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Southern trustees to vote
on buyout for Simmons

By Greg Warner

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Trustees of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary will be asked to buy out the contract of ethics professor Paul Simmons rather than face a showdown with those who want him fired.

A special meeting of trustees will be held Tuesday, Dec. 15, in Atlanta, during which trustees reportedly will hear a recommendation from their academic personnel committee regarding Simmons.

Trustee sources said the board will be asked to approve a proposal to pay Simmons an undisclosed amount to leave his position as professor of Christian ethics.

The 56-year-old Simmons, who has taught at Southern since 1969, has been the target of criticism from conservative trustees for years because of his support of abortion rights and his views on homosexuality.

The buyout proposal faces stiff opposition, however, from conservative trustees who want formal heresy charges brought against Simmons. And trustees apparently have no assurance Simmons will accept the buyout if approved.

Simmons told Associated Baptist Press Dec. 10 that he has not agreed to a buyout but that he is willing to listen.

As a full professor with tenure, Simmons could be fired only for violating his contract or teaching contrary to the seminary's doctrinal statement.

During their last meeting in October, trustees met behind closed doors for two hours to discuss possible charges against Simmons. No action was reported and Simmons' future remained unclear.

Trustees earlier had rejected a buyout plan negotiated between Simmons and seminary president Roy Honeycutt. But the move to end the dispute quickly has taken on new impetus since Honeycutt announced in October that he will retire at the end of 1993.

Trustees hope to elect Honeycutt's successor at their annual meeting in April. Dismissal procedures for Simmons, which would involve formal charges and hearings, could drag on longer, which some trustees fear would taint the administration of a new president.

Other trustees are opposed to any buyout of Simmons' contract, however. "Are we going to use this approach with anybody that the school has

trouble with?" asked trustee Jerry Johnson, a pastor in Aurora, Colo.

"I feel making a decision based on a new president is the wrong thing," said Johnson, who serves on the academic personnel committee. "The kind of president we want would not be scared about doing the right thing (concerning Simmons). We need to either keep him on or fire him. The kind of guy we want (for president) might be scared off by us doing the wrong thing. If the right guy sees us throwing money at a problem, he might be hesitant."

Trustee chairman Wayne Allen, who called the Dec. 15 meeting, declined to comment on the meeting or any action under consideration by trustees.

Simmons said he had not received any notification of a possible buyout, or of the trustee meeting for that matter. "All I know is what I'm getting from the rumor mill," he told ABP.

Asked about a possible package, he said: "I don't know what it would be. The last we heard was they turned down a (buyout) proposal Roy (Honeycutt) put forward and had nothing to offer in return. So I said, 'Let's move on and have hearings.'"

According to trustee sources, the earlier agreement rejected by trustees offered Simmons a severance package estimated at up to \$650,000.

The size of the new offer is not known, but Johnson and other trustees said it is less than the original.

"I'm open to listen to what they've got to offer," Simmons said. "But it's got to be acceptable. We're determined not to go away empty-handed or humiliated."

"Right now, I'm just waiting -- again."

Trustee Johnson said offering to buy out Simmons' contract "is doing him wrong." To offer the professor a deal without holding dismissal hearings and allowing Simmons to defend himself is "tantamount to harassment," he said. "Plus, it's just not good stewardship of our money."

Johnson said he would approve of an agreement to pay Simmons his salary for the current year and next year -- terms that would be required even if Simmons were fired. "That's what I would like to see."

Since notified of the Dec. 15 meeting, some trustees have been campaigning against the proposal. According to one estimate, 24 of the 63 trustees have indicated they will vote against it.

Johnson described that vote count as "a close estimate" of those who would be expected to oppose the package, and he predicted the buyout "might be defeated" Dec. 15.

"That might be the last chance at a buyout," he added. The next step, he said, would be to pursue formal dismissal procedures.

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-- This story includes information from Marv Knox of the Western Recorder.

FMB trustees hold quiet meeting,
hear search committee report

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Trustees of the Foreign Mission Board, bruised from several months of controversy over the agency's direction, held a remarkably quiet meeting Dec. 7-9, on the heels of Southern Baptists' annual week of prayer for foreign missions.

During their meeting, trustees learned that the committee seeking a new board president will hold a prayer retreat in January and heard their interim president's agenda for his tenure.

Trustees also appointed their last group of missionaries for 1992, agreed to retain a consulting firm to determine if the agency's organization is "congruent with its purpose," and adopted procedures for compiling a general policy manual.

Trustees scrupulously avoided references to recent controversies which have racked the board, apparently hoping to avoid damage to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions, which is taken in most Southern Baptist churches during December.

The offering -- with a 1992 goal of \$84 million -- provides about 46 percent of the board's budget.

Some observers fear many Southern Baptists lack motivation to support the offering following two months of resignations, allegations and competing mission endeavors.

Citing in part philosophical differences with trustees, FMB President Keith Parks retired Oct. 31 -- three years earlier than he had planned but not before sending a letter to the board's 3,900 missionaries charging trustees have replaced mission principles with "ultra-conservative" theology.

Parks' letter sparked a series of responses from board chairman John Jackson, interim president Don Kammerdiener and two former FMB chairmen, who all denied Parks' charges.

In addition, competition to the Lottie Moon offering emerged in early November when the moderate-conservative Cooperative Baptist Fellowship began promoting its own \$2 million "global mission offering" to be taken in December. The offering focused on the theme "Keeping the Promises" -- promises of mission support which the Fellowship alleged the FMB had broken.

Finally, Parks agreed Nov. 30 to direct the Fellowship's fledgling mission program, seen by some as competing for Southern Baptist mission money. In response, FMB chairman Jackson said Parks had thrown a gauntlet in the face of Southern Baptists.

But trustees cooled the heated rhetoric when they met Dec. 7-9 and no hint of the conflict broke the surface of the placid session. Even Parks' unexpected presence during a portion of the meeting didn't provoke response.

Parks, seated at the back during the Tuesday night appointment service and the Wednesday morning business session, told ABP he attended the first trustee meeting since his retirement as a curious observer. "I'm a Southern Baptist," he said. "I'm interested in what Southern Baptists are doing in missions."

Jackson said Parks "has a right to be a guest, as do all people to any board meeting." However, Jackson did not introduce Parks during the sessions and later he declined to say if he would welcome the former president at future board meetings.

The chairman praised trustees for their reticence, which he said coincided with his desire for a "high spiritual meeting" during the Lottie Moon season.

While trustees were successful in reducing rhetorical fires during their meeting, one trustee comment stood in stark contrast to the meeting's quiet tone.

Just prior to his closing prayer on Wednesday, trustee Horace Hall of Wilmington, N.C., voiced his "excitement" with the board's ministries and its future and said, "When you get the hogs out of the creek, the water clears up. It's clearing up all over the world."

Some observers interpreted Hall's comment as a reference to Parks and perhaps other administrators and missionaries who have resigned recently in disagreement with board policies.

Perhaps because it was uncharacteristic of the general tenor of the meeting, Hall's comment quickly spread by word of mouth within Baptist circles. Within two hours of adjournment, Baptists in Texas -- more than

1,000 miles from Virginia -- were calling sources in Richmond to confirm the statement.

Hall vigorously denied he was referring to former board staff, instead maintaining he was responding to reports made immediately before the prayer that Christian witness is progressing in Somalia, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

"What I was trying to say is that changes taking place in those countries and others has cleared the way for the gospel," he said. "It had nothing to do with anything going on with board staff."

Hall attributed the quote to SBC president Ed Young, who attended the trustee meeting. Hall said Young made the comment during casual conversation about "how things were changing, how the gospel was being preached, the hope for our missionaries going out and for people coming into the process.... There wasn't any discussion about any problem at the board."

Attempts to reach Young were unsuccessful.

But several trustees privately disassociated themselves from Hall's remark and said they regretted it had been made.

The search for a successor to Parks likely will come to an end in the first half of 1993. No timetable for concluding the search has been announced and apparently no final decision made among the more than 70 names received by the search committee.

But Joel Gregory, the panel's chairman, announced he and the other 15 members will gather for a prayer retreat Jan. 7-9 near Colorado Springs, Colo. "Behind us will be nine months of process and ahead of us the necessity of choosing," he reported to the board. The committee will hold a regular meeting Jan. 22 at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport.

Trustees could receive a presidential nomination at their next session, Feb. 8-10, which would permit the new executive's installation at the April 19-21 meeting in Columbus, Ohio, and his introduction at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in June. However, the nomination might wait until April or could be presented at a called session of the board, although Gregory has shown little interest in a special meeting.

Although he declined to discuss persons being considered by the committee, Gregory categorically denied he would be the nominee. A powerful preacher who recently resigned the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Dallas, the SBC's largest congregation, Gregory is often mentioned as a possible candidate for the prestigious post.

"No, that is categorically not going to happen," he told ABP.

The committee has reportedly interviewed interim president Kammerdiener, who also is the board's executive vice president; Jerry Rankin, area director for the board's work in southern Asia and the Pacific; and Avery Willis, a noted prayer leader and administrator at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

In his first report as interim president, Kammerdiener said he accepts trustees' contention that they have no hidden agenda. Some board critics have charged trustees are engaged in an unspoken attempt to enforce conservative theological views on Baptists around the world.

But Kammerdiener said he believes "that what you vote represents your true feelings toward missionaries and toward the principles under which we operate."

He urged trustees to make the board a "user-friendly" agency "to which all Southern Baptists will feel welcome and will naturally turn when ... they want to participate in foreign missions."

Kammerdiener said that while he believes news stories about FMB actions must be truthful, they should reflect the board's aims in furthering the kingdom of God. "I understand the FMB to be a kingdom agency....," he said. "We are kingdom communicators. That is our spin."

He also said he hopes to strike a balance between the use of career missionaries and of volunteers in carrying out ministry overseas.

Some observers -- including Parks -- have alleged trustees are placing too much emphasis on volunteers at the expense of full-time mission workers. Trustees have said they are trying to respond appropriately to numerous offers for short-term service from Southern Baptists, some of whom claim their efforts are stymied by FMB staff.

"I commit to use our staff and field structures to unleash energy and not to bottle it up," Kammerdiener said.

A "fruitful encounter" with Islam is another of Kammerdiener's hopes, he said. Successful Christian witness to Muslims remains an elusive goal of the foreign mission enterprise, he indicated.

The 35 mission workers appointed Dec. 8 brings to 205 the total named this year. That brings the total of FMB overseas workers to 3,941.

In addition, the number of countries in which they serve has risen from 126 to 129, due in part to the emergence of new countries in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union. "We've placed some missionaries in places and countries have been formed around them," said Clark Scanlon, director of the board's research and planning office.

Possible reorganization of board staff will be one topic examined by a consulting firm, which trustees authorized their policy subcommittee to retain. Although some trustees have said reorganization should await a new president, others have contended the process should begin prior to his election.

Compilation of a new policy manual will clarify what some trustees said is confusion in distinguishing between policies initiated by the board and others formulated by administrative action.

In other action, trustees learned that U.S. military attempts to disarm militias in chaotic Somalia may ease Southern Baptists' feeding efforts there. John Faulkner, area director for Eastern and Southern Africa, said \$1.4 million in hunger relief funds will assist the 10 FMB aid workers in the African nation to alleviate starvation among Somalis.

Faulkner also said sponsorship of an effort to bring peace among the warring clans in Somalia has been turned over to the U.S. State Department and the United Nations.

FMB administrators had been trying to facilitate peace talks.

Trustees also referred to their policy subcommittee a motion to hold more missionary appointment services outside of Richmond and learned that a five-person search committee has been named to seek a successor to Betty Law, who retires Jan. 15 as vice president for the Americas.

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FMB presidential search likely
to conclude in early 1993

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The search for a successor to former Foreign Mission Board President Keith Parks likely will come to an end in the first half of 1993, search committee chairman Joel Gregory hinted Dec. 9.

No timetable for concluding the search has been announced and apparently no final decision made among the more than 70 names received by the search committee.

But Gregory announced he and the other 15 members will gather for a prayer retreat Jan. 7-9 near Colorado Springs, Colo. "Behind us will be nine

months of process and ahead of us the necessity of choosing," he reported to FMB trustees during their Dec. 7-9 meeting. The committee will hold a regular meeting Jan. 22 at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport.

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Female chaplain opens doors
for colleagues in military

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Lorraine Potter knows how difficult always going "first" can be. In fact, she's made a career of it. But her struggles have proven to be more enriching than painful.

An American Baptist chaplain in the U.S. Air Force, Potter recently was promoted to the rank of colonel, making her the first woman chaplain to attain that rank in the history of the Defense Department.

In a Nov. 30 ceremony at the Pentagon, Gen. Merrill McPeak said Potter's promotion was not just a historic milestone for the Air Force but for the Defense Department as well. McPeak, Air Force chief of staff, described Potter as a "trailblazer" who has broken down barriers for women chaplains.

However, Potter was not promoted because she is a female chaplain, McPeak noted, but because she is a great chaplain.

On Sept. 27, 1973, Potter was commissioned at Bolling Air Force Base in Washington as the first woman chaplain in the Air Force. Her 19-year military ministry has taken her from a medical center in Texas to Germany and Korea.

Potter, the first woman ordained to the gospel ministry by the American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island, said she has not "paved the way" for her female colleagues, but rather she has "helped open some doors."

With only 21 women chaplains throughout the Air Force, Potter said no woman paves the way for others unless she precedes them in a post.

"We have all had to pave our own kind of road," she said.

Potter recalled that when she was beginning her ministry in the early 1970s, her options as a Baptist pastor were limited. A graduate of Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, she served as a chaplain at Yale-New Haven Hospital in Connecticut, where she received additional training and certification as a supervisor in clinical pastoral education.

Even with those credentials, she could not compete with male ministers

who had more experience.

In 1972, she wrote a letter asking if women could become chaplains in the military. In a move she called "pragmatic," she made a three-year commitment to the Air Force to gain experience.

In military ministry, Potter found her horizons were broadening. She liked the mixture of pastoral ministry in a parish setting and working as a part-time hospital chaplain.

By her fourth assignment, she began to notice other women, besides secretaries, who were working on staff. Potter remained in the military partly because she saw she could play a role in helping integrate women into the ranks, she said.

Potter, who was named Outstanding Military Chaplain by American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., in 1983, realized that she could be an advocate and role model for women in the military.

She also admitted that progress of women ministers in the military far exceeds that of their counterparts in local churches. She said she is not critical of the churches, however, because the military is required by law to provide equal opportunities for men and women.

The military advantage is that by law women receive equal pay for equal work, she said. However, the military may still have a "glass ceiling" that impedes women from receiving the "real senior promotions."

"The church doesn't have to abide by any laws for equal opportunity.... They stay within their own traditions and unfortunately their own prejudices."

Another advantage of military ministry is that it is ecumenical, she said. Military chaplains work in a pluralistic environment that she said provides her a broader witness.

"We are not here to proselytize for our church. We are here to ensure the free exercise of religion for everybody."

The only time she "talks about Baptist things" is when someone asks her about them; her job is to help people exercise their faith regardless of their doctrinal stripe, she said.

Reflecting on the significance of her promotion, she said it was an accomplishment she did not achieve on her own. The honor represents help and support from many people, as well as her hard work, she said.

The promotion also prompted her to reflect upon the goodness of God, she said. She expressed gratitude that God called her and surrounded her with supportive people. Throughout her ministry, Potter has had support. Even those who disagreed with her theologically were supportive of her ministry, she said.

Among those significant supporters is her husband, Robert Saunders, a retired Army chaplain. She said being married to an Army chaplain often helped her gain acceptance. They have attended First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

She described her military experience as exciting, fun and a struggle that afforded her renewal and growth opportunities.

Potter, whose mother was a Baptist lay minister, offered advice for young women considering the ministry. "When you are sure of your call, it doesn't matter what the barriers are.... If you are willing to pay that price, then you have God on your side."

-- Photo available upon request.

***** END *****