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IN THIS ISSUE:

- * FMB eliminates 38 positions because of budget crunch
- * Religious-freedom bill leaps another legislative hurdle
- * Wilkinson becomes fourth Southern administrator to resign
- * Southern students differ on changes at seminary
- * Kentuckians testify to Freemasonry, faith

FMB eliminates 38 positions because of budget crunch

By Ed Briggs

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Employees at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board began feeling the sting of a budgetary shortfall May 5 when administrators began firing and retiring 27 people.

In all, 38 jobs will be cut from the Richmond, Va., home office work force of 465, including 10 positions currently vacant which will not be filled. The cuts represent an 8 percent staff reduction.

The fired employees consist of 14 support-level and 13 professional or management-level workers. Most will be let go on June 1. Three who are close to retirement are being allowed to work several more months until their planned retirement dates.

One employee eligible for retirement whose contract will not be renewed is David Barrett, an Anglican minister who is one of the world's top missions researchers and strategists. Barrett, 65, a consultant who has been under a twice-renewed contract for eight years, said May 5 he will be retiring at the end of the year.

Employees being fired were informed May 5. Most will work through the end of May.

Don Kammerdiener, the board's interim president, said in a memo to trustees that, with the layoffs, the board can reduce staff salaries and expenditures by more than \$1 million per year. Stateside salaries cost the FMB \$15.5 million a year.

Kammerdiener said the cuts will be accompanied by reductions in the overseas budget. Those overseas cuts have yet to be identified, he added.

According to a staff memo distributed by Kammerdiener, the layoffs were caused by shortfalls in denominational and special offering incomes, as well as a drop in investment income because of declining interest rates.

He estimates the agency will have \$1.5 million less money for 1994.

Although Kammerdiener did not cite the growth of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as a reason for declining gifts to the FMB, critics of the moderate-backed Fellowship say its growing missions program is hurting FMB efforts.

The Atlanta-based Fellowship received \$7.5 million in contributions from Baptists last year and is expected to approach the \$10 million mark in receipts for 1993 after hiring former FMB president Keith Parks to direct its fledgling missions program.

But while the Fellowship spent approximately \$1.3 million on its own missions effort in 1992, it also sent \$1.8 million to the Foreign Mission Board.

Baptist moderates blame the FMB's woes on the influence of fundamentalist trustees and their application of strict theological standards on the agency's work.

Fundamentalists at first blamed the economy for a sluggishness in giving to denominational coffers, then began blaming moderates for withholding funds.

In recent weeks, some FMB trustees and officials have privately voiced a fear that increased defections of support will place the agency on an increasingly slippery financial slope that will lead to more cutbacks.

Both sides now blame the other for holding the agency's 3,900 missionaries in 129 countries hostage to the doctrinal crisis.

According to Kammerdiener's memo, those being fired are being given three- to six-month severance packages, depending on years of service, that include full salary and insurance and pension payments. Fired employees will also receive lump-sum payments for unused vacation time.

Also, the agency is picking up the cost of out-placement counseling and at least two months of professional job-hunting fees.

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-- Ed Briggs is religion writer for the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

EDITOR'S NOTE: While the FMB is reporting 450 total staff positions, the preceding story uses the figure of 465. The FMB figure refers to the number full-time equivalent positions, while the ABP figures reflects the actual number of employees, full- and part-time.

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Religious-freedom bill leaps another legislative hurdle

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Religious Freedom Restoration Act leaped its second major hurdle May 6 when the Senate Judiciary Committee cleared it for consideration by the full Senate.

The committee approved the measure by a 15-to-1 vote. The House Judiciary Committee previously approved the bill unanimously.

The bill (S. 578, H.R. 1308) would restore the high level of protection for religious practice virtually abandoned by the U.S. Supreme Court in its 1990 Oregon vs. Smith decision.

For three decades prior to Smith, the high court permitted government to interfere with religious practice only when it used the least restrictive means available to achieve a compelling interest, such as the health and safety of citizens.

In the Smith decision, the court reversed itself by holding that

generally applicable laws that infringed on religious practice no longer had to meet the strict requirements of the "compelling interest" test.

While the Senate panel's vote was overwhelming, some senators indicated that they likely will attempt to amend the bill on the floor.

Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., who effectively killed RFRA by placing a hold on the measure near the end of the last session, was the sole opponent of the bill.

Emphasizing he did not oppose religious freedom, Simpson said he was concerned that RFRA could create problems in prisons by forcing administrators to accommodate prisoners' religious practice to the detriment of security and order. Others raised the same issue but voted for the bill, saying they might discuss the problem during floor debate.

The attorney general of Florida sent a letter to the committee expressing concern about RFRA's impact on the administration of prisons. The letter has been signed by 21 other state attorneys general.

"Although this broadly worded bill has the laudable purpose of protecting the right of freedom of religion, the act, in its current form, would have the unintended consequence of upsetting the delicate balance between the rights of inmates to practice their religion and the security needs of our jails and prisons," the letter said.

Previously, the committee was scheduled to consider the bill but delayed action because the U.S. Justice Department asked for time to review the legislation in light of the prison issue.

After reviewing the bill, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno repeatedly has affirmed her support of RFRA. In an April 30 address, she told members of the American Bar Association that she favors passage of the bill. But her strongest endorsement came in a May 5 letter to Sen. Joseph Biden, D-Del., committee chairman.

She urged "swift enactment" of the bill without amendment.

"Certainly, the strong interest that prison administrators and society in general have in preserving security, order, and discipline in prison will receive great weight in the determination whether the government meets the compelling interest test . . .," she wrote. "Activities that are presumptively dangerous or carry a demonstrable likelihood of jeopardizing discipline within a prison will continue to be subject to regulation after enactment of S. 578.

"Likewise, prison administrators will retain authority, in many instances, to regulate the time, place and manner of an inmate's exercise of religion."

Brent Walker, associate general counsel, lauded Reno's "well-reasoned letter."

"RFRA would not turn our prisons into a sectarian free-for-all," Walker said. "Prison officials will be able to demonstrate a compelling interest and override prisoners' claims whenever the security or discipline of the prison is threatened. And, courts will continue to defer to the expert judgment of prison officials and respect their special institutional needs."

During committee debate, Simpson described RFRA as a curious bill with a "magnificent name" that seems to imply anyone who disagrees with the measure is against religious liberty.

"Something is wrong with this bill . . . I really wish I knew what it was," said Simpson, adding that he had a strong feeling the measure would do more than restore the compelling interest test. He said he's afraid RFRA would elevate religious practice to the level of religious belief -- or, in other words, beyond government regulation of any kind.

Simpson became flustered at one point while arguing that a provision he considered vague and confusing should be taken out of the bill. Then, after

it became apparent to Simpson that the provision was not in the bill but rather a potential amendment on prisons suggested by some state attorneys general, he said he supported it being attached to the bill.

"Simpson was woefully misinformed and unprepared," Walker said. "Having single-handedly killed the bill last year, one would expect him at least to have done his homework."

Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, asked a series of questions about the impact of RFRA, including whether or not the bill would protect the right of groups such as the Branch Davidians to abuse children under the guise of religious freedom.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and a chief co-sponsor of the bill, said that child abuse would not be a protected form of religious practice because government has a compelling interest in protecting all its citizens.

Another issue briefly raised was whether RFRA would protect violent protests at abortion clinics. Once again, bill supporters said the compelling-interest test would protect public welfare and safety.

Hatch told Associated Baptist Press that he would fight any attempt to amend the bill on the floor. Religious liberty is a "central core" belief in America and worth protecting, he added.

The bill, backed by a coalition of 58 religious and civil-liberty organizations, has 46 bipartisan co-sponsors in the Senate.

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David Wilkinson becomes fourth
Southern administrator to resign

By Marv Knox

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- David Wilkinson has resigned after more than six years as vice president for seminary relations at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Wilkinson is the fourth administrator to step down since March 26, when trustees elected Albert Mohler to succeed Roy Honeycutt as seminary president.

"In the context of dramatic changes at Southern Seminary, Melanie (his wife) and I believe this decision comes at an opportune time for the seminary's new administration and for us," Wilkinson told the Western Recorder, newsjournal of Kentucky Baptists.

"This decision was made without regrets but with an overwhelming sense of grief. For me, Southern Seminary has consistently represented the best of what it means to be a Baptist Christian, and my prayer is that the seeds of this precious heritage will continue and find fertile ground in Baptist life."

In addition to Wilkinson's departure, Provost Larry McSwain is leaving to become president of Shorter College in Rome, Ga. Milburn Price, dean of the school of church music, will become chairman of the music department at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. Bill Rogers, dean of the school of Christian education, will return to full-time teaching duties.

Wilkinson declined to link his resignation directly to dissatisfaction with Mohler's election and subsequent turmoil at the seminary, but he added, "I think it's best for the nature and timing of my departure to speak for themselves."

Although he did not announce what he will do next, Wilkinson has been mentioned as a possibility to fill several vacant posts in Baptist life.

"Regardless of the pain of this decision, Melanie and I are hopeful about prospects for the future," he said. "There have been a number of conversations in recent months about other opportunities for ministry."

The one mentioned most consistently by Baptist observers has been the assistant directorship of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a coalition of moderates disaffected by the rightward shift in the Southern Baptist Convention during the past decade.

Wilkinson declined to confirm or deny the story. But he added: "Some conversations with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship have taken place. Anything more specific at this point would be presumptuous and premature on my part."

Speculation about Wilkinson's successor at Southern has focused on Michael Duduit, director of development at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

Duduit, a former Southern employee and confidant of Mohler's, told Associated Baptist Press he has discussed "general institutional strategies" with Mohler and is available to advise the incoming president. But Duduit said he has not been offered a job and he has told Mohler he has no interest in an administrative position at the seminary -- either permanent or interim.

Wilkinson, 38, is the son of a Southern Baptist minister who has been educated by Baptists and has worked for Southern Baptists his entire adult life.

He is a graduate of Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, earned a master of divinity degree from Southern Seminary and is completing work toward a doctor of ministry degree at the school.

Wilkinson joined the seminary in his present capacity in 1987. Previously he was information specialist at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, 1976-77; staff writer and then director of news and information services at the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, 1977-79; associate editor of the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission's newspaper, World Mission Journal, 1979-81; director of communications at Southern Seminary, 1981-83; and director of news and information services at the Christian Life Commission, 1984-87.

Wilkinson's resignation will be effective May 31, he said.

"I am grateful beyond words for the high privilege God has given me to work alongside (outgoing president) Roy Honeycutt and the faculty, staff and students who comprise this tremendous community of faith and learning," he said.

"I will forever be indebted to Roy and June Honeycutt for what they have taught me about strength of character, personal integrity and Christian grace."

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Southern students differ
on changes at seminary

By Mark McCormick

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Two years ago Russell Winn thought he'd finally reached that legendary place his mentors talked about with wonder -- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

He was told it was the place where some of the world's premiere religious thinkers balanced their Christian conservatism with thorough exploration of progressive ideas.

But in a tumultuous two years, Winn and other theologically moderate students said last week, they have seen the school transformed from a paragon of academic integrity to a dogma factory where progressive thinking is anathema. Some said they are leaving the seminary.

Conversely, conservative students say they welcome the changes, and they reject the moderates' characterization of the seminary as a dogma factory. Conservatives were the ones who until recently could not talk openly about their views, they said.

Moderate students say Southern's proud tradition of scholarly investigation and academic freedom has been trampled by denominational leaders who are responsible for a recent rash of faculty and administrative resignations. Some moderate students feel they're not only being squeezed out of Southern, but out of the denomination as well.

After the recent election of conservative Albert Mohler as president-elect, three moderate trustees resigned. One said the "hostile takeover" of the seminary by theological conservatives was complete.

And Provost Larry McSwain quit recently to become president of Shorter College, a Baptist school in Georgia, and the deans of two of the seminary's four schools announced their resignations.

At least 10 faculty members have left Southern since 1991, or announced plans to leave, in the face of criticism from conservatives who now control the Southern Baptist Convention. Moderate students complained that courses once taught by the departed professors are no longer offered, such as a class on bioethics.

In the wake of these and other events, moderate students have worn pink armbands to show support for women-in-ministry issues, held a fasting and prayer vigil, and staged a stand-in at a campus worship service. Many said their academic freedom has been greatly diminished. They say they're often afraid to participate in class discussions, fearing reprisals from trustees or a confrontation with conservative students.

Jana Knight, who is studying to be a hospital chaplain, said a male student rudely interjected himself into a conversation about abortion she was having with another woman in a student lounge. When she said she didn't want to discuss it further and walked out of the building, she said the man continued to yell and followed her to her car.

Debbie Farmwald, a second-semester student from Elyria, Ohio, who identified herself as a conservative, said such tactics shouldn't be condoned, regardless of where a person stands ideologically.

Farmwald said she and other conservative students felt in the past that they couldn't express their views without being ridiculed; they now feel more comfortable with the seminary's direction. She said, for example, that during a class discussion a professor -- whom she would not name -- once referred to a viewpoint she agreed with as "naive" and "child-like."

Farmwald, who said she doesn't find biblical support for women as ordained pulpit ministers, took exception to moderate students standing during a recent campus worship service to show support for the ordination of women as pastors.

She said protesters inappropriately used the chapel as a "political soapbox." She said she had no problem with other protests made outside the chapel.

Paul Blizzard, a senior from Brownwood, Texas, described some female students who favor allowing women to be pulpit preachers as "fem-damentalists" and "radicals." He said they are as intolerant as they accuse the denomination's trustees and leaders of being.

"Some of the women are so angry about it that it seems like they are trying to cram this down my throat," Blizzard said. President-elect Mohler,

who held his first forum with students in April, received the same treatment, Blizard said. "They wouldn't allow him his opinion."

But the changes that have made conservative students more comfortable have created an unbearable atmosphere for students like Winn, who said he will transfer to Emory University in Atlanta this fall. He said he would also be leaving the denomination.

"I can no longer support the Southern Baptist Convention when the (SBC) Executive Committee, which has control of everything in Southern Baptist life, is abusing my trust and hurting people I care about. It's a painful decision, but it would be more painful to stay."

Rodney and Rhonda Stewart Wilcox also are leaving Southern. He said he will be attending the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (Va.) to study under Glenn Hinson, a church history professor who resigned from Southern under pressure last year.

The Richmond seminary was founded in 1989 by the Southern Baptist Alliance, an organization of moderates. There Wilcox expects he can expand his thinking without fear of reprisal, and his wife can answer her calling to be a pastor.

"What made Southern Southern is that it is a conservative place, but a very scholarly place that provided balance to liberal seminaries," he said. "My fear is, with what has happened, we'll lose that balance, and it may not be able to offer that voice that the theological world needs."

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Kentuckians testify
to Freemasonry, faith

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP) -- A panel of eight longtime Masons stood at the pulpit of a Baptist church April 27 to declare they see no conflict between Freemasonry and Christianity.

The Masons spoke during a program at Jeffersontown Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., intended to rebuff criticisms of Freemasonry coming from some quarters of the Southern Baptist Convention.

At the SBC's annual meeting in Houston in June, messengers will vote either to accept or reject a report on Freemasonry done by the Home Mission Board. That report says some elements of Freemasonry are "not compatible with Christianity," but that individual Baptists should be free to make their own decisions about whether to be Masons.

Of the 3.5 million Masons nationwide, an estimated 1.3 million are Southern Baptists.

The HMB report was developed in response to a motion offered at last year's convention by Larry Holly of Beaumont, Texas. Holly, an ardent critic of Freemasonry, has published two widely circulated paperback books to document what he claims are satanic elements in Freemasonry.

Joel Jones, pastor of Jeffersontown Baptist Church, noted at the informational meeting that his own church met for its first 60 years in a Masonic Lodge hall. Many church members and deacons are Masons, he added.

"Mr. Holly's motion is not the voice of all Southern Baptists," he

assured the 60 people in the audience, most of whom were Masons.

The event was organized by Jeffersontown member Marion Reed, retired editor of the Masonic Home Journal who was raised as a child in the Masonic Widows and Orphans Home in Louisville.

Reed and the other speakers uniformly stated that they have found no conflict between their Christian faith and Freemasonry. All of the speakers had achieved leadership positions within Freemasonry and had been Masons 20 to 40 years or more.

"I've known a lot of Baptist deacons who were Masons," Reed noted. "I never saw horns or tails on any of them, nor any halos."

Freemasonry 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 are inspired by pagan rituals and occultism and comprise a religion that competes with Christianity by convincing well-intentioned men that good deeds -- not faith in Jesus -- can get them to heaven.

Reed said the primary purpose of Freemasonry is to teach friendship, morality and brotherly love. He challenged Freemasonry's critics to find anything evil in those objectives.

Speakers attempted to address specific charges made against Freemasonry:

-- Titles. Calling the person elected to preside over a local lodge "worshipful grand master" is a traditional title and does not equate that person with deity, said William Hinton, who works on the staff of Hopkinsville Community College. "By no means do we mean that he is to be worshiped or venerated or set apart," he explained, "but that he is to be respected.

-- Oaths. Oaths taken by Masons are solemn vows, not "bloody oaths" with sinister meanings, Hinton said. "The oaths are promises to be a better man and a better Mason."

-- Religion. "Freemasonry is not a religion," said Floyd Booth, a deacon at Ninth & O Baptist Church in Louisville. He said Freemasonry does not offer a plan of salvation nor any theology and does not teach that salvation is found through good works. Further, discussion of religion is forbidden during Masonic meetings, he added.

-- Masonic Bible. Although critics claim Masons have created their own Bible, the only difference in a "Masonic Bible" from a normal King James translation is a set of cross-references at the back of the book, said Jack Early, president of the Kentucky Independent College Fund.

-- Universalism. "Nowhere in the Masonic ritual do we say every person will be saved," Early stated. "There may be (some Masonic) writers who say this, but they speak for themselves."

Several speakers said that while Freemasonry is not a religion it does promote the religious values of Christianity. For example, applicants to the York Rite of Freemasonry "must express a belief in the Christian religion ... and a belief that Jesus Christ died upon the cross for the remission of sins," said James Wall, who is retired from the U.S. Army.

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