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

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Mohler elected president
of Southern on 46-5 vote

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- R. Albert Mohler Jr. was elected the ninth president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary March 26 by a 46-5 vote of the seminary's trustees during a called meeting held in executive session.

The 33-year-old editor of Georgia Baptists' weekly newsjournal pledged his commitment to the conservative movement within the Southern Baptist Convention, to the inerrancy of Scripture and to the seminary's Abstract of Principles, its governing theological document.

He urged Southern Baptists to look to the seminary's promising future rather than focus on the controversy that has dominated the SBC since 1979, and which apparently led to the earlier-than-planned retirement of Southern's current president, Roy Honeycutt.

"I am not so much interested in responding to the past but in pointing to the future," Mohler said during a news conference the day of his election.

"I call upon all who love Southern Seminary to go with us, to grow with us," he added. "We ask Southern Baptists of good will to go with us, to pray with us, to build with us."

Mohler, who holds two degrees from the Louisville, Ky., seminary, said he accepts the position with "great awe and humility" and "absolute wonder."

"No human language can express the overflowing of my heart at this hour," he explained. "I pledge to you the full measure of my devotion and service to this calling. Southern Seminary has been for me the nourisher of calling, the equipper of service, the catalyst of dreams. I will be forever in her debt. A lifetime of service would be inadequate to repay the debt I owe this institution."

Mohler said there is no conflict between his love for the institution which educated him and his desire to be part of bringing about change within the institution.

"I am at one with the call for change within the institutional life of the Southern Baptist Convention," he said. "That is not in any way

incompatible or inconsistent with my love for this institution."

Mohler described himself as an inerrantist, but said inerrancy "isn't the only word I would use of Scripture."

"I believe the Scripture is without error, ... but the most important thing to say of Scripture is that it is God's Word."

Mohler, whose nomination was announced by the trustee search committee in February, was presented to the full board during a March 25-26 meeting in Atlanta. After Mohler's election in that closed session, he and the chairman and vice chairman of the board flew to Louisville for a reception and news conference on the seminary campus.

Trustee chairman Wayne Allen, who also served as chair of the search committee, defended his calling of the special meeting away from the seminary campus.

Some students, faculty and alumni had questioned the cost, timing and location of the special meeting, which was held three weeks prior to the regular spring trustee meeting. Like many other aspects of the search process, Mohler's election was far-removed from the Louisville campus.

Although Allen declined to say how much the meeting cost, conservative estimates secured by Associated Baptist Press from a professional travel planner showed a minimum expense of \$30,000.

The seminary has cut about \$500,000 from its budget in the past three years, and President Honeycutt told an SBC budget-planning group in January that if income doesn't increase, the next step likely would be staff layoffs. A student matriculation fee increase is to be recommended for the fall semester.

Allen said he believes the special meeting was worth whatever it cost because electing a president is one of the most important events in a seminary's life. This "investment" in the future -- Mohler's election -- was done more thoroughly during a special meeting rather than being tacked onto the already full schedule of the spring meeting, he said.

Student protests during the two days of the meeting focused on the search committee's actions more than on Mohler's selection. At a Student Government Association booth on campus, students wrote about 400 postcards to trustees to express their concerns, said Ruth Davison, SGA president.

No student, faculty or alumni representatives were included in the news conference where the president-elect was introduced.

When asked about criticism that the seminary community had been left out of the search committee's work, Allen said he would "plead guilty" to that charge. "This is a trustee responsibility solely," he explained.

Mohler will arrive on campus in early summer and will assume full responsibilities as president Aug. 1. This is a change from the Dec. 31 retirement date originally set by Honeycutt.

At 33 years of age, Mohler will become the seminary's second-youngest president, surpassed in youth only by the founding president, James P. Boyce, who was 32.

During their closed-door interview with Mohler, several trustees expressed reservations about Mohler's age and lack of experience. "He does not have the normal qualifications for president of a seminary," trustee George Steincross told Associated Baptist Press after the meeting.

Allen admitted he had been concerned about Mohler's age at first but now sees it as an asset rather than a liability. "Those who think Dr. Mohler is not old enough to lead Southern Seminary do not know Al Mohler," he said. "He is presidential. He is a leader."

Allen said Mohler had been recommended to the search committee by six people, including four seminary faculty members. He described the president-elect as "the most brilliant man I've ever known in my life."

Mohler is a native of Lakeland, Fla., and earned the bachelor of arts degree from Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., in 1980. He then earned the master of divinity degree in 1983 and the doctor of philosophy degree in 1990, both from Southern Seminary.

He was unanimously elected editor of the Christian Index in 1989, after a 15-month search to replace Jack Harwell, who was forced from the post due to the SBC controversy. While studying for his doctoral degree, Mohler worked as assistant to the president and director of capital funding at Southern Seminary. From 1982-1987, he was pastor of Union Grove Baptist Church in Bedford, Ky.

Since 1990, Mohler has served on the SBC's tellers committee, public affairs advisory committee and resolutions committee, which he chaired in 1992. He is associate editor of Preaching magazine.

Mohler and his wife, Mary, have two children, Mary Katherine, 3, and Christopher Albert, 1.

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Mohler says he stands behind
Southern's doctrinal statement

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP)--The president-elect of Southern Baptists' oldest theological seminary said March 26 he is a conservative who wants to "recover the theological tradition" of the school and propel it into the future at the "forefront of the Southern Baptist Convention."

"I am committed to a future of Southern Seminary that is solidly rooted in its past, and in the confession of faith which is the covenant of this institution, the Abstract of Principles," said Al Mohler, who was elected the seminary's ninth president earlier in the day.

The Abstract of Principles is "the irreducible minimum" and guide for doctrinal questions about the seminary's teachings, he said.

While the seminary should be a place for honest inquiry for "issues of ultimate substance," it should not foster an "absolute openness," Mohler said, but "an openness within certain specified parameters."

The Abstract, which dates to 1859, provides the parameters, he said.

"The Abstract is where we stand, and I intend to stand there substantively," the president-elect explained.

The Abstract does not specifically address certain issues of contemporary controversy, Mohler admitted, but said prospective faculty members might be questioned on issues of contemporary concern. He specifically cited abortion and homosexuality as two such issues.

In recent years, Southern's conservative trustees have asked prospective faculty members about their beliefs on such issues. The school's most conservative trustees have been particularly troubled by the nomination of "conservative evangelicals" who do not oppose the ordination of women as pastors and deacons.

However, that is one issue Mohler cited as not within the Abstract and therefore "not an actionable issue" among current faculty nor an "issue of interrogation of students."

Although he personally has struggled with this issue, Mohler said, he finds "the service of women in the pastorate or in certain offices of the church incompatible with Scripture."

However, that is his opinion only, he asserted. "The position of the

institution is the Abstract of Principles. There is nothing in the Abstract of Principles about the ordination of women."

The president-elect said he believes women should be accepted in all seminary degree programs but should realize "this denomination does not have a multitude of churches who are calling women as pastors."

When asked if any current faculty are in jeopardy of losing their jobs due to the change of administration, Mohler replied, "Every elected member of the faculty by signing the Abstract of Principles has indicated their commitment to it."

Mohler said faculty and administration must "hold each other mutually accountable" for staying within parameters of the Abstract.

Although Mohler did not indicate any concerns about the teaching of current faculty during the news conference, he reportedly did address the issue during the closed-door session with trustees.

According to trustees, Mohler told the board some faculty members were teaching outside the parameters of the Abstract during his days as a student, which ended in 1990. However, he declined to discuss current personnel issues with the board at this point, the sources said.

Faculty found to be teaching outside the parameters of the Abstract will either recant those teachings or retire, the trustee sources said Mohler promised.

As part of the interview process, Mohler prepared an interpretation of the Abstract, which was given to all trustees.

Within that interpretive document, Mohler quoted seminary founder James Boyce on the kind of fidelity faculty should have for the Abstract: "No difference, however slight, no peculiar sentiments, however speculative, is here allowable. His agreement with the standard should be exact."

Trustee Chairman Wayne Allen cited the president-elect's adherence to the Abstract as the reason five trustees voted against Mohler. "I sensed some people were uncomfortable with his commitment to the Abstract of Principles," Allen explained.

Several trustees who voted against Mohler's nomination told Associated Baptist Press they are troubled by Mohler's emphasis on and use of the Abstract.

"I fear there is going to be theological and doctrinal cleansing at Southern Seminary," warned George Steincross of Liberty, Mo.

Julian Pentecost of Richmond, Va., said he is "very concerned" that the Abstract "is going to be given a very prominent place in relation to the faculty. And the president is going to be at the center of that." Such an emphasis makes the Abstract much more important than was true in most previous administrations, Pentecost said.

Charlie Updike of Gaithersburg, Md., said he is concerned Mohler will enforce the Abstract down to the "letter of the law."

"One of the things that frightens me is I think we're going to go back to an 1850s theological dogma," Updike said, "and I have some hesitancy about using that as a point of reference for theological education today."

"E. Y. Mullins, (former Southern president), and the (seminary's) founders need to be considered, but I don't think they are infallible saints."

Several trustees also expressed concern about Mohler's suggestion that the seminary adopt a mission statement to state its positions on issues -- including social and ethical concerns -- not addressed in the Abstract. Such a document could be used as a tool for removing unwanted faculty members, they warned.

"That's part of its reason for being," Steincross said.

In addition to Steincross, Pentecost and Updike, those voting against

Mohler's nomination were Horace Benjamin of Greenville, S.C., and Roy Savage of Great Bend, Kan.

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-- Greg Warner contributed to this story.

Mohler's views expressed
in Index editorials

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Southern Seminary's president-elect, Al Mohler, has expressed his opinions on a variety of issues during his editorship of the Christian Index, the newsjournal of Georgia Baptists. Here's a sampling of some of the positions he took on pivotal topics in 1992 editorials:

-- Abortion: "Abortion must be faced for what it is -- the rejection of human life as defined by the Creator in favor of a definition the human will write for himself. One cannot deny the sanctity of life, nor hide behind such theological or moral revisionism, without denying the authority of God himself, who created all things living and unliving and who gathered dust into life, creating men and women in his own image." (Jan. 16)

-- The church and abortion: "The Christian community must wage war over values and instigate a moral revolution which will stem the tide of abortion and win the hearts and minds of the American people. Until then, the legal and political battles -- important as they are -- will be limited in value and temporary in effect." (July 9)

-- Homosexuality: "The witness of Scripture is clear. The Bible expressly prohibits all homosexual behavior, reserving its strongest language for this mandate. ... Those who are in revolt against the church's condemnation of homosexual activity must resort to interpretive acrobatics in order to revise the clear meaning of the biblical text." (Feb. 13)

-- The Southern Baptist Convention breaking with churches affirming homosexuality: "Baptists always will be a diverse people. Baptist polity will always focus more on the center -- a shared consensus -- than on the boundaries. But Southern Baptists are now called to protect the integrity of Baptist witness by establishing clear parameters and establishing boundaries as well. The denomination is now called to find that delicate balance which marks a people certain of the center, but aware of the boundary. The alternative is to lose sight of both." (April 2)

-- Sex education: "Sex education has been transformed from a simple matter of anatomy and human reproduction into a carnival of titillation and enticement which is often best described as child abuse." (April 30)

-- Christian education: "Baptists must insist on educational institutions which are not embarrassed to stand for the truth of revealed religion and that truth expressed in every arena of thought and life. Only those institutions unashamed to stand with the church against the secular press of modernity will serve the cause of Christian education." (May 28)

-- God's name: "God is not male -- he is Spirit and bears no physical gender. But God is not gender-confused. He has revealed himself in masculine terms, thus avoiding any confusion with the fertility cults and assorted paganisms of the Canaanites, Romans and late 20th century Americans. ... Attempts to revolutionize God-language are an attack upon the doctrine of the Trinity." (July 30)

-- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's promotion of an offering for global missions: "This action, combined with the assertive posture taken by the CBF, can be understood as nothing other than a direct assault on the SBC

Foreign Mission Board and the Lottie Moon offering. ... Those who will not stand boldly and unashamedly with Lottie Moon will not stand with Southern Baptists." (Nov. 26)

-- Prayer in public schools: "The (Supreme) Court's recent decision in the case Lee vs. Weisman indicates just how confusing the church-state terrain has now become -- and religious liberty is the loser. ... The decision comes as a blow to religious liberty and a further indication that religious speech is the most censured form of expression in contemporary America." (July 2)

-- Race relations: "American Christians must do more than curse this new racial factionalism (in America). The church must point the way toward a new level of racial and ethnic inclusiveness. Failure at this point is a scandal the church will bear before a watching world." (Feb. 6)

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Moscow seminary will fulfill
'dream of a century' for Baptists

MOSCOW (ABP) -- Russian Baptists will open a seminary this fall, fulfilling a dream of almost a century.

"It has been the dream of Baptists around the world since the time of the czars to have this," said Paul Montacute of the Baptist World Alliance, which is assisting the project.

The seminary is expected to open Oct. 1 with 20 students housed in temporary facilities.

Baptists in Russia have been trying to start a seminary since before the Bolshevik Revolution, Montacute said. Seventy-plus years of communist rule thwarted those plans. And since the fall of communism, the project has been slowed by a variety of factors -- government permits, choosing a location and funding.

"It has proved as difficult to do in post-revolutionary times as it was in pre-revolutionary times," Montacute said.

Baptists worldwide have been collecting money to open a Moscow seminary since the early 1900s, Montacute said. Now those efforts may finally prove fruitful.

The Baptist World Alliance is providing some financial support for the project through its Baptist Response-Europe, which has worked since 1990 to assist Baptist work among the continent's former communist countries.

Operating costs for the seminary's first year are estimated at \$50,000. The same amount is needed to operate the new Baptist seminary in Odessa, Ukraine.

Meanwhile, plans are already being laid to break ground later this year for the Moscow seminary's own campus in the suburb of Losinka. The facility will cost approximately \$1.5 million to build, said Montacute, director of the BWA's relief department. "They are hoping Baptists around the world will provide the resources for doing this," he said.

Montacute said funds totaling \$400,000 already are in sight, including some money from the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

Until the seminary's facility is ready, the school will be housed in the new headquarters of the Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists of Russia in Moscow.

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-- By Greg Warner and Stanley Crabb

Americans uncertain
on gays in military

GLENDALE, Calif. (ABP) -- Americans have mixed feelings about gays serving in the military, but Americans who consider themselves evangelical Christians aren't so indecisive.

That's the finding of a new nationwide poll by the Barna Research Group of Glendale, Calif.

The poll, taken through telephone surveys of a representative sample of American adults, was conducted in February.

On the bottom line question of whether the government should maintain its current policy of not allowing acknowledged homosexuals to serve in the military, Americans are nearly evenly divided. Forty-seven percent say they would prefer to keep gays out of the military, while 44 percent disagree.

Among evangelicals, however, 80 percent prefer no homosexuals in the military, while only 14 percent disagree.

Although Americans are divided over this question, they are more certain about other related questions. But these opinions appear to be contradictory.

For example, 57 percent of Americans believe "acknowledged homosexuals should not be prohibited from serving in the military solely because of their sexual orientation." Only 34 percent disagree with this statement.

And 81 percent of Americans believe "whether a person is homosexual or not is a private matter that is nobody else's business." Only 15 percent disagree with that statement.

Yet 55 percent of Americans believe homosexuality is "immoral," 58 percent believe allowing gays in the military will make it more difficult for some heterosexual soldiers to concentrate on their job duties, and 68 percent believe allowing homosexuals in the military will not make the armed forces more effective.

Further, 48 percent of Americans say they would not want to serve in the military alongside homosexuals.

That figure is even higher among evangelicals, with 78 percent saying they wouldn't want to serve alongside homosexuals.

The opinions of evangelicals differ more sharply from the general population on most points of the survey. On average, evangelicals registered resistance to homosexuals by at least 20 to 30 percentage points more than the general population.

For example, while 55 percent of Americans say homosexuality is "immoral," 92 percent of evangelicals take that view.

And while 81 percent of Americans believe whether someone is homosexual is a "private matter," only 52 percent of evangelicals agree.

On the question of whether people should be excluded from the military solely on the basis of sexual orientation, evangelicals reflect nearly an exact opposite profile than Americans at large. Sixty percent of evangelicals support this restriction, while 57 percent of Americans disagree.

Other sub-groups the survey found most likely to oppose homosexuals in the military include men, senior citizens, whites, Southerners, Republicans, Protestants and born-again Christians.

Pollster George Barna, president of the Barna Research Group, offered this interpretation of the data: "People are increasingly concerned about the moral condition of the country, and the implications of the shift away from traditional, Judeo-Christian values.

"Very few people in America are homosexual. Most Americans support the right to be a homosexual, theoretically. But when it comes down to interacting with people whose lifestyle they perceive to be immoral, or whose

behavior they believe will ultimately lead to cultural decay or lost productivity, they draw the line."

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-- By Mark Wingfield

North Carolina hosts first Fellowship meeting

GREENSBORO, N.C. (ABP) -- About 1,000 Baptists in North Carolina attended the first meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in the state and laid plans for what could become a statewide Fellowship chapter.

The two-day meeting, held at First Baptist Church of Greensboro, featured three speakers from the national Fellowship organization -- Coordinator Cecil Sherman, Missions Coordinator Keith Parks and Moderator-elect Hardy Clemons.

As of March, 181 Baptist churches in North Carolina are contributing funds through the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- more than in any other state.

At the Greensboro meeting, participants attended to very few matters of business. But one action could eventually lead to a formal statewide organization. An 11-member committee was formed to plan future meetings of the Fellowship in North Carolina. However, the committee has not yet been asked to develop a constitution to give shape to a state Fellowship chapter.

Instead, many moderate Baptists in North Carolina will continue to work through an organization called Friends of Missions, which for several years has rallied opposition to the influence of conservative Baptists in the state.

In other action, participants at the Greensboro meeting approved a motion to hold joint sessions with the North Carolina chapter of the Alliance of Baptists, another moderate group.

They also collected more than \$4,000 to pay the expenses of a family of Fellowship missionaries to attend the Fellowship's general assembly in Birmingham, Ala., in May. Most of the Fellowship's 20-plus missionaries will be commissioned during the assembly.

Clemons, who will become moderator of the national Fellowship during the May meeting, urged the North Carolinians to move beyond the 14-year struggle to regain control of the Southern Baptist Convention from conservatives. Moderates say conservatives are stifling Baptist diversity by imposing strict theological litmus tests for SBC employment and leadership.

"I don't want to fight them, but I don't want to be part of something that doctrinaire," said Clemons, pastor of First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C.

Parks, who retired as president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board last October and in December was hired to direct the Fellowship's fledgling missions effort, urged the group to focus on the needs and opportunities for outreach in the former communist countries.

"In these new nations, we will tell the people that we will be your older brother and walk alongside of you every step we can," said Parks of Richmond, Va.

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-- This story by Greg Warner includes information from Andy Barron of the Greensboro News & Record.

'Trust, obedience' called solution
to liberal-conservative impasse

By Tom Price

ELKHART, Ind. (ABP) -- Although Christians worldwide find themselves at an impasse because of a fissure between liberals and conservatives, a solution might be found in an old hymn, according to a Southern Baptist peace activist.

"There probably is no clearer dividing line within the Christian community than the one between pietists and activists, also framed as the line between conservatives and liberals," said Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

"There is something on the order of a massive fault line running down through most Christian bodies," he said. While conservatives emphasize a pietistic approach -- "Trust Jesus!" -- liberals focus on the need for faith in action -- "Obey Jesus!" Sehested said.

In the annual "Spirituality and Justice" lectures March 18-19 at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, Ind., Sehested literally had the audience singing the solution -- the chorus of John Sammis' hymn, "When We Walk With the Lord":

"Trust and obey / for there's no other way / to be happy in Jesus / but to trust and obey."

"That old hymn may contain the clue we need for a complete reformulation of the way we understand Christian identity, one that leads beyond the familiar polarization between concern for heaven and concern for earth, between personal religion and public faith, between the quest for spirituality and the longing for justice," he said.

Biblical faith must get beyond such a dualism and find the "organic connection" between trust and obedience, Sehested said.

"That illustrates why 'believing' is no longer an adequate word for Christian faith and why 'following' is actually better suited," he said. "A key reason many church folk have difficulty in taking justice and peace issues seriously is because such concerns failed to be addressed as spiritual concerns."

Sehested assailed much that passes for "spirituality" in America, comparing it to cotton candy: "Coming at you it looks bigger than life, but it's mostly air. And what substance is there is liable to rot your teeth and turn your stomach."

"We in the industrialized, wealthy part of the world have effectively rendered the Bible innocuous through a process of 'sentimentalizing' what we read," he said. "Spiritual reality has become all sentiment and no substance."

Sehested issued a call for personal responsibility in following Jesus.

"There is no resurrection by proxy. No one can stand in for you. You have to be personally present," he said. "We must personally enter into God's drama of redemption. We must, as Jesus commanded, pick up our own cross and follow. We must enlist in the resurrection movement."

But enlisting in that movement may produce suffering, Sehested warned in another address. In fact, he said, "It is not only our duty to suffer, but to cause suffering, to provoke a response," he said.

Citing Jesus' statement, "I came not to bring peace, but a sword," Sehested said being a faithful Christian sometimes means causing trouble.

"Some wounds need to be lanced, need opening, need invasive surgery before they can properly heal," he said.

"Our suffering for the sake of Christ ... is not simply a passive

suffering, something which others instigate against us, something foisted upon us without our asking for it. All of that can be true. But there's more," he said. "Sometimes the Body of Christ is called not simply to bear suffering, but to provide it, to instigate it, to lift off the lid and risk getting ourselves and others scalded."

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-- Tom Price is religion writer for the Elkhart (Ind.) Truth. This story is reprinted with permission.

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