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Patterson denied membership  
in Wake Forest church

By Greg Warner

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- Paige Patterson, controversial president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, has been denied membership in the Baptist church nearest the seminary because church members feel his presence would be disruptive.

"The unity of our church would be severely threatened," said Tom Jackson, pastor of Wake Forest Baptist Church, a 158-year-old congregation adjacent the seminary campus.

Patterson is considered the architect of the movement that since 1979 has turned the Southern Baptist Convention into a conservative bastion and given biblical inerrantists like himself control of Southeastern and other SBC seminaries.

But the church's members, keenly aware of Patterson's role in that movement and the turmoil that has racked the SBC for more than a decade, do not want Patterson to reprise that role in their congregation.

"This church has been wounded in the Southern Baptist war more than any other church in the Southern Baptist Convention," Pastor Jackson said.

"Out of 15 million members claimed by Southern Baptists, he is the one person identified most of all as the source of all that pain," he said.

The 500-member Wake Forest Church, located prominently within the seminary's quadrangle, has been closely linked to the seminary's moderate theological tradition. But that is a tradition Patterson has committed to change since becoming president in 1992.

The potential for conflict between the former Dallas educator and church members, including many long-time seminary professors and employees, is great, Jackson said. "There are many churches in Wake Forest and in the area, but the one church where they would be most disruptive is this one," he said.

The church's decision denying membership to Patterson -- an action Jackson called rare but not unprecedented -- became public when Patterson recently sent copies of a letter from the church to fellow Baptist agency executives.

Patterson first sought membership in the church last September, beginning with a request to Jackson. "He asked if I felt it would be disruptive if they joined," the pastor recalled. "He said, 'I don't want to tear up one more church.'"

Three weeks later, Jackson told Patterson his presence would indeed be disruptive, the pastor reported.

Jackson said he thought the issue was settled. But the Pattersons later submitted a written request for "watch care," a less official relationship in which the couple would retain their membership in First Baptist Church of Dallas while worshiping with the Wake Forest congregation.

On Jan. 24 the church's deacons voted down that request 16-1, with one abstention. There was no dissent when the action was reported to church members, Jackson said.

In a letter delivered by hand to Patterson's office the next day, church leaders asked the couple to withdraw their request. "Please understand that this matter has been difficult for us and has been dealt with only through much agony and prayer," the letter said. "We wish to spare both you and our church any further distress. Your membership in this church (even on a watch care basis) would certainly result in disruption and division in this congregation."

The Pattersons withdrew their request Jan. 27, Jackson said.

In late January Patterson sent copies of the church's letter to members of the SBC Interagency Council, made up of executives of the denomination's 20-plus institutions and agencies. Sources said the letter was intended to demonstrate Patterson's charge -- made earlier to the IAC -- that Southern Baptist moderates are guilty of the exclusionary tactics often assigned to conservatives.

Patterson is traveling in Russia and could not be reached for comment.

Pastor Jackson said the Pattersons' request "falls outside of intention of watch care," a form of temporary membership first offered to students at Wake Forest College.

The church was founded on the college's campus in 1835. The school, later Wake Forest University, moved out of town in the 1950s and Southeastern took over the campus. Although the church is located within the stone wall that surrounds the seminary, it has owned its property since 1913.

Over the years, the church took on the character of the seminary, Jackson said. At one time virtually every seminary professor was a member.

In the 1980s, when Southeastern's professors became targets of charges of "liberalism" from SBC fundamental-conservatives, the church became "a wounded spectator," Jackson said.

In 1987, when fundamental-conservatives gained control of the seminary's trustee board and took action to make the school more conservative, President Randall Lolley resigned in protest, followed by much of the administration and faculty.

In recent years Southeastern has adopted a more conservative bent. Meanwhile, Wake Forest Baptist Church has "focused on the larger town as opposed to being an appendage of the seminary," the pastor said.

Jackson said he considers Patterson a friend, even though the pair often find themselves on opposite sides of SBC issues. He said Patterson and his wife, Dorothy, felt welcome in the church despite those differences.

Dorothy Patterson has visited the church "six or eight times," Jackson said. Patterson, who preaches out of town many weekends, has visited once.

In its small community, Wake Forest Baptist "is the 'First Baptist Church' in the usual sense," making it only natural for the Pattersons to consider joining, Jackson said. "I think they came to Wake Forest intending to fit into the community," he added.

But some church members "fear other motives," Jackson said. That fear has been fueled by the boasts of some conservative students who intend to "turn it (the church) around," he said.

There were other differences between the church and Patterson, Jackson said, such as over ordination of women. Wake Forest Baptist has had women

deacons since 1925 and ordains women to the ministry -- actions Patterson opposes.

"Wake Forest Baptist Church doesn't want to go back and reopen issues we feel very comfortable about," Jackson said. "We respect (the Pattersons') views, but we don't feel a need to entertain those issues."

Jackson said church members preferred to deny the Pattersons membership, or even "watch care," in order to avoid a potential conflict later on. "It would be harder to discontinue that relationship than not to start it in the first place," he said.

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First Baptist of Dallas picks  
seminary prof as interim pastor

By Jim Jones

DALLAS (ABP) -- Seminary professor Roy Fish has been chosen interim pastor at First Baptist Church of Dallas.

Fish, professor of evangelism at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth for 28 years, will lead the church until a new pastor is named to succeed Joel Gregory, church officials said Feb. 1. But Fish, 62, is not a candidate for the pastor's position at the 28,000-member congregation, said church spokesman Ron Harris.

Gregory, who was with the Dallas church for slightly more than two years, abruptly resigned Sept. 30 in a dispute over whether he or legendary Senior Pastor W. A. Criswell was the true leader of the congregation.

Criswell continues as senior pastor but is focusing more of his attention on raising money for Criswell College, a preacher-training institution supported by First Baptist, Harris said.

Criswell often preaches at least one sermon each Sunday but has been traveling lately speaking on behalf of the college, Harris said. "He says his heart is with the college, but he is willing to do whatever the church asks him to do," Harris said.

Although there has been some internal discord since Gregory's resignation, Harris said the church is continuing on a positive course.

"The mood of the church is just to move on," he said. "We are hoping a lot of these things that have been a concern in the past will simply be in the past."

The naming of an interim pastor is a positive step, he said, and the church's search committee is continuing to move rapidly in an effort to recommend a pastor to succeed Gregory.

When Gregory resigned, he said that he was dissatisfied with the time needed for a transition of power in the church. Criswell, he said, had indicated that he wanted to continue in the senior pastor role until his 50th anniversary in October 1994.

Gregory, while expressing admiration for Criswell, said there was confusion about who was leading the congregation.

In the past, Fish has served in several other interim pastorates in large churches in Texas, Alabama, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Florida.

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-- Jim Jones is religion writer for the Fort Worth (Texas) Star-Telegram. This story is reprinted with permission.

Virginia conservatives form  
group for fellowship, influence

By Michael Clingenpeel

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- Claiming Virginia Baptist leaders are moving away from the Southern Baptist Convention, conservative Virginia Baptists have voted to form an organization to increase their fellowship and influence.

The organization, named Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, was formed to "assist local Southern Baptist churches in Virginia to win the lost to Christ, to develop believers and to promote missions and evangelism," according to a vision statement adopted by almost 700 conservatives Jan. 28 in Lynchburg.

The meeting took place at Old Forest Road Baptist Church, where 13 years ago Houston judge Paul Pressler announced conservatives were "going for the jugular" to win control of the SBC. That effort was successful, and moderate Baptists who once dominated the SBC have since formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as an alternative group within the SBC.

Like the Fellowship, which says it is not a new denomination, Virginia conservatives insist they are not forming a separate state convention to rival the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

The new group was formed to gain more influence in the BGAV, according to the group's leaders.

"Some felt like we need to make a break now," reported Tommy Taylor, pastor of London Bridge Baptist Church in Virginia Beach, who was elected president. "I don't feel that way and obviously most here do not. Two state conventions is not my goal."

Although conservatives control the national Southern Baptist Convention, moderates maintain their dominance in Virginia and some other states.

Taylor denied that an unstated purpose of Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia is to take over the Virginia association. "This is not an anti-BGAV movement," he said. "Our tone will be positive. There are many good and wonderful people in the BGAV, many good and wonderful programs."

"We would organize more only if Virginia Baptists continue to move from the SBC," said Taylor. "Virginia Baptist leadership needs to make a move back in the direction of the SBC."

Conservatives have been angered by BGAV actions they say show support for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and sympathy for homosexuals.

One person at the Jan. 28 gathering who wanted to make a break with the BGAV was Ronald Young, pastor at Plantation Road Baptist Church in Roanoke. As the four-hour meeting opened Young made an appeal to begin the process of forming a new convention of "Bible-believing churches in Virginia" that would seek formal recognition by the SBC.

Several others endorsed his proposal, saying it would be more appropriate to withdraw from the BGAV out of protest rather than remain and divide its fellowship.

T. C. Pinckney of Alexandria, one of Virginia's members on the SBC Executive Committee, countered that "conservative strength is growing every month in Virginia."

Pinckney, a key organizer of Virginia conservatives, noted his records indicate that conservative pastors in the state had increased from 373 to 672 since 1988, while moderate pastors had declined from 584 to 577. He also cited the "turnaround" at Southeastern and Southern Baptist Theological seminaries as evidence that conservative strength is gaining.

Young's motion was defeated by a wide margin. When a recommendation was offered to form a conservative Baptist organization, not a new state

convention, consent was almost unanimous.

The action comes in response to a defeat of the conservatives' candidates and their agenda at last November's annual meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia in Virginia Beach.

At that meeting Pinckney garnered only 23 percent of the vote in the presidential election. Messengers also adopted a resolution many conservatives felt condoned homosexuality.

Virginia also became the first state convention to fund the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship directly. A budget change approved by messengers made the Fellowship the recipient of money from one of the three funding plans the BGAV offers churches.

The new conservative group is expected to set up a channel to receive and disburse funds from churches dissatisfied with the new BGAV giving plan.

Taylor said that funds would be used for "our own evangelism conference, regional church-growth conferences and upgrading our own publication, the Baptist Banner." He added that some conservative churches were escrowing funds from the BGAV until a channel could be arranged.

A newly elected 26-member SBCV executive committee will prepare a constitution and bylaws, acquire non-profit status, form workgroups to implement the new vision statement, and plan another statewide meeting during the next year.

Before the Jan. 28 meeting adjourned, resolutions condemning homosexuality and endorsing the sanctity of human life were read and adopted with applause. Taylor acknowledged that different positions on these social issues were factors in the formation of the SBCV, but "the root issue is our view of Scripture. That determines where you stand on social issues," he said.

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