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Southwestern begins interviews;  
four among leading candidates

By Greg Warner

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- The committee seeking a new president for Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has begun interviews with candidates, according to the search chairman.

Committee chairman Miles Seaborn said he is "not at liberty to say" how many people are being interviewed or who they are. "We're not to that point yet, but we are moving along," said Seaborn, pastor of Birchman Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, where the seminary is located. "We might interview four. We might interview six. We're not sure."

Other seminary sources close to the process consistently name four men among the top candidates -- Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Convention's Christian Life Commission; Mark Coppenger, vice president for convention relations at the SBC Executive Committee; Timothy George, dean of the Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., and Ralph Smith, pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, and a former trustee chairman at Southwestern.

Two other names prominently mentioned are John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention; and Jerry Sutton, pastor of Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., but neither is currently under serious consideration, Associated Baptist Press has learned.

The committee is seeking a successor to Russell Dilday, who was fired as president March 9 by the conservative-dominated trustee board, which accused Dilday of blocking conservative reforms at the 3,000-student Southern Baptist seminary, the nation's largest.

Seaborn said the committee is still in the early stages of its work. It does not have finalists, he said, but candidates have been assigned to three "tiers," indicating the committee's level of interest at this time.

Seaborn said the committee, which has received "approximately 20 to 23" nominations with resumes, is beginning the interviews with its first-tier candidates. Packets of information about the seminary have been sent to the interviewees.

Coppenger and George would not say if they are being interviewed. Sullivan said he has had no contact

from the committee. Coppenger and Sullivan confirmed they have been nominated. George said he was unsure. The other three could not be reached for comment.

The committee is not committed to selecting its nominee from the six people named and is still open to other recommendations, a committee source said.

All six are considered theological conservatives. Land, Coppenger and Smith are closely identified with the fundamental-conservative movement that now dominates SBC affairs.

Land and George are the only candidates with administrative experience in theological education. George was a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary before taking the helm of Beeson. Land was vice president for academic affairs at Criswell College in Dallas before going to the CLC. Both were finalists for the presidency of Southern Seminary last year.

But neither Land nor George holds a degree from Southwestern. Coppenger, Smith, Sullivan and Sutton do. Land is a graduate of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and George is a graduate of Harvard.

Committee members said they have not made a Southwestern diploma an absolute requirement. But picking a non-Southwesterner would be considered an affront by many alumni and faculty.

All six hold doctorates.

Smith, at 66, is older than the other five. If selected, he would be considered by many a caretaker president who would help the seminary weather the turmoil that has followed Dilday's firing.

Only Smith, Land and Coppenger are considered insiders in the SBC's fundamental-conservative movement -- a credential important to some of the trustees. Damon Shook, a Houston pastor, search committee member and former trustee chairman, last year chastised Dilday for not hiring faculty identified as "political conservatives."

George declined to discuss his contact with the committee. "I've had a lot of discussion with many people about Southwestern, most of it confidential," he noted. He said he has received "some materials" from the seminary but he wasn't sure of the contents.

Asked if he would consider the position if it is offered, George said he feels "very certain God called me to Beeson Divinity School" and he would have to feel equally certain about taking any other position.

"I'm not trying to leave Florida," Sullivan said, "but I would consider anything at the point of praying over it. If I could do anything that I felt could help my school and was in the will of God, I would consider it."

Coppenger declined to discuss the Southwestern position other than to say he has been nominated.

Seaborn said the committee members have not drafted a profile of the type of president they are seeking, but they have written a "fingerprint of our expectations." The document has not been released to the public, he said. "We have one, but it's for our use."

In May, Ollin Collins, a search committee member who served as acting chairman during Seaborn's heart bypass surgery and convalescence, said the committee had decided not to limit its search to Southwestern graduates, those who hold doctorates or candidates of a particular age.

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Friends of Russell Dilday  
show support at banquet

By Toby Druin

DALLAS (ABP) -- Friends and co-workers packed a hotel ballroom June 6 to laud Russell Dilday and his wife, Betty, for a life of leadership, service, integrity, honesty, commitment and responsibility.

Dilday's almost-16-year presidency of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary ended abruptly with his March 9 firing by 27 trustees of the Fort Worth, Texas, institution. About 1,100 friends came out for a banquet at the Loew's Anatole Hotel in Dallas, creating a show of support that in Dilday's words helped "make up for all the

negative dimensions" of the trustee action.

The program featured testimonials on behalf of the Dildays offered by William Pinson, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas; Bruce Corley, dean of the School of Theology at Southwestern; Frank Pollard, pastor of First Baptist Church, Jackson, Miss., Jesse Fletcher, chancellor and former president of Hardin-Simmons University; and Kenneth and Millie Cooper, founders of The Cooper Aerobics Center, Dallas, and co-chairpersons for the banquet.

Special music was presented by a faculty ensemble from the seminary School of Church Music, and by Russell Newport, concert artist from Springfield, Mo.

Cooper, who noted he had severed a 20-year relationship with the seminary and its Southwestern Council because of Dilday's firing, said the crowd at the banquet was "sending a message to Nashville, the way we love this man."

The master of ceremonies, Paul Powell, president of the Southern Baptist Annuity Board, observed that probably never before had so many people come so far to "honor two jobless and homeless people." The Dildays moved out of their seminary-owned home the day after the dinner.

The banquet was arranged by a steering committee headed by the Coopers and which included Tom and Sandra Brannon, Charlie and Joy Fenner, Bill and Charlene James, Bruce and Lawanna McIver and Ed and Lilla Schmeltekopf, all of Dallas, and Wayne and Theresa Allen of Carrollton, Texas.

Allen is pastor of First Baptist Church of Carrollton, and one of the seven trustees who opposed the firing; Brannon is director of public relations for the Baptist General Convention of Texas; Joy Fenner is executive director of Texas Woman's Missionary Union; James is minister of music and Bruce McIver is the retired pastor at Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, and Schmeltekopf is associate executive director of the Texas Baptist Executive Board.

Some 50 persons and companies also contributed to support of the banquet.

McIver presented to the Dildays a bronze sculpture of a man supporting a great weight and said the steering committee felt it represented Dilday, "head unbowed, upholding the convention, showing respect for persons, responsible, a man of integrity, with a mission and call of God in your heart."

"Where are the heroes?" asked McIver. "Here are the heroes -- Russell and Betty Dilday."

Pinson, expressing appreciation on behalf of Texas Baptists, praised the Dildays for their faith in and love for the Lord; for integrity, honesty and responsibility; for their relationship as a family; and for their churchmanship. "Texas Baptists owe you a great deal," Pinson said.

Corley, representing students, staff and faculty of the seminary, said he didn't know of an administrator "in this generation of Baptists who has done a better job." He said Dilday had led Southwestern along one of its most troubled times with a mix of sure convictions and an easy hand.

"The reason he (Dilday) inspired such loyalty," Corley said, "is we learned we could depend on him when times were tough. What he believes is what he is. During his 16 years we haven't moved out of the radical middle. He has kept us on course. He has shown us grit of soul and gnarl of will."

Pollard praised Dilday for his commitment, and Fletcher, who said Dilday befriended him when they met as students at Southwestern, said he is the "closest thing to a brother I've ever had. He not only speaks the language of Zion, he lives it."

Millie Cooper said Dilday is one of the most godly men she knows, an intellectual and a "gentle-man" in every sense of the word. Dilday couldn't have a more perfect partner than Betty, she added.

The banquet was planned for 1,000, but McIver noted that at least 1,100 had packed the ballroom.

Responding, Dilday said he and Betty were overwhelmed at the audience. "Your being here tonight is a gift," he said.

He said that since the firing, though there had been a "lot of doubts and downsides," he and Betty had been able to maintain their sense of humor and saw that as a gift from God. He said the word "friends" had come to have new meaning and that it was "great to be in a fellowship where love is unfeigned."

Dilday said he was grateful for the support of Betty and their family and for faith in Christ, "more than just a token. Our relationship with the Lord Jesus is the basis on which we stand, and we are assured he will lead

us into the future."

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Louisiana pastor asking SBC to reject  
Evangelical/Catholic document

By Bob Allen

BATON ROUGE, La. (ABP) -- The signatures of two Southern Baptist Convention leaders on a document pledging greater cooperation between Evangelicals and Catholics represents a "step toward ecumenism" which the SBC should reject, contends a Louisiana pastor.

Tommy French, pastor of Jefferson Baptist Church, Baton Rouge, La., is asking the SBC to disavow the accord and censure the agency heads who signed it. French told Associated Baptist Press he is recommending a resolution at the June 14-16 SBC rejecting the document "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium."

French's resolution also asks trustees of the respective agencies to consider forcing Richard Land, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission, and Larry Lewis, Home Mission president, to withdraw their endorsement of the document. Land and Lewis were the only Southern Baptists among the 40 representatives of various Evangelical and Roman Catholic groups to sign the accord at a ceremony in New York City in March.

The document describes concerns shared by Evangelicals and Catholics in the realm of social morality -- including abortion, pornography and family values -- and encourages dialogue on differences that divide the two traditions.

French said he supports those aims. But the document signed by Land and Lewis errs, he contends, when it wanders into theological consensus, including an assertion that Evangelicals ought not to "proselytize" among active adherents of the Catholic Church.

That sort of compromise, French said, is why Southern Baptists historically have shunned ecumenical movements which, he charged, inevitably lead "to the diluting of and compromising of truth."

"I think we ought to find ways to cooperate with one another without compromising what we believe to be the truth of the Scriptures," French told ABP in a telephone interview June 8.

French said he supports dialogue between Baptists and Catholics. "I think Baptists have always said we will sit down with an open Bible and dialogue with anyone," he said. But the motive for those discussions should be "the evangelization of those who do not claim to be Christians and the giving of those who claim to be Christian an opportunity to examine their profession of faith in the light of the truth of God, the Holy Bible," his resolution says.

The Baptist belief that salvation comes by grace through faith is "totally separated" from the Roman Catholic understanding of a salvation process, French said.

In a letter mailed June 7, French asked members of the SBC Resolutions Committee to recommend his resolution to the convention meeting in Orlando, Fla. French cautioned that any SBC statement should be carefully worded to avoid being perceived as bashing individual Catholics but "should unequivocally declare that Southern Baptist beliefs are not compatible with those of the Roman Catholic Church."

"I think this resolution will keep us from getting into a negative situation with our Roman Catholic friends," French told ABP.

French said he also supports Baptists and Catholics working together to influence public policy, but only in ways that do not "subvert or subordinate" evangelization efforts.

Mark Coppenger, SBC vice president for public relations, said June 7 that at least two other resolutions on the Evangelical/Catholic accord have been received by the Resolutions Committee. The committee, Coppenger

said, has not yet determined what topics they will address in their report to the convention.

Land did not return ABP's phone call.

Lewis told ABP in an earlier interview that much of the criticism aimed at the document is based on misunderstanding of the ban on proselytizing, which he says does not prohibit Baptists from sharing their faith with Catholics. Lewis defended his endorsement of the accord in a letter to Home Mission Board directors dated May 27. In the letter, Lewis said the document is a breakthrough because in it Catholic signers recognize the legitimacy of evangelism and join in a call for freedom of religion.

Baptist historian Walter Shurden, chair of the religion department at Mercer University in Macon, Ga., agreed that Baptists historically have generally rejected ecumenical relations, particularly with Roman Catholics. He disputed the contention, however, that the Catholic-Evangelical statement signed by Land and Lewis represents authentic ecumenism.

"Those Southern Baptist leaders were not engaging in authentic ecumenical discussions about the spiritual unity of the universal church of Jesus Christ," Shurden said. "They were engaged in what I would call political and secular ecumenism to advance a right-wing political agenda."

The debate over the document "poses an interesting problem for the new fundamentalism of the SBC," said Shurden. One dimension of fundamentalism is support for a right-wing political agenda, he said, while another is anti-Catholicism. "What one sees in the current debate is a conflict between the politics of fundamentalism and the sectarianism of fundamentalism," he said.

During most of the 20th century, the leaders of the SBC were preoccupied with sharpening Baptist distinctives for the purpose of solidifying denominational support. In doing that, Southern Baptists tended to "cast themselves over against everything else," a posture that did little to encourage interest in the large ecumenical movement that spawned the World Council of Churches in 1948 and National Council of Churches in 1950, Shurden said.

Despite that official stance, beginning in the 1950s, there were "some serious ecumenical minds at work among Southern Baptists," he said. Most of their work, he said, was snuffed out by the resurgent fundamentalism that won control of the SBC beginning in 1979.

Shurden said the current debate should not be framed around ecumenism. "The real argument is not whether Southern Baptists are ecumenical or not. It's clear this group of Southern Baptists are not ecumenical," he said.

"It is not a struggle over ecumenism. It is a struggle over which kind of fundamentalism will carry the day in the SBC," Shurden said.

"The only way you can have legitimate ecumenical discussions is to believe that other Christians are bringing to the table something that you need to hear. What brought those evangelicals and the Catholics together was not a common acknowledgement that each of their faith communities was Christian. What brought those groups together was a secular political agenda. A genuine ecumenism is born out of a desire to heal the divisions in the church. What you have in this statement is the further polarization of the church along political lines," he added.

But another Baptist historian, Timothy George,<sup>1</sup> dean of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala., found the agreement more laudable in an editorial he wrote for the May 16 issue of Christianity Today magazine.

"Here is an ecumenism of the trenches born out of a common moral struggle to proclaim and embody the gospel of Jesus Christ to a culture of disarray."

"For too long, ecumenism has been left to left-leaning Catholics and mainline Protestants," George continued. "For that reason alone, evangelicals should applaud this effort and rejoice in the progress it represents."

gets 'serious' about task

By Toby Druin

DALLAS (ABP) -- The committee considering a major change in the way Texas Baptists fund mission causes got down "to the reality of the seriousness of the matter" June 8, according to chairman Cecil Ray.

And the "seriousness" is whether the committee's recommendation will continue a stated relationship between the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the SBC or any other Baptist body, how missions and ministry funds are to flow from the churches to that body, and what will be considered "Cooperative Program" funds.

One proposal being studied by the Cooperative Missions Giving Study Committee would have all missions contributions from a Texas Baptist church 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.

In its fourth meeting in Dallas June 8, the committee finally got around to discussing the need that prompted the committee's formation -- some people and churches feel they can no longer support the Southern Baptist Convention, that the SBC no longer exists as they have known it in the past, and that they want to give their missions and ministry support dollars another way but still have them considered "Cooperative Program" funds.

Ben Loring Jr., pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo, who made the motion at the 1993 convention that the committee be authorized, explained to the committee in April that his church's mission gifts have been made to appear "second class" because it has channeled its gifts to SBC entities through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship rather than the SBC Executive Committee. Last year the church gave more than \$180,000 to SBC causes but they were not considered "Cooperative Program" gifts.

To remedy that, the study committee has considered a recommendation that would call for a Texas Cooperative Program budget, with gifts beyond Texas to any Baptist cause -- SBC, CBF or others -- to be designated and directed by the churches. All would be considered "Cooperative Program."

At the June 8 committee meeting, one member challenged omission of the SBC from any recommendation, saying "Cooperative Program" historically has meant the partnership between the state and Southern Baptist Convention.

He said he favored recognizing gifts through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship but opposed limiting the Cooperative Program budget to Texas. To leave out worldwide missions causes from the budget would hurt everyone, he said, contending that 94 percent of Texas churches now support the Cooperative Program budget as is, including the SBC portion.

Another said that the Cooperative Program would not be the Cooperative Program if the SBC is omitted, though he said that for everyone to be happy some changes are needed.

Others wanting the SBC omission said that the Southern Baptist Convention no longer exists as it once did and to leave the BGCT/SBC distribution plan intact would be to leave them out.

Others noted that unless a recommendation is formulated that "provides inclusion" of churches that may differ in their giving practices, the committee will have failed in its assignment.

Ray asked each of the members to write their own versions of a recommendation on what would constitute Cooperative Program gifts and how they would be distributed and send them to him. A writing team will formulate them into one or more recommendations for the committee to consider at their next meeting in Dallas, July 29, although Ray said an earlier date might be considered.

Thomas named by NCC  
to religious liberty post

NEW YORK (ABP) -- A Baptist church-state specialist has been named special counsel for religious and civil liberties by the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

Oliver Thomas, former general counsel and associate director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington-based religious-liberty agency, assumed the NCC duties in early June.

Since moving to his native Tennessee in October, Thomas has remained active in the church-state field, working with school districts across the country on the appropriate role of religion in public schools and consulting with church organizations.

Thomas will continue to reside in Tennessee and serve the NCC on an on-call basis.

In his new role, Thomas will advocate and defend religious and civil liberties on behalf of NCC members and facilitate the ecumenical organization's Religious Liberty Committee.

The NCC is the nation's largest ecumenical agency, made up of 32 Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican communities. Founded in 1950, its member communions account for 42 million American Christians.

Thomas said the new role will help keep him active in the church-state field.

"One of the things I'm looking forward to is working with organizations like the Baptist Joint Committee, the Christian Legal Society, the American Civil Liberties Union and other organizations that are concerned about religious liberty," he said.

"It feels very comfortable to me to be going to work with the NCC," Thomas added. "It's an organization whose views I think are mainstream on these issues."

During his eight years at the BJC, Thomas developed a reputation as one of the nation's foremost church-state attorneys.

He helped form and chaired the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion -- an unprecedented coalition of 68 religious and civil-liberties groups that united to support enactment of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Signed by President Clinton Nov. 16, RFRA restored a tough legal standard government must meet before restricting religious practice.

Thomas' extensive work in the church-state field includes areas such as clergy malpractice, religion in public schools, creation science, tax aid to parochial schools and tax policies affecting churches.

He co-authored numerous church-state guidelines for use in public schools and the nation's first major curriculum project for teaching about religious liberty in public schools sponsored by the Williamsburg Charter Foundation.

Thomas served as an adjunct professor at Georgetown University Law Center. He holds a law degree from the University of Tennessee College of Law and a master of laws from the University of Virginia College of Law.

An ordained minister, Thomas is also a graduate of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

In addition to staying active in the church-state field, Thomas has pursued his interests as a country music songwriter in Tennessee.

"It's part of living a balanced life," he said. "A little music is good for the soul. For me, it's part of not becoming so focused on the law or on politics or scholarship that you forget the rest of life."

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CORRECTION: In the June 7 ABP story, "American Baptist seminary opens...", the 12th paragraph contained a typographical error. It should read as follows:

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.

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ADDITION: In the June 7 ABP story "Dildays move out...", please add the following after the fifth paragraph:

However, a trustee close to the negotiations said the lien was required by the original terms of the housing allowance, approved by trustees in 1986. Under the agreement, the trustee said, Dilday would have access to a fund of \$150,000 to purchase a home in retirement. The money would be repaid using a \$10,000-a-year housing allowance.

However, the housing allowance was nullified by Dilday's termination, the trustee said. But trustees agreed March 9 to include the housing allowance in Dilday's severance package, and trustee leaders later agreed to take a lien on other Dilday assets to free up the mortgage.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: ABP will cover hearings underway on EEOC guidelines for religion in the workplace. A story will be available as early as Friday, June 10.

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