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Faculty, others protest  
trustee firing of Dilday

By Greg Warner

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Faculty at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary protested the March 9 firing of their president and disputed the charges leveled against him by trustees.

Fired president Russell Dilday was an "excellent administrator" who led Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary "with a spirit of Christlikeness" and kept the school doctrinally sound, the seminary's theology faculty said in a statement March 22.

Trustees said a day earlier that Dilday, president of the Fort Worth, Texas, school since 1978, was guilty of mismanagement and insubordination and that his management style and doctrinal differences with trustees produced the impasse that led to his firing.

Faculty, students, alumni, donors and one accrediting agency have objected to the firing and the way it was handled by trustees, who dismissed Dilday immediately and without warning, then locked him out of his office.

Fallout from the firing continues:

-- At least two trustees have asked their colleagues to reconsider and reinstate Dilday, 63.

-- Jack Graham of Dallas, a prominent conservative leader, said the firing hurts the conservative movement that now controls the Southern Baptist Convention and its seminaries.

-- Students and faculty of the embattled school expressed their solidarity and mutual support during a chapel service March 23.

Southwestern's entire faculty, meeting the day after the firing, denounced the dismissal "and the manner in which the action was carried out." The brief statement also praised the six trustees who voted against firing.

The statement, representing the opinion of the seminary's music, education and theology faculties, was adopted March 10. Word of the action did not get out until 11 days later, however, because the school was on spring break.

Meanwhile, the theology faculty unanimously adopted its own statement

March 22, praising Dilday as "an excellent administrator who managed the seminary in a highly effective and successful manner."

"During his administration, his doctrinal stance was completely consistent with the 'Baptist Faith and Message' statement, which is the seminary's article of faith," the statement continued. "The theology faculty affirms Russell H. Dilday for leading the seminary with a spirit of Christlikeness and a desire to be inclusive with regard to the finest theological and biblical perspectives represented in the Southern Baptist Convention. We deeply regret his firing as president of the seminary."

In a chapel service March 23, the faculty also praised the student body for their response in the crisis. Preaching professor Jimmie Nelson, before delivering a sermon on forgiveness, thanked the students for their support of the school, faculty and Dilday.

"The entire faculty, seated at the front of the auditorium, then stood and turned, facing the students, and gave them a long, extended ovation," reported church history professor Leon McBeth.

At the close of the service, two students went to the pulpit and in turn voiced their support for the faculty.

"It was totally spontaneous," McBeth said. "It was a bonding experience, a deeply emotional commitment of students to faculty and faculty to students."

McBeth said the occasion may prove very important to the seminary's future.

"We hear talk that many of the faculty will leave, but if we feel the commitment of students, we may stay," he explained. Likewise, the solidarity of the faculty could persuade some students not to leave the school, he said.

In a statement to the Dallas Morning News, Jack Graham, pastor of the 12,000-member Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, said the firing of Dilday "showed very little, if any, compassion."

Graham, a longtime friend of Dilday's, is a leader in the movement that has placed conservative trustees at Southwestern and other SBC seminaries. His Prestonwood parishioners include trustee leader T. Bob Davis, an outspoken critic of Dilday, and Kenneth Cooper, a longtime seminary donor who resigned from the school's advisory council and cancelled his \$30,000 pledge in protest of the firing.

"As a conservative pastor, and one who is highly identified with the conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention, I feel this move does not serve the best interest of the cause of Christ, nor of the reputation of Bible-believing Christians," Graham said. The action, he said, "only fuels the persuasion that fundamental-conservatives are unloving and mean-spirited."

Graham said he plans to initiate meetings with conservatives across the nation to examine "the current status of the denomination" and "to move forward with a fresh agenda for the future."

One Southwestern trustee outspoken against Dilday's firing commended Graham's statement as demonstrating that not all conservatives agree with the board's behavior. "There have been actions taken that aren't Christian," said trustee Wayne Allen, who ran an unsuccessful campaign for the presidency of the Baptist General Convention of Texas under a fundamental-conservative banner last fall.

Allen said he is going to ask the SBC Executive Committee to investigate the board's actions.

He has also sent a letter to trustees calling for an emergency meeting to discuss Dilday's firing. Allen appealed to the board's chairman, Ralph Pulley, to call the emergency session soon "so we can sit as Christians and discuss the issues."

"Why not invite Russell (Dilday) to come if he would, and consider reinstating him as president until he chooses retirement, which will only be

three or four years at the most?" Allen requested.

Louisiana's trustee to Southwestern's board offered a similar suggestion in a statement made public March 17. The trustee, Bob Anderson, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, said he will "strongly encourage" the board chairman to call a special meeting to "reconsider this dangerous action."

Anderson said he had been trying to contact trustees for such a meeting, but had not been very successful.

"They all seem to be hiding out. (J. Edgar) Hoover couldn't find some of them now," Anderson said.

Anderson said he would like to see a compromise with Dilday. "He wanted four years; maybe we could give him two," he said.

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--Bob Allen contributed to this story. Information was also obtained from the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and the Baton-Rouge Advocate.

Baptist organizations in flux,  
historian tells Georgia group

MILLEDGEVILLE, Ga. (ABP) -- In the face of an uncertain future, Baptists are turning away from the highly centralized denominational structures that have characterized the 20th century, said church historian Bill Leonard.

"American religion is in a state of transition," said Leonard, chair of the religion department at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. "The old ways of organizing are either gone or going, and we do not know which forms of religious organization will take shape and last into the 21st century."

"In the interim, we Baptists are going back to the societal method of supporting missions," Leonard told the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia March 19.

The Fellowship, a loose organization of Southern Baptist moderates formed in reaction to conservative control of the 15.4-million-member Southern Baptist Convention, is only one example of a variety of shifts in how Baptists relate to the SBC, said Leonard.

He also noted the rise of other publishing ventures which compete with the Baptist Sunday School Board and the development of new divinity schools and seminaries as alternatives to the six Southern Baptist institutions which for many years have had a virtual monopoly on theological education of Southern Baptist ministers.

Referring to the recent firing of Russell Dilday as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Leonard said "the SBC is more fragmented today than two weeks ago. What happened in Texas is hastening the shift (of loyalties)."

More than 500 persons gathered at the Georgia College Centennial Center in Milledgeville for the Georgia Fellowship's second annual convocation. Although the state organization has been in place for only a short time, national coordinator Cecil Sherman told the participants they already had the third largest state Fellowship.

While gathering for worship, fellowship and business, the greatest interest among most participants was in gleaning information about the future direction of the Fellowship, an organization of individuals and churches looking for alternative missions programs and funding options to the traditional SBC.

The national Fellowship organization is already funding its own missionaries and providing an outlet for churches wishing to contribute to

specific SBC causes without using the Cooperative Program unified budget or to Baptist causes that have been eliminated from the SBC budget. Many churches, however, continue to give to both the Fellowship and Cooperative Program, even allowing individual church members to designate how they want their missions money distributed.

Convocation participants admitted their support of alternative missions programs puts them in conflict with staunch supporters of the traditional Cooperative Program, but many claimed they represent traditional Southern Baptist principles. Ironically, many who now support the Fellowship's funding options have in the past been among the strongest supporters of the Cooperative Program.

Leonard alluded to that dichotomy. "While the old loyalties (to the denomination) are no longer there among today's Yuppies who 'know not Nashville,' those of you in this meeting still have strong denominational identity," he said.

An informational seminar at the convocation concerned the possible development of a new Baptist seminary in Georgia.

"We are envisioning and dreaming at this state, but there is reason to be hopeful," said Peter Rhea Jones, pastor of First Baptist Church, Decatur.

Jones is chairman of a group called Clergy And Laity For A Seminary In Atlanta. The group feels the best option for establishing a seminary in Georgia is to work with Mercer University, a Georgia Baptist Convention-affiliated school in Macon which is in the process of conducting a feasibility study. Mercer trustees are scheduled to hear a report on that study at a called meeting in June, Jones said.

Jones described the proposed seminary as "a school that is positive and concerned for Baptist principles that we feel have been trampled upon, such as priesthood of the believer, the priesthood of laypeople and of women. ... It will be distinctively Baptist and positive toward evangelism and outreach ... and with a strong faculty who can preach, teach, and do research."

Jones also noted that Southern Baptists probably need more seminaries than the six officially connected with the convention. Smaller denominations like Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians all have twice as many seminaries as the SBC, he said.

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-- By William Neal

Whitsitt Society courage award  
to be given to Ralph Elliott

DECATUR, Ga. (ABP) -- Ralph Elliott, who was fired 32 years ago from the faculty of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for writing a controversial book, will receive the Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society's annual "Courage Award" May 5 in Greensboro, N.C.

The award is given annually to a person "who has in the face of strong opposition made a lasting contribution in one or more of the following areas: preserving religious liberty, championing soul freedom, pursuing intellectual integrity, upholding human rights or advocating social justice," said Walker Knight of Decatur, Ga., Whitsitt Society president.

Elliott, who in retirement is interim pastor of First Baptist Church in Rochester, N.Y., is being honored by the award for "his pursuit of intellectual integrity in the face of persecution by his denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention," Knight said.

Elliott was the first faculty member hired when Midwestern Seminary was

established in Kansas City, Mo., in 1958, as professor of Old Testament. His 1961 book, "The Message of Genesis," used methods of biblical interpretation generally acknowledged as conservative and scholarly but offensive to some Baptists who advocated a fundamentalist, literal approach to Scripture. A large outcry caused the Baptist Sunday School Board to halt its publication. Midwestern's board of trustees, under mounting pressure to charge Elliott with heresy, fired him in 1962 for insubordination after he found another publisher for a second edition.

"This recognition and honor is long overdue," said Knight.

After leaving Midwestern, Elliott taught at Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pa., and was a pastor in American Baptist churches in Illinois and New York.

The award will be presented at the Whitsitt Society's May 5 meeting in Greensboro, N.C. Elliott is scheduled to speak on "Safeguarding Baptist Freedoms."

Also at the meeting, James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, will speak on "Religious Freedom: A Threatened Heritage."

The Whitsitt Society was formed in 1992 to foster the study of Baptist history against fears that conservative domination in the Southern Baptist Convention might bring revision or downplaying of certain elements of Baptist heritage.

It honors William Whitsitt, who resigned in 1898 as president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary under pressure for challenging a prevailing view advocated by J.R. Graves' Landmark Movement that Baptist churches progressed in an unbroken succession from John the Baptist. Whitsitt, a church historian, determined that research indicated the first identifiable modern Baptist church was started in about 1609 in England by John Smyth.

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-- By Bob Allen

#### School prayer issue stalls education reform measure

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A controversial school prayer provision stalled a major education reform bill pending in the U.S. Senate March 23.

At stake in the delay is more than \$100 million previously earmarked for the measure. If the bill is not approved by April 1, those funds could be forfeited.

The Goals 2000: Educate America Act (S. 1150, H.R. 1804) would establish national education standards and provide grants for educational reform. Lawmakers have been working on the reform package for several years, and Democratic leaders were pushing to get the bill through Congress before its two-week spring recess that begins March 25.

But Republicans, retaliating against a conference committee's rejection of a school prayer amendment offered by Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., in favor of a Democratic alternative, employed delaying tactics to stall the bill.

The Senate had previously approved the Helms' amendment that would deny federal funds to school districts which prohibit constitutionally-protected prayer in public schools.

But the conference committee replaced the Helms language with a milder alternative offered by Rep. Pat Williams, D-Mont. The Williams proposal would bar Goals 2000 funds from being used to prevent voluntary student prayer, but would not mandate an across-the-board fund cutoff.

The conference report's alternative sparked controversy in both

chambers.

The U.S. House of Representatives approved the report after defeating a Republican attempt to insert into the House version of the bill the original Senate language. The effort was defeated 232 to 195.

The House earlier had approved a similar bill without any school prayer amendments.

If lawmakers cannot break the impasse, the measure will have to wait until the Senate returns from recess.

Another education bill (H.R. 6) contains school prayer language identical to the Helms amendment. It reauthorizes federal programs for elementary and secondary education. It may also be put on hold until after the recess. Another controversial provision of that bill would restrict programs or activities that affirm a homosexual lifestyle.

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-- By Pam Parry

Supreme Court rejects appeals  
in flag burning, prisoner cases

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The act of burning the American flag is constitutionally-protected speech and cannot by itself be the basis for convicting a person of inciting violence, according to a ruling left standing by the U.S. Supreme Court March 21.

The court declined to review a ruling by the Ohio Supreme Court which reversed an Ohio woman's conviction for inciting violence.

The woman, Cheryl Lessin, protested U.S. policy in the Persian Gulf at a demonstration in downtown Cleveland in 1990, burning an American flag during the protest.

Ohio's top court threw out her conviction, saying the jury should have been instructed that "flag burning in the absence of a call to violence is protected speech" and that jurors could not "consider the fact that Lessin burned the flag in determining whether she incited violence."

When criminal charges arise from conduct protected by the Constitution, jurors must be told that a conviction cannot be based on constitutionally-protected acts, the court said.

"We cannot uphold Lessin's conviction for the crime of inciting violence because it is impossible to say with any degree of certainty that her burning of the United States flag was disregarded by the jury in reaching its verdict," the court said.

The case was sent back to the trial court for proceedings consistent with the Ohio Supreme Court's opinion.

In another March 22 action, the nation's high court refused to hear a request by Nevada Attorney General Frankie Sue Del Papa to reduce the level of religious rights for prisoners.

Nevada officials wanted lower courts to be required to apply the Supreme Court's standard in *Employment Division v. Smith* in prisoners' rights cases. The 1990 *Smith* ruling made it easier for states to justify generally-applicable laws that have the effect of burdening religious practice.

In the case at issue, an Orthodox Jewish prisoner filed suit against Nevada prison officials alleging infringements of his religious rights because prison officials failed to provide him with a kosher diet, clothes made from an single fiber, the services of an Orthodox rabbi and a guarantee he would not be transported on the Sabbath.

A federal appeals court sided with Nevada officials on all issues except the kosher dietary requirements. The appeals court returned the case to the

trial court to determine the impact of accommodating the prisoner's dietary needs and what alternative means of religious practice were available to the prisoner.

The enactment in late 1993 of legislation which restored the high level of protection for religious practice abandoned by the Supreme Court in the Smith decision changed the dynamics of this case, according to a Baptist church-state specialist.

"The issue is all but moot now," said Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee. "The Religious Freedom Restoration Act provides a level of protection for everyone, including prisoners, that exceeds the standard that the lower court applied in this case."

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-- By Larry Chesser

White, black Baptist churches  
building Habitat house, bridges

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Two Baptist churches -- one predominately white and one black -- are working together to build a house and to tear down racial barriers in Winston-Salem, N.C.

The churches are Wake Forest Baptist Church, an anglo church which meets on the campus of Wake Forest University, and First Baptist Church of Highland Avenue, a 114-year-old African-American congregation with a long track record of social involvement. They have formed a partnership to sponsor construction of a house for Habitat for Humanity, a non-profit, ecumenical Christian ministry which provides affordable housing for low-income families.

"We are on the leading edge of a great new adventure," Wake Forest pastor Richard Groves said in a joint worship service attended by more than 600 members of the two congregations March 20. Beyond building a home, "ours is a ministry of reconciliation," he said.

"Jesus prayed that we might be one, and we are not going to be one unless we get together and break down some walls," he said.

"We're doing more than building a house," added Wendell Johnson, pastor of Highland Avenue First Baptist. "We're working on building the kingdom of God in this community."

"When the congregations of white and African-American churches can come together, we're then modeling God's inclusive kingdom," Johnson said.

Last year, in an informal discussion at a denominational meeting, the two pastors learned that each congregation was considering a Habitat project. Johnson suggested the churches consider working together. The Wake Forest congregation approved the concept last June and began raising funds from members. In September, the Highland Avenue church voted to proceed with the project. Project coordinators were appointed by each church to arrange schedules and recruit volunteers.

The joint effort is the first to benefit from a Winston-Salem Foundation grant of \$40,000 to encourage such interracial partnerships. The two churches have raised more than \$34,000, each exceeding separate initial goals of \$15,000. Habitat for Humanity of Forsyth County will contribute \$10,000. Contributions were also made by the American Baptist Churches of the South on behalf of the Highland Avenue congregation and by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship for Wake Forest Baptist.

Following the Habitat for Humanity concept, volunteers from both churches will build the house, along with 500 hours of "sweat equity" by the family that will occupy the house and other volunteers. The house will be sold to the family at cost with a no-interest loan secured by a 20-year

mortgage from Habitat.

Construction, to be in Winston-Salem's Morningside neighborhood in the Winston-Salem State University/Bowman Gray Stadium area, is expected to start about April 1 and be completed by late summer.

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-- By Bob Allen

Gun Violence Protection Act  
invokes different reactions

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Education is the key to halting an epidemic of gun violence in the United States, Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders said at a Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing March 23.

Gun violence is a public health issue that requires a public health approach, she said.

Elders provided testimony in favor of the Gun Violence Protection Act, introduced in Congress March 1.

Known as Brady 2, the bill would provide an "approach giving law enforcement more tools to keep guns out of the hands of criminals," Sen. Howard Metzenbaum, D-Ohio, said. At the hearing, Metzenbaum said the nation is "afraid of its own freedom." As a co-sponsor of this bill, Metzenbaum said "the American people want us to do something about this terrible tragedy."

In order to stop gun violence, Americans need to look at who is able to get a gun, what kinds of guns are allowed and who becomes a dealer, said Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill.

However, Sen. Hank Brown, R-Colo., said laws should focus on people who are gun-abusing, not law-abiding. Americans who choose to legally carry firearms will be punished by the bill, Brown said.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, agreed, and said the bill "will divert funds away from the real problem -- fighting crime and disarming criminals."

In addition to testimony provided by Elders, the senators heard from at least eight witnesses, including Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund.

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-- By Ashley Householder

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