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Texas Baptist board ponders
alternative theological training

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptists' executive board denounced the firing of Russell Dilday as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and voted to consider starting an alternative for training ministers.

Although Southwestern and other Texas schools offer theological training, the board said June 7, a study is warranted to see if "additional opportunities for theological education in Texas" are needed.

Dilday's March 9 firing has become a flash point for many Texas Baptists unwilling to stand idle while fundamental-conservative trustees correct what they perceive as a liberal drift in the Southern Baptist Convention institutions, including Southwestern, they now control.

The firing has prompted an angry response among Texas Baptists, many who feel a strong sense of ownership for Southwestern. There has been talk among state leaders of a theological education consortium as an alternative to Southwestern. The consortium would involve various Texas Baptist colleges in ministerial training, with the Baptist General Convention of Texas in a coordinating role and with Dilday perhaps serving as administrator.

"There is a need for coordination of the best use of energy and financial resources," the executive board said in a motion that created a 15-member study committee. The motion was offered by state convention president Jerold McBride of San Angelo.

The committee was asked to bring its recommendations back to the board Sept. 13 and, if approved, to the Baptist General Convention of Texas meeting in Amarillo Oct. 31 - Nov. 1.

Already Baylor University, a Baptist school in Waco, has started its own seminary, which was in the works when Dilday was fired. Baylor recently announced it will consider satellite campuses around the state -- including Dallas and Fort Worth -- which would position the school to take advantage of fallout from the Dilday firing.

But other Baptist colleges in the state would also be included in a BGCT-backed plan. Several faculty members at Southwestern say more than enough professors are willing to leave Southwestern to staff such an effort if necessary.

Dilday told Associated Baptist Press June 7 he has had informal discussions with Texas leaders about a consortium. "There's a lot of discussion about alternatives," he said. "It's more than talk. It's very serious discussion."

In a separate resolution approved June 7, the BGCT executive board said Southwestern trustees "acted irresponsibly and unconscionably in the manner in which they removed Russell Dilday from the presidency of the seminary."

A clear majority of the 213-member board approved the resolution, presented by Houston pastor Bruce Prescott, which praised Dilday as "a man of uncompromising integrity, unrepachable theology and unassailable administrative abilities."

The resolution noted that members of the BGCT board wished "to formally record our disapproval of the dismissal of Dr. Dilday, to remind Southwestern's trustees of their moral obligation to provide an equitable and generous severance package for the Dilday family, and to insist that the terms of the severance package neither infringe on Dr. Dilday's freedom to speak under the guidance of the Holy Spirit nor restrict his right to serve Christ according to the dictates of his own conscience."

Among those who objected to the language of Prescott's resolution was Austin pastor Ed Wright, who said the language of the resolution sounded "inflammatory." "It makes Dr. Dilday sound infallible," he added.

Another board member asked that the BGCT board "not try to interfere with business" of another board but to "let the process work."

By a 2-1 margin, the board voted down an amendment to strike the part of the resolution that trustees "acted irresponsibly and unconscionably in the manner in which they removed Russell Dilday"

Katy pastor Charles Wisdom asked for the privilege of abstention, and 12 other board members followed suit.

The board also approved, with only two opposing votes praising Dilday for his contributions to Baptist life.

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-- By Greg Warner and Ken Camp

Dildays move out
of seminary house

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Russell Dilday, fired president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, moved out of his seminary-owned house June 7 -- the deadline set by trustees -- after resolving a last-minute dispute with trustees over money set aside for his new residence.

Trustees who fired Dilday March 9 gave him until June 7 to move out of the two-story home on the Fort Worth, Texas, campus where he and his wife, Betty, have lived for 16 years. The Dildays purchased a house on the city's southwest side using a \$150,000 housing fund approved by trustees years ago for that purpose.

But closing on the new house was delayed twice, Dilday said, because the trustee officers wanted to put a first lien on the property, which caused the mortgage company to balk. "We would have been out three weeks ago if all had gone according to plan," Dilday said by telephone from the seminary house June 7 as he and family members were removing belongings.

The impasse was resolved, Dilday said, by separating the housing fund from Dilday's severance package, which is still in dispute with trustees. No lien has been placed on the property, he said.

Trustee chairman Ralph Pulley and seminary spokesman John Seelig were both unavailable for comment

June 7.

The Dildays signed the papers for the new house June 6, the same day friends and supporters held a banquet in his honor in Dallas. The \$25-a-plate dinner at the Loews Anatole hotel was attended by 1,100 people, Dilday said.

"It was incredible," he said. "Very affirming testimonies. Betty and I were completely overwhelmed."

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-- By Greg Warner

Coppenger says media
didn't tell all on Dilday firing

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A publication touted to promote what's right with the Southern Baptist Convention devotes two pages of its June issue to reporting what's wrong with Baptist media coverage of Russell Dilday's firing.

The two-page article in SBC Life was written by Mark Coppenger, SBC Executive Committee vice president for public relations and a candidate to replace Dilday, who was fired March 9 as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary by the school's conservative trustees.

Coppenger is editor of SBC Life, which is published by the Executive Committee and mailed to about 70,000 church and denominational leaders every month. His article also takes to task Associated Baptist Press, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Baptist Press, Religious News Service, Christianity Today, Southwestern Seminary's faculty and the secular press.

Coppenger reserves his praise for two publications -- the Indiana Baptist, published by the state convention which he previously served as executive director and whose editor he hired, and World, an independent evangelical journal based in Asheville, N.C.

All other publications, Coppenger implies, could not be trusted to tell Baptists the true story about Southwestern. That's why he decided to use SBC Life to tell "the rest of the story," he wrote.

"I know this sort of talk is distressing to some readers. Couldn't we just be nice and positive? Well, folks, it is nice and positive to stand up for conscientious trustees who are being dog-piled by the press. And I can't see where it would be particularly nice to remain silent."

When Coppenger launched SBC Life last summer, he billed it as a "good news" publication to tell all the positive things about the SBC that don't get reported elsewhere.

But Jim Watters, president of the state Baptist papers' professional group, the Southern Baptist Press Association, reacted to Coppenger's departure from this format.

"His long and quarrelsome opinion piece about the Southwestern Seminary fiasco ... comes across as the work of a partisan spin doctor, rather than the effort of a journalist committed to presenting the news about the Good News," said Watters, editor of the Northwest Baptist Witness.

"It is paradoxical that Coppenger, the advocate of good-news journalism, would allow himself to publish such rancor about fellow Southern Baptist editors and their publications."

The June issue's article about Southwestern "was a clearly different approach," Coppenger admitted in a telephone interview, "but I felt that the overwhelming treatment of the Southwestern trustees merited a different approach. It seemed to be just wretched excess that demanded an answer."

And on another level, the SBC Life column is good news, he said. "The article says to Southern Baptists, 'Good news, your trustees are not as bad as some people are saying.'"

Coppenger's main point in the article is that Southwestern's trustees had good reason to fire Dilday but the press has neglected to report on those good reasons.

Most press accounts have focused on trustee actions such as locking Dilday out of his office and denying a plan to fire him even though trustee leaders had been soliciting votes for several weeks.

"Most (state paper) editors are ready to hammer conservatives but infinitely oblivious to or tolerant of moderate missteps," Coppenger wrote. "At least 19 chose to editorialize against the trustees."

If the papers truly were interested in investigative reporting, they would have written about the content of Dilday's 1982 book, "The Doctrine of Biblical Authority," Coppenger explained.

Dilday's writings in that book were cited by trustee leaders as a reason for the firing, but only after two weeks of virtual silence on why Dilday had been fired.

For his criticism, Coppenger cites Dilday's 23 references to a 1979 book by Jack Rogers and Don McKim, "The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible." While other evangelical scholars rebuked Rogers and McKim, Dilday did not, Coppenger wrote.

"Rogers/McKim claimed to demonstrate that biblical inerrancy was not the historic position of the church, and that the concept was bogus," Coppenger said. Dilday "commended Rogers/McKim to Southern Baptists, warmly citing it 23 times in his second and third chapters" of his book, Coppenger wrote.

Coppenger acknowledged he is a candidate for the Southwestern presidency, but he said that did not factor into his decision to write the SBC Life article. "People can speculate about motives all they want, but I wrote the article out of a sense of indignation," he said. "... Sometimes you do what you have to do and let the chips fall where they may."

Coppenger said he received a phone call from "an angry pastor" who accused him of using the article to ingratiate himself to Southwestern's trustees. But such an objective could backfire, Coppenger noted, because "then you become more controversial."

Asked if he is being interviewed by the search committee, Coppenger said he would "leave it to the committee" to discuss those matters.

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American Baptist seminary
opens arms to Fellowship

By Bob Allen

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (ABP) -- Thirty-six years after the Southern Baptist Convention pulled out of a longtime partnership with northern Baptists to jointly sponsor theological education in the Midwest, an American Baptist school in Kansas City is ready to open its doors to Southern Baptists who are losing confidence in their own seminaries.

The board of directors for Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kan., voted in May to expand its historic covenant with the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., by expressing "full support" to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, encouraging the Fellowship to recognize Central as an option to conservative-dominated SBC schools, including Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in nearby Kansas City, Mo.

The 1958 opening of Midwestern, a unilateral move by the SBC, ended 57 years of joint sponsorship of Central Seminary by the Northern Baptist Convention (forerunner to the ABC) and the SBC.

Today, many progressive Southern Baptists -- historically the strongest supporters of theological education in the SBC -- find themselves at odds with the denomination's six seminaries now dominated by the convention's conservative wing. Through the Fellowship, they are able to maintain a tangential relationship to the SBC while exploring alternative methods of education and missions ventures.

The seven main seminaries affiliated with American Baptists, meanwhile, are in a process of seeking a more diverse constituency beyond the confines of the 1.5 million-member ABC, said Russ Jones, academic dean and evangelism professor at Central.

Central Seminary, for example, has traditionally operated in a "covenant" relationship exclusively with the ABC. "We have discovered that is kind of a narrow way of looking at theological education," Jones said.

"We feel it's time to expand our covenant relationships and become more of what you might call an open seminary to various denominations," he said.

The Fellowship's response to Central Seminary's overture is pending, said Cecil Sherman, Fellowship coordinator. The possibility of establishing a formal covenant relationship with the school has been discussed and is being studied by the Fellowship's theological education ministry group, he said.

Approaching the Fellowship "just seems to be natural thing" for Central Seminary, Jones said. "This group seemed to be closest to where we are theologically and they are in need of theological institutions right now since they are moving away from the Southern Baptist denomination."

Central Seminary represents "a moderate evangelical theological perspective" that is ecumenical ... in spirit," Jones said.

"What we have tried to do is be a seminary for all free Baptists," he said.

The action has "nothing to do at all" with the impending retirement of Midwestern President Milton Ferguson and the expectation his successor will lead the school to embrace a more overtly fundamentalist posture, Jones said. Ferguson, 66, announced in April he will retire in July 1996 after completing 23 years in the post.

Instead, the impetus "has to do with the growing movement of the Cooperative Baptists and their need for theological education. We just wanted to say, 'Here we are,' " Jones said.

In addition to the May 20 resolution endorsing the Fellowship, Central's board of directors adopted a new policy offering discounted tuition rates to students from Fellowship churches, before now available only to American Baptist students. "As we branch out into this broader covenant, we wanted to treat other branches of the Baptist family the same as our own students," Jones said.

The school also recently added two staff members from Southern Baptist backgrounds. The board of directors elected David May, currently a member of the Midwestern Seminary faculty, as visiting professor of New Testament. Also, Central Seminary President Thomas Clifton recently announced the appointment of Gayla Sherman as vice president for development and public relations. Sherman is former director of annual giving at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

The hirings reflect the seminary's desire to recruit students and financial support among Fellowship churches, Jones said. Sherman's moderate Southern Baptist background "was a serendipity type thing," he said. While her qualifications were first priority, the fact she happened to be a Fellowship supporter "was a plus too," he said.

In addition, directors elected Gregory Hunt, pastor of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo., and past moderator of the Missouri Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, to the board.

The move is in a sense a return to the 93-year-old seminary's roots. "It seems like coming home," Jones said. Founded in 1901 as Kansas City Seminary, Central was the first Baptist seminary established west of the Mississippi River. For its first 50 years, it served both southern and northern Baptists. In the 1950s, however, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a policy of not supporting any school for which it did not elect the board of trustees. The SBC decided unilaterally to open Midwestern Seminary in 1958, despite an appeal by Central officials to compromise.

Despite that rocky start, the two schools have shared a good relationship. "We've done many things cooperating back and forth down through the years," Jones said.

Though both schools are small -- Central enrolls about 100 students and Midwestern about 600 -- neither blames competition from the other.

"The competition was not really anything either of us saw as a problem because we were pretty well divided along denominational lines," Jones said. "Pretty much the Southern Baptists went to Midwestern. The American Baptists came here." Both schools are active in a consortium of the four theological schools in the Kansas City area.

Central is not the only institution competing for students and/or support from the Fellowship. Two new seminaries -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (Va.) and Baylor University's George W. Truett

Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas -- have emerged from the void in moderate theological education for Southern Baptists.

Houses of Baptist studies have formed at Duke and Emory universities. Other Baptist colleges have started or are planning divinity schools, and discussions are underway about possible new seminary alternatives in Georgia and Texas.

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Memphis church leaves SBC
over rightward swing

By David Waters

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- Members of Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., voted Sunday, June 5, to sever the 78-year-old church's lifelong ties to the Southern Baptist Convention.

"The present direction of the SBC is in direct opposition to our own understanding of our mission and vision as a Baptist church," Nancy Hastings Sehested, the church's pastor, said after the vote that followed morning worship.

The 62-1 vote ends a stormy relationship between church and denomination that began in 1968 when Prescott became the first racially inclusive SBC congregation in the Memphis area.

Conflicts continued over the years as Prescott displayed its Baptist independence by voting to ordain women as deacons, recognize Christian baptisms other than Baptist, allow non-Baptist Christians to share in communion and hire a female pastor.

Sunday's vote more or less formalized the church's and the denomination's gradual disassociation from each other.

Prescott was kicked out of the Shelby Baptist Association in 1987 after becoming the first SBC church in Tennessee to hire a female pastor. The church held on to its membership in the state and national conventions.

The 300-member church contributed to Southern Baptist programs for decades, but for the past five years those funds have been held in escrow due to the church's distress about the denomination's direction.

The church hasn't sent delegates to state or national conventions for several years.

Still, a final break was difficult, said Sehested, daughter of a Southern Baptist pastor.

"This is not a hallelujah time. This is a very painful decision for those of us who have been Southern Baptists all of our days."

Ray Newcomb, president of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, said Sunday he didn't know about Prescott's vote and would withhold comments until he learned more about it. John McBride, executive director of the Shelby Baptist Association, could not be reached.

Prescott will retain its 10-year affiliation with a smaller but older Baptist denomination, the American Baptist Churches USA, headquartered in Valley Forge, Penn.

"We will stay Baptist," Sehested said.

The church also will continue its relationship with the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The CBF is a growing moderate branch of the SBC.

The church has been assessing SBC ties since conservative elements took control of the denomination in 1979. In 1989, a survey of Prescott's members found most favoring withdrawal from the SBC.

Discussions continued on and off for years but became more intense in the past few weeks. Members were particularly upset over the March 9 firing of Russell Dilday as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Conservative trustees claimed Dilday was blocking conservative reforms.

Church leaders alluded to Dilday's firing and other controversial actions in a statement issued after Sunday's vote. "We have watched as credalism has replaced faithfulness as a mark of authentic Christian witness

... ."
Sehested said members believe the denomination has abandoned them as well as such basic Baptist tenets as the priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of the local church.

"Precisely because we are Baptist we are taking this action."

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First charges filed
under new abortion law

MILWAUKEE (ABP) -- Defying a new federal law against blocking access to women seeking abortions, pro-life demonstrators chained themselves to cars and a concrete-filled drum in front of an abortion clinic in Milwaukee June 4.

Five protesters were charged in the first application of the law signed May 26 by President Clinton. The law provides stiff penalties for blocking access to abortion clinics, damaging property or physically intimidating patients or clinic workers. First-offense violations carry a six-month jail term and a \$10,000 fine. Repeated or aggravated violations can bring life sentences and fines up to \$250,000.

Charged were Dale Robin Pultz, 32, James Daniel Soderna, 31, and Colin Lester Hudson, 55, all of Milwaukee, Michael Charles Suhy, 20, of Canton, Mich., and Marilyn Ruth Hatch, 43, of Seattle. A juvenile also was arrested, but won't be charged, according to Associated Press.

The six protestors succeeded in closing the clinic for 90 minutes while police and firefighters pried open chains and handcuffs linking them to two cars and a 55-gallon drum filled with concrete outside the Affiliated Medical Services clinic.

Supporters of the new law say it is necessary to curb violent protest of abortion. Its detractors contend that local laws already prohibit violence and that the law violates free speech and the ability to protest peacefully.

The law is being challenged in court by anti-abortion groups including the American Life League in Stafford, Va., and the American Center for Law and Justice in Virginia Beach, Va.

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-- By Bob Allen

Virginia school district loses bid
to charge churches higher rent

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court refused June 6 to save a Virginia school district's policy designed to discourage churches from long-term or permanent rental of school facilities.

Without comment, the high court let stand a federal appeals court's ruling that school districts may not single out churches for higher rental rates than those charged other non-profit groups for off-hours use of facilities.

Concerned that long-term use of school facilities by churches might be seen as subsidizing religion, the Fairfax County School Board adopted a policy in 1982 designed to discourage churches from renting its facilities longer than five years.

The policy provides free use for groups such as Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts and parent-teacher associations. Cultural, community and civic organizations are charged a non-commercial rate that reimburses the district its actual costs, while private organizations and business are charged a commercial rate designed to approximate market rental costs. That rate is five times the non-commercial rate.

Under the policy, churches are charged the non-commercial rate for five years, but their rent climbs over the next four years to the commercial rate. The escalating rates do not apply to other non-profit groups.

The policy was challenged by Fairfax Covenant Church, a 1,000-member evangelical Christian congregation that has been renting school facilities, except for two years, since 1980.

Lower courts sided with the congregation. The 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals cited the Supreme Court's 1981 ruling that a state university cannot deny religious groups access to a public forum on campus.

The court said the school board had opened its facilities to a wide array of non-profit and commercial organizations and that the escalating rates for churches discriminate against religious speech and practice protected by the First Amendment.

The district court must now assess what reimbursement is due the church, which is seeking \$280,000 plus interest.

The federal appeals court "correctly held that the state cannot discriminate against religious speech when it opens the doors after hours for general community use," said Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty watchdog group.

"At some point," Walker said, "the Supreme Court will have to address the issue of temporary versus permanent use. In the meantime, school officials will continue to operate with some uncertainty about where to draw the line between properly accommodating religion and improperly advancing religion."

In other action June 6, the Supreme Court declined to intervene in a Massachusetts church property dispute.

The dispute arose after the Roman Catholic bishop of Worcester merged St. Joseph's parish with Notre Dame parish. Two St. Joseph's parishioners filed suit claiming "equitable ownership" of the property and that the bishop had violated an oral promise not to close the parish if parishioners raised sufficient funds to repair the church.

A trial court said it had jurisdiction to hear the case but granted a summary judgment in favor of the bishop.

The Massachusetts Supreme Court, however, said the First Amendment bars civil courts "from intervening in disputes concerning religious doctrine, discipline, faith or internal organization."

For the court to "inquire into an alleged promise by the bishop to keep a parish open or refrain from merging it with another parish was an impermissible intrusion into the bishop's ecclesiastical authority."

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-- By Larry Chesser

President Clinton seeks
common ground with pope

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton sought June 2 to find common ground with Pope John Paul II, even though neither man budged on the issues that separate them the most.

Clinton met with the pope at the Vatican in Rome during his European tour that culminated in the commemoration of the D-Day invasion of Normandy. While the two hold differing views on abortion and birth control, Clinton said they share a "common commitment to the family."

The two men previously discussed their differences on the abortion issue at a meeting last year in Denver.

Clinton told a group of seminarians at the Vatican that he and the pope discussed a broad range of issues from peace and religious freedom to world population problems. Clinton said he pledged his "best efforts to work with other nations, especially nations in Asia, in the cause of religious freedom."

The two leaders also discussed an upcoming United Nations Conference in Cairo on world population, Clinton said, adding that there were points of agreement and disagreement on the issue. They talked about "how we could come together on a policy that would promote responsible growth of the world's population and still reaffirm our common commitment for the central role of the family in every society," Clinton said.

The pope has attempted to shape the conference, scheduled for September, in recent statements and activities, and his views are not necessarily in agreement with Catholics worldwide, according to Catholics for a Free Choice.

For example, a March 1992 poll indicated that 61 percent of Polish voters favor abortion rights while 10 percent agreed with complete banning of abortion. In Ireland 66 percent of the voters favor changing a constitutional amendment that would have banned abortion entirely, while in Chile 46 percent of the population says abortion should be allowed in special cases.

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-- By Pam Parry

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