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June 22, 1993

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Pattersons finally find church home in Wake Forest

By Donna Seese

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- As a fervent fundamentalist, Paige Patterson believes every word in the Bible is true. But lately he might have been wondering about "Knock and it shall be opened unto you."

For months the president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary has been making the rounds in and around Wake Forest, N.C., trying to find a church that would admit him as a member. One rejected him outright. Others, worried that his fiery reputation would attract controversy, discouraged him from applying.

Finally, on June 9, a church took him in.

Patterson and his wife, Dorothy, became full members at Stoney Hill Baptist Church, a 109-year-old country church near Wake Forest with about 450 members. Stoney Hill's pastor, Jeff Burns, is a graduate of the seminary.

Burns said that the congregation approved the Pattersons membership because "theologically, we are in agreement." He said the members of the church believe, as Patterson does, that the Bible is inerrant.

Patterson said: "I would count them as real friends of the seminary. If they didn't feel at home with the general theological direction of the seminary, they probably wouldn't feel excited about our coming."

Patterson was a leader of the fundamentalist movement that has controlled the Southern Baptist Convention since 1979. The movement has changed the direction and nature of many Southern Baptist institutions, including Southeastern.

The struggle also earned Patterson enemies, particularly among moderate Baptists who disagree with the shift in the denomination.

"The denominational press has painted us as a hybrid between Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan," he said. "So people were feeling I'd be a disruptive element in their church."

Patterson handled the search for a church gingerly after the sting of his nationally publicized rejection by Wake Forest Baptist Church, which stands inside the seminary's stone walls. For more than 100 years, the church has been home to every president on campus except Patterson's immediate predecessor.

Patterson came from Dallas in July 1992 to take over as head of

Southeastern, a major Baptist seminary on the original campus of Wake Forest University. Patterson inherited a school hit by declining enrollment and challenges from theological accrediting boards. He has said he will restore the school's academic standing while firmly establishing a theologically conservative faculty.

Patterson visited a number of churches throughout the winter and spring, testing the waters for theological compatibility -- and giving the pastor and congregation an understanding of what his membership might mean.

"Because of the notoriety of the whole thing, I would not think of going to a church that I did not talk to the pastor and have him talk to his people and see if it would be problematic," Patterson said. "I don't want to be problematic to a church."

Many Baptist churches accommodate members from across the theological spectrum, and they have held together despite the uproar dividing the denomination. But the sudden appearance in their pews of a major player in the controversy could upset that balance.

Patterson himself warned at least one church, Wake Union Baptist in Wake Forest, that if he joined he probably would draw followers who would outnumber the regular Sunday attendance of 60 to 70 people.

Lester Burleson, Wake Union's pastor, said Patterson visited once and expressed interest in membership. But the congregation took to heart Patterson's caution that his presence might upset the church's balance and discouraged him from applying.

"It saddens me to think that he would have reservations about coming to Wake Union because of the size and the damage it could cause," Burleson said.

The rumor mill that started to grind after Patterson's visit seemed to confirm fears that if he joined it would profoundly affect a church. Speculation rose to such a pitch this week that Burleson released a prepared statement denying that Patterson had formally requested membership and been refused.

"What has happened here cannot be viewed as 'rejection' or 'denial' of the Pattersons. Rather, it was for the concern for the identity of the church that Paige Patterson decided against requesting membership here," the statement said.

Turning down a potential member is not easy, and doesn't feel particularly Christian, said John Cook, deacon at Wake Forest Baptist, where the 17 deacons rejected the Pattersons in January. The congregation as a whole reconsidered the issue in April, and again voted overwhelmingly to bar the pair.

"Baptists are by nature a very inclusive body," Cook said. "It's a radical, extreme step to try to exclude anyone. But we felt by including a person with the beliefs we felt Dr. Patterson to have, it would change the nature of the church when so many churches in Wake County would be delighted to have Dr. Patterson."

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State-funded interpreter
at parochial school upheld

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The First Amendment does not bar state and local school officials from providing a sign-language interpreter for a deaf student attending a religious school, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled June 18.

In a 5-4 decision, the high court reversed rulings by lower courts that said providing an interpreter for James Zobrest at an Arizona Catholic high school would violate the separation of church and state required by the First Amendment.

Zobrest's parents are seeking reimbursement for more than \$7,000 per year they spent to provide their own interpreter after the Catalina Foothills School District declined to furnish an interpreter under a federally financed program.

Writing for the court's narrow majority, Chief Justice William Rehnquist said providing an interpreter for Zobrest at Salpointe Catholic High School would not violate the ban against governmental establishment of religion because the program providing such special services targets a broad class of citizens and the aid in question benefits the student, not the religious institution.

Rehnquist, joined by Associate Justices Byron White, Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy and Clarence Thomas, said the Zobrest case fits a pattern of court decisions holding that the First Amendment is not violated when government programs that neutrally provide benefits to a broad range of citizens incidentally benefit religion.

Because the federal program at issue in this case "creates no financial incentive for parents to choose a sectarian school, an interpreter's presence there cannot be attributed to state decision-making," Rehnquist said.

Additionally, Rehnquist noted that the parochial school in this case "is not relieved of an expense it otherwise would have assumed in educating students."

The majority said that the task of an interpreter is different from that of a teacher and that an interpreter's presence would not add or subtract from the religious environment chosen by Zobrest's parents.

Four justices dissented, citing the Supreme Court's longstanding rule of avoiding constitutional questions when cases can be settled on other grounds.

Justice Harry Blackmun, joined by Justice David Souter, disagreed with the majority's decision to decide the First Amendment question and also with its conclusion that providing an interpreter at a sectarian school does not offend the establishment clause.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, joined by Justice John Paul Stevens, agreed with Blackmun and Souter that the constitutional question should not have been addressed and refrained from discussing it.

In his response to the majority's establishment-clause reasoning, Blackmun said the court is breaking new ground.

"Until now, the court never has authorized a public employee to participate directly in religious indoctrination," Blackmun wrote. "Yet that is the consequence of today's decision."

Blackmun also took issue with the majority's conclusion that the aid sought by the Zobrests paralleled benefits previously upheld by the court.

"Those cases dealt with the payment of cash or a tax deduction, where governmental involvement ended with the disbursement of funds or lessening of tax," Blackmun wrote. "This case, on the other hand, involves ongoing, daily, and intimate governmental participation in the teaching and propagation of religious doctrine."

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, pointed to Blackmun's sharp dissent and the closeness of the vote as evidence of the complexity of such cases. "These issues require more than reading headlines and bumper stickers," he said.

The Supreme Court's decision did not end the case. A federal district court in Arizona must now decide whether the district is required to pay for the services.

"I don't think this case means much," said Oliver Thomas, BJC general

counsel. "A school district can provide this type of aid if it wants to, but it is not required."

The Baptist Joint Committee sided with the Zobrests in maintaining that the establishment clause does not bar the school district from providing an interpreter. The agency differed with the Zobrests' claim that the free-exercise clause requires the district to do so.

The BJC's Thomas said the case is a classic example of the child-benefit theory. "The program benefits did not affect the cost of tuition or, as the court noted, create an inducement to attend a parochial school," he said.

The Southern Baptist Convention's Christian Life Commission sided with the Zobrests on both issues in its brief asking the court to review the case.

The brief argued that James Zobrest's free-exercise rights were violated because the school district, although refusing to provide him an interpreter, provided interpreters for deaf students in public and non-religious private schools. That amounts to religious discrimination, said Michael Whitehead, CLC general counsel.

"Our brief does not assert that private school students have a (free-exercise) right to funds or services provided to public school students," Whitehead said when the brief was filed. "But if state officials decide to aid private school students, they cannot single out religious private school students for discrimination."

In deciding the Zobrest case, the Supreme Court declined an invitation by religious groups, including the CLC, to use the case to modify the so-called Lemon test -- a legal standard formulated in 1971 that requires governmental programs to have a secular purpose, have a primary effect that neither advances nor inhibits religion, and avoid excessive entanglement with religion.

While the court majority -- made up of critics of Lemon -- did not specifically apply the Lemon test in deciding the case, the court's opinion cited cases based on Lemon to support its ruling.

"I'm pleased that the court did not disturb the neutrality concept embodied in Lemon but relied on cases decided directly under Lemon," said Brent Walker, associate general counsel at the BJC.

"The court was right too in not holding that a student at a religious school is constitutionally entitled to receive the aid."

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-- By Larry Chesser

Peace Fellowship urges SBC
to confess 'racist' past

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists have been asked to "acknowledge and confess a 30-year-old failure of nerve" and consequently help reconcile black and white Americans.

The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America is marking the 30th anniversary of the 1963 racially motivated bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., by asking Southern Baptists to endorse "The Birmingham Confession."

The confession recounts how the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee in 1963 rejected a resolution expressing sympathy to Sixteenth Street Church and pledging prayers and "energetic efforts in healing the rift between the races." It tells how a substitute motion -- which failed to mention the bombing or the resulting deaths of four children -- spoke only in

general terms about the need to "heal the rift in our world."

Fred Wolfe, current chairman of the Executive Committee, said he didn't know why the committee declined to adopt the 1963 resolution, but he said the group might be willing to make amends now. "In fact, we might want to initiate something like that if it's the 30th anniversary," said Wolfe, pastor of Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala.

The Peace Fellowship's campaign to enlist endorsements for "The Birmingham Confession" began last month at Sixteenth Street Baptist and will conclude July 30, during the final program of the Peace Fellowship's annual summer conference in Birmingham, according to the group's executive director, Ken Sehested.

"Forgiveness only comes by remembering, (and) by confessing to God and to each other ... the specific failures which mark our lives and betray our calling," the confession states. "Racism impedes our own development as a people and discredits our own preaching."

The confession closes by acknowledging that the "roots of racial discrimination are deeper than we thought." It pledges to "commit ... to diligent patience, to sustaining the struggle against racism for all the days of our lives, to the small steps of reconciling action which will someday blossom forth in the healing of communities, of cities, of the very nations themselves."

Sehested hopes the document might lead to a broader confession in 1995, when the Southern Baptist Convention will mark its 150th anniversary.

Recent informal conversations have stressed "the need for white Baptists in the United States to use the 150th anniversary to issue a broad-based confession of racism to help bring reconciliation within the Baptist family," he said.

Slave-holding was a major issue of contention between Baptists in the North and the South in 1845, when the SBC was founded.

"By and large," Sehested said, "those whom we have wronged are more than willing to forgive. But, biblically speaking, repentance does not simply mean saying we're sorry. It also implies a change of behavior, a willingness to restore relationships -- in the manner of what Zacchaeus did when he professed his faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and then vowed to restore fourfold all he had stolen and to give half his goods to the poor. Unfortunately, most of our evangelistic preaching ignores that part of the conversion process."

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-- By Marv Knox

Music can aid grief process,
Kentucky music leader says

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Music can help people deal with grief, says Joy Berger, a Baptist musician who recently completed a doctoral dissertation on music and grief.

"I'm a firm believer that music reaches the soul," said Berger, whose conclusions are based not only on her academic study but a real-life experience with grief.

Although few people would automatically associate music and pastoral care, Berger insists they are a natural mix. "We as musicians have been doing pastoral care for a long time," said Berger, who recently became part-time keyboard consultant for the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

She also recently completed a doctoral degree at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, drawing upon the guidance of both the music faculty and pastoral-care faculty. Her dissertation topic: "Music as a Catalyst for Pastoral Care within the Remembering Tasks of Grief."

Put in language even the tone-deaf can understand, Berger sought to show how people draw upon music as a source of both comfort and pain during the grieving process. Because music evokes memories of comfort and pain, it can be an important key to pastoral care, she contended.

She identified at least six things music helps people do: express feelings, activate memories, encourage community, facilitate sustaining worship, explore meanings, and foster personal and spiritual wholeness.

"Music can capsulize a deep meaning from within. It can cut through and open up the soul," Berger said.

That's why some people are drawn to church during grief and others can't bear to attend at all, she continued.

"When people are going through loss and grief, often going to church is more painful than not going -- standing in the same pew where you've stood with your spouse for 40 years and suddenly he or she isn't there."

On the other hand, sometimes hearing and singing familiar tunes of faith can comfort grieving Christians, she added.

An unexpected turn of events during Berger's doctoral studies gave her a deeply personal perspective on the issue.

Berger is an accomplished pianist and organist, having played keyboard instruments since she was a small child. In May 1991, she was serving as organist at Highland Baptist Church in Louisville and had just completed significant portions of her doctoral degree requirements. Without warning, she began to lose use of her hands due to debilitating pain.

The condition, a variation on carpal tunnel disease, worsened to the point doctors offered little hope for improvement. Today she can play the piano or organ for only five-to-10 minutes at a time.

She had to quit her job as church organist, and she had to redirect her career dreams and plans. Music, which had been the focus and love of her life, suddenly became a painful reminder of her affliction.

Two years later, Berger has worked through most of the grief process and is finding ways to "reinvest" herself through ministries of music and pastoral care.

But the one thing she doesn't want is to be known as the keyboard instructor who can't play.

Drawing from her years of experience as a keyboard player and teacher, Berger said, she feels well prepared to teach others.

A native of Savannah, Ga., Berger formerly worked with the Georgia Baptist Convention's church music department, has been a piano instructor and was minister of music at a church in Virginia.

From her own experience, Berger paints a picture of the grief process as a symphony of four seasons.

Fall is when the loss first breaks off in a person's life. Winter is when the "dark coldness that will never end" sets in. Spring is the time of planting new seeds in faith. And summer is the time for bringing those seeds to fruition, to reinvest oneself in new aspects of life.

Although the distance from grief to joy seems immeasurable to a person who has suffered loss, there is hope, Berger advised. She points out that the words "mourning" and "morning" come from the same Latin root, meaning "from darkest midnight up through the break of day."

The healing power of the Christian faith found in that transition is a song Berger hopes to teach more Baptists to sing -- and play.

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