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Leaders reject Gregory's resignation,
seek talks with former pastor

DALLAS (ABP) -- First Baptist Church of Dallas is expected to ask Joel Gregory to withdraw his sudden resignation as pastor of the church, Southern Baptists' largest.

Gregory caught church members by surprise Sept. 30 when he resigned, citing the reluctance of Senior Pastor W. A. Criswell to leave the pulpit of First Baptist, where he has served for 48 years.

Twenty-five church leaders, including deacon leaders and committee chairmen, met Oct. 1 and voted unanimously not to accept Gregory's resignation.

The leaders also asked Gregory to meet with them to discuss the situation. Gregory told local reporters he has agreed to meet with the leaders. But the suggestion he may return as pastor is "far-fetched," he said.

"All these people are my friends I've grown to know in the last 20 months," Gregory said. "The meeting to me would be just a way of having some closure."

No date has been set.

The vote to reject Gregory's resignation will be presented to a hastily called meeting of all 250 deacons at 4 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 4. If the deacons approve the recommendation, it may be brought to church members for a vote Sunday night.

Gregory told church members during a prayer service Sept. 30 that he was resigning "immediately and irrevocably."

Gregory, 44, said the 82-year-old senior pastor had not lived up to the agreement to leave the pulpit after a short transition. The two have shared the pulpit and leadership of the 29,000-member congregation in downtown Dallas since January 1991.

Ron Harris, spokesman for the church, said the meeting between Gregory and church leaders has not been scheduled but likely will take place after Sunday, Oct. 4.

First Baptist has delayed plans to celebrate Criswell's 48th anniversary as pastor Oct. 4, Harris told ABP. Criswell will be present for the Sunday morning service but will not preach, Harris said. Instead, the service will be given mostly to prayer.

"We could program this thing, but we're trying to stay open and let God lead," Harris said. The regular live TV broadcast has been cancelled, he added.

Criswell has been approached about using the Sunday service to make a dramatic announcement that he would step aside and let Gregory seize the

reins of leadership, according to a church staff member who recently resigned.

The former minister, who asked not to be identified, said "I would be surprised" if Criswell follows through on the suggestion, however.

The former staff member said First Baptist is laboring under "an incredible financial strain" because of its indebtedness, and that financial concerns undoubtedly played a part in Gregory's surprise announcement.

"There is more here than meets the eye," the minister said. Morale among the ministerial staff has been "fairly intense and unsettling" for several months, the former staffer said. Gregory's unrealistic expectations of himself, the staff and the church had led to his frustration when substantial growth did not occur, the minister added.

Church Administrator Tim Hedquist, whom Gregory hired about a year ago, denied rumors the church's indebtedness was found to be worse than previously known. "Everything has been above the table," he said.

Gregory alluded to the church's financial struggles in an interview with the Baptist Standard of Texas.

Ambiguity over who was leading the church had prevented the congregation from facing up to its financial challenges, Gregory told the Standard Oct. 1. The purchase of a downtown office building and a new facility for the church-owned Criswell College have put financial pressure on the church, he said.

"I need to be able to challenge the congregation...to growth," he told the Standard. "But I could tell there was ambiguity and tentativeness in the situation that just created a kind of malaise. And there was just no way to sustain that for two more years."

Harris confirmed that the church's debt payments are affecting other parts of the budget. "I could see where that could be a concern" to Gregory, he said. But he said the debt service is "manageable."

"There is an indebtedness (and) there is a concern for having to deal with it," said Harris. "Something like that always puts a crunch on church programming."

Harris confirmed that the church's financial situation has come into clearer focus since administrator Hedquist joined the staff, but he added: "There was not an overwhelming revelation that took people by surprise." Harris estimated the debt at \$8 million.

Gregory, in his interview with the Baptist Standard, rejected the suggestion he might now become president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. Members of the FMB search committee, which Gregory chairs, asked earlier if they could consider him for the position but he refused, a committee member told ABP.

Few observers were willing to predict that Gregory will return to the church as pastor. The damage caused by his resignation "cannot be undone with an apology," the former staff member said. "There's no chance of his coming back without splitting that church right down the middle."

Spokesman Harris would not predict the church's action or Gregory's response, but neither would be disallow any possibility.

"We're praying that God is going to do something unusual, beyond what we could work out on our own," he told ABP.

-- By Greg Warner and Ken Camp

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