise clause is not the only protection in peril.

The establishment clause of the First Amendment, designed to assure government neutrality toward religion, also is under assault, the attorneys said. The high court is expected to rule by July on a case that could dismantle the Jeffersonian wall separating church and state, Thomas said.

In Lee vs. Weisman, the court has been asked to adopt a weaker standard that would allow government to promote religion as long as it does so in a non-coercive manner.

Both lawyers advocated government neutrality rather than government support of religion.

"Religion and government are both better off when state leaves the churches, the synagogues, the mosques, the temples alone to pursue their ministries in accordance with their theological convictions," Walker said.

Walker said it is a shame the country must fight to maintain its first freedom at the very time it commemorates the bicentennial of the Bill of Rights.

"Instead of celebrating its vitality we are mourning its decline...", Walker said. "The irony of all this is heightened by the fact that this shift has come primarily from the pens of justices appointed with the blessing of the Religious Right, not the secular left."

"Without a strong establishment clause and a free-exercise clause

rigorously enforced, we will never have the kind of full-fledged religious liberty that our founders envisioned and our present pluralism demands," he added.

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-- By Pam Parry

Ruschlikon hires librarian after FMB freezes request

RUSCHLIKON, Switzerland (ABP) -- The Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland, has decided to hire a new librarian rather than wait to see if the Foreign Mission Board will appoint a missionary to the position.

The Foreign Mission Board put the request for a missionary-librarian on hold after FMB trustees defunded the Ruschlikon seminary late last year. According to an FMB official, no decision has been made on whether or not new missionaries can be assigned to the seminary.

Eight missionaries now serve at Ruschlikon, but four of the eight are resigning -- including President John David Hopper -- because of changes in the FMB's relationship with European Baptists, who own and operate the seminary.

Librarian Laurie Baumgardner and her husband, Joshua, had applied for appointment through the Foreign Mission Board to work at the Ruschlikon seminary. After the request was put on hold by the FMB, they were hired directly by the school.

Laurie Baumgardner became the new librarian April 15. Her husband, Joshua, is working in a variety of capacities in the seminary administration. They replace I.D. and Marie Walker, who retired.

Laurie Baumgardner holds bachelor's and master's degrees in library science and has worked as an administrator in public libraries. Joshua Baumgardner, a music graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh and son of Southern Baptist missionaries, is a pilot and flight instructor, music teacher and computer specialist.

The Baumgardners make their permanent home in Green Bay, Wis., but recently have been living and working in Miami. They were commissioned for their overseas service by First Baptist Church of Perrine, Fla., where they are members.

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-- By Greg Warner

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