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Southern Seminary trustees elect Mohler president

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Trustees of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary elected Al Mohler as the ninth president of the Louisville, Ky., school in a special closed-door meeting March 25-26 in Atlanta.

Mohler's nomination was approved 46-5. Ten trustees were absent.

Word of Mohler's election came as trustees adjourned their meeting at a hotel near the Atlanta airport Friday afternoon. A press conference to announce the decision was scheduled for that evening in Louisville.

Mohler, 33, will become the second youngest president of Southern Baptists' oldest seminary. A theologian and editor of the Christian Index of Georgia, Mohler was announced as the unanimous choice of the trustees' search committee Feb. 22 in a news conference in Nashville, Tenn.

A native of Lakeland, Fla., Mohler is a two-time graduate and one-time employee of Southern.

He holds the doctor of philosophy and master of divinity degrees from the seminary, in addition to a bachelor of arts degree in religion from Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. He served as special assistant to retiring president Roy Honeycutt and director of capital funding for Southern before taking the Georgia editorship in 1989.

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-- By Greg Warner

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EDITOR'S NOTE: ABP will update this story after the press conference scheduled for tonight. The story will be available at least by Monday morning.

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Holly says HMB trustees
should renounce Mason study

BEAUMONT, Texas (ABP) -- Larry Holly, who has led a campaign against the involvement of Southern Baptists in Freemasonry, has called for trustees of the Home Mission Board to renounce their agency's study of the Masons.

Holly, a Baptist layman and physician in Beaumont, Texas, told HMB trustees March 25 he is "willing to accept" the recommendation trustees approved March 17 but not the study on which that recommendation was based.

The recommendation says some teachings of Freemasonry are incompatible with Christianity, but that participation in the fraternal organization should be left to individual Baptists.

While the trustee report points out contradictions between Freemasonry and Christianity, Holly said, the HMB staff study on which the report was based casts Masons in a much more favorable light, perhaps even encouraging Baptists to join the organization.

"The problem for the HMB, and thusly for Southern Baptists, is that the trustees have drawn one conclusion and the staff is driving for another," Holly wrote in his March 25 letter to trustees.

"The contradiction between your recommendation and the staff study has the HMB giving an 'uncertain sound,'" he told trustees.

Larry Lewis, HMB president, disagreed. "I don't see that there is any contradiction whatsoever" between the study and the trustee action, Lewis told Associated Baptist Press.

"In fact, most of what is in the (trustee) report is in the larger study, even the very wording in many instances," he continued. "The trustees had every opportunity to reject the study ... but no such action was taken."

Lewis said Holly's distinction between the staff study and trustee report is unfounded, since staff and trustees were involved in both. The trustees' administrative committee reviewed the study "line by line" before approving it, Lewis said, and Lewis himself -- not trustees -- drafted the trustees' report and recommendation.

Trustee chairman Brad Allen of Duncan, Okla., agreed the trustees had adequate input into the study and added, "I don't see contradiction and I'm pleased with the study."

The Freemasonry study was commissioned by the Southern Baptist Convention last June at the request of Holly, who has written two books criticizing Freemasonry. The study was assigned to the HMB and Gary Leazer, director of the HMB's interfaith witness department. Leazer was demoted after showing Masons copies of the unfinished study and encouraging them to attend the Southern Baptist Convention in June, where the trustees' report will be up for approval.

In his letter, Holly calls on trustees to denounce the study or instruct the HMB staff not to circulate the 75-page published version which is being sold for \$6. The trustees should take that action before the SBC meeting in June, he said.

The only other option is, he said, "Do nothing and allow Southern Baptists to experience the embarrassment and confusion of conflicting reports from the HMB, thus allowing Masons to quote from the staff report, making Southern Baptists the first denomination ever implicitly to bless the Masonic Lodge."

Freemasonry, which is organized into 51 independent Grand Lodges nationwide, is a secretive organization known publicly for its benevolent activities but whose private pursuits involve elaborate rituals and oaths and devotion to an eclectic quest for higher knowledge.

Holly and other critics insist those private practices, inspired by pagan rituals and occultism, comprise a religion that competes with Christianity by convincing well-intentioned men that good deeds -- not faith in Jesus -- can get them to heaven.

The Masons insist their organization is a fraternity, not a religion, and that its principles both reflect and enhance the Christian faith of members. Masons recently mounted an elaborate and rare public defense against Holly's attacks, which they say take Masonic materials out of context to make them appear evil.

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RFRA moves in House
but delayed in Senate

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Legislative action in late March on the Religious Freedom Restoration Act offered both great hope and mild disappointment for supporters of the bill.

The House Judiciary Committee unanimously approved an unamended bill (H.R. 1308) for floor consideration by the full chamber. But the victory on the House side was dampened slightly when the Senate Judiciary Committee postponed consideration of the bill (S. 578) until after the April recess.

Attorneys working for RFRA's passage agreed the House committee action far outweighed the Senate committee's inaction in determining RFRA's future.

House committee members expressed enthusiasm and support for the legislation that would restore a high level of protection for religious practices. In 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court said that in most instances government no longer had to demonstrate a compelling interest, such as public health or safety, before it could restrict religious exercise.

"We cannot let the Smith decision further chip away at the freedom to exercise religious beliefs," said Rep. Don Edwards, D-Calif.

Oliver Thomas, Baptist Joint Committee general counsel and chairman of the coalition of religious and civil-liberties groups supporting the bill, said: "The unanimous vote of the 35-member House Judiciary Committee shows the breadth of support for this bill. The members recognize that without RFRA the free-exercise clause (of the First Amendment) remains a dead letter."

Forest Montgomery, counsel for the National Association of Evangelicals, said: "You can't do better than 35-zip, and I think it sends a powerful message to the House ... that any qualms expressed in the past have been taken care of, and we are clear for rapid passage."

That message also should be clear to the Senate, he added.

Brent Walker, associate general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said that "the House committee's unanimous approval sets the tone for a successful vote in the Senate Judiciary Committee when it takes up the bill after the Easter recess. After all, several of the House committee members were RFRA's harshest critics last year, and they voted for it this time around."

Walker said while the Senate delay is not ominous with regard to the measure's final passage, it will prevent President Bill Clinton from signing it by April 13 -- a target date set by the broad-based coalition. That date was selected because it marks the 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth.

The Senate delay was prompted by a Justice Department request. The

Justice Department said it wanted to review the bill to make sure reinstatement of the compelling interest test would not produce undue burdens in prison settings. Thomas said he's confident it would not.

"I have spoken with both the Senate sponsors as well as the attorney general's staff and am confident the postponement in the Senate signals no change in the administration's position.

"Both the president and the attorney general have unequivocally endorsed RFRA."

Although the delay is disappointing, it is important to note that RFRA was reintroduced only two weeks ago, Thomas said. "We have been waiting for three years to have this bill marked up in the Senate."

Because of an eminent congressional recess, the earliest date the Senate committee could consider RFRA is April 22.

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Freedom of Choice Act
advances in U.S. Senate

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Freedom of Choice Act moved a step closer to passage March 24, but the journey is far from over.

The Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee quickly disposed of the controversial bill (S. 25) that would write into law a woman's right to privacy in abortion decisions. The committee approved the bill for floor consideration by a 12-5 vote within 30 minutes.

Supporters say the bill simply codifies the landmark 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision that recognized the right to abortion. Opponents counter that FOCA increases abortion rights beyond those delineated in Roe.

While the bill has been hotly contested, senators refrained from offering amendments or much debate in committee, saying they would do both when the bill comes to the full Senate.

Sen. Nancy Kassebaum, R-Kan., said she supports the bill but would offer amendments on the floor. She said it is troubling that "lines get drawn in the sand" and there is no room for compromise on the issue.

Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., also made a pitch for reasonableness and striving to seek a common ground in addressing the issue.

Sen. Dan Coats, R-Ind., said he agreed with the two senators except that FOCA leaves very little room for objective, reasonable discussion. Coats said some of the bill's provisions are too broad, allowing abortion throughout pregnancy.

The only lively exchange occurred after Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, observed the committee would not even need to consider the bill if more women sat on the nation's high court. Harkin said abortion is a women's issue and that men should not settle it. Abortion happens to women, he noted.

"And children," Coats interjected.

To women, Harkin countered.

"And children," Coats repeated. After which, he offered an impromptu amendment that the bill should not allow abortions in the ninth month of pregnancy except to save the life of the mother.

Bill supporters said that the amendment was unnecessary because the measure does not allow abortions after fetal viability -- the point at which the fetus can live outside the womb -- except to save the life or health of the mother.

Coats said he was unsatisfied because the bill does not define viability

and that the health of the mother exception was overbroad and open for abuse.

But a few minutes later, Coats withdrew the amendment.

In a related issue, Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., said he was concerned about the access patients and medical personnel have to abortion clinics. The March 10 murder of doctor David Gunn outside a Florida medical clinic was the tragic result of escalating violence at clinics, Kennedy said.

Kennedy introduced a bill (S. 636) to assure access to clinics, and he said he is working with the administration on that legislation. Attorney General Janet Reno has said repeatedly she would like to stiffen penalties for obstruction of clinic access.

A House subcommittee approved March 25 a similar measure (H.R. 796) by a 9-4 vote that would make it a federal crime to block clinic access.

While the Crime and Criminal Justice Subcommittee approved the bill for committee consideration, a hearing on the bill is expected to be held next week. An aide said the subcommittee proceeded with the vote because of the urgent need to act, but if the hearing produces new evidence, the bill could be amended.

In other abortion-related action, the House approved March 25 a bill that would write into law President Bill Clinton's order lifting the abortion-counseling ban at federally funded family planning clinics. The ban was initiated by the Reagan administration and was continued by the Bush administration. A few days after taking office, President Clinton lifted the ban by executive order.

The bill, approved 273-149, would reauthorize the federal family planning program.

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Bill Clinton wants court nominee
to support First Amendment, privacy

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In appointing his first justice to the U.S. Supreme Court, President Bill Clinton says he wants a nominee who has a strong view of First Amendment freedoms and who believes in a constitutional right to privacy.

Associate Justice Byron White recently announced that he will step down from the bench this summer.

During a March 23 news conference, Clinton twice underscored that he would not ask potential nominees how they would vote on specific issues.

"But I will endeavor to appoint someone who has certain deep convictions about the Constitution," he said. "I would not, for example, knowingly appoint someone that did not have a very strong view about the First Amendment's freedom of religion, freedom of association and freedom of speech provisions."

Clinton added that the right to privacy -- the constitutional basis for protecting abortion rights -- is "one of those rights deeply embedded in our Constitution." He said he will attempt to select a court nominee who believes in a "strong and broad constitutional right to privacy."

During the presidential campaign, Clinton said he would seek Supreme Court candidates who have an expansive view of the Bill of Rights.

"I'm worried about the Bill of Rights and the right to privacy -- not just the right to choose, but the general right to privacy -- which I think is very important," Clinton told journalist Bill Moyers in an interview broadcast July 7 on PBS.

"In a country like ours, you need that elbow room," he continued. "So I would want the first judge I appointed to believe in the right to privacy and the right to choose."

After White announced that he will step down from the bench when the high court's 1992-93 term ends this summer, Clinton said he would seek a nominee "who has a fine mind, good judgment, wide experience in the law and in the problems of real people, and somebody with a big heart."

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--By Larry Chesser

Prayer requested for
summit of gang leaders

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America is calling on Baptists and other Christians to organize a special service of prayer April 28 on the eve of a summit of urban gang leaders.

An estimated 100 African-American and Latino gang leaders from 30 cities are being invited to the summit, which will be held April 29-May 2 at St. Stephen Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo.

The summit comes on the first anniversary of the 1992 outbreak of urban violence in Los Angeles.

Organizers hope the meeting will help establish lasting peace in communities torn by gang violence and redirect the leadership of warring gang members into non-violent and creative problem solving.

The summit was initiated by the Council for Urban Peace and Justice, a one-year-old organization formed in the wake of the Los Angeles riots. The council is based in Granville, Ohio, where it operates out of donated offices at First Baptist Church.

George Williamson, pastor of the Granville church and president of the Baptist Peace Fellowship's board of directors, said the call for prayer support is going out to "our (church) members, our larger Baptist family and our ecumenical friends."

Williamson said the gang leaders at the summit "could very well be God's anointed ones" to find a resolution to gang violence in America.

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Nicaraguan Baptists
ordain first woman

MANAGUA, Nicaragua (ABP) -- Nicaraguan Baptists have ordained their first female minister.

Carmen Pena Garay, pastor of Hebron Baptist Church in Juigalpa, was ordained Jan. 30 at the Baptist Seminary in Managua after an ordination council composed of 90 people from 36 Nicaraguan Baptist congregations gave unanimous approval.

Tomas Tellez, executive director of the Baptist Convention of Nicaragua, preached the ordination sermon, in which he declared the convention is ready to welcome women into the pastoral ministry.

During Garay's examination by the ordination council, she presented a paper on the ministry of women in Nicaragua and in the time of Jesus. Garay,

who has served as pastor of four churches, has ministered for 17 years in northern Nicaragua, an area ravaged by war during much of that time.

In 1975 Garay was one of a group of six women who were the first to seek theological education at the Nicaraguan Baptist seminary. She earned a bachelor of theology degree in 1980 and is nearing completion of the seminary's highest degree, the licentiate in theology.

Last year Cuban Baptists ordained their first three women pastors. All three women graduated from the Baptist seminary in Havana in the late 1960s and served many years in pastoral roles before ordination.

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Smyth & Helwys sponsors
three education meetings

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Smyth & Helwys publishers of Macon, Ga., will sponsor three major educational conferences in coming months, headlined by the National Convocation on Christian Education.

That convocation will be held at the University of Richmond June 3-5. Theme of the convocation will be "Faith Formation in the Christian Community."

Speakers will include Peter Benson of Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minn.; Sara Little, professor emerita at Union Seminary in Richmond; Paul Duke, pastor of Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis, Mo.; and Isam Ballenger, professor of missiology at the Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond.

Worship sessions will be led by Don Nixon and the choir of Northminster Church in Monroe, La. Numerous workshops will be offered, plus a local church curriculum lab. Convocation coordinator is Robert Fulbright, minister of Christian education at Kirkwood Baptist.

In addition to the national convocation, Smyth & Helwys will sponsor two earlier meetings -- a National Childlife Conference April 23-24 at First Baptist Church in Asheville, N.C., and a National Youth Conference the same dates at Northside Drive Baptist Church in Atlanta, Ga.

Theme of the Childlife Conference will be "The Child Learns: Feeling, Thinking and Knowing." Leaders will be Sybil Waldrop, formerly of the Baptist Sunday School Board; William Hendricks of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; and Dixie Ruth Crase of Memphis State University.

Theme of the youth conference will be "New Visions for Youth Ministry." Speakers will include John Hendrix, a professor at Southern Seminary, and his wife, Lela; Thom and Joanie Schultz, founders of Group Publishing; and David Adams and David Cassady, both youth editors for Smyth & Helwys Publishing.

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