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FMB trustees take little action
but engage in tense discussion

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Approval of an interim president, an area director and 36 new missionaries topped the agenda of Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board trustees Aug. 17-19.

The three-day meeting also brought sometimes tense discussion as trustees expressed impatience with what they said was the board's slow response to new ministry opportunities in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

A number of trustees also appeared concerned by the impact of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and suspicious of FMB staff and missionaries who might be sympathetic to the moderate-conservative organization.

Elected interim president was Don Kammerdiener, the FMB's executive vice president since 1990. He will assume the position Nov. 1 and serve until a successor is found for Keith Parks, who will retire as president Oct. 30 because of philosophical differences with trustees. The committee seeking a new president is not expected to make a recommendation before December.

A 30-year veteran of foreign missions, Kammerdiener is a former missionary to Latin America who joined the board's Richmond-based staff in 1980.

Mike Stroope, 40, was named area director for Cooperative Services International, the entity which operates the FMB's non-residential missionary program in countries that will not accept missionaries. Stroope will assume the post Sept. 1 and be based in London. A native of Odessa, Texas, Stroope has been a field administrator for CSI.

A June restructuring of CSI's administration created the area director's position filled by Stroope, who will report to CSI vice president Lewis Myers.

The 36 new missionaries bring to 3,933 the total number of FMB workers serving overseas. They minister in 126 nations and carry out a witness in several dozen more.

Deploying some of that missions force in the newly opened countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has not happened rapidly enough for some trustees.

In several committee sessions, some board members decried what they said was delay in appointing new missionaries and redeploying existing ones to the region. They also lamented the low number of requests from the field for more personnel and the alleged failure to utilize the growing number of American volunteers eager to participate in short-term mission trips there.

Board staff members denied delay was motivated by any factor other than a desire to place only qualified people in a sensitive quarter of the globe. They also noted the few missionaries in the region have been inundated by volunteers and have been unable to both facilitate mission trips and carry out their own ministries.

Sam James, vice president for the board's work in Europe, told trustees he will soon assign a career missionary to work full-time with volunteers in an effort to employ their services more effectively.

One factor fueling trustee frustration is suspicion that missionaries and administrators sympathetic to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship are holding up the process.

The CBF, which was formed in 1990 by Southern Baptists dissatisfied with the current direction of the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies, launched its own missions program in Europe in January and has hired eight former FMB missionaries.

Growing concern over the CBF in general led this summer to a meeting between FMB trustees and representatives of the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union, which helps to raise a significant portion of the FMB's annual budget. Reports have circulated that the CBF has asked WMU, which is independent of convention control, to promote its missions endeavors.

FMB trustee chairman John Jackson told the board that, at WMU's request, he has agreed to meet with Cecil Sherman, coordinator of the CBF.

At that meeting, tentatively scheduled for Oct. 15, Jackson said he hopes to clarify "misconceptions" that the FMB will not appoint missionaries from CBF-affiliated churches.

It also represents an opportunity to "hold out an olive branch," Jackson added, and "will show the WMU we're willing to work with all Southern Baptists."

Trustees subsequently approved a motion endorsing the meeting and authorizing Jackson to involve other trustees in the discussions.

The chairman later reported that trustees had "repudiated the concept of prejudice in appointments" Aug. 18 when they approved the 36 new missionaries. He said the group included a couple from a church sympathetic to the CBF. "This shows that we appoint people and not churches," Jackson told trustees.

That was an apparent reference to Stephen and Pamela DeVoss, members of First Baptist Church of Norman, Okla., appointed to serve through CSI in sports-related ministries in Asia. Stephen DeVoss has been minister of youth at the Norman church since 1983.

Lavonn Brown, pastor of the church, told Associated Baptist Press the congregation has taken no official vote to align with the CBF but he said he feels "comfortable, and by far the majority of our people (at the church) would feel comfortable, with the fact that our church is a moderate one."

Brown noted that a portion of the church's world missions contributions are channeled through the Fellowship's offices in Atlanta, and Brown himself is a member of the Fellowship's Coordinating Council.

"Our church is still very supportive of Southern Baptist missionary

causes," he added, noting most of the money distributed by the Fellowship goes to fund SBC institutions and agencies.

Trustees' discomfort with the CBF emerged on several other fronts:

-- In a tense meeting of the trustee committee which oversees work in Europe, Paul Thibedeaux, a field administrator for Eastern Europe, was asked if he agreed with recent charges that the board has a "global agenda" to enforce doctrinal uniformity.

Last year the fundamentalist-dominated board eliminated funding for the Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland, alleging some professors there held liberal doctrinal views. In response, two board administrators -- Isam Ballenger, vice president for Europe, and Keith Parker, area director for Europe -- resigned in protest, citing a "fundamentalist global agenda." Both now work actively with the Fellowship, Ballenger as a consultant and Parker as coordinator for CBF missions in Europe.

Trustee uncertainty about the views of remaining FMB administrators and missionaries in Europe surfaced in the Europe committee meeting Aug. 19. In a sharp exchange with Thibedeaux, one trustee questioned the administrator's own commitment to the FMB and its trustees.

Although reporters are allowed to attend such committee meetings, they do so under background rules that prohibit direct quotes.

-- During a later "Green Alert" report to all trustees, another trustee asked similar questions of Thibedeaux. Green Alert is the board's accelerated effort to send missions personnel and assistance to the former Soviet Union. Cooperative Services International and European administrators -- including Thibedeaux -- direct the endeavor.

"Do you know if any European missionaries are considering joining the CBF?" trustee James Austin of Georgia asked Thibedeaux. "Will you personally affiliate with the CBF?"

CSI vice president Lewis Myers and board chairman Jackson headed off the questions, maintaining they were inappropriate during a Green Alert report.

-- Prior to trustee election of Stroope as area director for CSI, Bill Sutton of McAllen, Texas, asked if the candidate could "affirm" the trustees, the soon-to-be-elected board president and the convention constituency which elected the trustees. Sutton said the board has a right to expect "loyalty" from its staff.

CSI committee chairman Ron Wilson of Thousand Oaks, Calif., assured Sutton that Stroope is "very supportive of our board."

In other action:

-- Trustees asked staff to study a request from the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission for assistance in distributing television programming to stations in the former Soviet Union. RTVC president Jack Johnson told trustees TV stations there are eagerly seeking the kind of "wholesome" programming -- including televised sermons -- produced by his agency. However, the RTVC has no personnel in the region for contacting persons who may express an interest in Christianity after viewing a program. It is unclear if his proposal would involve FMB financial contributions.

-- Trustees heard a presentation from family specialist Bill Gothard concerning his projects in Russia. Gothard's Institute in Basic Life Principles, which he says transforms rebellious teenagers into model youths in a few weeks, is implementing its program in the public schools of Moscow and St. Petersburg at the invitation of government education officials, he said. He added he has undertaken similar programs with city officials in Dallas and Indianapolis and is in the midst of discussions with others in Chicago and Seattle.

-- Trustees learned that FMB staff and trustees will meet with representatives of the European Baptist Federation Sept. 11-12 in Hamburg, Germany. The discussions, approved by trustees earlier this year, are aimed at clarifying the FMB's relations with European Baptists in the wake of the defunding of the Ruschlikon seminary.

-- Trustees were told that the year-old Green Alert project will move into a second phase after Thanksgiving. A restructuring of the project's administration and requests for additional funding will be unveiled at the board's October meeting.

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New FMB president unlikely
before December, trustees told

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board is not likely to have a new president before the end of the year, the chairman of the board's presidential search committee said Aug. 19.

Joel Gregory, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, told FMB trustees following a meeting of the 15-member search committee that the panel is actively considering about 10 persons to succeed Keith Parks, who retires Oct. 30 as board president.

But interviews with candidates have not been conducted and the committee needs a "three-to-six-month corridor" of time to narrow the list and select a nominee, Gregory said. That probably rules out an announcement at the board's Oct. 12-14 meeting, although one could be made at the Dec. 7-9 meeting, he said.

He added he hoped a called meeting of trustees could be avoided because "it's so expensive."

The more than 60 nominations received by the committee have been organized into three "tiers," Gregory said. The first tier includes names for which the committee is actively seeking information and references. Nominees in the second tier are undergoing "less consideration," but are still considered viable. Third tier nominees are not being actively considered.

Gregory said about six names are included in the first tier and four in the second. He added additional nominations are welcomed and would be considered.

Gregory vigorously disputed rumors that the search committee has already settled on its choice.

"All reports that a decision has been made a priori...are absolutely false.... This committee did not have any predilection other than seeking the mind of the Lord," he said. There is no "favored candidate," he insisted.

Trustees later adopted a motion that the new president must be elected by a 75 percent margin of trustees voting. The FMB policy manual does not specify the percentage necessary for election, said Bob Clements of Austin, Texas, who made the motion.

The search committee will meet again Aug. 28-29 near the Dallas/Fort Worth airport.

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-- By Robert Dilday

FMB administrator joins
Fellowship's Europe team

THALWIL, Switzerland (ABP) -- Two more former Southern Baptist missionaries in Europe have joined the new mission effort of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

John and Revonda Deal are the seventh and eighth persons to join the CBF mission team. All eight are based in Europe and all are former appointees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

John Deal was assistant to the FMB area director for Europe, Keith Parker, who resigned from the FMB in protest last January. With the CBF, Deal will again serve as assistant to Parker, who has become CBF coordinator for missions in Europe.

The Deals, from Dothan, Ala., are 25-year veterans of foreign missions. They joined the CBF team Aug. 1.

The Foreign Mission Board's work in Europe has been in turmoil since last October, when FMB trustees cut funding for a Swiss seminary they considered liberal, igniting a storm of protest on both continents. Parker and his supervisor, regional vice president Isam Ballenger, resigned in January, saying trustees were trying to impose their brand of theological orthodoxy on European Baptists.

Trustees deny that charge and insist the FMB's approach to missions in Europe has not changed.

Also in January, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship announced it would start its own missions program and hire some dissatisfied FMB missionaries in Europe. The CBF plans to have more than 20 "missioners" serving in Europe by 1993.

In March the Deals informed the FMB that they would resign Aug. 1. "Due to the new direction of the administration of the Foreign Mission Board and its effect on missions in Europe, we can no longer represent this board," the couple said in their resignation letter. "Therefore, it is best that we leave and seek to pursue our call to missions elsewhere."

In a letter to CBF officials July 31, the Deals said they resigned without knowing if the Fellowship would offer them employment. "But CBF represented a new, beginning organization which presented an option for missions to which we agreed and saw a possible future," they wrote.

The Deals said they join the CBF "excitedly and expectantly...as we did the FMB 25 years ago."

"We are aware that not all who have learned of our plans agree with our conclusions regarding the FMB and CBF," the Deals wrote. "We allow them freedom in following the Lord's leadership. We also ask that they allow us the same."

Prior to their assignment to the FMB's Europe office in Thalwil, Switzerland, the Deals served in Malaysia, Jordan and the FMB's home office in Richmond, Va.

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-- By Greg Warner

Congressman offers resolution
for Christian heritage week

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Has the U.S. government bowed to pressures to distance itself from God and religion?

A U.S. congressman who introduced a resolution designating "America's Christian Heritage Week" believes it has. Rep. Nick Rahall, D-W.Va., introduced a resolution Aug. 11 that would designate Thanksgiving week, Nov. 22-28, as "America's Christian Heritage Week" (H.J. Res. 540).

Rahall said that America was founded to allow "oppressed peoples to have the freedom to worship as they please."

At this time in history, he said, America is witnessing emerging democracies struggle with the same "potentially politically divisive questions as our Founding Fathers" wrestled with more than 200 years ago. He said such questions include: To what extent should public schools recognize and teach religion? Should churches be exempt from general laws? To what extent should church and state be separated?

"And while we watch and wait for those emerging democracies to turn from the long-held atheism of communism to true religious freedoms, we find ourselves, with heavy hearts, watching our own government succumb to pressures to distance itself from God and religion," Rahall said.

A Baptist church-state specialist said there is nothing wrong with Congress acknowledging America's Christian "heritage" but he cautioned against government officially sponsoring religion.

Brent Walker, associate general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, said: "It's beyond dispute that Christianity has had a profound influence on our culture and its institutions. But we are not a Christian 'nation' in any formal, constitutional sense.

"Even more fundamental is our heritage of pluralism and religious liberty for everyone," Walker said. "If Mr. Rahall is serious about promoting morality and religious liberty he should start by co-sponsoring the Religious Freedom Restoration Act where his enthusiasm will do some good."

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (H.R. 2797) would restore a high standard of protection for religious practice that virtually was abandoned two years ago by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Baptist Joint Committee and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission are part of a 51-group coalition that supports RFRA.

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-- By Pam Parry

Baptist university to host
televised presidential debate

By Michael Clingenpeel

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The University of Richmond will be the site of the final televised debate between President George Bush and Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton, the Democratic nominee for president.

The debate, scheduled for Oct. 15 at 9 p.m. ET, is sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates, a non-partisan, not-for-profit corporation that sponsored the presidential and vice-presidential debates in 1988.

The University of Richmond is one of the seven educational institutions supported by the Baptist General Association of Virginia, a relationship dating to the university's founding in 1840.

University President Richard Morrill described the school's role as host, rather than sponsor, of the debate: "The university's purpose is education. The debates are a primary method of voter education." He added that the event will bring "untold national and international attention to the city, region and university."

To host the event the university's 10,000-seat basketball arena will be transformed into "a television studio," noted Morrill. The Commission on Presidential Debates will equip the elaborate set with state-of-the-art production equipment trucked to the campus for one night.

A viewing audience of 160 million people worldwide is expected to tune in to the 90-minute debate. Despite the arena's seating capacity, only about 600 seats will be used. The seats, all reserved, will be equally divided among Republicans, Democrats and financial sponsors of the debate.

Previous televised debates encountered problems with applause or other audible reactions from the audience, a problem this format is designed to avoid.

Cost of the debate, anticipated at \$400,000 to \$500,000, will be borne by a coalition of 10 to 20 sponsors enlisted by Morrill.

The university approached CPD about hosting the event on the suggestion of a student's parent. The school was selected from among 75 potential sites, Morrill said, because it had a self-contained facility, photogenic campus, and adequate financial sponsorship.

The CPD gave Morrill only four days to raise the almost half million dollars necessary to host the debate.

This is the third visit of a U.S. president to the Richmond campus. Previously Gerald Ford and Dwight Eisenhower spoke at the university.

The other two televised presidential debates will be Sept. 22 in East Lansing, Mich., and Oct. 4 at San Diego, Calif. A vice-presidential debate will be held on Sept. 29 in Louisville, Ky.

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Sunday school teacher
marks 105th birthday

By Eloise Barrow

GOLDEN CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- First Baptist Church of Golden City, Mo., was established 110 years ago. The congregation's oldest current member was born five years later.

Nellie Hunt, who recently celebrated her 105th birthday, still teaches a ladies' Sunday school class at the Missouri church.

She is a remarkable, unique woman," said her pastor, Bud Rogers. "She is knowledgeable about the Bible, the past and the present."

Rogers recalled the time Hunt tripped and fell down the stairs during construction of the current church facility; she was 96 at the time. He said she stood up, brushed herself off and said, "I'm all right. If I were an old lady, it probably would have hurt me."

Hunt spends the winter months with her two daughters, who live in New Jersey and New Mexico. She returns each summer to the Missouri home she moved into as a bride 75 years ago.

Now a widow, Hunt continues to cook and clean house. Her husband, a local businessman who brought the first electricity to Golden City, died in 1938. Still alive, however, are a 102-year-old sister and a 94-year-old brother.

Hunt said she continues to rely on God's promises in all of life's circumstances. "My daughters know when they bring me home for the summer that I will be all right," she remarked.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: ABP will cover the National Affairs Briefing in Dallas Aug. 21-22. We expect to have the first story available upon request by noon Monday, Aug. 24.

EDITOR'S NOTE: There was no ABP issue Aug. 18.

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