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SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
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 Nashville, Tennessee

EDITOR'S NOTE: There was no ABP issue for Sept. 7.

Elders confirmed as
U.S. surgeon general

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Senate confirmed Joycelyn Elders as U.S. surgeon general Sept. 7 after returning from its month-long summer recess.

The Senate approved 65-34 the controversial nominee who is the former head of the Arkansas Department of Health under then-Gov. Bill Clinton. Thirteen of the Senate's 44 Republicans voted for Elders, while only four Democrats voted against the nominee.

Elders, scheduled to be sworn in Sept. '8 during a private ceremony, is a pediatric endocrinologist and former pediatric professor at the University of Arkansas School of Medicine.

Despite near unanimous support from the medical community, Elders' nomination was challenged by Religious Right groups who say her views on sex education promote promiscuity. Known for her outspokenness, Elders' positions on abortion, teenage pregnancy and school-based sex education and condom distribution have drawn fire from several quarters.

Her supporters counter that she grapples with the growing crises of teenage pregnancy and other health-care issues in a realistic manner.

Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., led the floor debate in support of Elders, noting that her "outstanding contributions to the health of the people" of Arkansas has been recognized by the American Medical Association, the National Governors' Association, the National Education Association and other organizations.

"With regard to teenage pregnancy, an effective surgeon general committed to this issue can make impressive and long-overdue progress," Kennedy said. "As we saw in our hearing and our debate on the Senate floor prior to the recess, it is not Dr. Elders who is outside the mainstream on this issue -- it is her critics.

"Dr. Elders supports a policy of encouraging abstinence. But she also

recognizes the reality that not all teenagers will be abstinent. (Her) policy on this issue is precisely the policy of the top public-health officials of the Reagan and Bush administrations, and it is a policy that has the broad support of the American people."

Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla., saw Elders in a different light, describing her as having "a very radical agenda." Nickles took exception to a series of "startling statements" that she has made.

He cited a 1992 Elders' comment that anti-abortion activists should "get over their love affair with the fetus and start supporting children."

"I happen to know a lot of people who are involved in so-called right-to-life groups, the people who are opposed to abortion, and they are very supportive of children," Nickles said. "So I am kind of offended by that statement.

"It almost shows a disdain or a very negative attitude toward the fetus."

During her confirmation hearings, Elders said she wants to change the way Americans think about health and to be "the voice and the vision for the poor and the powerless. ... I have seen bright young people all over this country in an ocean surrounded by the sharks of drugs, alcohol, violence, homicide, suicide, AIDS and teenage pregnancy, while we argue over whose values we are going to teach."

Elders said that America's health-care system needs to start preventing problems rather than just fixing them.

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-- By Pam Parry

Thomas resigns BJC post
to move to native Tennessee

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Oliver Thomas, general counsel and associate director of the Baptist Joint Committee, has resigned to move to his native state of Tennessee.

His wife, Lisa, has accepted a teaching position in the public school system outside Maryville, and Thomas plans "to preach, teach, practice law and write country music -- not unnecessarily in that order," he said in his letter of resignation.

Thomas, who has distinguished himself on Capitol Hill as a leading church-state authority, also plans to remain active in that field. His resignation will be effective Oct. 31.

During his eight-year tenure with the religious-liberty agency, Thomas has provided leadership in several areas -- perhaps most notably as chairman of the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion.

Thomas helped put together and sustain the unprecedented coalition of 68 religious and civil-liberties groups from every point on the political spectrum. For the past three years, the coalition has been the driving force behind the effort to write into law a high level of protection for religious freedom.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act would restore the "compelling interest" test the U.S. Supreme Court formerly required government to meet before it could restrict religious liberty. The test virtually was abandoned by the high court in 1990.

Thomas' leadership on RFRA was recognized last April by the Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism when it honored him as a "champion of

religious freedom." Thomas, an ordained minister and member of the Supreme Court bar, was the only non-congressional leader honored by the center at that time.

Thomas indicated that he will continue working with the coalition until RFRA is passed.

Since coming to the BJC in 1985, Thomas also has been involved in such issues as clergy malpractice, prayer in public schools, creation science, aid to parochial schools and free speech.

He co-authored two highly acclaimed and nationally publicized sets of guidelines on religion in the public school. The project was sponsored by 16 national religious and educational organizations.

He was chairman and primary draftsman for the coalition that revised the "Equal Access Guidelines" in light of the Supreme Court's 1990 decision in *Westside Community Schools vs. Mergens*. He also co-authored the nation's first major curriculum project for teaching about religious liberty in the public schools, sponsored by the Williamsburg Charter Foundation.

He has chaired the ad hoc committee of attorneys representing the nation's major denominations that meets periodically with executives of the Internal Revenue Service to resolve problems pertaining to churches and tax policy.

In addition to numerous articles, Thomas co-authored the American Civil Liberties Union's first handbook on church-state law.

Thomas, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University Law Center, holds two law degrees as well as a master of divinity from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and a bachelor's degree from the University of Tennessee.

"I leave the Baptist Joint Committee assured of its strength and hopeful for the future," Thomas said in his resignation letter to BJC chairman Tyrone Pitts and BJC Executive Director James Dunn. "Under your leadership, the agency has soared to new heights -- accomplishing many things for our churches and the nation," he told the pair.

Dunn said: "Buzz Thomas has been the right man in the right job at the right time. With incredible patience and skill he has assembled and led unprecedented coalitions to deal with religion in the public schools, tax problems and challenges to both the separation of church and state and the free exercise of religion.

"Mr. Thomas has become one of a handful of respected authorities in church-state law and clearly one of two or three most active advocates in its application.

"Buzz is just a great human being. His compassion for people, his commitment to the cause of religious freedom and his common touch have made him the perfect person for this job. I shall miss Buzz as I would my right arm."

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-- By Pam Parry

Moderates plan meeting
to 'preserve' states

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A small group of Baptist moderates from approximately 18 states will meet in Nashville, Tenn., in late September to try to figure out how to stem the growing influence of fundamental-conservatives in state-level Baptist affairs.

John Baugh of Houston, organizer of the two-day meeting, said the purpose is "to preserve Southern Baptists' historic work and witness."

But he acknowledged the meeting is in response to evidence fundamental-conservatives in several states are gearing up to expand their influence into state conventions, many of which have been void of the politicking that has characterized the national convention for more than a decade.

"Many Southern Baptists would be distressed to see their state conventions controlled by fundamentalists using the same methods used to control the Southern Baptist Convention," said Baugh, a retired wholesale grocery executive and longtime moderate activist.

Several meetings of state-level conservative strategists have been held in the past year. Two such national meetings -- in August 1992 and February of this year -- were organized by T. C. Pinckney of Alexandria, Va., secretary of the Southern Baptist Convention's powerful Executive Committee.

Pinckney's meeting last February, also in Nashville, came on the heels of the winter session of the Executive Committee and was attended by several committee members.

Likewise, Baugh's meeting will follow by a day the fall meeting of the Executive Committee. However, it is not likely to include members of the committee, which is controlled by fundamental-conservatives.

Baugh called the timing of his Nashville meeting "a nasty coincidence," adding he was unaware of the Executive Committee session.

He estimated the moderate meeting will attract 50 to 60 people from 18 states. The session, which will be held at a Holiday Inn near the Nashville airport, will begin Thursday afternoon, Sept. 23, and conclude Friday about noon.

"We did not intend it to be a media event, nor did we intend to be secretive," Baugh said. Neither is the meeting an attempt to "centralize" the efforts of moderates to influence state conventions, he said.

But participants may share "some techniques to help keep the state conventions from fundamentalist control," he said.

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--By Greg Warner

Virginia Baptist conservatives
formalize state organization

By Michael Clingenpeel

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Virginia Baptist conservatives have taken another step toward a state organization for fellowship and missions.

Meeting only eight months after forming the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, approximately 300 conservative pastors and laypersons approved a constitution and bylaws, elected officers, established a structure of committees and approved guidelines for receiving and spending funds for mission causes different from those of the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

But leaders of the SBCV, which met Sept. 2 at a Richmond, Va., church, were quick to deny their organization is a new state convention to rival the BGAV.

"We have not formed a new state convention today," said Tommy Taylor, pastor of London Bridge Baptist Church in Virginia Beach, Va., and president of the SBCV. "That's not on the agenda. We are part of the Baptist family of Virginia, the BGAV."

In January the group formed as a fellowship in response to growing dissatisfaction among conservatives who say the BGAV is distancing itself from the Southern Baptist Convention. They are particularly rankled that the 1993 BGAV budget offered options which allow churches to reduce or bypass giving to SBC agencies and support the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Equally disturbing was the failure of messengers at last year's annual meeting to take strong action against homosexual behavior, action already approved by the SBC.

The Sept. 2 meeting was a step to formalize the fellowship started in January, when Virginia conservatives voted to influence the BGAV from within rather than secede.

The SBCV's new constitution, approved almost unanimously, declares unqualified support for the SBC and Cooperative Program, the central SBC budget, as "the primary instruments used by our denomination to further the cause of Christ on a worldwide and national basis." It encourages cooperation with the BGAV "in so much as conscience allows."

The document also commits the SBCV to "make a difference in the BGAV," encourage every staff member of the BGAV to hold a high view of Scripture, greater emphasis on evangelism in Virginia, strong public stands by Virginia Baptist leadership on public issues such as abortion and homosexuality, and greater loyalty to the SBC and the Cooperative Program.

The three-and-a-half-hour meeting was marked by harmony, and several speakers struck a conciliatory tone. "Never assume anyone's motives without asking them," advised Al Gilbert, pastor of Liberty Baptist Church in Hampton, Va. "Don't assume you know anyone until you ask."

Taylor urged conservatives to pray more and talk less. "Pray for a healing of wounds. Pray for repentance on both sides of the aisle. Pray and lovingly influence the BGAV back to full loyalty to the SBC. Rhetoric is not getting the job done and it's not the Lord's way."

But denominational politics did surface during the time for miscellaneous business. T. C. Pinckney of Alexandria, Va., secretary of the SBC Executive Committee, urged conservatives to bring messengers to the BGAV annual meeting in Richmond in November.

"The name of the game in Baptist polity is votes," he said. "That's how Southern Baptists make decisions. There are actually 80 more conservative pastors (in Virginia) than there are moderates or liberals. But we will not win any votes until we get our messengers there in November."

Pinckney has organized at least two national meetings of state-level conservative strategists in the past year.

A financial statement distributed at the meeting showed that \$32,017 had been received by the SBCV since January, all of it from nine churches and two individuals. Most (\$26,272) was contributed by Taylor's church.

SBCV treasurer Doyle Chauncey of Norfolk said he expects receipts to increase dramatically soon.

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Trustees of Florida newspaper
vote not to restrict editor

By Barbara Denman

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Trustees of the Florida Baptist Witness wrestled with the issues of "negative" news coverage and eroding subscriptions, but nonetheless voted to reaffirm the newsmagazine's editor and not restrict his editorial freedom.

In an Aug. 26-27 meeting in Orlando, longtime commissioner J. C. Mitchell of Orlando made the motion to "reassert our confidence (in) and commend the growth of Jack Brymer," editor of the Witness since 1984.

Mitchell added the Witness commissioners would "not set any parameters for his work as editor," turning aside suggestions from some commissioners that they instruct Brymer to align the paper with the conservative element in the state convention.

"I don't think that it should be our jurisdiction to limit the freedom of an individual anymore than I would want someone to tell me what I can and cannot do," said Mitchell, a former pastor and state convention president. "We've been through this enough. He does know, I'm sure, where we each stand."

Brymer's editorial freedom and the role of the state Baptist newspaper have been frequent topics for the nine-member board for several years. At their most recent meeting, several commissioners complained about the Witness' printing of stories about the SBC controversy and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, as well as articles originated by Associated Baptist Press, an independent news service.

But their criticisms were matched against a new reader opinion survey that demonstrated a high approval rating of the weekly newsmagazine and its editor. The telephone survey, done at the commissioners' request by an independent research firm, surveyed laypersons and pastors who subscribe to the Witness.

The research revealed that 72 percent of the laity and 66 percent of the pastors consider the reporting by the Witness to be fair; 71 percent of both categories assess the publication as accurate; and 65 percent of the two categories consider the Witness balanced.

Eighty-five percent of both groups answered "yes" when asked if the Witness should publish reports which deal with all sides of Southern Baptist issues. And when asked if the Witness should publish news stories from Associated Baptist Press, 70 percent of the lay subscribers and 85 percent of the pastors said "yes."

Pastors were evenly divided over the issue of publishing reports of the newly organized Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a group of Southern Baptists displeased with the current Southern Baptist leadership -- 47 percent said "yes," while 42 percent said "no."

A significantly high percentage of lay subscribers -- 28 percent -- answered "don't know."

Of the survey, commission chairman Lance Anderson said: "Baptists as a majority like what they see. Only a very minute (number) say 'I don't like it.' Who are we serving? We are serving all Baptists."

But several of the commissioners argued that a steady drop in subscriptions -- from 89,000 in 1987 to 55,000 in 1993 -- indicates many Florida Baptists, especially pastors of larger churches, would not give the Witness such an approval rating.

Commissioner Robert Parker, pastor of Markham Woods Church in Lake Mary, asked if churches had indicated why they were deleting the Witness from their budgets. Editor Brymer said most cite financial reasons or the desire to do their own newsletter.

Scott Leonard, pastor of the Palm Bay Harbor Community Church in Palm Harbor, encouraged the commissioners realistically to address the "deep concerns of the men of God pastoring churches that are reaching the bulk of people in our state with the gospel witness."

"If we don't address that, and address what is balanced and not in terms of these controversy issues, ... it's irresponsible," Leonard said. "I want to affirm Jack, but we've got to be realistic about the track

record of the Witness. We're remiss if we tiptoe around that."

But Mitchell contended that in recent years Brymer and the Witness have become more balanced in reporting issues. That opinion was echoed by John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention, who was attending the meeting.

"I think Jack has developed a greater sensitivity to the issues as they relate to conservatism," said Sullivan.

Sullivan said he would consider withholding the state convention's \$200,000-a-year support of the Witness if commissioners acted to "circumvent" the editor.

Following the discussion, the commissioners unanimously affirmed the editor.

Afterwards, Leonard withdrew a motion that had been tabled during the commission's May meeting which asked Brymer "to recognize the seriousness of the problem of not reporting fairly these controversial issues." That motion spawned the survey to determine if readers found the Witness fair.

Leonard said many people had perceived his motion as a "slap," but he had intended it to be a signal to pastors that "we are aware of their concerns."

Brymer said he did not perceive the motion as punitive, although "some people did."

Brymer said the commission's frank discussions are "healthy and positive." "Not many agencies, including other state papers, have the openness that this commission has. It is a compliment to you who serve to go out on the limb to bring up these concerns you have. I think it's important for those people to understand that you are doing just that -- that you're not a bunch of rubber stamps."

"And it's best for people to understand that I'm hearing that and I am in fact trying to respond to those kinds of things," Brymer said. "Together we can move forward, but we can't if we're fragmented."

The commissioners also raised subscription rates and instructed Brymer to develop a marketing plan to help curb the erosion of subscriptions and to explore innovative ways to inform Florida Baptists.

Brymer outlined several alternative ways to repackage the message of the Witness, formats that included audio cassettes, generic publications targeting specialized markets, and computer bulletin boards.

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Buyer's bankruptcy postpones
Atlanta church's move to suburbs

By Gayle White

ATLANTA (ABP) -- As the sale of the downtown property of First Baptist Church of Atlanta collapses, church officials are counting on the Lord and the legal system to ensure the church's planned relocation to the suburbs.

"We really aren't concerned because we know the Lord's in charge," said Larry Walker, chairman of the congregation's building committee, which is overseeing plans for a new church campus in the community of Dunwoody in north DeKalb County.

Both Walker and First Baptist administrator George Morgan said they think the church's relocation to 82 acres off Interstate 285 may be delayed by the bankruptcy of developer G. Lars Gullstedt, who bought the church's Midtown property on Peachtree Street for \$43.5 million.

Both men said they are confident the move will take place; they just don't know when. "Insofar as the impact it will have on the church, that is the major impact," said Morgan.

Plans had called for the entire congregation to be in new facilities, including a 7,000-seat sanctuary, by February 1995.

"This will delay that by whatever time it takes to sell and dispose of the property," Morgan said.

He said the church would like to continue to work with Gullstedt or his trustees. But if those efforts fail, he said, the church would foreclose on the developer and remarket the property.

"In fact, we are already talking to other potential buyers," he said.

Members agreed in March 1988 to sell the property and pursue plans to relocate to the suburbs. A few months later, the congregation voted overwhelmingly to buy property along I-285 owned by the Avon cosmetics company for \$20 million. The church later acquired additional property for a total of 82 acres.

The church is already holding services on the north DeKalb property. Some 2,500 worshipers, a capacity crowd, gather each week in a warehouse once used to store cosmetics.

Andy Stanley, son of the longtime pastor, Charles Stanley, preaches at the northern location.

Another 4,500 attend services at the Midtown building.

Walker said the building committee has not discussed whether to expand the temporary quarters of the northern branch of the church until a permanent building can be constructed.

"We are pretty much at capacity in the temporary worship center," he said.

The church is continuing to develop classroom space on the new site with donations to the church's building fund, Morgan said. He said he hopes the new education space will be completed by early next year.

"We anticipate continued ministry at Midtown and growth on both locations until God puts us together," Morgan said.

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-- Gayle White is religion writer for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. This story is used with permission.

Writer's father
dies in Texas

GREENVILLE, Texas (ABP) -- Roy Camp, 76, father of Baptist journalist Ken Camp, died Sept. 7 in Greenville, Texas.

Ken Camp, also of Greenville, is news writer for the Baptist General Convention of Texas in Dallas. The elder Camp, who has been ill for some time, was to be buried Sept. 9 in Greenville, north of Dallas.

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