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

April 1, 1993

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Another FMB vice president retires
citing trustees' 'political' actions

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Harlan Spurgeon, who administers the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's missionary appointment process, said March 30 he will retire early because the board's trustees have subordinated missions to politics.

Spurgeon, 61, vice president for mission personnel since 1983, also charged trustee actions have destroyed Southern Baptists' efforts to evangelize the world by the end of the century.

"I grieve over the losses we have suffered because of the trustees' preoccupation with being politically correct," Spurgeon wrote in his resignation letter. "We have lost trust between staff and trustees and between staff and staff. We have lost the freedom to discuss issues openly without fear of reprisal. We have lost heart. ... We are rapidly losing our integrity."

He added: "It is my prayer that by God's sovereign grace this board will soon return to its only agenda, that of seeking to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to every one in the world who has never heard. I no longer see how this can happen in my lifetime."

Spurgeon, who will retire June 30, is the third of the board's eight vice presidents in 15 months to leave early, claiming actions by the FMB's conservative trustees have undermined the agency's mission enterprise. FMB President Keith Parks also retired earlier than planned last October citing similar concerns.

Trustees have rejected the charges, and two trustee leaders repeated those denials April 1.

Board chairman John Jackson said he "disagree(s) with Dr. Spurgeon's assessment" but declined to elaborate because "it would not enhance the work of the kingdom to enter into an open discussion of the trustees' interpretation of his complaints."

Phyllis Randall, who chairs the trustee committee which oversees Spurgeon's work, disputed the vice president's "perceptions" and added, "I

think perception has become reality for him and he is acting on that perception."

In his resignation letter -- sent to interim president Don Kammerdiener March 30 and obtained from a source close to the board -- Spurgeon cited five board actions he claimed demonstrated trustees' political agenda.

-- The October 1991 defunding of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland, because of its alleged liberal theological stance. "This precipitous action was taken because it was politically expedient in light of the denominational controversy, not because it would contribute to our overall work in Europe."

He added: "This action was opposed by many thoughtful trustees. They have been punished by subsequently being excluded from responsible trustee positions."

Trustees who opposed the Ruschlikon defunding were defeated in board officers elections last April. The following June, then newly elected chairman Jackson reassigned trustee Steve Hardy -- an outspoken opponent of defunding -- from chairmanship of the board's Europe committee to membership on the Asia committee. At the time Jackson denied the move was punitive.

-- The board's refusal to affirm former president Parks' leadership through 1995 despite his request to do so. "... Strong leadership by Dr. Parks stood in the way of a small group of right-wing trustees. ... Because Dr. Parks could not conscientiously affirm the conservative resurgence, a vocal minority led in creating conditions resulting in his early retirement. The question was never asked as to what would be best for the cause of world missions."

-- Violations of employment procedures. "Policy calls for committees to interview and accept or reject staff recommended by the president for these positions. Instead, the board has worked to bring in their own candidates for these positions. Trustees making administrative decisions will make it very difficult for a new president to fill his administrative role."

-- A hostile attitude toward Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union, the auxiliary which helps raise about half the FMB's annual budget. Trustees and WMU leaders met in February to discuss WMU's recent decision to assist other missionary-sending groups as well as the FMB.

"... Our board chose to turn a dialogue with WMU leadership into a tense confrontation. ... If the board had acted in the interest of our missionaries and world evangelization, they would have strongly commended the WMU for their tireless and sacrificial efforts in behalf of missions and sought ways of continued cooperation. They chose rather to confront. Missions again took a secondary place in the decision-making process."

-- The employment of a consulting firm to study the board's organization. "Since most such firms are secular and know little about our purpose; since the cost will likely be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars; since the Foreign Mission Board has maintained an effective organization with the assistance of many primarily Christian consultants, this study appears to have little to do with missions. It rather seems that this study is to allow the trustees to make radical changes in leadership and direction and place blame on an outside secular firm. This is a political rather than a missiological decision, and cannot serve to advance the cause of missions."

Bold Mission Thrust, the Southern Baptist Convention's evangelistic effort to share the gospel with each person on earth by the year 2000, is a casualty of trustees' actions, Spurgeon wrote in his letter.

Fewer persons are applying for missionary service, in part because they believe the FMB will not appoint moderates, he maintained. Consequently the board's goal of placing 5,000 missionaries on the field by the turn of the

century will not be realized, he said.

"We have pled with our trustees to be sensitive to the fact that (missionary) candidates will not commit to lifetime service during uncertain times," he wrote, noting that twice in the past four years the board employed fewer missionaries at the end of the year than at the beginning.

"In theory, our board will still appoint missionaries from the broad spectrum of Southern Baptists. In fact, many young people are convinced either that they cannot be appointed or that they would not be comfortable serving with a board with such a single-minded political agenda."

In an interview with the Religious Herald, newsjournal of Virginia Baptists, Spurgeon said the perception moderates cannot be appointed is not entirely accurate. "If someone came through with views that are consistent with mainstream Southern Baptists, they could still be appointed," he said, even if they were members of churches affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the organization of moderates disaffected with the conservative tilt in the SBC.

"But many moderates believe they can't be appointed, so it amounts to the same thing (as exclusion)," he said. Trustee actions are primarily responsible for moderates' perceptions, he added.

Spurgeon said he had no future plans, although he has been contacted by "all kinds of people -- colleges, seminaries, churches, others." He declined to identify specific offers.

He also declined to say if the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has offered him a position in its fledgling missions program. Other top FMB staffers have been employed by the CBF, including Parks, who directs its missions program.

Spurgeon acknowledged "his great appreciation for Dr. Parks and what he is attempting to do in the mission program of the CBF."

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Sherman denounces homosexuality
to preempt criticism of Fellowship

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Homosexuality is a sin, and homosexuals should be told God can change their orientation, says the top official of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Cecil Sherman, Fellowship coordinator, spelled out his views in his regular column in the April 1 issue of the moderate newspaper Baptists Today.

While Christians should oppose homosexuality, Sherman wrote, they should do so in "the Spirit of Jesus." He predicted the Atlanta-based Fellowship will not appoint gays as missionaries.

Sherman's column represents the first time a Fellowship official has taken a public position on homosexuality. While the issue has gotten a lot of attention among Southern Baptists in the past year, the Fellowship, a group of moderate Southern Baptists, has tried to avoid the controversy.

"The Bible teaches homosexuality is a sin," Sherman wrote, and gays who argue otherwise "twist" Scripture.

"God made woman for man. God made man for woman. The Bible does not give mixed signals on this subject."

"Those who defend the homosexual (by) using the Bible are poor interpreters who are more into American culture than they are into Bible intention."

Moreover, Sherman wrote, "gays can change."

"The argument that 'God made me this way' is out of step with what we preach," he said, noting the message of the gospel is "we can be changed." That applies to the homosexual as much as to the adulterer, who would not be excused from the gospel's demands by claiming "'God made me with a wandering eye,'" Sherman said.

In his column, Sherman emphasized his comments represent his own opinion and not an "official statement" from the Fellowship. "I hope CBF will not make 'a statement' on this subject," he added.

But in February, Sherman warned members of the Fellowship's Coordinating Council that the organization might not be able to avoid the homosexual issue much longer. He predicted the group "may have to respond to the homosexual question in Birmingham," site of the Fellowship's annual meeting in May.

Sherman chose to address the controversial issue in his column, he said, because of the continuous stream of phone calls and questions he receives on the topic. While the inquiries may reflect genuine interest in the issue, he said, "a few people may want to discredit CBF by suggesting we are 'soft on homosexuality.'"

But Sherman said local congregations, not national and state Baptist bodies, should decide what churches should do about homosexuality.

Last year the Southern Baptist Convention and the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina expelled two North Carolina churches -- one that performed a marriage-like ceremony for a gay couple and another that licensed a gay divinity student to the gospel ministry. (Neither church participates in the Fellowship.)

Such convention actions, Sherman wrote, "will lead to conventions making more and more rules local congregations must abide by if they are to be a part of the convention. This is not the Baptist way."

But, Sherman continued, Christians should seek "the spirit of Jesus" in dealing with homosexuals and avoid gay bashing.

"It is the way of too many Christian people to hold the homosexual up to scorn," he wrote. "We almost take some strange pleasure in beating up on the gay community."

He cited Jesus' treatment of the woman caught in adultery as a worthy example (John 8). Jesus identified her lifestyle as sinful but still had compassion for her, Sherman wrote.

"We are conservative, Bible-believing Baptists," he said. "But there is one difference in CBF; we are making a conscious effort to catch the spirit of Christ as we deal with human beings who fall short of the glory of God."

"Are we against homosexuals? Yes, we are against the sin. But we have a wonderful message for those people. We want to get close enough to them to say it: God loves you, sent His Son to die for you. You can be remade by the grace of God."

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Clinton wants to stop ban
on federally funded abortion

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bill Clinton wants to end the nation's 16-year ban on federally funded abortions for poor women.

The White House confirmed March 30 that Clinton will fulfill a campaign promise by asking Congress to approve an appropriations bill for the

departments of Education and Labor, Health and Human Services that does not contain the Hyde-amendment restrictions on abortion funding.

Named for its sponsor, U.S. Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., the ban has been part of Medicaid funding measures since the first Hyde amendment was approved in 1976. During the Hyde amendment's early years, Congress repeatedly battled over exemptions to the ban but since 1981 has permitted Medicaid funds to pay for abortion only when necessary to save the life of the mother.

The news of Clinton's plans generated a predictable round of protest and support from advocates on both sides of the emotionally volatile abortion issue.

Hyde, saying he was neither optimistic nor pessimistic about his chances, promised a battle to keep the ban as part of future appropriations bills.

U.S. Rep. Patricia Schroeder, D-Colo., who predicted the administration's position would prevail after a heated congressional debate, called Clinton courageous for his willingness to make good on a campaign promise that undoubtedly will not be popular with many Americans.

Hyde said lifting the ban would result in "coercing tax dollars from millions of American citizens whose consciences forbid them from becoming accessories in perhaps a million more abortions than we have a year.

"We have already 1.6 million abortions, and if Medicaid funding is reinstated, I would predict another million abortions" a year.

Hyde said he is unsure abortion opponents can win this time.

"I can count as well as anybody else, but this is a new Congress," he said. "While it has expressed itself generally on the pro-abortion side of the equation, there are people who are very concerned about the fiscal dimension of requiring tax dollars to pay for abortions."

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Church 'simulates Somalia'
to teach lesson about poor

AUGUSTA, Ga. (ABP) -- Why would 115 teenagers and young adults spend the night in cardboard boxes in 30-degree weather, surrounded by Army soldiers and eating rice out of tin cans?

For most of the people at First Baptist Church of Augusta, Ga., the one-day experience was as close as they will get to life in a Third World country. And that was the point.

The church set up a mock refugee camp patterned after those in Somalia, where military protection and international relief efforts are being used to rescue Somalis from famine and civil war.

"Most of us live our lives as if this whole world goes around and nobody feels any pain," explained Randall Germann, minister to single adults at the Augusta church. "I'm hopeful this will draw some kind of attention to the fact that people go hungry every day."

Germann organized "Operation Third World: Simulate Somalia" March 5-6 to allow the church's youth and single adults to see life from the perspective of a refugee.

Soldiers from the 382nd Army Reserve Unit in Augusta, who recently returned from duty in Saudi Arabia, set up the mock camp on the church grounds. The 20 soldiers also processed the "refugees" as they arrived at the camp and provided security from imaginary Somali warlords.

Germann said care was taken to simulate accurately the conditions in the

Somali camps, from the presence of military vehicles to the chickens and goats that wandered around the encampment.

For participants, Germann said, the experience brought the plight of refugees to life.

"It's one thing to see it on CNN or read about in Newsweek," he said. It's another, the participants found out, to have to live that way -- even for one night.

Did the experiment work? "We had some people who seemed very much touched," said Germann. "It makes you appreciate what we have ... a warm bed, a home, security, citizenship."

When the temperature dipped to 30 degrees overnight, "even a sleeping bag was a luxury," the minister said.

Germann said it is particularly hard for Americans to comprehend Third World conditions because of the disparities between cultures.

While the annual income for a family of four in some underdeveloped countries is \$120, he said, some American youth spend that much on tennis shoes.

"We've got kids who get this notion that they are poor," he said. "But poor today means you wear \$50 tennis shoes instead of \$100 ones. ... They feel poor when the cable TV goes out and they only have five channels."

Because First Baptist of Augusta is an affluent church in an affluent community, Germann said, the youth particularly are insulated from the poor and have little understanding of real poverty. That limited worldview, he said, leaves them "impoverished by their wealth."

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-- By Greg Warner

Critical condition of health care challenges churches, Parham says

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Christians should inject their values into the debate over health-care reform, according Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics.

The Nashville-based center will sponsor a national conference on the church's role in health care May 12-13 in Birmingham, Ala. The purpose, Parham said, is "to sharpen understanding about the critical condition of the American health-care system and to expand the church's vision about preventive health care."

The conference, "The Church's Challenge in Health," follows on the heels of the Clinton administration's announced May 3 deadline for proposing its own health-care reform package.

"We're not having the conference to support or oppose whatever reform package is introduced," Parham explained. "We are having the conference to challenge and equip Southern Baptists and others of goodwill to work on health-care issues."

"Churches have a constructive role to play in promoting health and engaging in preventive health care, apart from any legislation or public-policy reform effort," he said.

"Because of the magnitude of the (health-care) problem, it affects all of us," he continued. "From a narrow self-interest, we have values that need to be injected into the reform effort."

Parham said the national debate over health care has turned "brittle," ensnaring politicians, physicians, pharmaceutical corporations, hospitals,

insurance companies and senior-citizen lobby groups in the argument over who is to blame and how it should be fixed.

"Virtually every segment of the society is blaming another segment for the crisis," Parham added.

Parham cited some of those casting blame:

Physicians blame lawyers for the skyrocketing cost of malpractice lawsuits. Patients blame doctors for unreasonably high fees and hospitals for ridiculously priced headache pills. Insurance companies blame physicians for unnecessary surgery. Consumer groups blame drug companies for gouging ill families. Ethicists blame high-technology for dictating overzealous and expensive tests.

Child activists blame the design of the health-care system which allocates a bulk of its resources to last-minute treatments for those in crisis at the end of life and spends so little on preventive health care for pregnant women and children. Many blame Medicaid with its unrealistic and wasteful bureaucratic regulations. Some Americans even blame themselves for their own risky behavior which has left them with terminal illnesses like AIDS or lung cancer.

In the midst of the "blame game" and the grid-locked debate about reform, the local church has a proactive and constructive role to play, according to Parham. That is the focus of the BCE conference, which will be held at Southside Baptist Church, Birmingham.

One conference session will focus on the Clinton administration health-care reform plan, with critiques by Gene Thrasher, president and chief executive officer of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama; Dennis Sansom, a ethics professor at Samford University; Jerry Hickson, pediatrician; and Emmett Johnson, president of Baptist Health Systems in Birmingham.

Plenary speakers and topics include Jerry Hickson, chief of general pediatrics, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, on "Dwindling Resources and Increasing Demand"; Thomas Droege, assistant director of the Interfaith Resource Center, The Carter Center, on "Spirituality and Health Promotion"; and, Wayne Flynt, distinguished professor at Auburn University, on "The Moral Imperative of Justice in Health Care."

Other plenary speakers include Southern novelist Vicki Covington of Birmingham, Ala., on "Babies with AIDs: The Church's Calling"; and Michael Saag, associate professor of medicine and director of the University of Alabama-Birmingham AIDS Outpatient Clinic, on "What Parents with Children K-12 Should Know About AIDS."

Theme interpreters will develop the biblical material related to preventive health care. Interpreters include: Chuck Bugg, preaching professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Robert O'Brien, director of the Global Center at Samford University in Birmingham; and David Sapp, pastor of Derbyshire Baptist Church, Richmond, Va.

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Dunn: Religion a thermostat,
not thermometer, in U.S. life

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- When it comes to shaping public policy, religion "is more of a thermostat than a thermometer," a Baptist church-state specialist told participants at a Furman University ministers conference.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, rejected the idea that America's love affair with belief is nothing more than

rhetorical religiosity.

"The 'lively experiment' envisioned by Roger Williams has worked," he said. "With the separation of church and state, this nation has the greatest freedom of religion, the least religious conflict, the largest number of people in church or synagogue or temple or mosque every week, the highest percentage of voluntary religious participants, the most missionaries and people-helpers sent out to other countries and the best record of giving for religious causes of any nation on the face of the earth."

Religion's prominent role in American life, Dunn said, belies the argument that government and society are hostile to religion.

"We as a people seem to need boogerbears," he said. "A whole herd of religion doers, simple and sophisticated, have nominated the godless, secular humanist media elite as the enemy."

"They have trouble defining secular humanism, identifying persons involved, or even pointing to the organizations in this 'well-organized' conspiracy, but they've disturbed millions of Americans with the troubling thought that the boogerbear of secularism has stripped naked the public square."

To the degree there is a contempt for religion, Dunn said, it has been engendered by the very people lamenting it: "Don Wildmon with his boycotts, James Dobson with his exaggerated faith in the political process, (Jimmy) Swaggart, (Jim) Bakker, (Jerry) Falwell, (Pat) Robertson."

Religious folk should be engaged in politics and public-policy debate, Dunn said, but should do so ethically. He criticized the tactics of Robertson's political organization in advising its candidates to mask their identity as Christian Coalition candidates.

"The avowed goal of the Christian Coalition people to elect stealth candidates is as unethical as sin," he said. "I thought truth-telling was one of their 'family values.'"

The religious right's emphasis on protecting majoritarianism runs counter to the Bill of Rights, Dunn said.

"The mood of the mob at the moment cannot wipe away the separation of church and state," he said. "In the United States the smallest religious minorities are protected from government-blessed or state-sponsored or publicly prescribed religion."

Dunn also expressed concern about the religious right's target audience.

"A 30-year-old was in high school when last we had a president who did not use the bully pulpit to lament 'God being banned from the schools' and who did not push for public funding for parochial schools," he said. "Sadly, we have a generation of young adults who have nothing in their memory bank except religious right rhetoric regarding church-state policy."

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