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Presidential search will set
future course of Southern

By Bill Wolfe

LOUISVILLE, Ky., (ABP) -- The choice of a new president for Southern Baptist Theological Seminary will confront the school's trustees with a critical choice, observers agree.

There is no doubt that the trustees, dominated by fundamental-conservatives, will appoint someone to the theological right of retiring President Roy Honeycutt. The new leader will surely continue -- and perhaps accelerate -- the seminary's move to a more conservative posture.

But will the new president be someone who can reach out to those in the middle -- pragmatic conservatives and moderates -- keeping peace with the faculty and preserving alumni support?

Or will the trustees choose someone with close ties to the Southern Baptist Convention's fundamental-conservative movement -- a president whose selection may drive away moderate-conservative students, teachers and administrators?

Those are the questions facing Southern following Honeycutt's surprise announcement Oct. 12 that the 66-year-old president will retire at the end of 1993, three years earlier than planned.

Whatever the outcome of the presidential search, its impact will be felt far beyond the Louisville, Ky., campus.

"The direction that Southern Seminary takes is in large measure the direction that the denomination will take," said Baptist sociologist Nancy Ammerman of Atlanta.

Southern has been the flagship institution of the Southern Baptist Convention for more than a century, said Ammerman, who directs the Baptist studies center at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta. Graduates of the 133-year-old school control the pulpits of churches throughout the country but particularly in the Southeast.

Since 1979, control of the denomination has been held by fundamental-conservatives who believe in biblical inerrancy -- that the Bible is literal truth, accurate in matters of science and history. They insist that only inerrancy be taught at seminaries.

Moderate-conservatives contend that individuals must be free to form their own interpretations of Scripture and resist what they consider to be rigid theological control at the seminaries.

Pragmatic conservatives, who want Southern's transformation to be steady and gradual, appear to control the board and the selection process. But the more dogmatic faction of the board may yet have enough influence to force a dramatic break with the past. The trustees hope to name Honeycutt's successor at their meeting next April.

Health apparently was not a factor in Honeycutt's decision to retire early. Although he underwent quadruple heart-bypass surgery two years ago, Honeycutt now claims good health.

Trustees insist -- and Honeycutt concurs -- that he was under no board pressure to leave. Louisville businessman John Michael, a trustee who sometimes has been at odds with Honeycutt, said the president "has won the trust and respect of the trustees.... He could have stayed as long as he wanted to."

Ammerman said Honeycutt has worked hard in recent years to provide incoming conservative trustees with a "middle ground that would please them and still maintain what Honeycutt could feel was an academically viable seminary."

Now Honeycutt may be less sure that such an approach "can continue to be a viable strategy (or) at least (a strategy) that he can pull off," Ammerman said.

Other seminary observers say they believe the president's account of his decision -- that retirement next year will help ensure a smooth transition and a responsible selection for Southern's ninth president.

"I really do take Dr. Honeycutt at his word," said Gerald Keown, president of Southern's Faculty Association. He noted that Wayne Allen, trustee chairman, will leave the board next summer as his second five-year term expires.

Honeycutt, who enjoys a close friendship with Allen despite theological differences with the conservative Tennessee pastor, may enjoy less influence with Allen's successor in choosing the next president.

"I think that Roy's resignation illustrates the volatility of the board of trustees at Southern," said Bill Leonard, chairman of the religion department at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. and a former church-history professor at Southern who left in part because of the seminary's rightward drift.

"In all probability, he felt he should resign in order to get as stable a board, as stable a search committee, as he possibly could," Leonard said.

Leonard views the trustees as divided between "moderate fundamentalists" and "militant fundamentalists" -- a situation mirrored throughout the Southern Baptist Convention.

"What we are seeing is that boards of trustees that were supposed to develop a fundamentalist center don't have a center at all," Leonard said. "The board at Southern is as fragmented now as it was when it was moderates against fundamentalists."

While the new president will be a conservative, he added, "how intense and how radical that conservatism is will depend on which side of the present board prevails."

Some on the board, however, reject the notion of deep divisions there.

"We have factions," said trustee P. A. Stevens of Louisville, but "I don't think the sides are there like they used to be.... We're reconciled to each other a lot better than I ever thought we would be."

Some seminary observers say the seven-member committee Allen appointed to search for a president is dominated by the more pragmatic conservatives

who hope to move Southern peacefully to the right. Allen doesn't hide his hope for the new president.

"I wish we could find another Dr. Honeycutt," he said. "We're still a community in transition. To maintain a cohesive spirit among all the constituencies, I think, will be prime."

Allen said the next president must be a Southern Baptist with a doctoral degree, a "strong commitment to conservative evangelical scholarship," recognized leadership in Southern Baptist churches or agencies, skills in fund raising and superb communication skills.

Among those frequently mentioned as possible successors are:

-- Mark Coppenger, 44, vice president for convention relations for the SBC Executive Committee. A former Southern trustee, he has criticized the seminary for being too liberal and alienated some at the school.

-- David Dockery, 39, dean of Southern's School of Theology. Although highly regarded by both sides, he has been in his current position less than four months.

-- Timothy George, 42, a former Southern professor and now founding dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. Viewed by many as a front-runner to succeed Honeycutt, he is conservative theologically but not considered a fundamentalist.

-- Ken Hemphill, 44, a former Virginia pastor and Southern graduate. He recently took a church-growth position jointly sponsored by the SBC Sunday School Board and Home Mission Board. Some say he has not been involved enough in the fundamental-conservative movement to get the Southern post.

-- Richard Land, 45, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission in Nashville, Tenn., who has strong ties to the political Religious Right. Though not a graduate of Southern, he is the favorite choice of many fundamental-conservatives.

-- Albert Mohler Jr., 33, editor of The Christian Index, the state Baptist newspaper of Georgia. A denominational insider, he is viewed as conservative but not radical. Although a Southern graduate and former fundraiser for the seminary, his youth and lack of classroom experience are considered drawbacks.

-- Adrian Rogers, 61, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis, Tenn. One of the most influential leaders in the fundamental-conservative movement, he was elected SBC president three times. A frequent critic of SBC seminaries, he holds a degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Unassailable conservative credentials will be essential for the new president, said Jerry Johnson, a fundamental-conservative trustee from Aurora, Colo. The next president must be "someone who has no problem with the concept of inerrancy or the direction the convention has been going."

"I think that's essential because the seminary is moving in the direction of the convention," Johnson said. A president who doesn't wholeheartedly support the new direction will face an uphill battle, he said.

Chairman Allen said the trustees will seek advice from all quarters -- faculty, students and alumni -- in developing a profile for the next president. The profile will be complete by Dec. 18, when final applications for the post will be accepted.

Whoever is selected president, independent-minded Southern Baptists are unlikely to set aside their arguments, Allen said. "If we could call Jesus Christ to be president," he said, "there would still be people who didn't like" the choice.

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-- Bill Wolfe is religion writer for the Louisville Courier-Journal. This story is reprinted with permission.

Critics see threat to religion
in proposed Albanian law

By Greg Warner

TIRANA, Albania (ABP) -- A new law under consideration in Albania may restrict religion and hinder the pioneering work of Baptist missionaries in the former atheistic country, critics charge.

But other observers say the proposed legislation represents some progress in a country which outlawed religion until recently.

The legislation, which was being circulated in the Albanian parliament in late October, reportedly grants favored status to four established religions but requires all others to seek recognition from a religious council.

The four "traditional religious communities" are Islam, the Bektashi branch of Islam, Roman Catholicism and the Albanian Orthodox church. All others, including Baptists and evangelicals, would have to have signatures from 100 Albanian adherents to receive government recognition.

That could hinder the work of Chris and Mairi Burnett, who in September became the first Baptist missionaries in Albania, one of the few European countries without a Baptist witness. The Burnetts are under appointment of the European Baptist Federation through the Baptist Missionary Society of England.

Two American missionary organizations -- the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- plan to place missionaries in the country soon to work with the Burnetts and EBF.

The village-development program undertaken by EBF missionaries focuses on agricultural, educational and medical projects, as well as church planting, in Albania, which is located on the Adriatic Sea between Greece and the former Yugoslavia.

But the proposed Law Regarding Religious Communities may pose a threat to those missionary efforts and the fledgling evangelical community in Albania, observers say.

"We are all quite anxious about this," reported Keith Parker, who helped open Baptist work in the country and now directs European missions for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

"It does not forbid Christianity or the freedom of religion, but it is a definite disadvantage to evangelicals and others that are trying to do mission work in there," he said. "It would appear, if not to stop them, to restrict them."

Others gave the proposed law an even more ominous reading.

James Wood, president of the Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, said the law would virtually deny religious liberty to Albanians by restricting their right to disseminate their faith.

"The role of government in religious affairs would, in effect, place all religious communities in a subordinate role to the state and dependent on the state for its approval and their existence," said Wood, who wrote the Albanian ministry of foreign affairs Oct. 20 representing the International Academy for Freedom of Religion and Belief, which he serves as a director.

The law's provision requiring Albanian leadership of all religious groups and prohibiting aid from outside the country would "virtually prohibit the formation of new religious communities in Albania," Wood wrote in his letter.

Wood, who visited Albania recently, said the proposed law threatens the EBF's village-development program because it states religious groups "can

carry out social, cultural and religious activities on condition they serve only religious aims."

Albania's ambassador to the United States disagreed with Wood on the law's effects.

Although drafted by the government, the proposed law would create a Council of Ministers to govern religious affairs, said Ambassador Roland Bimo.

"The concept will be that the matter of religion will be handled by the religious community, not the government," he explained. "This is the basic principle of the law."

"The government does not interfere any more in the matters of religion," he told Associated Baptist Press.

Once considered the most closed of Europe's communist countries, Albania was officially declared an atheist state by its communist rulers. The communist government fell in 1991 and was replaced by a democratic government last spring.

According to the EBF, 70 percent of Albania's 3.5 million people are Muslim, 20 percent are Orthodox and 10 percent are Roman Catholic. There are an estimated 100 evangelical or Protestant Christians in 30 congregations or house churches.

Government committees monitoring religion were once common in Europe's communist countries. To some, Albania's plan is more reminiscent of those communist regimes than Europe's new democracies.

But Parker of the CBF said the proposed law, though not ideal, represents progress in a country that only recently opened the door to religion. "When you're coming from below zero and you get up to zero, that's something," he said.

Despite the proposed legislation, Parker said many government leaders are basically committed to religious freedom.

He predicted the EBF will be able to go on with its work even under the scrutiny of the proposed Council of Ministers. "We could live with that committee, although it wouldn't be our ideal," he said.

Parker said the EBF has received encouragement from government leaders, including Rudolf Marku, one of two Albanian leaders to whom Wood's letter was addressed. Marku attended the September ceremony opening the EBF office in the capital city of Tirana and expressed gratitude for the presence of Baptists in the country.

Parker predicted the religious groups that have fostered good relations with the government will not be hindered by the law. Those who have tried to circumvent the government or have worked underground "probably will have more problems," he said.

Ambassador Bimo, who said he was surprised by opposition to the proposed law, said he would seek more information about it. Comments from critics may lead to changes, he suggested.

The parliament will consider the legislation "very, very shortly," Bimo said, beginning in early November.

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Joel Gregory 'high on the list'
to follow Chapman in Wichita Falls

WICHITA FALLS (ABP) -- Joel Gregory, who resigned suddenly as pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas Sept. 30, is preaching temporarily in the former pulpit of the Southern Baptist Convention's new executive, Morris

Chapman, and is a candidate to succeed Chapman as pastor.

The church is First Baptist of Wichita Falls, Texas, where Chapman served for 13 years before becoming president and treasurer of the SBC Executive Committee in September.

"We are considering Joel, but he's only one of about 60 other people," said Harold Warren, chairman of the search committee in Wichita Falls, about 120 miles northwest of Dallas.

Warren said the committee has not talked to Gregory about the opening, but he added, "He's high on the list."

Gregory has kept a low profile since resigning from First Baptist of Dallas -- Southern Baptists' largest church -- in a dispute with senior pastor W. A. Criswell over who would lead the 28,000-member congregation. In late September he said he planned to "rest and see what opens up."

Gregory preached both the Sunday morning and evening services at the 8,000-member Wichita Falls church Oct. 18. He is scheduled to repeat those duties for the next two Sundays.

Warren said he spoke to Gregory after he preached Oct. 18 but only to ask him to recommend other potential pastors for the church.

Rumors that First Baptist had already hired Gregory were rampant in Wichita Falls, Warren said, as well as other parts of the country. Warren said Oct. 21 he planned to tell the congregation that night that the rumor was untrue.

Warren said he was surprised how quickly the rumor about Gregory's hiring had spread. "A man told me today we had already called him (as pastor), and I liked to never convince him we hadn't," Warren reported.

Although the committee has been working only a month, Warren suggested it may move quickly. "We may be able to announce something before long," he said.

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-- By Greg Warner

Richmond seminary likely to add trustees from supporting groups

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond likely will grant representation on its board of trustees to three Baptist groups that fund the new school.

During their meeting Oct. 19-20, trustees of the seminary authorized President Thomas Graves to negotiate with the Baptist conventions in Virginia and North Carolina, as well as with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, about possible representation on the BTSR board.

The Baptist General Association of Virginia in November will consider a proposal to make BTSR a "shared ministry," with the BGAV nominating one or more trustees for the seminary board in recognition of providing financial support. Last spring the seminary invited Virginia Baptists to have official representation on the board.

The seminary has received \$25,000 in financial support from the Virginia association in 1992 and is expected to receive more in 1993.

Trustees of BTSR also agreed to pursue similar relationships with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Both organizations have discussed more formal ties with the school. The Fellowship is the seminary's largest supporter.

The seminary was founded by the Alliance of Baptists and has attracted the support of moderate-conservatives displeased with the direction of

theological education in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Graves reported to the board on the seminary's growth since April, which included the addition of three new faculty members, enrollment of 55 new students for a total of 86, and expansion into larger facilities on the campus of Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond.

"We are here to stay," Graves said. "The issue now is how well we are enabled to do our job. We must enlarge our base of support."

Graves affirmed the seminary's need to broaden its base of support. "I am willing to work with all Baptists who are willing to work with all Baptists," he said.

Trustees also approved new cooperative relationships with two educational institutions. Regent's Park College of Oxford University will accept one student annually from BTSR as an Oxford Scholar. BTSR also will become a sponsoring institution of the Appalachian Ministries Educational Resource Center in Berea, Ky., which will provide ministerial internships and classes for BTSR students.

In other business, the board approved:

-- Addition of elected faculty positions in Old Testament, Christian ministry, and pastoral care for the 1993-94 academic year;

-- Plans for an annual fund drive, a President's Club for donors of \$5,000 or more, and the Morris Ashcraft Legacy Society, honoring the seminary's first provisional president, for persons including the seminary in their wills; and

-- Appointment of a trustee long-range planning committee.

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-- By Beth McMahon

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CORRECTION: In the Oct. 15 ABP story "FMB-CBF dialogue shows...", please change February to March in the 13th paragraph.

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