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WRAP-UP

Carter embraces Fellowship;  
Fellowship embraces missionaries

By Mark Wingfield and Greg Warner

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- With a ringing endorsement from former President Jimmy Carter, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship commissioned its first missionaries and adopted a permanent constitution and bylaws May 13-15.

About 5,100 people registered for the Fellowship's annual general assembly in the Birmingham-Jefferson Civic Center in Birmingham, Ala. But more than 7,000 people were present to hear Carter during the first of two evening sessions.

At a missions service the second night, a commissioning ceremony was held for the Fellowship's first 25 missionaries -- most serving in Europe and all appointed in the last 16 months.

Everyone in attendance had a chance to embrace one of the missionaries with a word of affirmation, a hug or a prayer. From virtually every seat, people stood and filled the aisles to touch the missionaries, to speak a word of affirmation, or to whisper a prayer. Tears flowed and smiles passed during the highly emotional ceremony.

Among those commissioned were Bert and Debbie Ayers, the first Fellowship missionaries who are not former employees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. The Fellowship's other overseas workers all resigned from the Foreign Mission Board, most in protest of the FMB's more conservative direction.

The Ayers and their four children, all from Gainesville, Ga., soon will be sent to work as agricultural missionaries in Albania.

Keith Parks, former FMB president and now missions coordinator for the Fellowship, noted the importance of the Ayerses appointment. "There is something awesome about sending out a first new family without previous missionary experience," he said.

Later, in a response to an invitation from Parks, 33 men and women

walked to the front of the auditorium to say God was calling them to be Fellowship missionaries. Some of them likely will be among the 20 new missionaries the Fellowship plans to appoint by the end of the year.

The night before, former President Carter embraced the whole Fellowship movement.

"In the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, my wife and I have found a home," Carter said, prompting an extended ovation.

"I pray that as Rosalyn and I cast our lot with this fellowship for the rest of our lives, we can be part of a transcendent movement," he said later in the speech.

Carter, a lifelong Southern Baptist whose election as president in 1976 propelled the Southern Baptist Convention into the national spotlight, said he was always proud to be a Southern Baptist. "The last few years, however, Rosalyn and I have been in a quandary about what to do," Carter said.

He referred to the 14-year-old division within the SBC that eventually led to the Fellowship's formation by moderates, who said they were being excluded by SBC conservatives.

In a breakfast meeting with about 400 people the next morning, Carter recounted his own pilgrimage that led him to join the Fellowship. He said the moment he knew something was wrong came in 1979, after Tennessee pastor Adrian Rogers was elected as the first of a string of conservative SBC presidents.

Carter said he invited Rogers to meet with him at the White House. Carter recalled that after a cordial visit and photo session, Rogers said, "Mr. President, I hope you will give up your secular humanism and return back to Christianity."

That comment shocked him, Carter said. The encounter convinced him his own "deep beliefs were different from those being mandated" by the large-church pastors who were coming to leadership in the SBC.

In each of his appearances during the Fellowship, Carter said Baptists should not force a uniformity of belief on others.

"When there is a definition of what is a proper person, a proper Baptist, a proper American, we are violating the basic principles of what we believe," he said. "When we enforce uniformity on other people, it saps their freedom."

Carter praised the Fellowship for upholding the Baptist principles he believes in -- the autonomy of the local church, total separation of church and state, and the priesthood of believers.

Yet Carter warned against being critical of SBC leaders with different views. He urged the Fellowship to follow the example of Woman's Missionary Union, which earlier this year adopted a plan to cooperate with all Southern Baptists, as well as other missions-minded Christians.

Carter praised WMU for attempting to unite Baptists through missions rather than divide them over theology and politics. "They are not casting aside anyone who wants to support missions overseas," he said.

The president asked the Fellowship to embrace women not only as WMU members, but as ministers and deacons in local churches. In the breakfast session, both Carter and his wife, Rosalyn, spoke to that issue again.

"Women should be able to fill all the positions in the church," Rosalyn Carter said. She recalled her disappointment in the early 1980s when her own church voted against ordaining women as deacons. "I don't think there should be any distinction," she added. "People are people."

Carter offered several principles to guide the Fellowship's growth: avoid duplicating the efforts of others; be inclusive of people with different perspectives and backgrounds; and focus on action and not just talk.

Carter volunteered his own services to help the fledgling Fellowship grow. He said he would especially like to be a spokesman for the Fellowship to reach out to other religious groups, to help support WMU, and to assist in the missions effort. If missionaries encounter problems in other countries, Carter said he would be available to help negotiate with heads of state.

In contrast to the recent pattern of SBC meetings, where business sessions have been packed and missions programs poorly attended, the Fellowship attracted its largest crowds for the missions service and Carter's speech. Business sessions drew about half as many people.

Fellowship Coordinator Cecil Sherman, in his address to the assembly, said the two evening sessions typified two important themes in the Fellowship -- inclusiveness and missions. Yet, he said, not everyone in the Fellowship identifies with both themes.

He said the general assembly is "the place where we are supposed to be wide enough to let both streams run freely."

That kind of diversity is a hallmark of the Fellowship, he said. "But diversity is something you want for yourself and grant ever so grudgingly to everyone else," he said.

One anticipated test of the Fellowship's diversity never surfaced during the three-day meeting. Some observers predicted Fellowship participants would argue over homosexuality after Sherman issued a statement in April denouncing the gay lifestyle.

Although Sherman's statement upset homosexual supporters, the issue did not surface during the meeting.

The Fellowship's business sessions produced not conflict but increasing signs of permanence for the two-year-old organization. The Fellowship adopted a permanent constitution and bylaws, set guidelines for membership, and made some changes in its funding plans.

Sherman reported that 900 churches now channel some funds through the Fellowship, up from 400 in 1992. An additional 3,000 individuals contribute directly to the organization rather than through their churches.

Sherman said the Fellowship is expected to receive \$9.5 million in contributions from churches and individuals in 1993. While some of that income will be channeled to SBC and non-SBC agencies, approximately \$3.7 million will be retained for the Fellowship's own causes -- mostly missions.

Participants adopted a 1993 budget to spend that estimated \$3.7 million, and approved a \$5 million budget for 1994.

Sherman said Fellowship contributors are targeting an ever-larger percentage of their gifts for Fellowship causes and away from the SBC -- a five-fold increase in two years. "I want you to feel good about what you are doing," he said.

He urged participants not to lament the fact that the SBC agencies they supported for years are now under the control of fundamentalists. "Somebody else got the property; we got the principles," Sherman said, adding, "We got the better deal."

"Our job is to teach the principles," he said.

During the assembly, the Fellowship said goodbye to outgoing moderator Pat Ayres of Austin, Texas, who has presided in the organization's top elected office for the past year, installed moderator-elect Hardy Clemons, pastor of First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C., to succeed Ayres, and chose Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler of Cincinnati, Ohio, as new moderator-elect.

Adopting a new constitution and bylaws was necessary because the documents adopted in May 1991 included a "sunset clause" stating they expired at the close of the 1993 general assembly unless reaffirmed.

A constitution and bylaws committee reviewed the documents and presented

revised versions, which were approved unanimously.

For the first time, the Fellowship will begin in 1994 defining membership by financial contributions. The bylaws state that membership "shall be composed of individual Baptists, Baptist churches and the members thereof, who contribute annually to the ministries and operations of the Fellowship."

All individual members and any member of a participating church may be eligible to vote at general assemblies.

The funding used to determine membership does not include "pass-through" money sent on to the SBC. Individuals and churches qualified for representation at the general assembly must give at least something, however small, to the Fellowship's own causes.

The constitution mandates that the officers and committees represent a balance of "the full diversity of the individuals and churches that compose the Fellowship."

The bylaws also redefine the way states or regional clusters gain representation on the Fellowship's coordinating council. Previously set allotments of three to six representatives per state will be replaced with a formula based on contributions.

Each state and regional cluster will be entitled to two members on the council and one additional representative for every 3 percent of total dollars contributed to the Fellowship, up to a maximum of 10 representatives for any state or cluster.

The three-day meeting included a variety of speakers and break-out sessions. The 60 small-group sessions offered everything from information about the Fellowship to worship aids, help for parenting and one session where meeting-weary Baptists could simply sit and listen to music.

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CBF 'blesses' missionaries,  
plans for more in 1993

By Greg Warner and Mark Wingfield

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship officially welcomed its first 25 missionaries May 14 and laid plans to nearly double its mission force by the end of the year.

The Fellowship conducted a service of blessing for its current missionaries, most of whom had never attended a meeting of the two-year-old moderate organization.

The estimated 5,000 people attending the annual general assembly of the Fellowship in Birmingham, Ala., each had a chance to embrace one of the missionaries with a word of affirmation, a hug or a prayer.

After testimonies by three missionaries and a message by the Fellowship's missions coordinator, Keith Parks, 33 men and women from the audience walked to the front of the auditorium to say God was calling them to be Fellowship missionaries.

Some of them likely will be among the 15-20 new missionaries the Fellowship plans to appoint by the end of the year. They would join the 25 missionaries already under Fellowship appointment -- all hired in the last 16 months and almost all former employees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

The FMB has been in turmoil since late 1991, when trustees acted against alleged liberalism among missionaries in Europe. Amid the turmoil, the

Fellowship began its own mission program, picking up 22 FMB missionaries who resigned in protest -- including Parks.

Most have been working overseas ever since. They were brought back to the states for the ceremony of blessing and a three-day orientation session, with specific Fellowship churches voluntarily paying their travel expenses.

The May 14 global missions celebration gave the missionaries and Fellowship participants a chance to meet face to face. Each missionary family was stationed at a location in the coliseum. From virtually every seat, people streamed down the aisles to speak a word of affirmation, offer a hug, or to whisper a prayer to the missionaries. Tears flowed and smiles passed during the highly emotional ceremony.

"Not until tonight have they been fully embraced by Baptists faithful and free," Parks told the audience.

The group also included Bert and Debbie Ayers, the first Fellowship missionaries who are not former employees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. The Ayers and their four children, all from Gainesville, Ga., will leave in June to work as agricultural missionaries in Albania.

"There is something awesome about sending out a first new family without previous missionary experience," Parks said.

He spoke of the history of Albania, which saw the martyrdom of first-century Christians and the later attempt by communists to rid the nation entirely of religious faith.

Martyrdom makes for good sermon illustrations but is not something most American Christians understand, Parks said.

"When something uncomfortable comes into our lives, we begin to ask why God is punishing us," he explained. But persecution and suffering should be the marks of Christians living out authentic faith in a world where Satan and God are in a spiritual battle, he added.

"When we reach the point where we think there should be no discomfort, ... we've forgotten our roots and our promise to follow Jesus Christ."

Parks told of a prospective missionary who said God did not expect him to risk his family in a dangerous place. "Where did he get his concept?" Parks asked. "Not from Jesus."

Although most of the Fellowship's first missionaries are assigned to Europe, Parks said future appointments will focus on what missiologists have dubbed "World A," the 26 percent of the world's population that has not heard the gospel and is often hostile to Christians.

Some current missionaries will be reassigned, such as "T" and Kathie Thomas, who early last year became the Fellowship's first missionaries. The Thomases will become missionaries to Gypsies, a nomadic group of 3-to-6 million people scattered in countries throughout the world.

The Thomases' work with Gypsies will be the prototype for the Fellowship's new strategy of assigning missionaries to people groups, not countries. "T" Thomas will coordinate the Fellowship's effort to reach Gypsies in several countries.

Parks said Gypsies have been among the world's most despised and neglected people. A higher percentage of Gypsies were killed by the Nazis than even the Jews, he said.

Although many mission strategists consider Gypsies too difficult a target, Parks said they are the type of unreached people that will get Fellowship attention.

Parks also spoke about newly open doors for the gospel around the world.

"Timing is not accidental with God," he declared. "Who we are, what we are, our coming into being at this very time is providential in nature."

The Fellowship is attempting to respond to these opportunities as quickly as possible, but needs more financial support to send more

missionaries, Parks said.

"There is only one force in the world that can prevent the gospel from going to all the world," he said.

That force is not Satan, Islam or even secularism, Parks continued, but apathetic Christians. "The greatest barrier is in the heart of the Christian."

After Parks' message, the small group of Fellowship missionaries stood in front of the stage as Parks issued an invitation for others to commit their lives to missions.

While the assembled crowd remained seated, people began moving toward the front. Young couples, some with babies in their arms, walked forward to register their commitments. Singles, middle-aged and older adults also came forward.

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Carter issues challenges  
to his new Baptist 'home'

By Larry Chesser

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- After declaring he had "found a home" in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, former President Jimmy Carter challenged the young but growing organization to open its arms to women in ministry, racial minorities, other denominations and the world's poor.

Carter told the Fellowship's annual general assembly that he and his wife, Rosalyn, had been in a quandary in recent years as "fundamentalist" leaders have shifted the direction of his long-time denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention.

"Now I can announce that in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship my wife and I have found a home," he said. After a lifetime of participation in the SBC, Carter said he and Rosalyn are now committed to the Fellowship "for the rest of our lives."

He quickly warned, though, that Fellowship members should not assume a self-congratulatory mood because its members have quit supporting the SBC.

He advised the Fellowship not to get bogged down in criticism of the SBC or duplicating or competing with the mission efforts of other groups. He said those principles have worked for the Carter Center, the Atlanta-based organization he directs which operates humanitarian and social programs in 26 countries.

The Fellowship, he said, should find a way to heal rather than divide.

"It already been shown to us by the Women's Missionary Union," he said. "They're not casting aside anyone who wants to support missionary efforts overseas."

During several appearances at the Fellowship meeting, he repeatedly emphasized the organization should be inclusive in its outlook toward women, minorities and other denominations.

Carter, whose speech was preceded by a dramatic presentation on racism, deplored the lack of racial progress among churches.

"Although the civil-rights movement was successful 30 years ago, the last bastion of racial separation is in the churches of Jesus Christ," said Carter, who served as president from 1977-1980. "Can we do something about it? I think yes."

Carter lamented that many Baptists still relegate women to positions of secondary importance. He drew loud applause when he said the Fellowship should welcome and encourage "women who want to be deacons or ministers or active preachers in a pulpit."

Addressing a breakfast gathering the next day, Carter and his wife urged the Fellowship to keep an open stance toward women ministers.

All church positions should be open to women, Rosalyn Carter said, adding that she deplored the fact that the Carters' home church, Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga., had voted against ordaining women deacons.

Reaching out to other denominations is an unexplored territory available to the Fellowship, he said.

More than once, Carter called on Fellowship members to blend preaching with service by working with the poor. He cited the success of the Atlanta Project, an outgrowth of the Carter Center, in meeting the needs of that metropolitan area's poor.

Carter said the Fellowship came into being in a search for freedom to express and protect abandoned beliefs -- the autonomy of the local church, the separation of church and state, and the priesthood of the believer.

"I remember a time when lay persons were elected to serve two years as president of the Southern Baptist Convention," he said. "We now have in effect a priesthood of preachers who exert their influence, their authority."

Carter may have received his first hint that he was out of step with what would become more than a decade of fundamentalist leadership in the SBC during a 1979 White House visit by newly elected SBC President Adrian Rogers. After a pleasant conversation and photo session in the Oval Office, Carter recalled, Rogers said as he was leaving, "Mr. President, I hope that you will give up your secular humanism and return back to Christianity."

"It shocked me," he said, "and from that moment on I began to say, 'what am I?' You know I'm a Southern Baptist but the president of my own denomination is claiming that I'm not a Christian."

After leaving the White House, Carter said he kept track of denominational developments and "began to see that my own deep beliefs ... differed from those that were being mandated, I felt, from First Baptist Church in Dallas.

"I just didn't feel at home."

More recently, disruption at the SBC Foreign Mission Board, culminating in President Keith Parks' retirement in protest last year, convinced Carter to take his stand with the Fellowship, the former president said.

Carter's decision to abandon the SBC was made without equivocation but not without mixed emotions, he said.

The mixed emotions, he explained later at a news conference, were linked to his concerns that he did not want to see his home church split along the lines of the division in the SBC.

Carter said he plans to play an active, not just an adjunct, role in the Fellowship.

"I pray to God that, as Rosalyn and I cast our lot for the rest of our lives with this fellowship, we could be part of a transcendent movement -- no matter how large in number -- constantly analyzing what we do as measured by the standards of Jesus ...," he told the general assembly.

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Clinton should be concerned  
by low ratings, Carter says

By Greg Warner

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- President Bill Clinton should be concerned that his public-approval rating has dropped so far so soon, said Jimmy Carter, the last Democrat before Clinton to hold the nation's highest office.

"He has to take action to modify his positions, or explain his positions, or back off" some of them, Carter told reporters at a Baptist meeting in Birmingham, Ala. He spoke the same day that a nationwide poll showed Clinton's approval rating had dipped below 50 percent.

"I think Bill is obviously a brilliant young man," Carter said. "His heart's in the right place. His goals are very much compatible to mine. But ... he has an agenda that was perhaps too complicated."

Carter spoke to reporters May 14 after addressing the annual general assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a new organization of moderate Southern Baptists. Carter said he and his wife, Rosalyn, are joining the Fellowship "for the rest of our lives" because the Southern Baptist Convention has been taken over by fundamentalists.

Clinton likewise has been a Southern Baptist, and both Carter and Clinton were criticized by their more conservative fellow churchmen. Carter said he has talked to Clinton about the treatment he has received from fellow Southern Baptists. "I think he has felt the anger of the rejection of many of the conservative leaders, as I did."

Clinton's decision that has attracted the strongest condemnation from conservative Christians is his plan to allow gays in the military. Carter said he advised Clinton to act quickly and not let the dispute drag on.

"If he had done it and gotten over it, it would have been a better thing," he said.

Evaluations of Clinton based on his first 100 days in office are premature, Carter said. "He's had some difficulty," Carter said. "I think he's learning in office."

Carter refused to criticize Clinton for his handling of the war in Bosnia. "How could you handle Bosnia well? Who could handle Bosnia well?" Carter said he never faced an issue as president that was so fraught with complications as the civil war in the former Yugoslavia.

Carter, who said he has talked with Clinton a couple times about Bosnia, said the United States should work for a consensus policy with Europeans. "I don't think we should get out in front of our European allies," he said.

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Wilkinson named Fellowship's  
communications coordinator

By Mark Wingfield

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- David Wilkinson, vice president for seminary relations with Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has been named communications coordinator and interim staff administrator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Wilkinson, 38, was elected to the newly created position by the Fellowship's Coordinating Council May 12, one day before the Fellowship's annual general assembly. He officially begins work June 1.

In his new role, Wilkinson will be the Fellowship's chief public relations officer, will plan and direct all functions of public relations, marketing, news and information, and will supervise office support staff.

He is the fourth professional staff member hired for the Fellowship's Atlanta office. The other three are Cecil Sherman, Fellowship coordinator, Keith Parks, missions coordinator, and Betty Law, missions associate.

The Fellowship is a two-year-old organization of Southern Baptist moderates who have abandoned the 14-year struggle with fundamental-conservatives for control of the SBC in favor of starting their own

organization for fellowship and ministry.

Wilkinson earlier in May had announced his resignation from Southern Seminary to be effective May 31, saying at the time he was only considering the Fellowship among several job possibilities.

Wilkinson is the fourth Southern administrator to resign in protest since the school hired a new president-elect committed to taking Southern Baptists' oldest seminary in a more conservative direction.

Wilkinson said he views his own job change as a chance to "leave the salvaging business and get into the construction business again."

"I'm ready to be a part of something new instead of trying to piece together the fragments" of the Southern Baptist Convention, he explained.

"It's a chance to be Baptist and an opportunity to be a part of telling a grand story of courageous persons who have dared to dream some new dreams about being Baptist Christians."

Fellowship leaders -- including communications committee co-chairperson Reba Cobb -- said Wilkinson was the best choice to fill the group's growing communications needs. That sentiment was echoed by Sherman, who told a May 13 news conference that better communications is the Fellowship's most pressing need.

Wilkinson said he concurs with Sherman's assessment that the communications function is essential to support the Fellowship's primary emphasis of missions.

"The story about what CBF is doing needs to be told and will generate support," he contended. "Baptists are looking for positive and proactive ways of expressing their faith."

Wilkinson said he sees a need to communicate the Fellowship's message with two primary audiences -- active supporters of the Fellowship and "the thousands of Southern Baptists who are aching for Baptist freedom."

He said goals of his work will include using a variety of communications techniques; being a "broker" rather than a person who tries to do all the work himself; listening to discover what people believe are the strengths of the Fellowship; and helping state Fellowship chapters communicate better.

Wilkinson has been vice president at Southern Seminary since 1987. He previously was director of news and information services for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, director of communications for Southern Seminary, associate editor of the Brotherhood Commission's World Missions Journal and information specialist with the Sunday School Board.

He is a graduate of Oklahoma Baptist University and Southern Seminary and currently is completing the doctor of ministry degree at Southern.

Wilkinson and his wife, Melanie, are the parents of two children, Micah, 9, and Meredith, 4.

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Southern should train women  
for all roles, Honeycutt says

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Whether or not churches are calling women as pastors, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary should be training women for whatever roles God has called them to, the seminary's outgoing president said May 14 in direct contradiction of the views of his successor.

"A local congregation is free to call whom it will as a minister," Honeycutt said. "Does not Almighty God have as much freedom to call whom he will?"

In one of his last addresses to alumni, Roy Honeycutt hinted at the

despair he has felt in the seminary's transfer of power. But he stopped short of directly criticizing President-elect Al Mohler or the conservative trustee board who elected Mohler to succeed Honeycutt after his retirement July 31.

Honeycutt spoke to a crowd of seminary alumni and friends at a banquet held during the spring meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Birmingham, Ala. Mohler was not present.

Mohler previously has stated he does not believe women should be allowed to serve as pastors or in certain key church leadership roles. Women will be welcome in all seminary degree programs, he has said, but they will be encouraged not to prepare for positions for which the majority of Baptist churches won't hire them.

Mohler's position has drawn strong criticism from advocates of women in ministry, who previously have found a home at Southern Seminary.

Prior to the Birmingham banquet, Honeycutt had not publicly rebutted any of Mohler's statements -- though many of Mohler's positions differ from the outgoing president's. And even at the banquet, Honeycutt never mentioned Mohler by name.

But, he said, there should be "no gender distinction" in the community of God. "God's spirit may empower anyone and everyone to fulfill a prophetic role."

The thrust of Honeycutt's message was two-fold: advice that the grieving seminary community should move beyond despair to hope and a declaration that the seminary is in excellent condition as he prepares to turn over leadership.

"We can live on the other side of despair. There is an afterward," he said in apparent reference to the pain many moderate alumni are feeling at the school's new fundamental-conservative direction.

Many alumni who thought of the seminary as a Garden of Eden now see it as being "East of Eden," Honeycutt said in reference to a John Steinbeck novel.

But moving from despair to hope requires acknowledging disaster and being open to the promise of God's future, he claimed. Then a "new community" can be created, he said.

In an apparent attempt to hold his successor accountable for the health of the seminary, Honeycutt talked about "driving down a stake" to mark the school's health as he leaves.

"We commit to our successors an institutional mystique and image of which we have been stewards," he said.

Honeycutt cited the school's accreditation standing, "quality faculty," student body, healthy financial condition, sizeable endowment and good physical plant as notches on the stake.

"I want the record clear that of this date, May of 1993, Southern Seminary is a healthy institution," he declared.

Also during the banquet, Honeycutt presented the seminary's distinguished alumni award to Floyd Roebuck, pastor of First Baptist Church in Rome, Ga.

Roebuck also referred to the seminary's painful transition in his acceptance speech. "Let us never cease to be grateful to God for what we had, which can never be taken away from us," he said.

The comic relief for the evening came early on in an offhand remark made by professor William Hendricks, who along with two other professors was denied an endowed teaching chair by seminary trustees last month.

After the crowd had given the faculty and staff present a standing ovation, Hendricks quipped loudly, "Gerald Keown and I will have to remain standing since we cannot find our chairs."

That trustee action was viewed by most faculty as an attempt to punish

the professors for positions they have taken in the past.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

House of Representatives  
approves religious-liberty bill

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. House of Representatives struck a blow for religious freedom May 11, approving landmark legislation to restore a high level of protection for religious practice.

On voice vote, the House unanimously voted to suspend the rules and approve the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (H.R. 1308). Suspension is a time-saving method of approving bills in the House by allowing only 40 minutes of debate and disallowing amendments from the floor.

The bill has not yet passed the Senate, although a Senate committee has approved the measure.

RFRA would restore the tough standard the U.S. Supreme Court previously required government to meet before it could restrict the free exercise of religion. In 1990, the Supreme Court virtually abandoned its three-decades-old test that stipulated government had to have a compelling reason -- such as safety or health -- before it could interfere with its citizens' religious practice.

The House debate yielded staunch, bipartisan support for the measure, with no representative speaking against the legislation.

Rep. Jack Brooks, D-Texas, and chairman of the Judiciary Committee that brought the bill to the floor, said, "The Supreme Court's decision three years ago transformed a most hallowed liberty into a mundane concept with little more status than a fishing license -- thus subjecting religious freedom to the whims of government officials. That, indeed, has been the sorry legacy of the court's view of this matter.

"Passage of this legislation is the only means to restore substance to the constitutional guarantee of religious freedom," Brooks continued.

Brooks pointed to the "unprecedented coalition of religious denominations and civil-rights groups who have united to stand up for the liberty given meaning by this bill. I am proud of how such marvelous diversity was united by a shared view of the place and role of religion in our society."

Other representatives also noted the breadth and commitment of the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion, which was chaired by Oliver Thomas, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee. Nearly 60 groups, ranging from the American Civil Liberties Union to Concerned Women for America, have worked for the bill's passage.

Rep. Don Edwards, D-Calif., acknowledged that "this has been a long and arduous path" to enactment -- a journey that began three years ago. He credited the coalition for its relentlessness on behalf of the bill, as well as Thomas' leadership.

Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., opposed the measure last year because of concerns raised that RFRA could somehow advance abortion rights. That concern was championed by the U.S. Catholic Conference and became one of the key obstacles to the bill's passage in the last session.

The coalition and many constitutional scholars maintain that concern was unfounded, but this year in an attempt to bring the Catholic Conference

in line with virtually every other major U.S. religious body, some language was "clarified," according to Thomas. BJC attorneys maintain the language change does not alter the bill but merely clarifies what its intent was all along.

But the change prompted the Catholic Conference to drop its opposition and join other religious bodies in supporting RFRA.

Hyde said with that language change his concerns had been resolved and that he supports the bill's enactment.

A more recent concern that RFRA would somehow complicate administration in prison settings is unfounded, said Rep. William Hughes, D-N.J. Government would have a compelling interest in assuring security of prisons even if it meant restricting inmates' religious exercise, he added.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., called the legislation "landmark" and emphasized that the distinction held by religious liberty -- as the first liberty guaranteed by the Constitution -- was intentional. It was the genius of the framers of the Constitution that Americans were not to leave religious minorities to the protection of the political process, he added.

Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., told his colleagues that "we owe to our heritage and to our children and grandchildren to protect these religious freedoms."

James Dunn, BJC executive director, said, "It is highly significant that the religious-liberty constituency should be able to pass the Religious Freedom Restoration Act unanimously in the U.S. House of Representatives. As a veteran Washington lobbyist, I've seen few such resounding victories for religion and absolutely no inter-faith coalition so inclusive.

"Every American is indebted" to Oliver Thomas, who headed the coalition with "energy, skill, grace and patience," Dunn said.

Thomas had equally high praise for Rep. Brooks. "Baptists are indebted to Texan Jack Brooks for passage of this landmark legislation. Without his leadership, this effort could not have succeeded.

"Today's unanimous vote is proof that Congress can do more than tax and spend," Thomas said. "I may just change my position on term limits."

In the Senate, the Judiciary Committee has approved a companion bill (S. 578) for floor consideration but it has not been scheduled for action.

Dunn warned that it is too soon to celebrate because the Senate still has to act. "Almost as much legislation fails to pass both houses, even after passing in one, as is ever enacted into law," he said. "We are only half way home."

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