
ASSOCIATED BAPTIST PRESS

Editor: Greg Warner

Phone: (904) 262-6626

Fax: (904) 262-7745

May 26, 1994

IN THIS ISSUE:

- * Motion to dismiss Southwestern officers to come before SBC, state exec says
- * Southwestern search won't yield early results, acting chairman says
- * Accrediting agencies start investigation of Southwestern
- * Sunday School Board eliminates church recreation department
- * 'Gay Day' is no Mickey Mouse matter for Arkansas association
- * Texas committee hears Chapman on proposed change in CP
- * SBC Executive Committee member concedes to court order to open books
- * Chaplain keeps faith with AIDS patients

NOTE: ABP will post two additional stories on the upcoming SBC presidential race and a wrapup of issues expected at the convention tomorrow morning.

Motion to dismiss Southwestern officers
to come before SBC, state exec says

By Bob Allen

PORTLAND, Ore. (ABP) -- A motion to request that three officers of Southwestern Seminary's board of trustees resign their positions will be made at this year's Southern Baptist Convention, a Baptist state convention executive has announced.

Cecil Sims, executive director of the Northwest Baptist Convention in Portland, Ore., wrote a letter May 25 to editors of Baptist state papers announcing his intent to ask the convention to request that the seminary board's chairman, vice chairman and secretary resign.

The officers, respectively, are Ralph Pulley, a Dallas attorney; Lee Weaver, a Fort Worth petroleum engineer; and T. Bob Davis, a dentist from Dallas. They have borne the brunt of criticism for the March 9 firing of Russell Dilday, the seminary's president, and operated as spokesmen for the board in a series of statements defending the controversial action.

In his letter, Sims acknowledged his motion "will not change any balance of power" but will afford "an appropriate forum for the voice of dissent" at the SBC, scheduled June 14-16 in Orlando, Fla. "I genuinely believe the decisions and judgments of these officers have not been in the best interest of the convention or seminary," Sims wrote.

Sims said he has researched the SBC's constitution and bylaws and believes the motion is in order and can be adopted by a simple majority. He said he has asked SBC President Ed Young of Houston and Executive Committee President Morris Chapman of Nashville, Tenn., for guidance about how to introduce the motion "with dignity and order."

Chapman was out of town and unavailable for comment May 26. Mark Coppenger, the Executive Committee's vice president for public relations, said it will be Young's prerogative to rule on whether the motion is in order. Those who would advise the president, including legal counsel

and parliamentarian, are in conversation, studying "everything from Robert's Rules of Order to Texas law," Coppenger said.

Young did not return a phone call before ABP's May 26 deadline.

SBC legal counsel Jamie Jordan said recent precedents are being considered. Two incidents, in 1989 and 1990, indicate the SBC has been reluctant to air grievances with individual trustees on the convention floor.

In 1989, a motion to remove Mississippi physician Curtis Caine from the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission over allegedly racist statements was ruled out of order. That convention did, however, adopt a motion by the Committee on Order of Business that an investigation, including the legal ramifications of the motion, be conducted and a recommendation be brought to the 1990 convention.

After study, the SBC Executive Committee declared the issue "moot" since Caine completed a first term on the CLC at the 1990 meeting. His renomination to the committee was a decision between the commissioner and the SBC's Committee on Nominations, they reported. Caine was included in a slate of nominees to leadership posts and elected by messengers to a second term, which expired in 1994.

In 1990 President Jerry Vines ruled out of order a motion calling for Colorado pastor Jerry Johnson's removal from the board of trustees at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for writing a widely circulated article alleging a "cover-up" of liberalism by the seminary's president, Roy Honeycutt.

At Honeycutt's suggestion, the convention voted to refer the matter to Southern Seminary's board of trustees. Johnson subsequently apologized to Honeycutt and the board and received a public exoneration by the trustees.

"Those are the only two precedents of which I'm aware," Jordan said. He said in his opinion how the motion is worded when brought to the floor will have a lot to do with if the motion is in order, but "it really wouldn't be appropriate for me to second guess the chair" about how Young ought to rule.

Chairman Pulley said he is surprised by the motion. He said he has known Sims since both were students at Baylor University more than 40 years ago but has not had contact with him "for some time."

Sims is "free to bring any kind of motion he wants to," Pulley said, but the officers "feel the convention will affirm the trustee process that's been in motion all these years."

Pulley said both the SBC constitution and the seminary's bylaws and charter make it clear that the trustees are charged with operation of the seminary on the convention's behalf and that the trustees "have acted in a decisive manner in the best interest of Southwestern Seminary."

Repeated attempts to reach Sims were unsuccessful.

-30-

Southwestern search won't yield
early results, acting chairman says

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Southwestern Seminary won't have a new president anytime soon, and the selection process may take as long as a year, according to the acting chairman of the trustee search committee.

Despite speculation Southwestern's trustees would move quickly to replace fired president Russell Dilday, Ollin Collins said there is "no way" a decision can be reached by the June meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. "It would have been marvelous to walk in there and say, 'This is the man,'" added Collins, pastor of Harvest Baptist Church in Watauga, Texas.

Dilday was fired March 9 by conservative trustees who said the 63-year-old president was

blocking conservative reforms at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the SBC's largest seminary, located in Fort Worth, Texas.

The search committee is considering eight presidential nominees and intends to interview four initially, Collins said. At this point it's a wide open field, he said.

"None of them has a head above the other ones," he said. And no one on the committee has expressed a strong inclination for any one candidate, Collins said.

Collins, acting chairman and a Southwestern graduate, said the search has not been slowed by the illness of committee chairman Miles Seaborn, who underwent successful heart-bypass surgery April 22. Seaborn, the 64-year-old pastor of Birchman Baptist Church in Fort Worth, attended the committee's last meeting, Collins said.

The committee has met three times and has adopted a presidential profile. Seaborn could not be reached for comment and the profile was not immediately available.

Collins said committee members have not restricted their search to Southwestern graduates or to candidates who hold earned doctorates. And, he added, "We are very open as to age."

"We have been very open to finding God's man," said Collins, who noted the committee has spent about an hour and a half in prayer at every meeting.

SBC Sunday School Board President Jimmy Draper, who earlier was considered by many to be the front-runner for the seminary post, has since declined to be considered, and Collins said the committee is not trying to change Draper's mind.

-30-

-- By Greg Warner

Accrediting agencies start
investigation of Southwestern

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Officials from two accrediting agencies visited Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary May 23-25 to determine what response they will make to the firing of seminary president Russell Dilday by trustees.

Many observers on the Fort Worth, Texas, campus expect the accrediting agencies to place Southwestern on probation, which would hinder the school's ability to attract students and financial support.

But Bill Tolar, acting seminary president, said he does not expect such harsh treatment from the two agencies -- the Association of Theological Schools and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

"I did not get the impression, personally, they were going to put us on probation," said Tolar, who met with committee members after they completed their three-day visit. "We may be in for a notation or two."

Tolar said the committee emphasized its findings are preliminary and any recommendations would have to be approved by their respective bodies. Committee members summarized their observations for Tolar but asked that seminary officials not reveal the committee's findings until its report is finalized in a few weeks. At that time, Tolar said, he will release as much of the report as possible. No timetable for action by the agencies has been announced.

During their visit to Fort Worth, the five-member committee -- three from ATS and two from SACS -- interviewed Tolar and other administrators, Dilday, current and former trustee officers, faculty from all three of the seminary's schools, and student leaders. "They were especially interested in talking to elected leaders of student organizations," Tolar said. The committee also attempted to contact alumni leaders by telephone.

This is the third time that actions by conservative Southern Baptist seminary trustees have

brought scrutiny from the accrediting agencies.

In 1987, conservative trustees of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina voted to hire only biblical inerrantists to the faculty. Then-president Randall Lolley and other administrators resigned in protest, prompting an investigation and probation from ATS and SACS. The probation was recently lifted.

In 1991 trustees at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kentucky tried to enforce the findings of the SBC Peace Committee on seminary faculty. The faculty objected. An ATS investigation followed. The trustees and faculty worked out a compromise, called a "Covenant of Renewal," which eased tensions.

-30-

-- By Greg Warner

Sunday School Board eliminates
church recreation department

By Lacy Thompson

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Continuing an effort to economize in non-revenue-producing areas of its work, the Baptist Sunday School Board has eliminated its church recreation program area in a reorganization move.

The Nashville, Tenn.,-based board will continue to offer church recreation resources on a more-limited scale, transferring those duties to two consultants who will operate within the board's church leadership department.

Ten of the board's 13 church recreation positions reportedly are being eliminated over the next five months. The cuts are a first step in a reorganization of the board's Church Leadership, Worship and Ministry Division.

None of the 10 positions on the chopping block is currently vacant. The affected employees -- eight professional and two support staff -- will receive career transition and outplacement assistance in addition to a severance package based on their years of service at the board.

Also, Church Recreation magazine will cease publication in January 1995. Another publication, Church Recreation Digest, will be evaluated in upcoming months.

The board had not released a press release on the moves by May 25. However, news of the action was addressed in the board's in-house publication, BSSB News.

An article announced that Tommy Yessick will move to the church leadership department and work as a church recreation consultant, as others do in the area of Christian education and youth ministry. A new position for a drama consultant will be added within the church leadership department as well.

Eventually, another church recreation staff member will be added to assist Yessick. Mike Miller, director of the Church Leadership, Worship and Ministry Division, said he expects the two staff members to "multiply themselves through networking with other recreators who will help conduct field service events."

Miller also said a different format for distributing program information will be implemented once Church Recreation magazine is deleted. "Only the magazine format is being replaced," he said. "The same resources and program helps will be provided in a newer format. ... The Church Recreation program will continue to offer materials and products to meet church needs."

Miller said the moves are being implemented as part of an overall board effort "to achieve greater economy while retaining the most effective field services and materials needed by churches."

The church recreation shakeup follows on the heels of other layoffs at the board. Earlier this month, it was announced that four National Student Ministry positions (three professional and one support staff) were being eliminated.

That news came in a press release announcing the naming of new National Student Ministry Director Bill Henry. Henry has served as associate director in the area and will succeed Charles Johnson, who is retiring July 1.

-30-

'Gay Day' is no Mickey Mouse
matter for Arkansas association

By Trennis Henderson

COVE, Ark. (ABP) -- First it was "NYPD Blue" and now it's "Gay Day." Visiting Disney may cause a world of concern in June for many Southern Baptist Convention messengers.

A spokeswoman for Disney World in Orlando, Fla., confirms the fourth annual "Gay and Lesbian Gathering" at the Magic Kingdom is set for June 4, 10 days before Southern Baptists are to open their annual convention in that city. But "Gay Day," as it is dubbed by some, "is not an official Walt Disney World event," the spokeswoman said.

"We are not sponsoring or promoting it," she explained. "This is a private group of individuals who have informed us of their plans to visit the Magic Kingdom park."

Emphasizing that "Walt Disney World is open to everyone," the spokeswoman added, "We do not discriminate on any basis."

Earlier SBC officials threatened to cancel plans to offer discount Disney tickets to convention-goers when it was learned that Touchstone Films, a subsidiary of Disney, was advertising during "NYPD Blue," a controversial TV show that drew Baptist criticism for depicting violence and sexual situations.

Although SBC officials backed down from that earlier threat, new trouble with Disney surfaced recently when Jim Oliver, pastor of First Baptist Church, Cove, Ark., heard on a Christian radio talk show about plans for "Gay Day." After calling Disney to confirm the report, Oliver wrote letters to Arkansas Baptist State Convention president Ronnie Rogers and executive director Don Moore, encouraging them to urge Southern Baptists to boycott Disney World.

Although Gay Day is not an official Disney event, Oliver voiced concern that Disney officials have not sought to stop it.

He introduced a motion to the Ouachita Baptist Association executive board May 23 which asked SBC president Ed Young to call for Baptists to boycott Disney World, Epcot Center and MGM Studios during the convention and afterward.

The motion, which passed with little discussion, was forwarded to Young for his consideration.

Emphasizing that "the pocketbook is all that some people understand," Oliver added, "I felt like we need to at least let our voice be heard."

Late last year, Young and SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman wrote to Disney officials about the corporation's sponsorship of the controversial "NYPD Blue" television program. The SBC leaders threatened at that time to "reconsider our immediate plans for promoting attendance at your Orlando venues."

A Disney official responded that while Touchstone Films did advertise a movie during "NYPD," Touchstone and Walt Disney World do not offer the same products. "Families and family values are our No. 1 priority," the spokesman said. "Disney World will not advertise on 'NYPD Blue.'"

Chapman reported later that convention officials had decided to work with Disney to

provide discount tickets for SBC participants. Despite concerns over the "NYPD" advertising, Chapman said many Southern Baptists would be going to Orlando for vacations and would want to visit the popular tourist attractions.

In addition to the motion opposing "Gay Day," Ouachita Association executive board members approved a second motion by Oliver concerning the 1994 Gay Games in New York City.

Oliver said the final day of the event is scheduled to take place in Yankee Stadium. The motion called on convention leaders to urge all Southern Baptists to permanently boycott New York City, New York state and all Yankee baseball games.

-30-

Texas committee hears Chapman
on proposed change in CP

DALLAS (ABP) -- The committee considering a dramatic change in the way Texas Baptists fund mission causes moved a step closer to a recommendation May 23, despite a warning from Morris Chapman, chief executive of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Under a proposal being studied by the Cooperative Missions Giving Study Committee, all missions contributions from a Texas Baptist church would stay in the state convention unless the church specifies otherwise. Currently the Baptist General Convention of Texas automatically sends about 37 percent of all undesignated receipts to the national coffers of the Southern Baptist Convention -- \$21 million in 1993 -- making Texas the largest supporter of Baptist missions worldwide.

The proposal, one of several under consideration, has drawn sharp criticism from critics who say it would undermine the Cooperative Program, the SBC's 69-year-old system of joint missions funding. Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, asked to address the panel's May 23 meeting to argue against the proposal.

The 22-member study committee met for six hours at the Baptist Building in Dallas reviewing recommendations from a writing team named by chairman Cecil Ray to bring together suggestions from the April meeting. The recommendations formulated by the writing team continued the general thrust from the April meeting, when three of the committee's four workgroups favored the controversial proposal.

During the May meeting, one committee member questioned whether the change was warranted since most Texas churches support the current practice by sending their money to the Cooperative Program. Committee members were told about 94 percent of Texas Baptist churches support the current budget. However, the state treasurer's office reported that, since the firing of the president of Southwestern Seminary in March, several hundred phone calls and letters have been received asking about different giving options.

Chapman cautioned against any move away from the partnership that exists between the SBC and state conventions and toward the "society approach" to missions and institutional support that prevailed before the Cooperative Program was adopted in 1925.

He quoted extensively from chairman Ray's 1985 book touting the Cooperative Program, "Cooperation: The Baptist Way to a Lost World," written by Ray and his daughter, Susan.

Chapman also gave a word of "caution and appeal," noting that though "100 to 150" Texas churches may want to give to Southern Baptist work outside SBC control, "there are still 5,300 to 5,350" (churches) asking no change.

"I would think long and hard before abandoning" the Cooperative Program system, he said, adding the CP is the "one thread that has kept us together" through controyersies.

He raised the question of what might happen if the day should come when state conventions and the SBC were making separate appeals to churches for funding. "I don't think any

of us knows how it would turn out," he said, "but it doesn't seem to be a reasonable and wise risk."

Whatever Texas does could be a "bellwether" for other state conventions, Chapman said. Should Texas adopt a departure from the CP, "it is my theory that it would begin a chain reaction that would totally change the nature of who we are as Southern Baptists."

Ray said the committee is considering no recommendations that would return the state convention to a form of societal support.

"Providing some freedom or perhaps breathing room within the Baptist family and within our Cooperative Program system is essential to our present, but it may also prove to be the very way for preserving cooperation in Baptist future mission endeavors," said Ray following the committee meeting.

Ray stressed again that any recommendation eventually coming out of the committee will be subjected first to an evaluation plan adopted at the first meeting: 1. Is it fair to all the churches? 2. Is it inclusive of all the churches? 3. Will it enable the churches to provide effective support to Baptists' missions and ministries? 4. Is it true to our Baptist polity? 5. Will it help each church and each member to fulfill the biblical mandate given by Christ in the Great Commission?

Ray emphasized that the committee probably will have no final recommendation until its last meeting July 29. The next meeting is scheduled June 8.

The committee was authorized in the annual meeting of the convention in Dallas last fall to study ways to enhance cooperative missions giving in Texas and report its findings and recommendations to the state convention in Amarillo, Oct. 31-Nov. 1.

-30-

-- By Toby Druin

SBC Executive Committee member
concedes to court order to open books

By Bob Allen

SANFORD, Fla. (ABP) -- After exhausting all appeals, a Florida pastor and prominent leader in Southern Baptist Convention will obey a court order to open church records to a disgruntled member who alleges he misused his church's tax-exempt status for personal gain.

An attorney for Pastor Bob Parker and his church, First Baptist Church of Markham Woods in Lake Mary, Fla., said May 25 his clients will drop their challenge to a court ruling demanding they allow longtime member Ann Haynes and her agents to view church records. "I believe that what's going to happen is Mrs. Haynes is going to be allowed access to look at the records she is seeking to look at," said John Campbell, an Orlando attorney representing both Parker and the church.

Parker, pastor of the church since 1983, is one of four Floridians on the powerful SBC Executive Committee, which conducts work for the 15.4-million-member convention between annual sessions.

The Jan. 18 order by Seminole County Circuit Judge Newman Brock also levied court costs exceeding \$13,000 against Parker and the church to cover Haynes' attorney fees during the nine-month legal battle she initiated when denied access to church records last August.

Haynes, 73, says she believes the records hold answers to her suspicions that Parker wrongfully used the church's tax-exempt status to avoid real-estate taxes on his personal property, altered corporate documents, received interest-free loans to build a house and misused his position with First Baptist Church for personal gain.

She also requests proof that a \$416,000 estate left to the church by a former member was used properly. She alleged in court that no accounting of the Sarah Tatum estate has ever been

made.

The county sheriff will sell some of the church's property June 20 if the court costs remain unpaid, said Haynes' attorney, Tim Askew of Sanford. However, he said he was told by Parker's lawyer the legal fees will be paid and an appeal of Brock's ruling dropped.

Campbell said those decisions are not "finalized," but that is "a likely outcome" to the dispute.

Parker and church leaders chose to drop their challenge to the ruling rather than face a May 25 contempt of court hearing that would "in effect put the preacher in jail if he didn't comply," said Askew.

Parker and the church had been resisting the circuit court's order. Initially they asked Brock to grant a stay, which would have postponed the ruling's effect until they could pursue an appeal. Brock denied the request and they asked the same thing of the 5th District Court of Appeals, which granted a temporary stay April 13. After reviewing arguments, however, the appellate court dissolved the stay May 3. Finally, Parker turned to the state Supreme Court, which informed attorneys May 25 they would not exercise jurisdiction in the case.

Askew said the church has agreed to produce the records within the next two weeks.

Campbell said his clients still believe they were within their rights to refuse Haynes' request to examine church records last Aug. 17 because the deacons had voted to exclude her from membership at a meeting Aug. 4, citing a church document giving them authority to determine membership status in some cases. The congregation endorsed that decision Aug. 18, agreeing not to extend fellowship to three charter members: Haynes; her husband, M.T., a deacon; and Frances Wilson.

Brock, however, ruled that the church's articles of incorporation require membership to be determined by vote of the congregation during "any regular church meeting," further defined in the document as a quarterly business meeting. He ordered that Haynes be reinstated and given access to the documents.

"We feel that was an erroneous ruling," said Campbell, who claimed Haynes' membership was an ecclesiastical concern in which, under the First Amendment, the court had no proper jurisdiction.

He also alleged Haynes sought access to the books for an improper purpose. "She was clerk of the church over 10 years," he said, and had unlimited access to records. Now, he said, "she was doing this just for the purpose of harassing the church."

Campbell said Haynes is among "a few -- four or five -- former members who have taken a dislike" to Parker and turned to litigation only after failing to get him fired. The decision to exclude her, for gossip and non-attendance, came only after her husband rebuffed attempts at reconciliation, Campbell said.

"It's sad," said Campbell. "It sends a bad message to the world and it definitely violates First Corinthians 6 which says we're not supposed to air our troubles in the courts. Personally, I feel for Mrs. Haynes and I pray for her."

Campbell acknowledged that Parker's stubborn defense of his refusal to open the books "may create the impression" he has something to hide, but a committee overseeing the church's financial affairs shares the opinion that everything is in order and Parker has done nothing improper.

Under mounting pressure, Parker told church members at a Sunday night service on Jan. 10, 1993, that about three years earlier, with an attorney's advice, he transferred ownership of his personal residence to the church, believing it to be proper because he used the home for church business. His study was there, he said, and often used the home to entertain church members.

Later, he decided to sell the house and purchase property near the church to build a new home. The church approved the sale and purchased the new lot for \$20,000 with the understanding that it would be reimbursed by proceeds from the sale of the old home, he said.

Proceeds from the sale went into an account in the church's name, Parker said. After

\$20,000 was deducted to retire the debt on purchase of the lot, the remaining \$42,000 in equity was transferred into a separate account, also in the church's name, for construction of Parker's new home. Later, the house was transferred to Parker's name and the account closed, he said.

While he believed the transaction was legal, he said, in hindsight he would have handled it differently to avoid any appearance of impropriety.

Parker has since transferred ownership of the home to his name and paid 1993 real estate taxes. The assessor, however, is seeking to collect a combined \$2,116 in taxes for 1991 and 1992. A legal advertisement ran recently in the local newspaper announcing them as outstanding taxes in a tax certificate sale scheduled May 31.

Last December several church members tried to fire Parker. They asked Parker to declare the church in business session for the purpose of considering his termination. He refused, saying the church's constitution requires called business meetings to be announced in advance.

Several families, including four of the seven deacons, left the church after that meeting, said John King, one of the former members.

Trouble began for Parker when King, then the pastor's strong supporter, joined the congregation's finance committee. King, a certified public accountant, said he intended to offer his expertise to improve the church's budgeting process.

As King reviewed records, he said in a letter to Parker last December, he became concerned about certain practices, such as the church handling the title of Parker's house, and became convinced the pastor was overpaid. As he pressed those questions, King said eventually Parker accused him of performing an unauthorized audit and King and other members concerned about unanswered questions were "shunned" by the congregation.

King plans to act as Haynes' agent when the books are opened, a relationship he has offered her free of charge.

Haynes is "very happy at the outcome she has fought so long and hard to obtain," Askew said. He declined to comment on what Haynes plans to do with the information in the church records. "Until we see what the records contain, there's no way of telling what might be done," he said.

Parker did not return a phone call by Associated Baptist Press.

Campbell said the public battle between factions has damaged the church. "They lost a little bit of attendance when this was going on and they've not regained it," he said. "In the community it is known legal action is pending, " but the people who remain in the church "are glad these disgruntled people are gone. There's a sweet spirit and a lot of love among the members that are in the church."

-30-

Chaplain keeps faith
with AIDS patients

By Alan Patureau

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- He used to long to go to India and work with Mother Teresa. "Suddenly it clicked with me that I could reach out to the dying in my own back yard, that AIDS patients are the lepers of today and need my help."

So in March Malcolm Marler, 38, a one-time star cornerback at Clemson University, became the first full-time AIDS chaplain at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

A Southern Baptist, Marler now applies his compassion to counseling the 1,000 AIDS outpatients of the UAB School of Medicine's 1917 clinic, and to teaching Alabama churches not to shun victims of the disease.

"I get more silence than criticism from my hard-shell colleagues, but I hope to sway them

to my way of thinking," says Marler, who is the antithesis of a hellfire-and-damn-AIDS preacher.

He sees a clear parallel in the Bible. "Jesus comforted and healed the lepers while society rejected them. He's my model."

Unfortunately, he adds, "In one disease you've got all the issues the church recoils from -- sex, infidelity, homosexuality, promiscuity, drug addiction. The basic question is, who should God's love be available to? The answer is everybody."

As far as he knows, there are no UAB students among the scores of patients he counsels weekly. But they come from all walks of life -- from "Buzzy," a 29-year-old heterosexual basketball player, to a gay accountant in his 50s. Clinic patients are 52 percent white, 47 percent black. Fifty-seven percent acquired AIDS through homosexual contact and 20 percent through heterosexual contact, while others contracted the disease through drug use or blood transfusions.

After two months at UAB, Marler says he's amazed at the isolation many AIDS patients feel. "They come to me because they're afraid to tell their own pastors they're HIV-positive," he said. One minister, believing he was acting in his congregation's best interests, advised a member not to come back to church.

Last week Marler helped one patient die peacefully at home. Then he presided at his funeral at a Birmingham cemetery while AIDS activist Harry Wingman sang and played his guitar.

Wingman, 39, a former UAB drama department professor, said, "It means a lot to have someone like Malcolm helping us. The amount of time I have left is limited. I often run a temperature of 101, and my T-cell count is down to 10."

Among the functions of T-cells is controlling the production of antibodies in the presence of an antigen. An IV unit drips antibiotics into Wingman's left arm while he rests in his living room.

A Catholic, Wingman helped launch Birmingham's Interfaith AIDS Committee in 1992. Now he's gradually relinquishing his AIDS projects to Marler.

"We lose two or three patients every week, creating tremendous stress among the families and our clinic staff," Marler said. To avoid burnout, he's cut back to nine-hour days and acquired a new hobby, growing miniature roses at his home. That contrasts nicely with his other passion, whitewater rafting.

Three influences have shaped Marler's outlook:

-- His mother died when he was 10, leaving a painful gap filled by friends in his hometown of Montgomery, Ala. "I had a dozen mothers step forward," he said.

-- His father, Lewis Marler, is a well-known Baptist minister who set a good example. "I didn't love to preach like Dad does, but I had great enthusiasm for pastoral care and counseling."

-- The minister of music at his Hartford, Conn., church for four years was gay. "He ... allowed me, a typical Southern homophobe, to ask all the dumb questions about gays and AIDS. I learned we had far more in common than differences."

Last fall, when his wife, Penny, accepted a professorship of religion at Samford University in Birmingham, the timing was perfect. Michael Saag, a doctor who founded the UAB AIDS clinic in 1988, decided to seek a full-time chaplain to counsel patients. Marler was hired in January and went to work in March.

His challenge is to persuade churches and synagogues to be havens of compassion for AIDS sufferers. "I believe in a God of love, not a God who would send disease and tragedy," he said. "My God walks with people through tragedy."