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IN THIS ISSUE:

- * Sunday School Board expected to offer 188 early retirement
- * Smyth & Helwys risks \$1 million on fall debut of curriculum
- * Fellowship picks Keith Parker to head European missions program

Sunday School Board expected
to offer 188 early retirement

By Greg Warner

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Sunday School Board is expected to offer early retirement to 188 employees -- about a tenth of its work force -- as part of a reorganization and downsizing of the Southern Baptist agency.

Trustees will be asked next month to approve the plan, which will be offered to all board employees that meet certain requirements of age and length of employment.

The trustees' executive committee already has consented to the plan, which is designed to cut costs and correct what board officials admit is an overstaffed and top-heavy administration.

E. V. King, vice president for finance and administration, described the generous retirement option as "sort of a win-win situation" for both the board and eligible employees. He said the board should gain "significant" savings from the smaller payroll, but he declined to say how much until trustees hear the details.

All board employees, not just the 188 eligible, were notified of the proposal in a July 7 letter from new board President Jimmy Draper. Draper was vacationing and unavailable for comment July 14.

Since taking office last year, Draper has led in a major evaluation and restructuring of the board using an outside consultant. In June he described the reorganization, which also received endorsement from the trustee executive committee, as "an attempt to restructure the board along business lines and make us a more flexible operation."

King said the proposed early-retirement plan "is a very compassionate and reasonable way to get the organization in that position."

In June seven longtime Sunday School Board executives were forced to retire as part of the reorganization, receiving the same retirement offer now under consideration for other employees. An eighth retiree -- Ken McAnear, director of the Ridgecrest (N.C.) Baptist Conference Center -- was told he could keep his job but declined.

With 1,915 employees, including 1,318 at its Nashville headquarters, the Sunday School Board is the world's largest producer and distributor of Sunday school literature and other religious supplies. It serves most of the 38,000 churches of the Southern Baptist Convention.

To be eligible for the proposed plan, employees must be at least 52 years of age and must have worked at the board long enough to make their age and years of service total 77 years. That means a 52-year-old employee who has worked at the board at least 25 years would be eligible.

The early retirees can receive their full retirement benefits plus health insurance paid to age 65. Additionally, for those retirees under 62 years of age, the board will pay a retirement supplement or "bridge" equal to the Social Security benefits of a 62-year-old retiree. Once normal Social Security payments begin at age 62, the payments would cease.

King would not disclose how much the packages are expected to cost the board. But he did say the benefits can be paid from the board's retirement trust fund "without any negative impact."

Since the retirement offers are voluntary, King said he could not estimate how many employees will opt to retire. For planning purposes, however, projections have been prepared that assume between 30 percent and 50 percent of eligible employees accept the offers, he said. That range is "fairly typical of other organizations when they offer these programs," he said.

King acknowledged the retirement offers could be perceived by eligible employees as pressure to leave, but he added: "I certainly hope that's not the case...because they have earned these options. I'd be very surprised if that happens, because that's not the way it's usually perceived in most organizations."

King said he could not predict if the early retirements will solve the board's need to reduce staff, since personnel requirements are still under study. "We have not set any arbitrary number (of employees) that we feel we need to move toward at this time," he said.

According to Charles Willis, senior news media coordinator for the board, the benefits offered in the proposed plan are better than normal retirement benefits at age 65 and better than the board's established early-retirement plan, which is available to employees with a combination of years of service and age that totals 92 years.

Eligible employees will have 45 days to respond to the offer. Those employees who decline still will run the risk that their jobs could be eliminated in the agency's ongoing reorganization. At that point, however, the more generous retirement terms would not be available.

Under federal law, the board is required to offer the retirement packages to a defined group of employees and cannot use the plan to single out employees it wants to be rid of.

Board trustees will hear details of the plan Aug. 17-19 during their meeting at Ridgecrest, N.C.

-30-

Smyth & Helwys risks \$1 million
on fall debut of curriculum

By Marv Knox

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- More than a year of work and almost a million dollars will be at stake when Smyth & Helwys, Baptists' newest publishing house, unveils age-graded Sunday school literature this fall.

Smyth & Helwys began in the spring of 1990, intent on providing an alternative book publishing press for "thinking Baptists," said Cecil

Staton, founder and publisher.

"We assumed it would be slow and gradual," Staton recalled. "Everyone involved had full-time jobs. But then we started getting letters, phone calls and other contacts, all asking us to consider publishing Sunday school literature."

That led to a March 1991 meeting of Baptists who had been developing their own educational materials and the debut last fall of Formations, Smyth & Helwys' Bible study materials for adults.

But beginning this September, Formations is expanding to provide age-graded Sunday school curriculum for everyone from infants to adults.

Smyth & Helwys recently concluded a nationwide series of workshops designed to introduce church leaders to the new materials. Staton said about 1,600 people participated in the workshops, which were held in Atlanta, Charlotte, N.C., Fort Worth, Texas, Liberty, Mo., Louisville, Ky., and Richmond, Va.

Now Smyth & Helwys -- named for John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, who founded the modern Baptist movement in 1609 -- must wait to see if today's Baptists want the materials.

"An enormous amount of human energy and financial resources have been committed to this project over the last year and a half," Staton said. "Should we fail, it's unlikely any similar investment will be expended any time soon."

"We will spend \$1 million this year -- 90 percent of it on curriculum."

About 550 churches are using Smyth & Helwys materials, but 1,000 churches will be required to sustain the project, he estimated.

Despite popular opinion to the contrary, Smyth & Helwys does not receive funds from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Staton said.

"We are a free press and autonomous and will remain autonomous," he insisted. "Also, there is a limited amount of money for new ventures. Those limited resources should be used primarily for missions and other new ventures that have no other means of gaining financial support. We, however, have a product. If churches use Formations resources, Smyth & Helwys will thrive."

A key factor in selling churches on the new materials will be their "core curriculum approach," Staton said: "The center of Formations material always is Scripture, but around that we weave relevancy. We provide materials for developing mature Christians, such as missions, church history and especially Baptist history, theology, Christian ethics and other issues."

"This is where we break the mold from anything out there. Baptists usually have broken down their study into program units, such as Bible study in Sunday school, church history and ethics in discipleship training, and so forth."

The combined material offers a realistic approach for training Christians, Staton claimed.

"We live in 1992; most folks don't go to church three times a week," he said. "Where are we going to get church history and missions and ethics if we don't study them Sunday mornings? We're still doing Bible study, but we look at what the Bible says about these issues."

The curriculum reflects a holistic view of spiritual growth, added David Cassidy, Smyth & Helwys' managing editor for Sunday school materials and former minister of education at Buechel Park Baptist Church in Louisville.

"Faith development is more than learning Bible knowledge," he

explained. "Bible knowledge is important, but the goal of Christian education is to bring meaning and understanding."

In addition to incorporating the study of faith issues into Bible study, the new Formations material also will be graded differently, Cassady added.

"We have our own age-group divisions, which are different than many publishers," he said. For example, kindergarten and first grade are combined, and sixth grade is set off by itself.

"We put kindergarten with first grade, not because we want to rush the kindergartners, but because we want to keep from rushing the first graders," he reported. "Teachers know kindergartners and first graders think more similarly than do first and second graders.

"The same principle applies to sixth graders: They do not readily fit with youth any more than they fit with children."

The change in structure is risky, because it asks churches to change the way they organize part of their Sunday school programs, Cassady acknowledged. "But the new breakdown is the best way for children to grow in faith. It is for them that we're asking churches to make these changes."

Following that reasoning, Smyth & Helwys sponsored a childlife conference in Charlotte, N.C., earlier this year. It was the first of an ongoing program of annual conferences for Christian educators, Staton said.

Among other developments, Smyth & Helwys has sold Formations literature to about 20 Canadian Baptist churches. It also has signed an agreement with Baptists at Regents Park College at Oxford University in England to publish books jointly.

-30-

Fellowship picks Keith Parker to head European missions program

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship escalated its missions program to a new level July 1 by naming Keith Parker to head its work in Europe.

Parker, 56, will serve in essentially the same position he held with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board before he announced early retirement last January to protest changes in the FMB's missions philosophy and practice.

The 23-year missions veteran began duties as the CBF's coordinator for Europe July 1. He served as the FMB's area director for Europe from 1987 to 1992.

Parker and his wife, Jonlyn, became the fifth and sixth mission personnel hired by the CBF, which created its own missions program last January in the wake of disruptions at the Foreign Mission Board. In October 1991, FMB trustees cut all board funding for the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, because of alleged liberalism, touching off an international controversy over Baptist missions strategy.

The Atlanta-based Fellowship is on track to have at least 20 "missioners" under appointment by early 1993, according to Jimmy Allen, co-chairperson of the CBF's global missions ministry group.

The first four were named in April -- John David Hopper, president of the Ruschlikon seminary, his wife, seminary administrator Jo Ann Hopper, and Romanian missionaries Charles and Kathie Thomas. All four resigned as FMB missionaries in protest of the actions and philosophies of FMB

trustees.

Parker and his supervisor, Isam Ballenger, FMB vice president for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, announced early retirement in the wake of the Ruschlikon controversy.

The two men said they could no longer associate with the FMB because trustees have a global agenda to export the ongoing SBC controversy and to enforce their brand of theological orthodoxy overseas -- charges FMB trustees deny.

Ballenger, 57, has since become professor of missions and world religions at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (Va.) and serves as a missions consultant for the CBF, according to Allen.

Allen said Parker, operating out of an office in Thalwil, Switzerland, in the Ruschlikon area, will set up a basic organization in Europe to receive and work with any new missionaries who join CBF.

Parker added: "We will not work in competition with any other group, nor will we recruit (missionaries). We rejoice in the diversity of our Baptist heritage in America and Europe and look with excitement to God's use of the many gifts and different emphases of our new colleagues, both male and female."

Initially Parker is working part-time for the Fellowship. For the next six months he will continue to serve with a private Swiss company that is working on development projects in Eastern Europe for the European Baptist Federation and national Baptist unions in Eastern Europe.

Parker acknowledged the CBF's fledgling mission effort will be "lean," but he said he has been impressed with the sincerity and commitment of CBF leaders. "Not unlike Gideon of old, we will start out with a small but committed group of select folk who are wanted by, and will work with, European Baptists," he said.

Accompanied by two volunteer agriculturists from North Carolina, Parker already has left for Albania on a fact-finding mission for the CBF.

The trip, Allen said, is intended to "fulfill our commitment to the European Baptist Federation to assist them in opening Albania for the gospel," Allen said. "They will help evaluate ways in which we can respond appropriately to the human needs of Albanians as we share the love of Christ with them...in this time of crisis, hunger and hurt."

Allen expects a preliminary report to the CBF global missions ministry group in July and a full report by the time the CBF Coordinating Council meets in September.

The Parkers were appointed as FMB missionaries in 1969. Before becoming FMB area director for Europe, Keith Parker was a professor at the Ruschlikon seminary, where he taught pastoral care and counseling, and was associate to the area director for Europe and the Middle East. He has been a leader in the formation of European and international movements for pastoral counseling and active in developing ministries for evangelism, human need and church development.

Jonlyn Parker has also served in the seminary administration and as a social worker in the Swiss prison system.

Keith Parker received the bachelor of arts degree from Berea (Ky.) College and the bachelor of divinity and doctor of philosophy degrees from Southern Seminary. Jonlyn Parker, a native Virginian, earned the bachelor of arts degree from Kentucky Southern College in Louisville and attended Ruschlikon seminary. The couple has three grown children.