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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the only issue of ABP this week.

Southern trustees appear headed
for heresy hearings on Simmons

By Greg Warner

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Baptist seminary professor Paul Simmons, whose pro-choice position on abortion has angered many trustees of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, likely will face formal dismissal charges as early as February, according to some trustees.

A last-ditch effort to quietly resolve the Simmons' dispute failed Dec. 15 when trustees voted down a plan to buy out his contract at a cost of up to \$362,000.

Now the seminary faces the probability of hosting heresy hearings against Simmons, who has taught Christian ethics at the school since 1969.

All parties agree there are few other options left.

Unless Simmons resigns, which he has shown no inclination to do, or the trustees drop their dispute with the professor entirely, which for many would be an intolerable admission of failure, only formal dismissal hearings can resolve the matter.

"I don't know of any other thing that could," said trustee chairman Wayne Allen, a pastor in Cordova, Tenn.

Allen declined to speculate on what the trustees will decide, but he said the seminary's formal dismissal procedures, though lengthy, could be completed in time for trustees to vote during their regular April meeting on a recommendation to fire Simmons.

"It can be done," Allen told Associated Baptist Press.

"I think there will be some closure by April," predicted trustee Jerry Johnson, a key figure in the dispute.

Simmons, 56, has been a target of conservative trustees because of his support of abortion rights and his views on homosexuality. However, as a full professor with tenure, he can be fired only for violating his contract or

teaching contrary to the seminary's doctrinal statement.

Seminary sources say either charge would be hard to prove. However, trustees have been scouring Simmons' record and writings for more than a year in search of grounds for dismissal.

According to Allen, charges against Simmons could be initiated by either seminary President Roy Honeycutt or the trustees' academic personnel committee. That committee -- along with five professors approved by the president and faculty -- would constitute a fact-finding committee to investigate the charges.

The fact-finding group would present its findings to Simmons and schedule heresy hearings in which Simmons, with access to legal counsel, could answer the charges.

If charges are initiated in early January, Allen said, and are handled expeditiously, hearings could be held in February or March. Rick White, a pastor in Franklin, Tenn., and chairman of the committee, could not be reached for comment.

"My impression is there will be (hearings)," said Johnson, a member of the academic personnel committee and chairman of the committee's work group investigating Simmons. "I think everybody is ready for us to do something or shut up," said Johnson, a pastor from Aurora, Colo., and one of Simmons' chief critics.

Even Simmons has acknowledged hearings appear inevitable. After an earlier buyout proposal was dropped, Simmons said he was ready to "move on" with the hearings.

Simmons declined to comment on the latest developments. "I have a lot of feelings, but I'll just have to go with silence," he told ABP Dec. 22.

If after the hearings the academic personnel committee votes to recommend dismissal, the recommendation would go to the full board of trustees, who must approve any dismissal by a two-thirds margin.

Almost two thirds of the trustees voted against buying out Simmons' contract during the closed-door meeting Dec. 15. Most fundamental-conservatives, who hold a majority on the board, opposed the buyout as an inappropriate use of funds and an improper solution to the problem. It failed 21-34.

Trustees on both sides said they were surprised by the wide vote margin, which some said has ramifications far beyond the Simmons' dispute. It may affect the leadership of the trustees and their search for a new seminary president.

Trustee leaders, though conservative, are viewed as more pragmatic than many on the board. Those leaders, who called the special Dec. 15 meeting apparently because they expected the Simmons' buyout to pass, "miscalculated" support for the proposal, said trustee David Miller of Heber Springs, Ark.

That miscalculation was evident when the buyout plan was presented to trustees and met by "utter silence," reported another trustee. Although the proposal came from the academic affairs committee, none of the committee members except the chairman spoke in favor of the plan, the trustee reported, and Johnson spoke against it.

"The leadership that brought that proposal misjudged the full board and its thinking..." said Johnson. "They did lose touch with the pulse of the full board."

"The leadership has lost control of the board," said another trustee, who asked not to be identified. "The inmates are running the asylum."

Pragmatic, less strident, trustees also dominate the search committee looking for the successor to Honeycutt, who will retire as president in December 1993.

The vote on Simmons, by demonstrating the power of fundamental-conservatives, could guarantee that a hard-line conservative is chosen to succeed Honeycutt, trustee sources said. The board hopes to elect his successor in April.

The Simmons vote "added to the expectation" that the search committee will bring a clear-cut conservative candidate, said Johnson. "I think they will factor in the Simmons situation and find a candidate who could best bring closure to that and prevent future situations like that from developing."

The "definite" message to the search committee, Johnson said, is that "somebody who would be scared off by this kind of problem is not a good candidate."

Accusations of liberalism against Simmons and a handful of other professors helped fundamental-conservatives gain control of Southern and the five other Southern Baptist seminaries during the past decade. If Simmons survives the latest and most serious accusations, it would be seen by many as a blow to the fundamental-conservative movement.

It is unclear whether the Simmons dispute, and the specter of heresy hearings, could slow the election of a new president at Southern. Several trustees said the Dec. 15 meeting was intended to clear the Simmons issue from the trustees' agenda before their April session, which is one of only two regular meetings of the board.

While trustees could vote on Simmons in April, they may be reluctant to fire a professor and hire a president at the same meeting.

"We can do both, but I think most people would prefer a separation of the two -- including the (presidential) candidate," Johnson said.

"Obviously, no one in his right mind, if he could choose his circumstances, ...would prefer to move in during a trial to dismiss a professor," said Miller. "But at the same time, we have a vacancy."

"Whatever decision the trustee board makes regarding Paul Simmons," he continued, "whomever we bring in as president has got to be comfortable with that decision."

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Dallas church to cut costs
by ending TV broadcasts

DALLAS (ABP) -- First Baptist Church of Dallas will end its long tradition of broadcasting its worship services, apparently because of financial constraints.

The church's deacons voted Dec. 22 to stop the local broadcasts in January, according to church administrator Tim Hedquist. The decision will save the church an estimated \$600,000 to \$700,000 in 1993.

Left unclear by the decision was the future of the church's media minister, Ron Harris, who may have lost his job as a result. Hedquist would not comment on Harris' situation. Harris said his future is "uncertain."

The church has broadcast its Sunday morning worship services for more than 25 years, most recently on Dallas-Fort Worth TV station KTVT. Station officials said Dec. 23 they had not been informed of the church's decision to stop broadcasting.

The decision comes on the heels of the resignation of pastor Joel Gregory, who abruptly left the pulpit in September in a dispute with Senior Pastor W. A. Criswell over leadership of the 28,000-member congregation.

Southern Baptists' largest.

Some church members unhappy with Gregory or the events surrounding his resignation have called for the firing of staff members hired by Gregory. Those include Harris and Hedquist.

The church, with a debt of \$8.6 million, reportedly has come under increasing financial strain since Gregory's departure.

The day after the deacons' meeting, Harris declined to discuss his employment situation with reporters. He would not say whether or not he still had a job.

"I don't want to comment," he said. "I don't think it would be productive for the life of the church."

The deacons were scheduled to hear a report Dec. 22 from the personnel committee about the media ministry. But personnel decisions are handled by the committee and not voted by the deacons, Harris said Dec. 23.

A day earlier, however, Harris confirmed elimination of his job was one item under consideration by church leaders. He said he had met with the personnel committee and deacons and discussed "a lot of possibilities."

Harris said financial considerations were behind the plan to discontinue the broadcasts. Both he and Hedquist declined to say exactly how much the broadcasts cost, however, and KTVT officials were not available to discuss the cost of airtime.

The church had planned to spend \$260,000 for airtime and \$300,000 for needed equipment in 1993, when plans called for reducing the one-hour broadcast to half an hour.

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-- By Greg Warner

Religious freedom bill among
measures facing 103rd Congress

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A new crop of lawmakers probably will not impede passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, say bill proponents who predict the measure is on track for early passage in the 103rd Congress.

RFRA is designed to restore a high level of protection for religious practice that virtually was abandoned by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 1990 Oregon vs. Smith decision.

When Congress convenes Jan. 5, one-fourth of the House of Representatives will be newcomers. The 110-member freshman class will be the largest since 1948. The Senate will welcome 12 freshmen.

The process of introducing newcomers to the need for RFRA could slow down the bill, which has died in the previous two Congresses for lack of time. But a church-state specialist who heads a 54-member coalition backing the bill said that danger is minimal.

Oliver Thomas, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said the Clinton administration's support for RFRA will offset the difficulty of having to educate new members of Congress on the bill.

Clinton has voiced his support of the bill, and if his administration makes RFRA a priority, the measure should move quickly, Thomas said.

The political problems that plagued and eventually killed the bill in the 102nd Congress should be less of a threat, Thomas said.

The National Right to Life Committee and the U.S. Catholic Conference

were the two staunchest opponents of RFRA. Those organizations argued that if Roe vs. Wade be overturned, denying women the legal right to an abortion, women could claim that abortion is a free-exercise right under RFRA.

Most constitutional and legal scholars think such a claim could be made but can't be won.

RFRA opponents will be less effective in the 103rd Congress for two reasons, Thomas said.

First, 1993 is not an election year. Many people did not want to take on the National Right to Life Committee during an election, Thomas said.

Second, the Supreme Court in July reaffirmed the essential holding in Roe vs. Wade, making the abortion arguments related to RFRA even more imaginary, Thomas said.

With a pro-choice president and the court's recent ruling, abortion politics are less likely to derail RFRA, he added.

In addition to RFRA, the new Congress is likely to address other legislation affecting churches.

-- School choice. One such issue is the public funding of private and religious schools. In the 102nd Congress, the Bush administration pushed an education package that included school choice, a plan to provide parents vouchers to send their children to the public, private or religious schools of their choice.

After months of political battles, the House approved a bill without choice provisions and the Senate approved a measure providing only public school choice. The education bill died when the Senate failed to approve the conference report.

Choice has less chance of advancing in the new Congress, said Brent Walker, BJC associate general counsel, because majorities in both houses of Congress oppose public funding for private purposes and the new administration is on their side.

The school-choice battle probably will return to the states, Walker said.

-- Lobbying. A bill designed to tighten restrictions on lobbyists likely will move through the legislature because of the emphasis in the campaign on reforming lobbying laws and campaign finances, Thomas said.

The bill needs an exemption for churches, Thomas said. Churches lobbying out of a sincere religious conviction should be protected by the First Amendment, he said.

-- Taxes. The new Congress probably will grapple with a tax bill that contains provisions affecting non-profit organizations and their donors, the lawyers said.

Such provisions, said BJC attorneys, were included in a wide-ranging tax bill (H.R. 11) that Bush vetoed because it contained a tax hike on the very wealthy. Several of the bill's provisions would have encouraged charitable giving by changing tax laws governing non-profit institutions and their donors.

One provision would have made all gifts of appreciated property fully deductible on a permanent basis. Appreciated property includes real estate, stocks and tangible items such as collectibles whose value increased after being purchased. A 1986 tax act subjected the appreciated portion of charitable gifts to the alternative minimum tax, causing a decline in large gifts to charitable institutions.

The bill would have repealed the alternative minimum tax on such appreciated property so that all donors would receive a deduction equal to the property's fair market value.

Two other provisions would have required more disclosure and

substantiation of charitable contributions.

One would bar a taxpayer from deducting any contribution of \$750 or more without a receipt from the charity receiving the donation. Previously, the Bush administration proposed that the charity report taxpayers who gave \$500 annually to the IRS. The new proposal involved single contributions of \$750 or more and would require only that the taxpayer have the receipt in his possession.

The other provision involved disclosure requirements related to "quid pro quo" contributions, payments made partly as a contribution and partly for goods and services provided by the church or charity.

The provision would require the church or charity to inform the donor that the deductible amount is limited to how much the gift exceeds the value of goods or services provided. The church or charity also would have to provide the donor with a "good faith estimate of the value of such goods or services."

Both disclosure provisions would result in churches dealing exclusively with the donor, not the government.

"The new disclosure proposal is a vast improvement over the one originally proposed by the administration," Walker said.

The measure also dropped proposals to extend beyond 1995 or make permanent the 3 percent floor for itemized tax deductions.

Present law limits itemized deductions, including charitable contributions, for higher-income individuals. Itemized deductions for high-income taxpayers are reduced by an amount equaling 3 percent of their adjusted gross income of more than \$100,000.

Both attorneys agreed those provisions would benefit the non-profit community.

James Dunn, BJC executive director, said the religious-liberty agency is eager to work with the new Congress.

"We are constantly amazed and appalled at the general level of insensitivity to the counter-majoritarian nature of the Bill of Rights," Dunn said. "We are especially eager to work with new members who are, for perhaps the first time, facing the national implications of the first freedom -- freedom of religion -- set out in the first 16 words of the Bill of Rights."

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Record number of minorities,
women serve in new Congress

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The new Congress will look more like America, benefiting from the election of a record number of women, African-Americans and Hispanics.

When it convenes Jan. 5, the 103rd Congress will welcome 122 new members, with 110 in the House of Representatives and 12 in the Senate.

A record 48 women will serve in the House. Women also made significant strides in the Senate, tripling the number in the previous Congress. The election of four new members brings to six the number of women in the Senate.

Four decades have passed since more than two women served in the Senate, according to Congressional Quarterly's Nov. 7 issue on new members and districts. (In the last Congress, three women served for a few months when Jocelyn Burdick, D-N.D., replaced her husband, Quentin Burdick, following his

death.)

Despite gains, women still are not proportionately represented in the legislative branch. Women make up more than half of the country's population, but they constitute only about 10 percent of Congress.

African-Americans and Hispanics made greater gains proportionately. Sixteen blacks are among the new members of the House, with one black elected to the Senate. Carol Moseley Braun, D-Ill., is the first black woman elected to the Senate. The Senate has never had two blacks serving at the same time.

Blacks constitute about 12 percent of the population, and their membership in the House will be about 9 percent.

Hispanics did not fare quite as well. Eight new Hispanics were elected to the House; no Hispanic will be in the Senate. Hispanics hold 4 percent of House seats and make up 9 percent of the total population.

Voters also elected for the first time a Korean-American to serve in the House.

Brent Walker, associate general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, praised the demographic diversity of the new Congress. The more Congress looks like America, the better off it is, Walker said.

"It's exciting that Congress is going to be more reflective of our diversity," added Oliver Thomas, BJC general counsel. New viewpoints and perspectives will be represented by an eager group of freshmen, he added.

The new freshmen generally are younger and have more political experience going into the job than their incumbent counterparts had when first elected. Despite an election-year emphasis on changing the status quo, nearly 72 percent of House newcomers have held an elected office.

The new class reflects a diversity of religious affiliations. Fifteen Baptists are among the 110 new House members. No additional Baptists were elected in the Senate.

Within Congress, Baptists represent the third largest group with 62. The two largest groups are Roman Catholics (141) and Methodists (65).

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Homeless families on rise
in America, report says

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- More Americans are seeking shelter and finding themselves in danger of a hazardous winter this year than in recent years.

According to a report from the National Coalition for the Homeless, the number of Americans seeking shelter has sharply increased over the past two years, and much of the increased demand comes from families with children.

"We fear this winter could be the most dangerous one yet," said Fred Karnes, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless.

"Recent cuts in federal funding for emergency shelter can only exacerbate this dismal situation," warned Karnes, a member of the Fredericksburg Baptist Church in Fredericksburg, Va.

The report, entitled "A Place Called Hopelessness: Shelter Demand in the '90s", surveyed 18 states and the District of Columbia.

Among the report's findings:

-- In Atlanta, more people sought shelter in the first nine months of 1992 than in all of 1991. The 16,062 requests logged through September represented a 28 percent jump over 12 months of 1991, when 12,546 requests were received.

-- For the fifth consecutive year, the number of homeless people in Virginia rose. A survey by the Virginia Coalition for the Homeless found that the number of people denied shelter increased 31 percent from 1990 to 1991. Fifty percent of those seeking shelter were families.

-- The number of families in shelters in Washington, D.C., between the winter of 1990 and December 1992, increased from 517 to 771, an increase of 49 percent.

-- The number of homeless individuals in Kentucky increased approximately 15 percent from 1991 to 1992.

"The fact that more families are finding no room in the inn ought to be a chilling reminder to American Christians about our status; ironically, we are the inn-keepers of our society," said Robert Parham, who directs the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn.

"We cannot accept homelessness as a common occurrence or norm of life," said Nathan Porter, field staff consultant for domestic hunger for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. "It is not right. It is tragic. And we ought to feel very uncomfortable about it."

"The call we must face is to commitment and action, not only in ministries, but also to bring changes in public policy," Porter said.

The report underscored that shelters are not "a solution" but "a first line of defense" against homelessness. "Any solution to homelessness lies in creating more permanent affordable housing options, decent-paying jobs, and improving access to health care, including substance-abuse and mental-health treatment," the report said.

Parham added: "One of the early tests for President-elect Bill Clinton is the degree to which his agenda of a 'New Covenant' includes the homeless and near-homeless in our society."

The survey examined the shelter situation in the District of Columbia and in the states of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Maryland, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Utah, Virginia, Washington and Wyoming.

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Fellowship on target
for \$6.4 million in '92

ATLANTA (ABP) -- With one month left in the fiscal year, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is on target to reach its projection of \$6.4 million in contributions for 1992.

Contributions through the Fellowship totaled \$531,003 in November, bringing the year-to-date total to \$5,991,449. The Fellowship received nearly \$3.8 million during the same period last year. Year-end totals for 1992 won't be available until later in January.

An average month in December would put the organization over its projection of \$6.4 million for the year. The Fellowship's first Global Missions Offering is expected to add to the December and January totals.

The November total is 33 percent more than the same month a year ago but 19 percent less than October's near-record figure. After hovering near \$500,000 for four months, contributions shot up to \$653,764 in October before dropping to \$531,003 in November.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was established in 1990 by Southern Baptist moderate-conservatives displeased with the current leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies.

The Fellowship's three funding plans allow churches and individuals to bypass traditional Southern Baptist funding channels, such as the Cooperative Program, and to withhold funds from SBC agencies of which they disapprove.

The portion of contributions designated for traditional Southern Baptist causes has been in a near steady decline during 1992.

Last year about three fourths of the money contributed through the Fellowship went to SBC causes. That portion dropped to 53 percent in November, with 42 percent supporting SBC agencies and 11 percent designated for state conventions and other state-level Baptist causes.

That trend has left more money for the Fellowship's own ministries and projects.

In November, 35 percent of contributions were targeted for the Fellowship's own efforts, such as its newly launched missions program. An additional 12 percent of October receipts went to independent organizations and agencies supported by the Fellowship.

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-- By Greg Warner

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