

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES  
Historical Commission, SBC  
Nashville, Tennessee

\*\*\*\*\*

A S S O C I A T E D   B A P T I S T   P R E S S

\*\*\*\*\*  
Phone: (904) 262-6626   Fax: (904) 262-7745   CServe: 70420,73

January 25, 1993

IN THIS ISSUE:

- \* Tom Elliff tapped as nominee for FMB president
- \* President overturns abortion restrictions
- \* Testimony appears to undergird Clinton's support of RFRA

EDITOR'S NOTE: ABP is continuing to follow developments at the FMB and will update this story later in the day if more is known.

Tom Elliff tapped as  
nominee for FMB president

By Greg Warner

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Oklahoma pastor Tom Elliff is expected to be nominated as president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board when trustees meet Feb. 8-10.

Elliff, 48, is pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, a suburb of Oklahoma City, and was an FMB missionary for a short time. He has been a leader in the movement to steer the Southern Baptist Convention in a more conservative direction, a movement which former FMB president Keith Parks says is disrupting missions work overseas.

Parks retired last October -- three years earlier than planned -- in a dispute with trustees over the control and direction of the FMB, the largest missionary agency of its kind in the world.

Although no public announcement of Elliff's selection has been made, FMB trustee chairman John Jackson said Jan. 11 that the search committee had made its choice. The committee will mail trustees a packet of information about the nominee early this week, according to sources close to the process.

News of Elliff's selection traveled quickly in Southern Baptist circles Jan. 22 and was reported by the Richmond Times-Dispatch Jan. 23. It was confirmed by several sources at the Richmond-based agency.

Although Elliff could not be reached for comment, Associated Baptist Press confirmed that each of four other finalists for the job is not the committee's choice.

Elliff, meanwhile, recently underwent a complete physical evaluation by the Cooper Clinic in Dallas, one of the steps the committee said would be necessary before a recommendation could be made. Morris Chapman also was evaluated by the Cooper Clinic before his hiring last year as SBC chief executive.

Last October committee members said they had narrowed their search to two men, both with missionary experience -- FMB Interim President Don Kammerdiener and Sunday School Board administrator Avery Willis. But fundamental-conservatives complained neither had been involved in the 13-year struggle to win control of the SBC agencies.

The 15-member search committee then apparently backed away from the two top candidates and renewed its search. Elliff was the only one of seven finalists for the post who has been both a missionary and a leader in the fundamental-conservative movement.

Elliff is the brother-in-law of former SBC president Bailey Smith and followed Smith as pastor of the Del City church. In 1990 Elliff served as president of the SBC Pastors' Conference, often a stepping stone to higher denominational leadership.

Many of the FMB's 3,900 missionaries say overseas service is essential for the new president. Elliff meets that requirement but barely. He and his wife, Jeannie, served two years as missionaries in Zimbabwe.

In 1981 Elliff left a successful pastorate in Tulsa, Okla., after he and his wife became convinced God was calling them to missions. "On the logical side it might seem that this is foolish," he said at the time. "But when God says do it, you do it, especially if you've preached that all your life."

He was assigned to Zimbabwe as a church development consultant, helping churches in the south African country grow.

Elliff and his family, which includes four children, returned to the United States in 1983 so that his oldest child -- a daughter then 14 years old -- could receive treatment for injuries received in a 1982 automobile accident in Zimbabwe.

But several former missionaries told ABP Elliff's short stint overseas may not be enough to convince FMB employees and missionaries that he is qualified to lead the agency.

"I suspect a lot of them will have questions, especially those who worked with him," said Davis Saunders, who was FMB area director for eastern and southern Africa during Elliff's service.

"I'm sure they would prefer someone who came straight from the field and who learned about the board from many different perspectives," said Saunders, who retired in 1990 and now lives in Walterboro, S.C.

Most previous FMB presidents rose to the position after lengthy missionary and administrative careers with the agency. But Saunders said Elliff "does not really have a working knowledge" of the FMB or missions.

As for Elliff's work in Zimbabwe, Saunders said, "I really can't evaluate him. He wasn't there long enough. He got a lot of things started, but I'm not sure how much of it lasted."

Saunders said he was aware of complaints that Elliff never settled in to his African assignment and was anxious to leave. "I know he maintained his contacts with his church and friends" in the states, Saunders recalled.

"He felt like he had to come back home," he said. Although that decision resulted in part from his daughter's injury, Saunders said, "part of it had to do with his own personality and sense of direction."

When he returned to the United States, Elliff became pastor of Applewood Baptist Church in Wheat Ridge, Colo., before following Smith in the Del City pulpit in 1985.

Elliff's resume differs from that of the last two men who served as FMB president, both of whom were lifelong missionaries who held doctoral degrees. Elliff holds a bachelor's degree from Ouachita Baptist University

in Arkadelphia, Ark., and a master of divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Born in Paris, Texas, Elliff lived in Texas, Arkansas and Missouri while growing up. He served Baptist churches in Arkansas during college and in Texas during seminary. He also was a summer home missionary in Vermont.

After seminary, he became pastor of Eastwood Baptist Church in Tulsa, Okla., in 1972, leading the church to triple its membership to 5,000 before he left for the mission field in 1981.

After returning to the states in 1983, and later assuming the Del City pastorate in 1985, he found the church \$15 million in debt. The church defaulted on bonds issued to build its new facility, and later drastically cut staff and expenses.

Under Elliff's leadership, church finances have improved and a repayment plan for the bonds has been worked out. Weekly attendance now is up to 2,200.

In 1992 the church's contributions to the Cooperative Program -- the SBC's unified budget which supports the FMB and other agencies -- totaled \$80,653, or 3 percent of the church's undesignated receipts of \$2.7 million. Another \$41,684 went to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering that funds the FMB.

In addition to Elliff, three other prominent megachurch pastors were among the finalists for the FMB post -- John Bisagno of First Baptist Church of Houston; Jim Henry of First Baptist Church of Orlando; and Adrian Rogers of Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis, Tenn.

Both Bisagno and Henry spoke highly of Elliff.

"He would be a wonderful choice and would have my complete support," Bisagno said.

"I think he would be a tremendous choice," Henry said. "He's got a heart for the Lord. He's really sensitive. And he's been down the missions road."

In addition to Kammerdiener and Willis, search committee chairman Joel Gregory of Dallas also was mentioned frequently as a candidate, although he dismissed the possibility.

Gregory would neither confirm nor deny Elliff's nomination.

"The search committee has voted that there will be no comment until it is time for comment to be made," Gregory said in a statement released through the FMB. "We've done that heartily and unanimously. When it's time to make a comment, I will make a comment. We feel very strongly about this."

-30-

President overturns  
abortion restrictions

-WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bill Clinton repealed several abortion restrictions, including the so-called "gag rule," on the 20th anniversary of Roe vs. Wade and his third day in office.

In keeping with campaign promises, Clinton lifted the restrictions imposed by the Reagan and Bush administrations.

"Our vision should be of an America where abortion is safe and legal but rare," Clinton said during a Jan. 22 Oval Office ceremony in which he signed the executive orders.

The orders:

-- Repealed a ban on abortion counseling at federally funded family planning clinics, which critics labeled a "gag rule" because they said it interfered with doctor-patient relationships and First Amendment free-speech rights. Supporters, however, said the ban prevented family planning workers from encouraging women to have abortions.

The ban, imposed by Reagan and supported by Bush, sparked a series of court battles and several congressional challenges. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the ban's constitutionality, and Bush's veto power sustained it.

-- Lifted a ban on research using tissue from aborted fetuses. Research into the use of fetal tissue to reverse Parkinson's disease have produced promising results, and researchers believe they may also find treatments or cures for such diseases as diabetes, birth defects and spinal cord injuries. The Bush administration imposed the ban two years ago because it said the research encouraged abortions by providing a market for aborted fetuses.

Congress grappled with legislation to overturn the ban, and lawmakers on both sides of the abortion issue supported the measure. Once again, the Bush veto sustained the ban.

-- Reinstated the right of overseas U.S. military hospitals to perform abortions as long as they are paid for by private funds.

-- Ordered a re-evaluation of the Food and Drug Administration ban on private importation of the French abortion pill, RU-486. But observers said it is uncertain whether or not the drug will ever be sold in the United States.

Clinton signed the executive orders as anti-abortion forces protested outside the White House. At least 75,000 abortion opponents marched on Capitol Hill and held a three-hour rally.

The crowd at the 20th annual March for Life matched its highest ever.

The next day, more than 300 demonstrators participating in Operation Rescue blockades at three medical clinics were arrested by Washington police. Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry demonstrated safely across the street from one clinic, according to the Washington Post.

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said Clinton's actions will serve to invigorate the anti-abortion movement. "In the words of John Paul Jones, 'We have not yet begun to fight.'"

"Today is a sad day for America and a horrifying day for unborn children," the SBC ethics leader said in a prepared statement Jan. 22. "The new president has taken actions, in his very first week, which will further devalue human life and which will result in the deaths of untold millions at the hands of abortionists."

Taking those actions on the anniversary of Roe vs. Wade adds "insult to injury," Land said. "It is clear to us that President Clinton has begun his presidency by rapidly accelerating America's drift toward neo-paganism. The gauntlet has been thrown down in the struggle for our nation's conscience and soul."

-30-

-- By Pam Parry

Testimony appears to undergird  
Clinton's support of RFRA

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Although Zoe Baird will not become the next U.S. attorney general, her testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee appears to undergird the Clinton administration's support of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, said a Baptist church-state attorney.

RFRA, a bill designed to restore a high level of protection for religious practice, has the backing of a broad coalition of religious and civil-liberties groups.

Prior to withdrawing from consideration, Baird said the bill "should be one of the highest priorities in the early days of the administration."

Clinton indicated a need for RFRA in a September speech before Jewish leaders. Backers of the bill, including the Baptist Joint Committee and the Christian Life Commission, have said his strong support is key to the bill's early passage.

Oliver Thomas, BJC general counsel who helped write the legislation, said the measure is "tailor-made" for the Clinton administration.

"President Clinton wants to bring people together," Thomas continued. "RFRA gives him an opportunity to do just that. Liberals and conservatives, believers and non-believers, Democrats and Republicans have laid aside their private political agendas to unite behind this bill.

"The president's enthusiastic support would establish him as a leader who cares about religion and its importance to the American people."

RFRA was introduced in the 101st and 102nd congresses but failed to receive approval. The bill may be reintroduced in the U.S. House of Representatives in early February.

-30-

-- By Pam Parry

\*\*\*\*\* END \*\*\*\*\*