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EDITOR'S NOTE: This story replaces one sent earlier in the day.

Al Mohler is nominee
for Southern presidency

By Greg Warner and Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Al Mohler, a 33-year-old Baptist newspaper editor from Atlanta, will be recommended as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, according to the seminary's search committee.

If elected, Mohler will succeed retiring president Roy Honeycutt. Mohler formerly served as special assistant to Honeycutt and director of capital funding for Southern. He left that position in 1989 to become editor of the Christian Index, weekly newsjournal of Georgia Baptists.

Wayne Allen, chairman of Southern's trustees and the search committee, made the announcement of Mohler's unanimous selection in a Feb. 21 news conference in Nashville, Tenn., where Southern Baptist Convention leaders were gathered for the winter meeting of the SBC Executive Committee.

Southern Seminary trustees were notified of Mohler's selection in a letter mailed Feb. 20, Allen said. The faculty was to be informed at 3 p.m. Feb. 22, simultaneously with the Nashville news conference.

Allen said the decision to make the announcement in Nashville rather than on the seminary's Louisville, Ky., campus was a practical one. "We were all here ... so it was a better stewardship of money and time," he said.

Although trustees planned to announce their selection in April, Allen said the search committee reached a "first-vote unanimous decision" after interviewing Mohler and two other finalists during the week of Feb. 15 and decided to release the name immediately.

"We had not planned to reach a decision until early March," Allen said, "but we had such a sense of God's leadership and peace concerning God's will that we reached a unanimous decision Friday afternoon (Feb. 19)."

"I am amazed that God communicated to us so quickly," the chairman said.

Rather than letting Mohler's selection "be dispensed by conjecture or rumor, we thought it best to officially declare who the candidate is," Allen said.

He thanked those editors who declined to print the name of the finalists when the story was first released by Associated Baptist Press Feb. 11.

Mohler will be recommended to Southern's trustees when they meet April 19, or sooner if trustees decide to call a special meeting, Allen said. The chairman said a March meeting devoted only to Mohler's election would allow trustees more time to get to know the candidate.

A native of Lakeland, Fla., Mohler is the only one of four finalists for the post who is both a graduate and one-time employee of Southern. He holds the doctor of philosophy and master of divinity degrees from Southern, in addition to a bachelor of arts degree in religion from Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

He was pastor of Union Grove Baptist Church in Bedford, Ky., while a seminary student.

If elected, Mohler would be considerably younger than most of the faculty members he would supervise. He also would be the youngest president in the seminary's history, except for the school's founder, James P. Boyce, who at 32 became chairman of the faculty at the seminary's founding in 1859.

Allen said Mohler's age "could be seen as a liability, but it could be seen as a strength." He noted that four of Southern's eight previous presidents were in their 30s when elected.

Although Mohler has no classroom teaching experience, Allen said that has not hindered other SBC seminary presidents, including retired Southern president Duke McCall and current presidents Russell Dilday of Southwestern Seminary and Landrum Leavell of New Orleans Seminary.

Mohler is considered by most colleagues to be a capable -- some say brilliant -- scholar with a confidence that belies his age. Honeycutt said Mohler is an effective fund-raiser who is capable of delineating a vision for the 134-year-old seminary, the Southern Baptist Convention's oldest.

"Personally, I have great confidence in him," the retiring president said. "I predict for him an outstanding career as president."

Allen said Mohler and his wife, Mary, "exude a strong Christian presence," and added their family -- which includes a 3-year-old daughter and 1-year-old son -- would be a good role model for students.

"The search committee was profoundly influenced by the passion that Al and Mary Mohler have for Southern," the chairman said. "They clearly understand the Southern (Seminary) mystique and are committed to the school."

The chairman explained that each finalist prepared a written interpretation of the seminary's doctrinal statement, the Abstract of Principles. He described Mohler as a "conservative evangelical" theologian, based on his statement and the interview.

Although Allen praised Mohler for the vision the nominee has outlined for the seminary's future, Mohler declined to define that vision until he discusses it with all trustees. "It's not a matter of reluctance to speak but respect for the process," he said.

Mohler spoke of his love for the seminary. "I cannot express to you how precious Southern Seminary is to me. It was that seedbed where the seed of the gospel and seed of my own vocation took root."

Mohler has been successful at winning allies in both camps during the SBC's 14-year theological-political battle. However, during his four years as editor of the Christian Index, he has become a hero of SBC conservatives. His editorials, as well as his service on the SBC Resolutions Committee, have given conservatives intellectual undergirding for their positions on such sensitive theological issues as homosexuality and abortion.

Allen said he is confident Mohler can win easy election by trustees

"I fully expect God to move in the hearts of trustees as he did with the search committee. I believe Dr. Mohler will receive a very strong vote. I believe it will be a very significant majority of trustees."

Others interviewed for the post were Timothy George, dean of Samford University's divinity school, and Richard Land, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission.

The fourth finalist -- Bob Agee, president of Oklahoma Baptist University -- was not interviewed. He withdrew from consideration Feb. 16 after news of his candidacy was published by Associated Baptist Press. Feb. 11. Agee said the news service "compromised the interview process."

Mohler, asked if he felt the search process had been compromised, declined direct comment. "To the best of my knowledge, I was not sought for confirmation (of the Feb. 11 story). . . . Since I had no opportunity to respond to it then, I will take no opportunity to respond to it now."

If elected, Mohler likely will assume the role of president-elect sometime this summer. Honeycutt is expected to remain at the seminary until Dec. 31, his announced retirement date.

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O'Brien says WMU is held
to double standard

By Karen Owen

OWENSBORO, Ky. (ABP) -- Don't hold the Southern Baptist women's auxiliary to a double standard, Dellanna O'Brien appealed to conservative Baptists Feb. 21.

O'Brien, executive director of Woman's Missionary Union, spoke at Third Baptist Church in Owensboro, Ky., during the Sunday school hour and in morning worship.

Later in the day, she met privately in Nashville, Tenn., with leaders of the SBC Executive Committee, who are upset that the new WMU vision statement adopted last month opens the door to work with any evangelical group interested in missions, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In the past, WMU has worked almost exclusively with the SBC's Home and Foreign Mission boards.

But other SBC agencies already are doing what WMU has decided to do, O'Brien said. "My plea is that we also allow WMU that same benefit and privilege."

For example, O'Brien pointed out that the Foreign Mission Board accepts missionaries who attended non-Southern Baptist seminaries and works overseas with "Great Commission Christians" who are not Baptist.

The Southern Baptist Sunday School Board receives 15 percent of its revenue from the sale of literature to a broader Christian audience, O'Brien said. And the SBC itself provides exhibit space for non-Baptist groups at the denomination's annual convention, she said.

In her talk during the Sunday school hour, O'Brien addressed several other false accusations against WMU -- accusations she described as ranging from ludicrous to insulting. For example, some have said WMU's real goal is promoting the ordination of women, and others have said WMU plans to provide missions literature for homosexuals.

"We in the past have been referred to as a feminist organization," O'Brien said. "I have taken great offense at that. We have always focused our energy and attention to relating the story of Christ around the world. To say WMU is a Christian NOW (National Organization for Women) is an absolute insult to us."

Critics have accused O'Brien's group, the largest Protestant women's organization in the country, of veering from its historic course of supporting Southern Baptist missions and missionaries. An auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention, WMU raises approximately \$120 million each year for Southern Baptist missions causes.

Although WMU has decided to work with outside organizations as well as Southern Baptist agencies, "never have we gone back on a promise," she said.

"WMU members in this church will probably see no change at all," O'Brien said. "The literature used for Acteens, Mission Friends and other groups will still promote the work of the Foreign Mission Board and the Home Mission Board.

"Whatever we do for any other group will be aside and apart from that," she said.

WMU's new mission statement was the result of a year of work, but the timing of the vote -- soon after the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship promoted its first missions offering and hired former FMB President Keith Parks to lead its missions work -- made it appear WMU was responding to the Fellowship, O'Brien said.

But that is not the case, she explained. "We did it because we wanted to establish priorities for our future."

WMU is trying hard to keep up with changes in society and in the lives of women, O'Brien said. "To delay, we felt, would put us too far down the track."

Two-thirds of the world's population is not Christian, she said. "We don't have the time to be timid about reaching out to others."

WMU has tried not to take sides in the controversy between SBC moderates and conservatives, O'Brien said, explaining WMU includes women from both camps, as well as the "confused and uncommitted."

Let those who want to get involved in the debate over theological differences do so, she said, but "please allow us to be an umbrella for all Southern Baptists."

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-- Karen Owen is religion writer for the Owensboro Messenger-Inquirer in Owensboro, Ky.

Speakers urge churches
to support families

By Kathy Palen and Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The American family faces an uphill battle, but churches can offer unique means of support, said speaker after speaker during a national conference on the family.

"The church is the best hope for the family," said Kay Shurden, a family therapist, during the second annual Baptist Center for Ethics conference Feb. 15-16 at Woodmont Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn. An estimated 230 people participated in the meeting, in spite of a snowstorm that hit Nashville Feb. 15, said center director Robert Parham.

Shurden, an associate professor at Mercer University's School of Medicine, said the church is the only group or organization that cares for people from birth through death. As families become increasingly isolated, she noted, the church's role as a provider of community becomes increasingly important.

"The church not only supplements what the family can't provide," Shurden said, "but for some people it serves as a parent." The church often serves this role for members of families struck by death or divorce, she said.

Through such special ministries as divorce-recovery groups, programs for latch-key kids, day-care programs, 12-step recovery groups, singles ministries and family-life committees, Shurden asserted, the church "doesn't just proclaim the gospel, but it is the gospel."

In addition to community, churches offer families content that provides a sense of direction, said Shurden, an associate of the Baptist Center for Ethics. Churches, she explained, can help direct families to look beyond themselves to the larger family of humankind. Churches also can help families break down an insider-outsider mentality that causes them to look inward rather than turning outward.

But, Shurden added, churches should avoid preaching or teaching that faith in Jesus will protect families from pain. "Rabbit-foot Christianity does not help families," she said.

"Families were human before they became Christian, and they are human after they become Christian. Don't over promise. The gospel is enough."

Paul Duke, pastor of Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis, Mo., echoed Shurden's emphasis upon families' need to turn outward. God puts people in

families not for their sake alone but also for the sake of the world, Duke said. "If the family is only an in-facing circle," he said, "we always do damage to each other."

Jesus spoke harsh words about family love, Duke noted, describing Jesus' words on families as "not the kind of stuff you cross-stitch and hang on a kitchen wall. He knew families are prone to idolatry."

The family should not be seen as a fortress, but as people on mission, Duke suggested. "We do not focus on the family. We turn and find the focus of our family in the larger world."

John Hewett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C., said the best help churches can give families is "emancipation from the idolatrous notion that God's primary work in the world is done in and through local congregations."

"How can Christian families grow and thrive when they're never at home, when the primary competitor for their own sacred, sacramental moments is the church?"

Hewett, also a director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, urged churches to rediscover the doctrine of the autonomy of the local family, which he called the primary household of faith, and to structure congregational life so as to give priority to family time at home.

"Can't the church honor what God's people do at home?" Hewett asked. "Sometimes we at church talk as though people ought to sell their homes and move to church. If churches really want to help families, they'll give them time -- prime family time -- and turn them loose to celebrate that time without guilt and with glad and generous hearts."

Time was the subject of another conference speaker's message. Quentin Schultze, a professor at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich., said the biggest threat that television poses to the family is not the worldly perspective of Hollywood, but the monopolization of increasing amounts of time.

"In all the hullabaloo about television and its influences on the family, I think we're missing the major point," Schultze said. "Relatively speaking, the flap over (TV character) Murphy Brown doesn't matter that much. The biggest influence of television is its shifting of our time usage from interpersonal relations to watching more television."

He cited the following statistics to support his point:

-- Last year, the average American adult watched four hours and 40 minutes of television per day.

-- Last year, the average American child watched three and a half hours of television per day.

-- Last year, the average American family had at least one television set on in the home seven hours per day.

"If we have the television on that much, what are we not doing?" said Schultze, who has written several books about the influence of television. Research has shown that Americans now spend more time on average watching television than working, he said.

Adults need to set limits on television viewing for both themselves and their children, Schultze suggested.

And rather than asking how they ever could give up their favorite television shows, Americans should consider what they could gain in better relationships as a result, he said.

Ultimately, the influence television has on American families will be determined by the self-control families exercise, Schultze said.

"The Christian community loves to blast all the secular humanists in Hollywood," he said. "But I think a lot of that anger is there because we don't have our house in order. We want to blame other people for raising our children wrongly."

Churches, in fact, can help families by offering alternatives to the media culture, suggested Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, a research associate with the Institute for American Values in New York. Instead of letting children learn most of their stories from television, churches can help by offering other stories that reinforce morals.

Churches also can help families by providing premarital counseling, marriage-enrichment programs, intergenerational activities and opportunities for service.

"Many children simply have little to do except turn on the TV, hang out at the mall or play Nintendo," she said. "Churches can provide alternatives to the mall, both in supporting youth activities and creating occasions when children and grown-ups other than their parents can get to know each other.

"Equally important, churches can provide occasions where children learn to serve others."

Other conference speakers shared about difficult ethical decisions -- those made within corporate America, those made about elder care, those made within the legal system and those made by wounded parents.

In addition, leaders of the conference's 11 workshops offered practical suggestions on such topics as teaching sex education, beginning a ministry for victims of domestic violence, understanding the dynamics of the blended family, dealing with suicide, and coping for discouraged couples.

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Editors hire director, hear
complaints about Baptist Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. (ABP) -- Editors of Southern Baptist state newspapers hired an executive director for their organization, registered complaints about the Southern Baptist Convention's news service, and held a dialogue with state-level Baptist executives on the tasks they have in common.

The actions were part of the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Press Association, which met in Scottsdale, Ariz., Feb. 16-18.

Lynn Davis, a former Baptist editor and retired marketing specialist, was hired for a new part-time position as executive director of the editors' group. According to SBPA president Jack Brymer, the position was created to strengthen the work of the association, composed of the editors of the 30-plus Baptist state newspapers.

Davis will direct SBPA administration, facilitate training for editors, and promote the work of the newspapers to Southern Baptists, among other duties.

Davis, 62, was editor of the Ohio Baptist Messenger in the 1960s. He was a marketing specialist for the SBC Sunday School Board until last year, when he and almost 200 other employees were offered early retirement as part of the board's reorganization and downsizing.

In the meeting's most tense session, the editors offered a frank assessment of recent coverage by Baptist Press, the denomination's official news service, but stopped short of adopting a strongly worded report critical of news service.

Most editors indicated agreement with concerns detailed in a five-point report from the association's Baptist Press Liaison Committee but were uncomfortable with the report's adversarial tone. The editors opted to receive the report and lengthy discussion as information while urging "continued and increased openness and dialogue" between Baptist Press and the press association.

Baptist Press is operated by the SBC Executive Committee, which in 1990 fired the director and news editor over the objections of the press association.

The three-page report, presented by liaison committee chairman R. G. Puckett, editor of the North Carolina Biblical Recorder, claimed BP's current staff members face "external intimidations and/or self-imposed pressures and restraints to avoid conflict and threats of firing by the present leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Acknowledging "the difficulty of operating an honest, accurate and unbiased news service in this context," the report took issue with the length and spin of many articles published by BP.

Herb Hollinger, vice-president for Baptist Press, countered with concern that Puckett and one of the other two liaison committee members serve as directors of the Associated Baptist Press, the independent news founded in the wake of the 1990 BP firings.

"The committee itself was very sensitive to this," Puckett responded, noting that the report does not seek to pit one news service against the other. Any characterization of bias within the report "is without foundation," he said.

Marv Knox, editor of the Western Recorder of Kentucky and the other ABP director on the liaison committee, urged participants to "consider what is helpful and reconciling and true to our calling" within the report. "I would hope that this, rather than being a divisive document, could be very helpful," he said.

The report singled out articles produced by the Christian Life Commission, which operates a BP bureau in Washington, as often featuring "not-too-thinly-veiled right-wing, secular political opinions" which raise questions about "journalistic objectivity, fairness and balance."

CLC communications director Louis Moore responded that he is "tired of being abused" by state paper editors. "You have made some very strategic, serious charges against our bureau," he insisted. "Everything we do is always subject to 'You never do anything right.' I'd like to have your feedback but I don't want to be abused.

"We try to balance the stories," Moore said, indicating potential sources are sometimes uncooperative. "This is as frustrating for me as it is for you."

Hollinger said BP "will do our best to be the kind of news service we

ought to be." Offering a point-by-point response, he said he was "a bit puzzled" by the liaison committee's report.

"You have control over Baptist Press in the sense that if you don't like the articles, you don't run them," Hollinger told the editors. "You've always had control. Some of these recommendations border on punishment."

Responding to concerns that some articles convey political overtones with little or no balance, Hollinger said, "We have very specific operational guidelines, but (we) still have to interpret those guidelines."

"With all the (SBC) agencies in control of political conservatives, those are the kind of stories you are going to get from those agencies," Hollinger said.

"I'm in a hot seat," Hollinger noted. "... My judgments are not always correct; I understand that. This is an art, not a science."

Indiana Baptist editor Gary Ledbetter questioned whether accepting the committee's report as information would be construed as "calling into question the integrity of those associated with Baptist Press."

"I don't think by receiving their report we are endorsing it," responded Mark Wyatt, editor of the California Southern Baptist. "I believe Herb and others have demonstrated integrity. Basic integrity is the same for all but we operate in different environments."

In addition to receiving the report, the editors referred the report's conclusion to the association's officers for study and future action. The proposal called for changing the committee's name from Baptist Press Liaison Committee to Liaison Committee for News Services. The change would allow the committee to relate to Associated Baptist Press, Evangelical Press, Religious News Service and Zondervan as well as Baptist Press.

Two editors and two state executive directors shared their views during a joint session of their two organizations. The presenters were Mike McCullough of the Nevada Baptist, Bobby Terry of the Missouri Word and Way, Cecil Simms of the Northwest Baptist Convention, and William Pinson of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

McCullough said he has worked to focus his monthly publication on news about Nevada Baptists, avoiding pressures to make it primarily a promotional tool for state convention programs.

"There is always going to be pressure to be primarily a promotional piece," he said, "but the churches will pay for a good newspaper, not a promotional piece."

Simms said the Northwest Baptist Witness "is a vital part of the life of the Northwest Convention." He said he appreciates Editor James Watters' emphasis on Northwest Convention news and noted Watters' coverage of the Southern Baptist Convention "doesn't hide or highlight the SBC controversy."

"The power of the press is a great power," said Simms. "Informed people will usually do the right thing. We will support a paper that does that."

Pinson said the Baptist Standard of Texas and the state convention share a common task, "making disciples, extending the kingdom of God."

"We are ... part of an integrated team," he said. "If we ever lose sight of our mission, we will lose the mission."

While most state Baptist papers claim a priority of presenting news, Missouri editor Terry said, the founding documents of most papers also

include such objectives as promotion, furthering relationships, education, evangelism, personal piety and promoting public morality.

"In Missouri, we are also to 'be concerned for the general welfare of the convention,'" he said. "That helps determine what goes on the front page."

Terry credited the late John Hurt, editor of the Christian Index (1947-66) and Baptist Standard (1966-77), with focusing the attention of Baptist state papers on news gathering.

The papers today, however, must do more than print the news, he said. They must show they impact the lives of individuals, helping them with moral values, church life and the issues of daily life.

In other business, the editors suspended their bylaws to re-elect president Brymer, editor of the Florida Baptist Witness, to an unprecedented second term after the president-elect declined to serve.

The editors also passed a resolution praising former Arkansas editor Everett Sneed, who died last year.

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-- By Trennis Henderson and Toby Druin

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