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Waco standoff ends tragically,
but tough questions linger

By Ken Camp and Greg Warner

DALLAS (ABP) -- The 51-day standoff between federal authorities and members of Branch Davidian sect came to a fiery end April 19, but many tough questions remained for Christians and others trying to make sense of the tragedy.

The Davidians' compound near Waco -- nicknamed "Ranch Apocalypse" -- burst into a land-locked lake of fire on the Central Texas prairie April 19. Left dead in the flames were more than 80 people who apparently followed besieged sect leader David Koresh into mass suicide.

The FBI started punching holes in the walls of the Mt. Carmel compound at about 6 a.m. with Bradley armored vehicles, pumping non-flammable, non-lethal tear gas into the buildings. Near noon fire ignited at three locations, burning the stronghold to the ground within an hour. Sect members who escaped the blaze later claimed that fellow Branch Davidians started the fire.

Only nine of the 95 persons inside the compound -- and none of the 17 children -- were known to have survived the holocaust.

One person from the compound -- Ruth Riddle, 29, who sustained a broken ankle and first- and second-degree burns -- was taken to Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center, which is affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Within 24 hours of the fatal fire, some Baptists in Waco joined more than 200 people of faith in a citywide service of prayer and lament. The service was conducted by the Waco Ministerial Alliance at Central Presbyterian Church.

Dan Bagby, pastor of Seventh and James Baptist Church and a member of the ministerial alliance, told the Dallas Morning News: "There's a lot of sentiment in Waco that it's not our religious trouble, yet it happened at our back door. There's a sense of sadness I feel as I walk around town."

A Baptist professor who has studied the Branch Davidians warned that the tragic results in Waco could have damaging effects on other cults and society in general.

Dan McGee, professor of Christian ethics at Baylor University near Waco,

said the tragedy could convince other apocalyptic groups "that the world out there really is against them," leading to more deadly confrontations.

"This contributes to their paranoia, alienation and siege mentality," McGee told Associated Baptist Press. "To them, the performance of the federal government is just proof that they were right all along."

Likewise, McGee warned, the Waco tragedy could pose a threat to religious liberty if Americans respond with an attitude of "Get rid of the cults!"

McGee said most new religious groups "have been viewed as weird." He noted both the early Christian church and early Baptists were considered illegal cults.

In an interview on CBS News April 20, McGee lamented the tendency of Americans "to turn to violence to try to solve problems." That tendency was evident in both the Davidians and law enforcement officials who attacked the compound, McGee said.

Although Koresh earlier warned that "God would rain down fire" on federal agents if they attacked the compound, McGee said he did not anticipate from that threat that Koresh and his followers would "use fire on themselves" in a flaming mass suicide.

Fire is a common apocalyptic image, he said, and Koresh's use of the image offered little clue to the outcome of the standoff. "I have to be honest, I did not expect it," he told ABP.

The standoff near Waco began on Feb. 28 after agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms unsuccessfully attempted to execute a warrant at the Mt. Carmel compound and were met with a hail of gunfire.

Four ATF officers were killed in the shootout, and 15 were injured. Sixteen ATF agents -- including three who died -- were received at Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center following the Feb. 28 shootout.

Within the first five days after the attempted raid, 21 children from the compound were released, but 17 remained inside.

Self-proclaimed messiah David Koresh, who in 1990 changed his name from Vernon Howell, claimed to be the "Lamb of God" sent to open the seven seals of Revelation, which would unleash a catastrophe leading to the end of the world.

Waco pastor Nathan Stone underscored the "weight of sadness that will not go away" among Wacoans, as they begin to realize the Branch Davidians were human beings with relatives -- some of whom live just down the road.

To help healing begin, Lake Shore Baptist Church, where Stone is pastor, planned to host an April 24 memorial service for victims of the Mt. Carmel tragedy.

For Waco's citizens, the most long-lasting effect of the seven-week standoff could be the way the city's religious image has been twisted into a bizarre distortion of itself, according to Waco pastor Kenneth Massey.

Religion and church-going is woven into the fabric of the Central Texas community, said Massey, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church. Many local believers have taken the attention given to David Koresh and his followers as a personal affront.

"It seems like Christians feel they have been back-handed in a way," Massey said. "David Koresh has been seen by some as the media prototype of what it means to be devotedly religious. He is perceived by some as a typical Bible believer, but that's not really who we are."

Baylor's McGee added, "Anytime a religious group gets a black eye, all religions to some extent share it."

Still the presence of sects is a reality mainstream Christians need to accept, said Stone of Lake Shore Baptist. Believers help create the "compound mentality" of sects, he charged. "The more we refuse to listen to people --

and I mean everybody, regardless of their position -- the more we push them off into compounds."

That alienation affects not only sects like the Branch Davidians but, for example, gays and lesbians, Stone said. "Refusing to listen alienates us from one another."

The events at Mt. Carmel point both to the reality of sin and its tragic consequences, said Massey of Calvary Baptist. And, he added, "It points to the danger of authoritarian leadership. A person doesn't have to be a cult leader to exploit that kind of power."

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Two deans stepping down
at Southern Seminary

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- At least two of the four deans at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary will step down from those posts before President-elect Al Mohler takes office Aug. 1.

Milburn Price, dean of the school of church music since 1981, has been named dean of the music school at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. Bill Rogers, dean of Southern's school of Christian education, will resign because differences with Mohler over the role of women.

Rogers will remain on the seminary faculty but not as dean. Both resignations are to be effective July 31, the day Roy Honeycutt retires as seminary president.

Knowledgeable sources on campus indicate these two resignations may be only the first of several to be announced before Honeycutt transfers power to Mohler. By some estimations, up to half the current administrative staff may be gone by the start of the fall semester.

In addition to the seminary's four deans, the administrative team includes a provost and five vice presidents. The seminary also operates Boyce Bible School as a separate division with its own dean.

Mohler, who was elected to the presidency by seminary trustees March 26, has vowed to move the school in a more conservative direction. Seminary trustees appointed by the Southern Baptist Convention have wanted to make the 134-year-old school more conservative for some time.

Southern's deans and top administrators serve at the pleasure of the president and are not elected by trustees in the same way as faculty members.

However, both Rogers and Price said Mohler had not asked for their resignations, nor the resignations of any other administrators to their knowledge. Mohler confirmed he had not requested their resignations.

"He specifically went out of his way to say to all of us in a cabinet meeting that he had been advised by some to (ask for blanket resignations) but that he was not going to pursue that course of action," Rogers said.

But Rogers did note that while he was not "overtly asked to resign," he has major philosophical differences with the incoming president.

The most important difference, the education dean said, is on the role of women in ministry. While saying he wants to "affirm the ministry of women," Mohler has said he does not believe women should be pastors or hold certain offices in the church.

In his resignation letter to Honeycutt, Rogers said his decision was made "in light of the stated position of the president-elect" on women's roles.

"I believe that being Baptist and being Christian mean that I must advocate freedom for each believer in Christ to identify gifts and define calls to mission and ministry without regard to gender," Rogers wrote. "I find no evidence that Jesus taught exclusiveness related to gender and ministry; rather he taught a profound inclusiveness."

Rogers said he cannot support elevating some ministry positions as unacceptable for women over others deemed lesser and therefore acceptable for women. "There is always the back-handed slap which says, 'Well, maybe a woman could be an associate pastor, maybe a woman could be a music minister ... but not pastor.'

"That kind of second-class citizenship has always been harmful to the mission of the church," Rogers said.

Mohler responded by saying he and Rogers "have an honest disagreement over the issue of the service of women in the pastorate."

However, "the issue of women in ministry, their ordination and service in the pastorate is hardly the most important issue facing Southern Seminary and its future," Mohler said.

Although Rogers said he wants to focus on the women's issue, he has "many differences of opinion" with Mohler about the school of Christian education. "I might have submitted my resignation over some or all of those issues, but want to keep a focus on this one."

"I see Christian education needing to address issues of discipleship and Bible study and Christian community," Rogers explained. "He has a rather singular focus on church growth. We disagree about that."

Mohler responded: "I refuse to see that as a clear dichotomy. I would want the school of Christian education to provide the best background for students in educational theory, discipleship and educational ministries. But hand-in-hand with that, I would want to see an unembarrassed attention to issues of church growth and providing front-line leadership for the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. This should be a both/and rather than an either/or."

Although Price said his decision to leave Southern's music school was influenced by current changes, he was "responding to an opportunity and challenge at Samford ... that is very attractive and to which I look forward."

Some music students on campus have said they fear the music school will abandon its classical approach to music for a more contemporary, "praise chorus" approach.

Price said concerns about different approaches are "only speculation," as far as he knows. He and Mohler "never talked about specifics of musical styles or that sort of thing."

Mohler said he hopes the music school will build upon its good track record of service and focus on "quality graduate education."

"I'm determined that Southern Seminary will be at the forefront of leadership in this denomination and that we will graduate ministers who are academically rounded and prepared for service and ministry in the churches of this denomination.

"We live in the midst of a changing age with changing worship styles," he continued. "I would want Southern Seminary's school of church music to reflect the best of the classical tradition and the best of contemporary worship styles."

Mohler praised both Price and Rogers for their contributions to the seminary.

"Milburn Price served with distinction as dean of the school of church music," the president-elect said. "As an alumnus of both Southern Seminary and Samford University," Mohler added, "Southern's loss is Samford's gain."

Mohler said Rogers "has exercised dedication and service" as dean. "We will honor and appreciate his service as dean and move forward to find the right leadership for the next era of service."

When asked if new deans will be appointed before the fall semester, Mohler responded: "We will do our best to have the right leadership in place at the right time."

What role new deans will play in shaping the future of the seminary remains to be seen, both Price and Rogers said.

Price said Southern's music school still has a "wonderful" faculty. "As long as these faculty members are here and teaching, then I will in good conscience recommend students to come and study with them."

Rogers noted that while the new president has the prerogative to appoint a dean in line with his own philosophy, changing the religious education curriculum could not be done easily.

"The president would not have unilateral authority to alter the curriculum. The faculty owns the curriculum. The president could find someone to lead the school who agrees and is compatible with the president's direction about the school, but it would require a lot of debate and a number of years to effect that change in the curriculum."

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CORRECTION: In the April 13 story "No FMB nomination expected....," the second sentence in paragraph 8 should read: Two committee members -- Bonnie Westbrook of Beaumont, Tx., and John Simms of Salem, Va., -- complete terms as trustees in June.

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