

# Associated Baptist Press

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## In this issue:

- Southwestern committee picks mainstream nominee, Ken Hemphill
- Religious leaders issue appeal for universal health coverage
- Resolution honoring Constitution introduced in U.S. Senate

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
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## Southwestern committee picks mainstream nominee, Ken Hemphill

By Greg Warner

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Ken Hemphill, a church-growth specialist and former Virginia pastor, is the nominee to become president of the troubled Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, the nation's largest seminary.

A mainstream conservative with a low profile in the 15-year controversy that has racked the Southern Baptist Convention, Hemphill is expected to help calm the furor that erupted at Southwestern after trustees fired then-president Russell Dilday in March.

Search committee chairman Miles Seaborn of Fort Worth, Texas, said July 7 that a nominee has been unanimously selected for the Fort Worth seminary but he declined to say who it is. "We're not ready to say who the Lord has put his hand on," said Seaborn, pastor of Birchman Baptist Church in Fort Worth. "In due time we will reveal who it is."

Search committee members T. Bob Davis and Ralph Pulley of Dallas weren't talking July 7, deferring all questions about the committee's work to Seaborn. However, a source close to the process, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, confirmed to Associated Baptist Press that Hemphill is the choice.

Hemphill was unavailable for comment.

Seaborn said all trustees are being notified that a nominee has been chosen and will be presented for a vote in a special trustee meeting July 29 in Fort Worth. That mailing did not name the nominee, however, according to trustees who received it.

Hemphill, 46, is director of the Southern Baptist Center for Church Growth, a project sponsored jointly by the SBC Home Mission Board and Sunday School Board. While pastor of First Baptist Church of Norfolk, Va. (1981-92), Hemphill built a reputation as an expert in church growth. The Norfolk congregation grew from 975 resident members to 6,529 during his tenure.

Dilday, 63, was fired March 9 by trustees who accused him of creating "gridlock," blocking conservative reforms they wanted to see at the 3,500-student seminary. But many interpreted the firing as a volley in the denomination's on-going political battle, much of which centers on the seminaries. The firing elicited protests from

faculty, alumni, donors and at least one accrediting agency.

Word of Hemphill's choice met with cautious approval from some of those critics.

"I'm reasonably excited about him," said Wayne Allen, a trustee who opposed the firing. "Of the list of candidates that I heard, he could come closer to smoothing the waters than any of the others."

Allen, pastor of First Baptist Church of Carrollton, Texas, said Hemphill is not aligned with any political faction in the SBC, and added, "I think he would be a pretty good healing influence."

Hemphill holds four academic degrees but none from Southwestern.

"I would have preferred a Southwestern alumnus to someone who does not have those ties," said Roberta Damon of Richmond, Va., Southwestern's national alumni president. "However, let's wait and see."

Damon said she knows Hemphill only by reputation. "I certainly wish him well. He has enormous shoes to fill. I will watch with great interest what happens to Southwestern under his leadership."

Hemphill, a native of Morganton, N.C., holds two degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. -- master of divinity and doctor of ministry. He also earned a doctor of philosophy degree from Cambridge University in Cambridge, England. His undergraduate work was at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Leon McBeth, Southwestern professor of church history, said the seminary faculty probably would have preferred a Southwestern alum, "but the mere fact he is not a Southwestern grad I don't think will be a problem."

"We're a national denomination now," McBeth added. "And if the man is the right man, I don't think it matters what school he attended. If he is an authentic, mission-minded, evangelical Southern Baptist, he will fit at Southwestern."

Lorin Cranford, professor of New Testament, was more cautious. "This is not going to change the agenda of the trustees," he said. "It may slow down the implementation of the agenda."

Dilday's firing culminated years of tension at the seminary between administrators and conservative trustees, some of whom called for hiring faculty members who endorse the conservative political agenda in the SBC.

Texas Baptist president Jerold McBride, pastor of First Baptist Church of San Angelo, said the makeup of the trustee board will have more influence on the direction of Southwestern than Hemphill's election. "...The board determines the direction of the institution and not the president," said McBride, a former Southwestern trustee.

"With the current chairman and the members of Southwestern's board who voted for ... Dr. Dilday's firing, I really see no basis for believing that any substantive changes will be made," McBride said.

To many observers, however, Hemphill's selection is seen as a hopeful sign.

"I feel pretty good about Hemphill," McBeth said. "Everything I've heard about him indicates he is a balanced, genuine, mainline Southern Baptist, and that's what we're trying to be out here."

Hemphill was not named in a list of top candidates obtained from search committee members in June.

Others mentioned were 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.; Richard Melick, president of Criswell College in Dallas; and Ralph Smith, pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, and a former trustee chairman at Southwestern.

Most of those candidates are clearly identified with the fundamental-conservative movement that has gained control of the SBC and its institutions. Hemphill, while a less visible figure in the SBC controversy, did publicly endorse the conservative trend in the convention in 1990.

At that time he joined with prominent pastors Jim Henry of Orlando, John Bisagno of Houston, Charles Fuller of Roanoke, Va., and Joel Gregory of Fort Worth in calling for Baptists to "broaden the tent" of denominational leadership without compromising biblical inerrancy. Conservatives touted that statement as an endorsement of their candidate for SBC president, Morris Chapman, who went on to defeat moderate candidate Daniel Vestal.

Dilday said Hemphill represents "a strong choice" because of his combination of academic preparation and

pastoral experience. Those were the same qualifications the trustees sought in 1977, when they hired Dilday, the former president said, "except then there was no expectation of political party identity."

"Most of the critics of the board will be surprised that they chose a person who does not represent the hard-line, right-wing position of the denomination, even though he clearly identifies with the persons now in control of the convention," Dilday said.

The nominee has been "a supportive friend through the years," Dilday said, noting Hemphill preached the seminary revival in 1991 and Dilday preached at the Norfolk church.

Prior to going to Norfolk, Hemphill served churches in Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina and England. He and his wife, Paula, have three daughters. Paula Hemphill is a former trustee of the Foreign Mission Board.

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-- This story contains information from Toby Druin

## **Religious leaders issue appeal for universal health coverage**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Universal health coverage is a moral mandate, not a partisan or political matter, leaders of major U.S. religious bodies declared in a July 5 statement.

The statement -- titled "A Pastoral Appeal: Health Care Coverage for All Americans" -- was issued as Congress wrestles with the specifics of various health-reform proposals.

Signers included officials of several religious organizations representing Baptist, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Church of Christ, Moravian and Catholic traditions.

While universal coverage is among the most debated aspects of health-care reform, polls show that most Americans favor universal health coverage.

"Anything short of health care for all is morally flawed," the religious leaders stated. "Religious commitment to the dignity and value of every human life insists on it. Our nation's history of failing to provide such care needs to be repudiated as a moral deficit that has stood too long."

Without universal coverage, the nation's poor and those without significant assets will fall away, often unnoticed, the statement says.

"Therein lies the moral issue: whether we are willing to provide for all people as children of God."

The statement noted that many important health-care issues are being debated and can best "be resolved in a setting of commitment to and the enactment of universal coverage."

Baptist signers included Jimmy Allen, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention; James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee; Stan Hastey, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists; Tom Logue, director of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas; Daniel McGee, a professor at Baylor University; and Cecil Sherman, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

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-- By Larry Chesser

## **Resolution honoring Constitution**

## introduced in U.S. Senate

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A member of the U.S. Senate has introduced a resolution setting aside a day to honor the nation's Constitution and its impact on American life.

Sen. Harris Wofford, D-Pa., introduced the measure designating Sept. 17 as Constitution Day in the Senate June 29.

"Constitution Day would honor the Constitution and publicize the importance of observing and understanding how this document affects our daily lives," Wofford said.

Wofford introduced the measure on behalf of the National Constitution Center, which was chartered by Congress in 1988.

The resolution is part of an effort to teach people the values of the Constitution, Wofford said. Last year, the center broadened its Constitution Day celebration from one park in Philadelphia to 139 parks, archives and presidential libraries across the country. The center hopes eventually to extend the program into a Constitution Week and ultimately to build a Constitution Center in Philadelphia.

Wofford said the new center would be "a place where millions of Americans could come to learn more about the great ideas behind our Constitution, its Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence."

The resolution requested President Clinton to support Constitution Day by calling Americans to observe that day "with appropriate ceremonies and activities."

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-- By Elizabeth Rivers

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