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Conservative leaders gather
for damage-control session

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Top leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention's conservative movement, including four former SBC presidents, held a private meeting in Atlanta April 21 apparently aimed at damage control.

Although few of the participants would talk about the meeting afterward, they were overheard discussing the SBC presidential candidacy of Jim Henry and turmoil at Southwestern Seminary -- two events some fear threaten to destabilize conservative control in the Southern Baptist Convention.

At least 15 leaders of the conservative movement were seen leaving the meeting at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel downtown, including former presidents Adrian Rogers of Memphis, Tenn., who presided at the six-hour meeting, Charles Stanley and Bailey Smith of Atlanta and Jerry Vines of Jacksonville, Fla.

Also at the meeting were Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler, credited with spearheading the movement that brought conservatives to power in 1979. Patterson now is president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C. Pressler is a retired judge in Houston.

Others included Dallas pastors O. S. Hawkins of First Baptist Church and Jack Graham of Prestonwood Baptist Church. Three Georgia pastors participated -- Ike Reighard of New Hope Baptist Church in the Atlanta suburb of Fayetteville, who is the current president of the SBC Pastors' Conference; James Merritt of First Baptist Church of Snellville, an officer of the SBC Executive Committee; and Richard Lee of Rehoboth Baptist Church in Atlanta, former Pastor's Conference president. Also participating was Ronnie Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church in Springdale, Ark., and an Executive Committee leader.

Reighard, who made arrangements for the meeting, said "a few more" attended, but he declined to name them.

Bailey Smith likewise declined to reveal details. "Indeed, there was a meeting, but we agreed not to talk about it," he said. Smith said it was the first meeting of the top leaders in "three or four years."

"We were talking about some of the issues that are out there," offered Reighard. Those issues included Henry's candidacy and fallout from the March 9 firing of Russell Dilday, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Reighard acknowledged. But "three or four other topics" also were discussed, he said.

Many Southern Baptists blame conservatives for the Southwestern firing, which culminated years of conflict between Dilday and the seminary's conservative trustees. Some observers predict a backlash against the SBC's conservative leaders, who are supporting Alabama pastor Fred Wolfe in the June presidential election. Jim Henry's late entry into the presidential contest is seen by some conservatives as a threat to the tightly held control they have enjoyed since 1979.

"There is some disappointment because Jim announced after Fred did," explained Smith, an Atlanta evangelist and SBC president in 1981-82.

The Southwestern firing, which unleashed a barrage of protest from the pews, poses a serious threat to the conservative movement, said Smith. "Anybody who is not (convinced of that) has got their head in the sand," he said.

Smith said sympathy for Dilday and Southwestern likely will translate into votes for Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla., host city to the June SBC meeting. But Smith added, "I don't think the presidential election will be decided by that."

Although Henry is himself a conservative who endorsed the "conservative resurgence" in 1990, he represents a growing sentiment among less strident conservatives that the movement's leaders have held the reins too tightly and at times operated too heavy-handedly.

Although SBC leaders don't doubt Henry's conservative credentials, some fear he will open the door too widely to moderate Baptists, who have been all but pushed out of convention life. "Among some there is the concern that he would appoint the wrong people," Smith said.

That's not a concern for Reighard, one of the young, rising leaders of the conservative movement. "Jim Henry is a conservative to the core," said Reighard, former president of Georgia Baptists. "I'm not concerned about his appointments. I don't think that's a big concern at all. There is a danger that somehow this would be perceived as some kind of rift that has developed among conservatives, or that the thing over Dilday precipitated his running."

Neither Reighard nor Smith would talk specifically about the discussions at the Atlanta meeting, which was an unusual mix of the movement's original leaders and their heirs apparent -- young, baby boomer pastors who represent the next generation of SBC conservatives.

Despite growing talk of a rift, the younger leaders wanted to make clear they are not in conflict with the former presidents, Reighard said. "What the younger guys have said is we are appreciative of our leaders in the past," he said.

"This was a chance for us to ask, 'Are we on the same page?'" he explained.

The attempt to close ranks has not produced consensus on the presidential election, however. Jack Graham, another of the young leaders who attended, has said he is willing to nominate Henry. That move has put him in conflict with some hard-line conservatives, and his friends say he is being pressured to back down.

Graham also issued a statement in March condemning the Dilday firing, which he said "only fuels the persuasion that fundamental-conservatives are

unloving and mean-spirited." He promised to gather conservatives in the next few months to draft "a fresh agenda for the future."

Graham's role was discussed during the Atlanta meeting, participants said. If an attempt was made to talk him out of nominating Henry, it apparently was not successful. Participants initially considered making an announcement saying, in effect, "May the best man win," but eventually decided not to issue any statement.

Graham could not be reached for comment.

The Atlanta meeting "certainly was not an attempt to organize a 'Stop Jim Henry' campaign," Reighard said.

However, the group did reach a consensus on the Southwestern situation, agreeing not to second-guess the trustees' firing of Dilday. "We still affirm the trustee process. ... That's what it distilled down to," Reighard said.

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National hunger convocation
canceled over poor response

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- What planners foresaw as a major denominational event -- a national convocation on hunger at Ridgecrest, N.C. -- has been canceled because of apparent lack of interest.

The conference, scheduled May 13-15, was to be sponsored jointly by the various Southern Baptist Convention entities which emphasize hunger relief. Planners hoped it would kick off a renewed denominational effort to highlight, coordinate and identify future strategies for hunger ministries.

Promotional materials predicted the convocation, which had been canceled once before, would lay to rest the "unfounded rumors" that "the new conservative leadership in the convention is not interested in the world's hungry."

After mailing more than 100,000 brochures promoting the convocation, the organizers received "less than a dozen" paid registrations, said Ben Mitchell, a staff member of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and ad hoc chairperson of the planning committee.

Mitchell, director of biomedical and life issues for the Nashville-based CLC, said he is "puzzled" by the poor response. "I'm hopeful this poor showing doesn't indicate a lack of interest in the hunger issue, but we've yet to clearly identify the reason for such a dismal response."

"We're all puzzled," added Louis Moore, the CLC's director of media and product development. Recent seminars sponsored by the SBC's official social-concerns agency "are drawing in the hundreds and are doing quite well, I feel."

Asked if the poor response might indicate that conservative Southern Baptists do care less about hunger than moderate Baptists, Moore responded that the meeting was not targeted to conservatives. "It was a consortium," he said. Brochures were mailed to most of the 90,000 subscribers of Light, the CLC magazine, covering every SBC church. Woman's Missionary Union, another sponsor, also mailed a large number. Other specialized smaller lists were also used, he said.

Nathan Porter, longtime hunger consultant for the Home Mission Board and that agency's representative on the ad hoc committee, blamed late publicity. Southern Baptists "simply did not learn about this convocation in time to attend."

"The lack of response to this conference in no way reflects the commitment or interest of the Southern Baptist people to the issue of hunger," he said.

Moore, however, said he believes the publicity was adequate.

The meeting, originally scheduled for 1993, was announced in May 1992 in a story in Baptist Press. Other stories followed, including one last year describing the decision to delay the meeting until 1994.

John Cheyne, who recently retired as the Foreign Mission Board's human-needs coordinator, blamed undercoverage by media and the Southern Baptist controversy for taking hunger out of the spotlight.

News media reports have focused on wars and political unrest abroad, while ignoring an assessment by the World Health Organization that drought in Ethiopia and eastern and southern Africa is worse now than in 1984-85, Cheyne said.

During those years, intense media attention to starvation in Africa resulted in record gifts to American relief agencies, including the SBC. The denomination's hunger gifts in 1985 reached \$11.8 million. In recent years, SBC hunger receipts have leveled off in the \$7.7 million range. In the four years prior to the 1984-85 increase, hunger gifts averaged \$5.5 million.

The SBC's track record on hunger giving is "as commendable as any denomination in the world," Cheyne said, but he added that he fears the convention's constituents are being distracted by denominational squabbling, such as the recent debacle surrounding the firing of Southwestern Seminary president Russell Dilday.

"I do think there's much more focus even within our constituency on the problems within the convention than there is on specific issues such as world hunger," Cheyne said.

Mitchell said despite continuing to support hunger ministries financially, Southern Baptists apparently did not see the need for a national conference at this time. "It may be time for us to rethink our strategy for motivating and supporting hunger ministry. If not through a national conference, somehow, some way we need to redouble our efforts, using some other strategy to intensify interest in this area."

Robert Parham, who formerly directed the CLC's hunger concerns and now is executive director of the Nashville-based Baptist Center for Ethics, a moderate alternative to the CLC, said hunger is a casualty in the change of leadership in the SBC..

Moderates "deeply distrust the leadership of the Christian Life Commission and decline participation in their programming," said Parham. Meanwhile, "fundamentalists have historically demonstrated little interest in hunger issues."

Those "twin forces," he said, forced the SBC agencies to "cancel a desperately needed conference on global hunger."

During the decade beginning with the mid-1970s, the hunger issue was a primary concern among moderate Southern Baptist churches, Parham said. He joined the CLC staff in 1985 with the singular responsibility of hunger concerns.

Fundamentalist churches, he said, "demonstrated little interest" in denominational programs on hunger and "fundamentalist leaders aggressively attacked those concerned about hunger issues."

"The end result of the Southern Baptist Convention takeover is that people will go hungry tonight," he said.

Moore said CLC-produced hunger materials continue to sell well. Once the best-selling CLC products, they have been overtaken recently by pro-life materials, but sales of hunger-related materials "certainly have not decreased," he said.

Moore said the CLC staff is "committed and believe we ought to address every issue that's assigned to us."

"We continue to emphasize hunger," he said, and the conference's cancellation "will not stop us from doing that."

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-- Louis Moore contributed to this article.

Trustee calls for prayer,
fasting for Southwestern

BATON ROUGE (ABP) -- After failing to force an emergency meeting of Southwestern Seminary trustees to make amends for firing president Russell Dilday, trustee Robert Anderson has called for a day of prayer for the seminary May 11.

"I want to sound the alarm to the fact that we need to get on our knees before God and hear from him on this matter," Anderson said in a news release April 26. "The action (of trustees) is impacting our entire convention, and if God doesn't step in the results could be devastating. The situation is not hopeless but is in desperate need of God."

The March 9 firing, the culmination of political tensions between Dilday and trustees, has sparked widespread criticism from faculty, students, alumni, donors and one accrediting agency. Some critics called for the trustees to reinstate Dilday.

Anderson said April 16 the required 20 trustees had agreed to reconvene, not to reinstate Dilday but to seek "reconciliation" by apologizing for misdeeds and re-establishing some relationship between the seminary and Dilday, perhaps making him chancellor.

Within hours of reaching agreement, however, two trustees withdrew their support for the special meeting.

Anderson urged all pastors and churches in the Southern Baptist Convention to pray and fast Wednesday, May 11, "for Southwestern Seminary and the issues surrounding the dismissal of Dr. Russell Dilday." He asked pastors to promote the observance during their Sunday worship services May 8.

"Pray that the chairman will call all the trustees immediately for the purpose of prayer that will bring about peace, harmony, goodwill and reconciliation," the news release said.

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, is one of six seminaries owned by the Southern Baptist Convention. The firing of Dilday, who was president since 1978, was blamed in part on his earlier criticism of the tactics used by SBC conservatives to gain control of the 15.4 million-member denomination and its agencies.

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-- By Greg Warner

Head of seminary search committee
undergoes heart-bypass operation

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Miles Seaborn, the Texas pastor who chairs

the committee seeking a new president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, underwent quadruple bypass surgery April 22.

Seaborn, 64, is "recovering fine, just as prescribed," said Ron Wicks, executive minister at Birchman Baptist Church in Fort Worth, where Seaborn is pastor. He said Seaborn is expected to leave the hospital either April 27 or 28 and fully recover in six to eight weeks.

The presidential search process is not expected to be affected by Seaborn's illness, said John Seelig, public relations consultant for the Fort Worth seminary. Search vice chairman Ollin Collins, pastor of Harvest Baptist Church in nearby Wautaga, will lead the process during Seaborn's absence, Seelig said.

The search committee elected Collins at its first meeting, April 14, Seelig said. He said the committee plans to meet again in early May to begin processing resumes from prospective candidates to succeed former president Russell Dilday, who was fired by trustees March 9. Seelig said the committee has received about 25 resumes.

Seaborn, pastor at Birchman for 26 years, has no history of heart problems, said Wicks. "Brother Miles has been one of the healthiest men you've ever been around," he said. "I'm sure he'll bounce right back from this."

He said Seaborn began experiencing chest pains on Sunday, April 17. He saw a doctor the following Tuesday, and took a CAT scan that was inconclusive. A heart catheterization on Thursday revealed arterial blockage requiring bypass surgery. Friday morning, surgeons removed veins from his right calf and upper chest to perform a quadruple bypass operation.

-- By Bob Allen

Baylor's Truett Seminary hires first two faculty

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- George W. Truett Theological Seminary, which will open this fall under the auspices of Baylor University, has hired its first two faculty members.

Abda Johnson Conyers III, a professor at Charleston Southern University, will teach theology. Ruth Ann Foster, a church education minister from San Antonio, Texas, will teach Christian Scriptures.

The pair join Truett Dean Robert Sloan and Associate Dean Brad Creed, who also will teach classes. Other faculty appointments are planned soon, Sloan said. The seminary is housed temporarily at First Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, near the Baylor campus.

Conyers, who was hired with the rank of professor, has taught religion at the Charleston, S.C., school, since 1987. He also is chairman of the religion and philosophy department. He previously taught at Central Missouri State University.

Conyers received a doctorate in 1979 from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and has authored five books and numerous articles. He has served as pastor of several Baptist churches.

Foster, hired as assistant professor, has been minister of education at Manor Baptist Church in San Antonio since 1991. She held adjunct teaching positions at Texas Christian University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, both in Fort Worth, Texas.

Foster holds master's and doctoral degrees from Southwestern.

Sloan said Conyers and Foster "fit perfectly with Truett's goal of

having a faculty committed to both teaching and academic excellence. These two individuals have extensive experience in ministry and are clearly committed to the Lordship of Jesus Christ."

Truett Seminary was founded in 1993 to provide alternative theological education primarily for Texas moderates should the conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention ever bring drastic changes to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which is located in Fort Worth. That threat proved imminent in March when Southwestern trustees fired the seminary's president, Russell Dilday, citing "gridlock" between Dilday and the conservative-dominated board of trustees.

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-- By Greg Warner

EEOC assessing reactions
to harassment guidelines

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Blitzed by criticism from religious groups, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is studying extensive public input before issuing final guidelines on religious and other forms of harassment in the workplace.

Last October the EEOC issued proposed guidelines for complying with the 1964 Civil Rights Act's ban against workplace discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

The guidelines say conduct is unlawful when it has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment; unreasonably interferes with work performance; or otherwise adversely affects an individual's employment opportunities.

Conduct is sufficiently severe and pervasive to be considered harassment when a reasonable person would find it intimidating, hostile or abusive.

While the time for public comment on the guidelines ended in November, an agency spokeswoman said EEOC still is hearing from the public and is reviewing comments, including those that arrived after the deadline.

Reaction from Baptist and other religious organizations has been split. Some, including Michael Whitehead, the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's general counsel, say the EEOC proposal could turn workplaces into "religion-free" zones. He wants religion omitted from the guidelines.

"We are deeply concerned that the guidelines would have a chilling effect on religious freedom and expression in the workplace," Whitehead earlier told Baptist Press. "If a person shares his faith with a co-worker on lunch break, the person and his employer might be charged with religious harassment."

Others, including Brent Walker, Baptist Joint Committee general counsel, say such fears are overblown and that EEOC need only modify the guidelines to ensure they are not applied in ways that restrict legitimate religious activities.

In an April 5 letter to the EEOC, Walker said removing religion from the guidelines "could send a wrong signal that EEOC is less concerned about religious harassment than it is harassment in other forms."

However, to hedge against the possibility that employers might apply the guidelines in ways that limit or "chill religious speech and practice," Walker urged the EEOC amend its proposals "to make absolutely clear that they are intended to protect, not denigrate, religion and expressly disavow any intent on the part of EEOC to create a 'religion free zone' in the workplace."

Walker suggested to EEOC that the guidelines list examples of conduct that, without aggravating circumstances, would not constitute harassment. Among the examples:

- Sharing one's religious affiliation or conviction or using religious language in casual conversation;
- Inviting a colleague to attend church or Bible study;
- Discussing religious topics informally or in the context of voluntarily attended Bible studies during free time; and
- Wearing or displaying religious objects.

Including these or similar examples, Walker said, would answer concerns that the guidelines will be used to inhibit religion while advancing the positive aspects that prevent religious harassment.

Representatives of a number of religious groups have communicated their concerns in recent meetings with EEOC attorneys. Walker said EEOC attorneys appeared receptive to the concerns raised at the meeting he attended, an assessment also reflected in a fact sheet issued by EEOC.

The EEOC fact sheet states that if clarifications are needed, they will be made before final guidelines are issued.

"Not all offensive conduct violates the law," the fact sheet states. "Harassing conduct rises to the level of unlawful discrimination only when a reasonable person would regard it as hostile or abusive."

EEOC contends that neither the law nor the proposed guidelines prevent a supervisor from telling subordinates he is Jewish, Muslim or Christian or bar workers from sharing their religious affiliation or from wearing religious objects.

"It is one thing to express one's own beliefs; another to disparage the religion or beliefs of others," the fact sheet states. "In a diverse workforce, this is a critical distinction and is the heart of non-discrimination law."

Religious workers stand to gain from the guidelines, Walker said.

"Ironically, the prohibition on religious harassment will protect, not prohibit, the things evangelicals care a lot about, like sharing their faith, Bible studies and other expressions of religion at work," he said.

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Court declines to review church property dispute

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Georgia pastor's claim that the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment prohibits civil courts from ruling in a church property dispute has no legal standing.

The U.S. Supreme Court declined to review a case pitting the pastor, Kenneth Crocker, against several members of Conyers Community Church, a non-profit corporation organized in 1976 and dissolved in 1990.

A sale of church property netted more than \$700,000. Members voted to give \$100,000 of the proceeds to Crocker as a retirement gift and to use the remainder to continue missionary and newsletter ministries. Some church

members, however, sued Crocker to ensure that the remaining funds were handled properly.

A jury trial awarded Crocker the parsonage and the \$100,000 retirement gift but returned the remaining funds to the plaintiffs.

In addition to the original suit, Crocker filed a counterclaim against one of the plaintiffs, who in a newspaper article likened him to convicted television preacher Jim Bakker. The trial court denied both Crocker's defamation suit and a request that the church pay his attorney fees.

With regard to the First Amendment question, the court stated, "It is obvious that not every civil court decision as to property claimed by a religious organization jeopardizes values protected by the First Amendment."

"Civil courts do not inhibit free exercise of religion merely by opening their doors to disputes involving church property," they added.

The case was settled by neutral principles of law, allowing the court to intervene without infringing upon any First Amendment values, they said..

The case is Conyers Community Church vs. Stevens.

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-- By Ashley Householder

Texas church well represented
behind Huntsville's prison bars

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- At least one Sunday afternoon each month, about 10 percent of North Creek Baptist Church, Centerville, Texas, can be found behind bars.

On the second Sunday of every month -- and on fifth Sundays -- volunteers from North Creek leave church after the morning worship service and make a 60-mile trip to lead chapel services for inmates at the Walls Unit, a state prison in Huntsville, Texas.

"We have 19 men on the list who go when they can, and we've had as many as 12 to 14 go at one time," said G. Wayne McNeill, pastor of North Creek Baptist Church.

"Without fail, we'll have six or seven (volunteers) who go every month. That's not easy when it comes to Mother's Day and some other special occasions, but our families are very understanding."

The church, which averages about 70 in attendance, became involved in prison ministry a few years ago when McNeill received a letter from a cousin who was serving time at the Walls Unit. He asked if McNeill might come preach at worship services in the Texas Department of Corrections facility.

Since then, men from the church have established strong bonds with several of the inmates, including three who have become watchcare members of North Creek.

The concern of the North Creek volunteers was seen clearly a few weeks ago when they -- along with a prison-ministry group from Ephesus Baptist Church in Marquez, Texas -- made a special trip to Huntsville to greet and pray with an inmate who was being released.

Tommy Rose served seven-and-a-half years for armed robbery before being released. Midway through his sentence -- about the time he met the men from North Creek -- he renewed the commitment to Jesus Christ that he

had made as a child at a Baptist church in east Dallas.

"The state had tried to rehabilitate me using behavior modification, punishment and everything else. But when I rededicated my life to Christ, he gave me the desire," Rose said. "He led me to try to improve my life in every area."

He completed two seminary extension courses offered through Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and he earned a bachelor's degree in sociology from Sam Houston State University.

"Tommy was one of our best, the pick of the litter," said Chaplain Carroll Pickett. "I've known Tommy for seven years and I've seen him change from what he was to what he is today, all because of the gospel of Jesus Christ and his desire to follow Jesus."

But even with an education and a solid biblical grounding, Rose recognized the temptations he would face when he re-entered the free world.

"When you walk out that front gate, there's everything waiting -- drugs, prostitutes, you name it. They're like vultures waiting out there," Rose said.

"When I walked out, it blessed my heart to see those men from North Creek and Ephesus waiting there to pray with me and encourage me."

The men walked across the street with Rose, joined hands and encircled him, and then prayed with him.

"We had a prayer meeting right in front of the prison administration building," McNeill said. "When we went back the next Sunday, the men inside had heard about it. They couldn't believe somebody would take the time to come pray with a released convict. Several of them asked, 'Would you do it for me?'"

North Creek's volunteers are willing, but they are the exception, according to Chaplain Pickett.

"They don't do it so they can tack it up on a bulletin board somewhere and say, 'Look at what we're doing in prison.' They do it because they care about these men even after they get out," he said.

Few ex-convicts have anyone to meet them when they are released, Pickett noted.

"What North Creek did is unique. It doesn't happen enough. It ought to happen a lot more," Pickett said.

"If we had more churches who were accepting of ex-convicts, we'd have a lot less recidivism."

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