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FMB vice president resigns,  
cites 'growing conformity'

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Citing a "growing tendency toward control and conformity" by trustees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, missions veteran Betty Law announced Oct. 22 she will retire as the board's vice president for the Americas.

Law, who turns 64 next month, will leave her post Jan. 15 -- "earlier than I had originally intended" -- she announced in a letter to President Keith Parks, who will himself retire Oct. 31 for many of the same reasons.

The trustee who supervises Law's area of work denied he and his colleagues are attempting to impose greater control and conformity on FMB staff and missionaries.

Law, the first and only female to serve as an FMB vice president, has held her position since 1990.

Copies of her resignation letter were sent to trustees on the board's Americas committee and to the approximately 1,350 missionaries in the region, which comprises Canada, Central and South America and the Caribbean.

Because of recent changes in board philosophy and attitude, Law wrote, "I do not feel I can, with integrity, continue to serve as vice president...."

"I cannot, as I have in the past, support and defend the actions, directions and views of the trustees or fairly interpret these to the missionaries and staff in the Americas region and to Southern Baptists as I speak about our foreign mission work."

Law is the second of the board's five regional vice presidents this year to step down earlier than planned. Isam Ballenger resigned in January as vice president for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, claiming trustees' defunding of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland, indicated a global "fundamentalist" agenda.

The defunding, which trustees said was provoked by the seminary's alleged liberal theology, was cited by a number of other FMB administrators and missionaries in Europe who also have resigned in protest this year.

But Law's early retirement appears motivated by more general philosophical concerns.

Her resignation comments apparently reflect rising discontent among regional administrators outside Europe with what some observers say is the

trustees' inclination to impose viewpoints on Baptists overseas without prior consultation and trustees' growing emphasis on mission volunteers at the expense of career missionaries.

"In the past, the Foreign Mission Board has focused on the career missionary and partnership with nationals in the countries....," she wrote in her letter. "This philosophy of work has been effective and given unusual strength, stability and growth worldwide. Now this focus is shifting to meeting the needs of our own constituency rather than the needs as indicated from the field...."

"There is a growing tendency toward control and conformity," she added. "In my service with the Foreign Mission Board, I have worked with Baptists in other countries who have a deep faith. They do not have to express their faith in the same way as I do as a Southern Baptist, or be Southern Baptists, for me to serve with them, learn from them and be inspired and challenged by them."

Law warned of growing intolerance among trustees, an attitude she contrasted to past openness. "In your (Parks') administration there has been trust and confidence in missionaries and staff," she wrote. "You have allowed us the freedom to disagree and to work toward changes without penalty."

"Now I see a move toward expecting allegiance and compliance without room for differences of opinion. In recent months, for the first time in my experience with the Foreign Mission Board, there has been suspicion and distrust of missionaries and staff."

In a cover letter to trustees on the Americas committee, Law said her observations of board actions during the past few months convinced her that "many of the trustees and I come from different perspectives. Perhaps we even understand words in different ways. We certainly see from a different point of view the impact that the directions and decisions (made during those months) have on the missionaries and the work worldwide."

"For this reason, I do not feel I can continue to represent the decisions and directions of the board, and that is a very vital part of my responsibility as regional vice president."

Omar Pachecano, chairman of the Americas committee, said Oct. 26 he regretted Law's resignation, adding, "I have tremendous respect for this lady."

But he said he could not agree with her perception that trustees are attempting to impose greater control and conformity on staff and missionaries.

"I have never seen trustees as people who micromanage," said Pachecano, a director of associational missions in El Paso, Texas. "I've never tried to tell her, 'This is what I want you to do.'"

Nor has he seen evidence of "arm-twisting" of trustees by other board members to vote a certain way, he said. "I just don't see that on this board," he insisted.

Law holds the highest administrative post of any woman at the Foreign Mission Board. At her election in 1990, some trustees raised concerns about naming a woman to a vice presidential spot, and two trustees voted against her.

The widow of a Southern Baptist missionary, she and her husband served for 25 years in Cuba and Spain until his death in 1980. For nine years after that she was the board's associate area director for Spanish South America, which comprises all the continent's nations except Brazil, French Guiana, Guyana and Suriname.

In her letter, Law did not specify what her future plans may entail. Some staff and missionaries who have left the board subsequently were employed by the moderate-conservative Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and are

participating in its emerging missions program.

"My call to missions is stronger today than when, as a college junior, I made a lifetime commitment...", said Law. "I am confident that (God) will continue to open doors of mission service in the future."

She declined to elaborate on her remarks, saying the letter is an accurate representation of her views. However, she emphasized to ABP, "I have no plans for the future."

Law has recommended to trustees that they not immediately elect her successor, since Parks will retire Oct. 31 as FMB president and the board voted earlier this month to consider the feasibility of hiring an outside consultant to study the agency's organizational structure.

"I believe it will cause less trauma on the field if you wait until a president is in place and the organizational structure is determined, thus avoiding possible changes," she said in her cover letter to trustees.

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Changes in FMB philosophy prompted  
retirement, Parks tells missionaries

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Despite reports to the contrary, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board is undergoing significant changes in philosophy and methodology, according to retiring board President Keith Parks, who said those changes influenced his decision to retire earlier than planned.

Parks explained his decision to retire in an Oct. 23 letter to the 3,900 FMB missionaries he supervises.

Trustees have replaced mission principles with "ultra-conservative" theology in decision-making, Parks wrote, and stepped up scrutiny of new missionaries and staff members. The result is an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust and an expectation of conformity at the FMB, he said.

Parks' letter -- copies of which were sent Oct. 26 to trustees, Baptist leaders and Baptist news outlets -- is an attempt to "explain to you more adequately" his reasons for stepping down Oct. 31, he told the missionaries.

Parks' comments come on the heels of recent assurances from trustees and some staff members that the conservative shift in the Southern Baptist Convention has had little influence in defining the FMB's current direction. Three trustees and two staff members repeated those assurances Oct. 15 at a meeting in Charlotte, N.C., with representatives of the moderate-conservative Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

But in his letter, Parks disagreed, citing "a few of the changes I see":

-- "A very large percentage" of Bible-believing Southern Baptists are excluded from service as trustees at SBC agencies by the denomination's new leaders.

-- "Ultra-conservative theological interpretations," not mission principles, are driving trustee decisions.

-- "Suspicion, distrust, criticism and intimidation" have replaced trust and respect for differences.

-- "Freedom to disagree has been replaced by expectation of conformity."

-- With fewer career missionaries seeking appointment, the trustees' increased emphasis on using volunteers is creating "an imbalance overseas."

-- Trustees are increasingly involving themselves in FMB administrative decisions for which they lack "time, expertise, knowledge or experience."

-- Pressure on the FMB news staff to report only "positive" news

threatens the staff's credibility.

-- Prospective staff members are asked to express loyalty to the trustees or the SBC "conservative resurgence."

-- Prospective missionaries are asked to affirm the four examples of biblical inerrancy cited in the SBC Peace Committee report.

-- "Many fine (missionary) candidates" are not pursuing appointment because they disagree with changes at the FMB.

"I feel we are missing the best that God had for us," he lamented. "Southern Baptists should be marching through God's door of opportunity as a united, loving, obedient people of God. May God forgive us and have mercy on us!"

However, trustee chairman John Jackson disputed Parks' charges, saying, "Trustees would disagree with most of his allegations."

In his letter, the 65-year-old Parks acknowledged there is confusion over the reasons for his sudden retirement, three years earlier than planned.

During an August 1991 board meeting, Parks told trustees he felt God was leading him to remain president until 1995 to carry out a vision of expanded Christian witness in newly-open Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

But seven months later, at a March 1992 spiritual retreat with trustees, Parks again cited God's leading in announcing he would retire Oct. 31. He subsequently cited "philosophical differences" with trustees as contributing to the decision.

Why would Parks say God was leading him to stay till 1995 and later say it was God's will that he retire in 1992? The answer, Parks said in his letter, is that the board never affirmed his leadership through 1995, and some trustees publicly opposed it.

Parks said trustee response to his August 1991 vision for the FMB and his desire to stay three more years "seemed designed to discredit the concepts, encourage my retirement and focus on other trustee concerns," he wrote.

Parks' tenure, rather than his evangelistic vision, became the focus of trustee attention, he added. "It was indicated that I might be allowed to stay if I would affirm the trustees and the 'conservative resurgence.' It became evident that I would not be allowed to fulfill my role as president without restrictions and hindrances.

"It was stated that 60 percent of the board members' would vote for me to stay. But in board meetings in August, October, December, February and April, as well as the retreat in March, every effort to vote on affirming my leadership until 1995 was delayed or ruled out of order. The supportive trustees never forced the issue."

It was during the March retreat, he said, that "the Lord impressed me that if I was not going to be affirmed to lead, then my staying would be a hindrance to missions and just a marking of time."

But Bill Hancock, trustee chairman at the time, told Associated Baptist Press Oct. 27 the trustees never had a chance to vote to affirm Parks.

Hancock confirmed he told Parks that a majority of trustees were prepared to vote in March for him to stay. Hancock said that vote would properly have come at the trustees' regular meeting a month later, however, not during an informal prayer retreat. Parks announced his decision before the vote could be taken, Hancock said.

As for the timing of Parks' letter -- one week after the trustees met -- Parks told ABP he waited until after the Oct. 12-14 trustee meeting in order to keep the meeting's agenda from focusing on the letter. He also hoped to protect staff from trustee anger by sending a letter rather than communicating through board publications.

"I decided that if I used any official organs of the board that the

trustees would be unhappy with whatever staff was involved. And I decided if I sent it before the (October) board meeting, trustees would spend time reprimanding staff for whatever part they played in it, discussing it word for word, and it would consume the agenda of the meeting. I didn't want to expose the rest of the staff to that kind of treatment."

He also denied the letter was primarily a reaction to comments reported from the Charlotte meeting between FMB and Fellowship representatives.

However, he added, "I was intrigued -- at least -- by the fact that comments made in the meeting referencing me were certainly not what I would agree with."

Trustee chairman John Jackson took issue with Parks' comments in a statement released through the Foreign Mission Board and made available to Associated Baptist Press.

"I strongly disagree with the conclusions regarding philosophical differences found in (Parks') letter," said Jackson, a Fairfield, Calif., pastor. "I have no desire to attack Dr. Parks, but I do know the heart of trustees and feel compelled to defend them.... Trustees would disagree with most of his allegations."

Jackson said most of Parks' 10 examples of disruptive change "were never discussed with trustees."

"In addition," Jackson continued, "when discussion did take place, any negative view (from trustees) was exploited or labeled as the controversy weaving its way into board affairs."

Although missionaries and other Southern Baptists are not told of philosophical disagreements among FMB administrators, Jackson said, "if one trustee voices a negative opinion, it is trumpeted as if all trustees have voted."

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-- Greg Warner contributed to this story

Did FMB trustees affirm Parks?  
Former chairman, president disagree

By Greg Warner

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Did the trustees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board affirm the leadership of Keith Parks as board president?

Parks says no. Former trustee chairman Bill Hancock says yes.

Parks says he gave up plans to continue as FMB president till 1995 because trustees never agreed he should stay that long.

Hancock says trustees did affirm Parks' leadership, though not his specific plan to stay until 1995. They would have done that too, he said, but they were never given the chance.

Wrong, says Parks. Trustees had the chance to affirm his plan during six trustee meetings over nine months, but "every effort to vote on affirming my leadership until 1995 was delayed or ruled out of order."

Since the 65-year-old Parks announced in March that he would retire at the end of October, trustees have insisted his departure wasn't necessary.

But in a letter to missionaries one week before he left the post -- and an earlier letter to chairman Hancock -- Parks insisted he did not have the support of trustees to lead the Foreign Mission Board, the largest missionary-sending agency in Christendom.

Parks warned the FMB's 3,900 missionaries that trustees have replaced proven mission principles with "ultra-conservative" theology in decision-

making and have stepped up scrutiny of new missionaries and staff members. The result is an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust and an expectation of conformity at the FMB, he wrote.

Trustees deny those changes have taken place at the FMB, which in recent years has come under the control of Southern Baptist fundamental-conservatives.

The dispute over Parks' leadership has been brewing at the FMB for several years but came to a head in August 1991, when Parks revealed his vision for the Foreign Mission Board's future. Continuity of leadership was critical to the plan's success, he said at the time, and he asked the trustees to affirm his leadership until 1995.

Trustees agreed to study the request but gave him no vote of confidence. Seven months later, after again asking trustees to settle the issue of his tenure, Parks announced after a prayer retreat with trustees that God was leading him to leave.

In his Oct. 23 letter to missionaries, Parks asked himself the question many Southern Baptists have asked in recent months: "Why did you say it was God's will to lead until 1995 and then a few months later say it was God's will to retire in 1992?"

The answer, Parks said in his letter, is that the board never affirmed his leadership through 1995, and some trustees publicly opposed it.

Although he had been told by trustees that a majority of board members would vote for him to stay, Parks said, "the supportive trustees never forced the issue" during meetings in August, October, December, February, March and April.

But former chairman Hancock, pastor of Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., told Associated Baptist Press Oct. 27 that trustees did affirm Parks in February.

On Feb. 10, the first day of a three-day meeting, trustees met privately with Parks and emerged with a statement affirming him and his seven mission principles but not the specific plan to stay until 1995.

Many staff members and trustees were "clicking their heels" that a conflict had been avoided with Parks, Hancock recalled, "and some of us told him he needed to affirm what the trustees had done."

Two days later, in his report to the board, Parks acknowledged the trustees' contributions to the FMB but not the specific direction in which they were leading the agency. He called on trustees to settle the issue of his tenure once and for all.

"I felt the trustees affirmed him and worked with him to get an extension," Hancock recalled, "(but) they did not get the proper affirmation from him."

Instead of voting on Parks' tenure in February, the 90-member board scheduled the March prayer retreat in Texas to deal with the issue. After that closed-door, two-day meeting, Parks announced God was leading him to retire in October.

Hancock insists Parks overreacted.

In a recent letter about Parks to a Kentucky pastor, Hancock said "a minimum of 70 trustees were committed to vote for his extension through 1995 in the March 19-20, 1992, meeting in Texas."

"In that meeting, Dr. Parks strongly implied the Lord was leading him to retire," Hancock wrote Sept. 30 to Bob DeFoor, pastor of Harrodsburg (Ky.) Baptist Church. "I, along with other trustees, personally appealed to him not to retire or resign. The trustees never had opportunity to vote."

Parks disagreed. After receiving a copy of the DeFoor letter from Hancock, Parks responded to his former chairman, saying he was "totally and completely perplexed" by Hancock's account. "I would have to take issue with

your statement that the trustees never had opportunity to vote," Parks wrote.

"If there were 70 trustees ready to affirm," Parks wrote, "I simply ask you why they didn't do it at the first of the meeting when \_\_\_\_\_ asked for a vote?"

The name of the trustee making the motion to affirm Parks during the closed-door session was deleted by Parks in copies of his letter sent to all trustees Oct. 22. Parks sent trustees copies of Hancock's letter to DeFoor and his response to Hancock, but he deleted the names of both men.

Parks declined Oct. 26 to identify the men to ABP, saying he didn't want to focus on the individual trustee but only on the letter as representative of trustee sentiment. However, Hancock and DeFoor both confirmed the letters to ABP.

Parks' letter outlined six opportunities during recent board meetings when supportive trustees could have insisted on a clear statement of affirmation for the president, including two times such a motion was made but deferred.

Although Hancock's letter said at least 70 trustees were committed to vote in March, he told ABP Oct. 27 that would not have been proper during an informal prayer retreat. Such a vote would properly have come at the trustees' regular business meeting a month later, Hancock said, but Parks announced his decision to retire before the vote could be taken.

In his letter to missionaries, Parks said the trustees' avoidance of a vote was viewed by many as an "intentional maneuver" by trustees opposed to his presidency.

"Whether they had the majority of the votes or not, we'll never know," he wrote Hancock. "They did control the agenda. Neither you nor any of the supposed 60 percent (of supportive trustees) ever insisted on voting."

During the retreat, Parks said, he received a fax that quoted a "prominent trustee" who publicly predicted that Parks would be affirmed at the March retreat but "on my way out" by the summer. That and other developments convinced Parks the issue of his tenure would remain unsettled, he said. "Under the circumstances, I decided to retire as soon as possible and free the board to find a person they could trust."

Hancock complained that while Parks made no mention of philosophical differences with trustees when he announced his intention to retire, he cited those differences when he later told reporters and staff members at the FMB's Richmond headquarters about his decision.

"What you say in Texas ought to be what you say in Richmond," charged Hancock.

Hancock told ABP Parks hurt his chances of remaining as president until 1995 by not soliciting the support of trustee leaders before unveiling his vision and his request to the full trustee board in August 1991.

The former chairman said he met with Parks three times prior to the August meeting to discuss the president's future and try "to work out a plan whereby he could stay."

But Parks never revealed his desire to remain until 1995, Hancock said. Hancock found out about Parks' plan when everyone else did, he said, "when he stood and gave his vision" in the August meeting. "There was improper communication for a continued relationship," Hancock said.

"I would like to have known that before walking into that meeting," the former chairman said. "The communications would have made a lot of difference."

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-- Robert Dilday contributed to this story

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