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Joel Gregory writing book  
about 'seduction' of superchurch

By Toby Druin

DALLAS (ABP) — Joel Gregory is writing a book about his experiences at First Baptist Church of Dallas, where he abruptly resigned a 21-month pastorate in 1992, but he said he "harbors no ill will or bitterness" and will not "trash" the church or its senior pastor, W. A. Criswell.

"Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America's Super Church" is the title of the book to be released in early October by The Summit Group, a Fort Worth publisher Gregory said contacted him about writing it. He has a standard royalty agreement with the publisher and has not received any advances, he said.

Gregory and officials of the publishing house held a press conference at Dallas' Fairmont Hotel June 10 to counter what they called "inaccurate rumors" prematurely circulating about the contents of the book.

Gregory walked out of the sanctuary of First Baptist of Dallas after reading a brief resignation statement to a Wednesday evening prayer meeting crowd Sept. 30, 1992. Effective "immediately and irrevocably," the resignation statement expressed frustration that Criswell, pastor of the church since 1944, had not moved off the scene as Gregory had been promised and was expressing a desire to stay until his 50th anniversary, which will be this fall.

A press statement released by The Summit Group about Gregory's book noted the "ironic coincidence" that publication of the volume will coincide with the Oct. 2 celebration of Criswell's anniversary.

In a statement to media at the press conference, held across the street from the church, Gregory said he had accepted a proposal to write the book for several reasons -- that it is best for him to tell the story, he has insights into the 15-year Southern Baptist controversy, and he hopes the book will make a positive contribution to the church and the kingdom of God.

While saving the details for buyers of the book, Gregory commented on several aspects that will be covered in it.

He reiterated that the primary reason he left was because of the leadership question posed by Criswell's decision to remain on the scene. Yet Gregory was kind to Criswell in his remarks, calling him a "great man whose historic position is secure" and noting that a man who can serve a superchurch for 50 years with all of its pressures "is amazing."

But what happened to Gregory during his 21 months at the church is a story the former pastor said he needs to tell. "No one wears a black or white hat. We all wear gray hats. There is a seductive power in the situation that is explored in the book."

Criswell told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram he is "amazed" about news of Gregory's book. "I have been told it is a blistering indictment of me and the church," he said. "Before God, I did everything in my power to help him before, during and after what happened."

Gregory and his wife, Linda, filed for divorce last October, blaming the stress of the Dallas pastorate in part for the breakup.

The press conference was held in the presence of an armed guard, an off-duty Dallas police officer. Gregory said the guard was present because he likes to be "cautious." Asked if he had received threats, he said, "I have reasons to be cautious, substantial reasons."

The book will deal with the superchurch phenomenon, not strictly First Baptist of Dallas, and will confront the question, "Is this what Jesus Christ came to found as the church in the world?" Gregory said.

"I think one thing that will come out in this book is that the church is a divine/human institution. And when you really show it, warts and all, in one sense it is a tribute to the power of the gospel that it has survived 2,000 years."

He said he will also deal with the Southern Baptist Convention controversy, in which he said he was a "double agent," acquainted with strategies of both sides, and it will deal with the firing of Russell Dilday at Southwestern Seminary and the departure of Baylor University from its traditional relationship with Texas Baptists.

Gregory said his viewpoint on the Baylor issue "has changed substantially." He still is opposed to the method used by the university in essentially severing its ties to the state convention, but he regrets that his opposition cut him off from his alma mater.

The 44-year-old Gregory, once the most sought-after preacher in the SBC, said that since his resignation he has been working for Greenwood-Mt. Olivet funeral home and cemetery in Fort Worth, going door-to-door selling pre-arranged funerals.

"It is refreshing to relate to God as a layman," he said.

As to a future ministerial career, he said he hasn't "begun to approach" that possibility but said he doesn't feel publication of the book will close any doors that wouldn't have been closed already.

There are some who won't welcome the book, he said, but "that is not troublesome to me either. When you have the kinds of experiences over the last five years (that I have had) you kind of learn to wake up in the morning and nothing really bothers you."

Wake Forest divinity school  
selects its first leader

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) – An internationally acclaimed Old Testament scholar has been tapped to lead the new divinity school at Wake Forest University.

Walter Harrelson, former divinity dean at Vanderbilt University and the University of Chicago, will serve a two-year appointment to give shape to the divinity school at the Baptist-affiliated school in Winston-Salem, N.C. He will begin July 1.

Harrelson will structure a divinity program that will be both "Baptist and ecumenical," according to a news release dated June 16.

"Dr. Harrelson will share his deep knowledge of theology and theological education with us, so that our school might be a truly significant force in divinity education from the day it opens its doors," said David Brown, the university's provost.

Harrelson, 74, is an organizer of the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and a member of the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation. He served on the translation committee of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, published in 1990, and is former rector of the Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies in Jerusalem.

He will join the divinity school at the rank of distinguished professor.

A native of North Carolina, Harrelson is a graduate of Mars Hill College and University of North Carolina with a doctorate from Union Theological Seminary in New York.

He was dean of the University of Chicago's divinity school (1955-60) before moving to Vanderbilt as professor of Old Testament theology. He served as dean there 1967-75.

The Wake Forest divinity school, in planning stages since 1988, will open when a \$5 million endowment is raised, university officials say. The school has raised \$2.5 million in cash so far and \$4.2 million worth of gifts and pledges.

"We can't afford to build this school on the back of undergraduate tuition," said Robert Spinks, the divinity school's director of development. "And it's very expensive to have a program of the quality we want."

Ultimately, the school hopes to hire six faculty members, enroll 135 divinity students of all denominations and operate on a \$1 million annual budget.

In North Carolina, the school would compete for students with Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, a 44-year-old Southern Baptist Convention seminary in Wake Forest. It carried a reputation as one of the SBC's most progressive seminaries until a takeover by conservatives in 1987.

Paige Patterson, an architect of the takeover movement and the school's current president, says he is not worried about the competition. "I certainly don't endorse ... the theology that would be involved," Patterson said. "I do endorse their right and privilege to open a school."

The school would likely receive support from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate organization that has funded both SBC institutions, including seminaries, and new ventures for theological education and missions since 1991.

While the Fellowship has not promised any money to the Wake Forest school yet, it "would be one of the institutions we would entertain and be enthusiastic about talking to," said David Wilkinson, the Fellowship's communications coordinator.

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– By Bob Allen with information from the Raleigh News & Observer.

Supreme Court rejects  
appeal of cross display

WASHINGTON (ABP) – The U.S. Supreme Court won't overturn a ruling that keeps San Diego County in California from maintaining two large crosses in public parks and keeps one city from displaying one of those crosses on its municipal insignia.

Without comment, the Supreme Court declined June 20 to review a March 1993 ruling by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that the use of the Latin crosses violates the "no preference clause" of the California constitution.

That clause guarantees the "free exercise and enjoyment of religion without discrimination or preference."

Both crosses at issue in the case were constructed with private funds but later maintained by the county. A 36-foot cross on Mount Helix was built in the 1920s on privately owned land that later was deeded to the county. A private organization constructed a 43-foot concrete cross on Mount Soledad in the city of San Diego that was dedicated in 1954 as a tribute to war veterans.

La Mesa chose the Mount Helix cross as a central element in its insignia that appears on city vehicles, uniforms and literature.

The appeals court concluded that the size and religious significance of the crosses and the lack of other religious symbols created an appearance of religious preference.

The appeals court agreed that La Mesa had legitimate secular purpose of selecting a well-known local landmark to make the city's property and personnel more identifiable, but said that purpose did not lessen the preference the insignia showed for a particular religion.

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– By Larry Chesser

EEOC should move  
on guidelines: Walker

WASHINGTON (ABP) – The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission should move expeditiously to revise religious-harassment guidelines – whether or not they appear separately or as part of overall regulations covering other forms of discrimination, according to a church-state specialist.

Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, made that observation following recent Senate action. The U.S. Senate approved 94-to-0 a "sense of the Senate" measure that called on the EEOC to remove the category of religion from the proposed guidelines and treat it separately.

The guidelines were proposed by the EEOC to interpret Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Virtually every religious and civil-liberties group, including the BJC and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, found the guidelines vague and open to misinterpretation. Some requested religion be dropped from the guidelines, and others called for clarification.

The Senate resolution, offered by Sen. Hank Brown, R-Colo., expresses the sentiment of lawmakers but does not carry the force of law.

"The resolution properly acknowledges the problems with the religion guidelines and calls for their improvement," Walker said. "It matters little whether the religion guidelines are put out separately or in the comprehensive guidelines.

"We would urge EEOC to move expeditiously if they decide to go with separate guidelines."

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--By Pam Parry

Proposed amendment  
addresses religious practice

WASHINGTON (ABP) — A U.S. senator introduced a Senate resolution June 14 calling for a constitutional amendment to restore the free exercise of religion.

Sen. Thad Cochran, R-Miss., said the resolution is necessary to counter a "politically correct negative view" of those who openly practice their faith.

The first 16 words of the Bill of Rights guarantees religious freedom, but Cochran said some decisions by the nation's Supreme Court have undercut that protection. He pointed to the 1960s school prayer decisions and the 1990 Oregon vs. Smith decision that virtually abandoned a high level of protection for religious practice.

In November, President Clinton signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act that restores the protection lost in the Smith case. Cochran said RFRA is only "a partial solution" to the anti-religion sentiments of American society.

The proposed amendment states: "The right of citizens of the United States to the free exercise of religion shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state."

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, which led the effort behind RFRA's passage, said, "Sen. Cochran's unnecessary amendment simply adds another layer to the confusion."

--By Pam Parry

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## Summer missions along Rio Grande inspires Mexican Baptist program

By Ken Camp

PIEDRAS NEGRAS, Mexico (ABP) – A Texas Baptist summer missionary program on the Rio Grande River has inspired a similar endeavor among Mexican Baptist youth.

This summer, 29 college and seminary students will serve as summer missionaries for the Texas Baptist River Ministry and 13 high school youth will work in the Helping Hands Brigade. Meanwhile, a nearly equal number of Mexican Baptist young people will work in their own country as summer missionaries.

Forty high school students, mostly from the state of Veracruz, will serve two weeks among the churches and the indigenous Indians of southern Mexico's Tononacapan region.

The "Vision Samaria" program was the brainchild of River Ministry's Ruben Juarez. As a medical doctor coordinating health-care ministries in northeastern Coahuila and as pastor of a church in Piedras Negras – across the river from Eagle Pass, Texas – Juarez has seen firsthand the benefits of Texas Baptists' River Ministry summer missionary program.

"After seven or eight years of working with River Ministry, I saw the summer missionary program as a good foundation both for promoting mission work and for missions education among the youth," Juarez said.

Juarez has seen summer missionaries work in medical clinics, his church and in a lunch program that serves 500 needy children five days a week.

Juarez's proposal for a summer missionary program to evangelize the Tononacas meshed with the National Baptist Convention of Mexico's 1994 emphasis on evangelizing indigenous ethnic groups. According to the convention, Mexico is home to 56 distinct ethnic groups that speak 256 different languages and dialects.

"The Mexican Baptist young people learned about the culture of the Tononacas – the same kind of cross-cultural training River Ministry summer missionaries receive to help them relate to the people of Mexico," said Elmin Howell, director of River Ministry.

In early August, the Mexican Baptist summer missionaries will spend one week working among the Tononaca Indians and one week strengthening the work of Baptist churches in the Poza Rica, Veracruz, area. Leaders hope to appoint up to seven of the 40 summer missionaries for one-year assignments in the Tononacapan region. They would help local churches disciple new believers and start new churches.

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