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October 5, 1993

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Bob Allen hired
as ABP associate

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Bob Allen of Baltimore, Md., has been named associate executive editor of the independent news service Associated Baptist Press.

Allen, 37, has been editor of the True Union, newsjournal of the Baptist Convention of Maryland-Delaware, since 1988. He will join the staff of Associated Baptist Press Nov. 1, handling editing, writing and administrative duties for the twice-weekly news service.

News articles from ABP are published in 29 Baptist newspapers and used by journalists at 54 major daily newspapers and newsmagazines nationwide. ABP was founded in 1990 as the first independent news service for Baptists.

"My entire sense of calling to ministry hinges on one proposition -- that honest journalism has a positive role in Baptist life," Allen explained. "I believe Associated Baptist Press is the best avenue available to me to do the kind of job God has called and equipped me to do."

Allen resigned to state convention officials in Columbia, Md., Oct. 4, who accepted his resignation with "profound regret."

Allen will move to Jacksonville, Fla., home base for ABP, which has operated with a two-person staff since 1991.

"Bob Allen exemplifies the type of journalism ABP is all about," said Greg Warner, ABP executive editor. "He is a fair, honest, insightful reporter who is uniformly respected by his colleagues. And he is one of the most gifted journalists I have met in my 15 years in the profession."

"The face of Baptist life is changing. The need for our news service is greater now than at any time in our short history. The addition of Bob to our staff will allow ABP to cover more news, report it better and distribute it more broadly."

A native of Marion, Ill., Allen graduated from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, where he worked on the staff of the campus paper, The Daily Egyptian. From 1978 to 1981 he was a reporter for the Sullivan Daily Times in Sullivan, Ind.

He received the master of divinity degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1985. During seminary he was editor of the campus

newspaper, The Towers; was news director in the seminary's communications office; managing editor of The Tie, the seminary's publication for external audiences; and held internships at two Baptist newspapers -- the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine and the Western Recorder of Kentucky.

He went to the Baptist True Union in 1985 as associate editor and was elected editor three years later. He is married to the former Vicki Johnston of Little Rock, Ark. Their children are Patrick, 7 and Amy, 4.

Allen was elected unanimously by ABP's executive committee Sept. 30.

"This is another plateau of progress for ABP -- hiring our third staff member," said R. G. Puckett, ABP chairman and editor of the Biblical Recorder, newsjournal of North Carolina Baptists. "Bob brings to the position all the credentials we need to guarantee the free flow of information in the Baptist world."

ABP was founded in 1990 by a group of Baptist journalists after Southern Baptist Convention officials fired the editors of Baptist Press, the denomination's official news service.

ABP is governed by an 18-member autonomous, self-perpetuating board of Baptist journalists, laypersons and clergy. It is funded by subscriptions and donations from churches and individuals.

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Southern Seminary pulls out
of joint women's conference

By Greg Warner

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has decided not to sponsor a conference on women in the church next March, apparently because the topic is controversial among Baptists.

The conference, planned by a consortium of Kentucky theological schools that includes Southern, was on the drawing board before Albert Mohler, a conservative, became president of Southern this summer.

In a meeting of the consortium Sept. 19, Mohler told the presidents of the other four schools that Southern would not join them in sponsorship of the March 4-5 event.

"Dr. Mohler was very cordial and good spirited about it," said consortium coordinator Wayne Bell of Lexington, Ky. "... (But) he felt it was so controversial in the church, and that Southern would not at this time lend its endorsement to it."

The role of women in the church, particularly the issue of women's ordination, has been hotly debated by Southern Baptists for several years. Although Southern Seminary has been viewed as advancing the cause of women in ministry, Mohler told students in April neither he nor the majority of Southern Baptists support women as pastors.

The upcoming conference, "Towards Solidarity: A Conference on Women and the Church," will include workshops and plenary sessions examining the theological, ministerial, educational and social-justice aspects of women in the church. The two keynote speakers are Letty Russell of Yale Divinity School and Mercy Oduyoye, a native of Ghana active with the World Council of Churches.

Mohler said his decision to withdraw sponsorship was based on the selection of the keynote speakers as well as a suggested list of workshop topics and leaders.

"The scope and nature of the program was slanted in a very radical

direction and was not at all sensitive to the concerns of evangelicals," he said.

"My decision was made on behalf of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as an institution serving the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention. The program as planned was not in any way appropriate for sponsorship by this institution on behalf of those churches."

But Katherine Johnson of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary, who is chairing the committee planning the conference, said it is designed to give different viewpoints equal footing in the debate over the role of women.

"It is not a conference that assumes women should be ordained," she said. "It does celebrate the full participation of women in the church. ... We're being very careful in planning the workshops to include men as well as women and people who come from all the traditions."

Johnson, who described Southern's withdrawal as "unusual," said another sponsoring school, St. Meinrad School of Theology in Louisville, comes from a Roman Catholic tradition that disallows ordination of women, yet that school continues as a sponsor.

Mohler said: "The conference was clearly directed toward issues of feminist theology and ideological concerns which ranged far beyond the issue of the ordination of women or the service of women in the pastoral ministry. Evangelicals can discuss the ordination of women to the ministry in contexts that are both sensitive and appropriate. In this case, the conference met neither of those requirements."

Nonetheless Southern will allow faculty and students to participate if they wish, and Southern will offer housing and other assistance to participants, according to Doris Borchert, who teaches Christian education at Southern and is directing the seminary's involvement in the conference.

The consortium, more than a decade old, shares library facilities, sponsors faculty exchanges and coordinates other joint activities. The other members of the consortium are Asbury Theological Seminary, a Methodist school, and Lexington Theological Seminary, affiliated with the Disciples of Christ.

This is the first time a consortium project has sparked controversy, said coordinator Bell, but it's also the first time the group has addressed something as volatile as women and the church.

Bell and Johnson agreed Southern's withdrawal won't hurt the conference. "We're planning to continue," Johnson said.

The consortium had planned to involve some Southern Baptists in leadership roles and likely still will, Johnson said.

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Travelers find Russians cynical
about latest government upheaval

By Greg Warner

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- Several Baptists who returned from Moscow Oct. 4 said they found most Russians "lackadaisical" about the political upheaval that has shaken their government.

"The people really seemed to be disinterested in what was happening at the White House," David Napier said, referring to the Russian parliament building that was the scene of a bloody showdown between supporters of Russian President Boris Yeltsin and hard-line backers of the parliament.

As many as 500 people were killed Oct. 3 when Yeltsin's forces overran

the parliament's defenders, causing heavy damage to the parliament building and solidifying Yeltsin's control of the government.

Russians have watched the latest government standoff with growing cynicism, said Napier, associate pastor/administrator at Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. "I found the mood of the people there was very lackadaisical. They do not care what happens with the government. They are disinvested in it."

"They throw up their hands and say, 'Ah! We don't care. Somebody will win and life will go on.'"

Napier was one of seven Baptists who traveled to Russia and Slovakia Sept. 24-Oct. 4 to lead and participate in church-planting conferences under the sponsorship of the Baptist World Alliance.

Randel Everett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Pensacola, Fla., said the group passed by the Russian parliament building a couple days before the worst violence hit. They saw troops guarding the building but no fighting.

The Americans found Muscovites did not share their intrigue for the governmental upheaval. "It was amazing how uninterested they were in what was happening," Everett reported.

He said most Russians, who are weathering severe economic hardships, are more concerned with finding food and adequate shelter than the latest shape of their post-communist government. "Only the politicians have the luxury of arguing about things like that," he said.

"Most (Russians) are supportive of Yeltsin, but they are pretty cynical about the whole government," Everett noted.

He said Baptists in Russia are more concerned about the opposition they face from the Orthodox Church, which they say is trying to block construction of non-Orthodox churches and other signs of progress among non-traditional faiths.

Everett said he recounted for his European hosts the story of religious freedom in America, and the pioneering role of one Baptist, Roger Williams. "I pray God will raise up a Roger Williams from among them," he added.

Both Everett and Napier said they were impressed with the evangelistic work being done by the Baptists of Eastern Europe. "Those people are on the ball and they are doing a great job," Napier said. "It was eye opening."

The Americans participated in a church-planting conference in Bratislavia, Slovakia, which attracted Baptists from Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, Poland, Austria, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and elsewhere.

"It was great to see Serbian and Croatian Christians worshipping together," Everett said. Sadly, however, the Croatians were forced to leave the meeting early when they heard about new bombing near their homes, he said.

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Alliance assesses future,
grapples with gay rights

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Alliance of Baptists will not merge with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship but will continue to play a constructive role in Baptist life for years to come, according to its chief executive.

Stan Hastey, Alliance executive director, told his board of directors that dialogue between the two groups resulted in a mutual agreement to work side by side with one another, rather than join as one. "We come out of this

process with the ability to affirm one another," he added.

Since the formation of the Fellowship in 1990, participation in the Alliance has dropped off and many people had anticipated a merger of the two moderate Baptist groups. But discussions between the two organizations instead affirmed their continued separate existence.

In the last 12 months, Hastey said he has developed "a much greater sense of hope ... that there are yet important tasks for the Alliance to undertake."

In addition to discussing the future of the Alliance, the board in its semi-annual meeting Sept. 30-Oct. 2 empowered a special task force to begin the process of developing a statement on homosexuality. The board also adopted a budget and heard various reports during the meeting at First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

Hastey said that two years of dialogue have clarified the relationship between the Alliance and the CBF, revealing a need for both. Reading from a paper by Nancy Ammerman, Hastey said the Alliance plays a unique role as "admittedly the most progressive of Baptists -- people not afraid to take unpopular stands."

According to Ammerman, the Alliance is distinctive in its organizational innovation, linkage across denominational lines, and ability to forge alliances for pursuing specific short-term goals.

"It does not alone define what it means to be Baptist or shape the entire program of a local church," Hastey continued reading. "Rather, it is one part of the vast network of organizations and people who make up what it means to be Baptist and together, in various configurations, shape the program of local churches."

The Alliance has "survivability" and "viability," he said.

"We are a generation of Baptist people with a rare opportunity to make a difference in the history of the people called Baptist," said Hastey, the son of Baptist missionaries. "What we counted as incalculable loss was all the time great gain. ... God has privileged us greatly to live in these times and for these days ahead of us."

In addition, the board empowered its special task force on human sexuality "to develop a working statement on human sexuality, specifically in regards to issues of homosexuality, and a proposed process for the use of the statement for presentation to the board at the annual meeting" in March.

The voice vote was overwhelming but not unanimous.

The board grappled with what to call the document and finally settled on "working statement." This term was selected to communicate that the document presented in March would not yet be an official Alliance position and that members would have opportunity for input before it could become one.

Bill Johnson of Ardmore, Okla., spoke against drafting a working statement. He asked the board, "Who are we to judge?" It is wrong for the board to take a vote on affirming homosexuality because it places the directors in the role of God who rightfully judges, he said.

"To not vote is a vote itself," countered Larry Crawford of Burlington, N.C. "Not taking a stand is a stand. Vote or not vote, we will take a stand. It's time to speak out."

Hastey said he had hoped when the task force was initiated that the Alliance would not deal with a statement on homosexuality. But now, he said, he has overcome "my personal fear" about considering a statement on the issue.

"Process is important," Hastey said, adding the way the Alliance proceeds with this matter is as important as what it does.

In other action, the board:

-- adopted a \$246,173 budget for 1994;

-- approved a formal relationship with Atlantic Baptist Fellowship, a similar group in Canada;

-- elected Maxwell Hill, pastor of First Baptist Church, Jonesville, N.C., to fill a vacant at-large position;

-- changed its constitution and bylaws to create an ecumenical development committee.

A new feature of the meeting included topical treatments of two issues confronting the church. Board members and guests shared stories about pain and inclusive ministry related to women and homosexuals in the church.

The 1994 convocation of the Alliance will be March 3-5 in Greenville, S.C.

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Scholar see hope for peace
between liberals, conservatives

By Marv Knox

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The chasm between religious conservatives and liberals may be bridged in the next century, sociologist Robert Wuthnow predicted.

That's good, because neither side is doing a particularly successful job of meeting the needs of average Americans, Baptist church historian Bill Leonard added.

They presented their views during the recent National Interfaith Religious Symposium in Louisville, Ky. Sponsored by the Lilly Endowment and the Cathedral Heritage Foundation, the conference focused on "Religion and Region: Images of Faith for a New Century."

Wuthnow, director of the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University, disputed the notion that conservatives and liberals are irreversibly divided.

"The term 'culture wars' has now become a way of describing the current scene," he acknowledged. "This is a particularly unfortunate choice of words. I object to the imagery. ..."

"There is no evidence for this claim -- not a shred of systematic evidence. Everything depends on media and interest-group accounts of these controversies themselves. Thus we have the testimony of arch-combatants."

Only "the extremists" profit from the perception that the nation is at war over its culture, Wuthnow asserted, because that view galvanizes their support and gives purpose to their cause.

"On the religious side, there have been a number of developments favorable at least to the prospect of reconciliation," he noted. One is the "rational, deliberative, legislative means for discussing contested issues." Another is the formation of groups whose purpose is to find religious "middle ground."

"Still another is that mainline and evangelical churches have been learning from each other," he said. For example, mainline churches have become more evangelistic, and evangelicals "have distanced themselves from some of the extremist religio-political groups, focused energies on church growth, and become increasingly active in social-service ministries."

Wuthnow, who has conducted extensive research on American religion, suggested several possibilities for reconciliation between the groups:

-- People's religious faith perspective exists across a spectrum of beliefs; they are not clustered around the far extremes, with nobody in the

middle.

"People in the middle may lean to the right or the left," he said. "But they are nevertheless in the middle. They provide a substantial resource for effort to find common ground."

In addition, the ranges of liberal-conservative viewpoints cross denominational lines, with advocates of both viewpoints found within single denominations, and with advocates of either viewpoint linking up with like-minded people in other denominations.

"There is little evidence that the two sides have simply gravitated toward entirely different religious organizations," he reported.

-- Although the Religious Right "will continue to be a factor in American politics, ... it will increasingly try to avoid the national media coverage that has polarized opinion, often to the detriment of the Religious Right."

This will have the effect of keeping the intensity of the struggle between the sides out of the public limelight.

-- The two groups hold in common "topics that might themselves provide areas of agreement."

"One such area is charitable behavior," he explained. "Helping the needy is surely one area on which conservatives and liberals can agree. ... Both are also involved -- about equally -- in programs of ministry to their communities, in visiting the sick and in helping fellow congregants who may have special needs.

"Clearly, this can be an avenue toward reconciliation. It helps both sides to see that others' needs are more important than their own biases and conflicts."

-- The emergence of small discussion groups can provide another avenue to "foster reconciliation across religious lines."

"You can talk out your differences," Wuthnow insisted. "Small groups function by finding common ground among their participants. This does not mean that liberals and conservatives will necessarily gravitate to them in equal numbers ... and work out their differences. But the potential is at least there."

He cited statistics indicating 40 percent of the U.S. population participates in small groups and that 55 percent "said they had gained greater understanding of people with different religious perspectives."

-- Language, which has been used to divide people, also can unite them.

"Much of the conflict between evangelicals and liberal mainline Christians stems from different traditions, different subcultures, in which subtle uses of language itself help to define who is 'in' and who is 'out.'"

The hope for reconciliation stems from the groups' ability "to translate, bridging out of their own traditions so that others can understand and appreciate what they are saying."

Both groups need to do a better job of translation, not just for themselves, but for the sake of society, stressed Leonard, chairman of the religion department at Samford University and former professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

"In the latter 20th century, theological liberals and conservatives alike have lost or are losing their ability to provide meaningful response to the spiritual concerns of the times," he contended.

"Liberalism's attempt to demythologize Scripture, theology and dogma have left many wondering what was really Christian in the end. Conservatives' concern to protect old myths at all cost have led them dangerously close to a spiritless propositionalism which has maximized orthodoxy and minimized faith." Both have stressed the mental at the expense of the spiritual, he claimed.

Quoting religion professor Robert Ferm, he said, "Issues posed in debates between 'liberals' and 'fundamentalists' are no longer significant ones."

Consequently, "theological debates are important but not always pertinent, particularly when they distract the church from the Spirit and its mission in the world," he added.

More important than debates is "a new quest for community among religious people," Leonard stressed. "Such community offers persons a place of acceptance and understanding, but it also provides a place to stand from which to confront personal and corporate issues of human life."

That's important, because another thing liberals and conservatives have in common is an identity crisis, he said.

Pointing to dramatic change taking place among liberals and conservatives, as well as among small churches and "megachurches," he noted, "They're all in transition."

Consequently, they face a crisis regarding "how religious people will pass on their traditions to another generation."

At least part of the answer is in finding their "place," which gives them identity, he said.

Wuthnow appealed for religious people to find that "place" -- their common ground or center -- together.

"There will always be voices, of course, that argue against reconciliation on grounds that compromise of principle is only a vice," he said. "But principle can be retained while finding other ways in which to promote reconciliation."

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