

Associated Baptist Press

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September 14, 1994

Samford trustees vote to elect their successors

By Mark Baggett

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- In a surprise move, trustees of Samford University voted Sept. 13 to elect their own successors -- a prerogative granted to the Alabama Baptist State Convention since 1845 -- saying the move is necessary to protect the Birmingham, Ala., school from a fundamentalist takeover.

At its regular fall meeting, Samford's board of trustees voted to take legal steps to allow it to elect its own board of trustees without approval of the 1 million-member state convention. In the past, the convention has elected Samford trustees selected through a nominating process, traditionally in consultation with the school's president.

The change takes effect immediately, leaving it up to the convention to decide whether to retaliate, either by challenging the move in court or defunding the \$4 million it contributes to Samford's \$68 million budget.

The university's president said he hopes neither action will be necessary, because the change is not intended to alter Samford's relationship with Alabama Baptists.

"This university does not want to change its mission or its relationship with Alabama Baptists," said President Thomas Corts, who marked his 10th anniversary at the school last year. "We did not take this action out of hostility, retribution, or in response to any particular event. This is a result of quiet, reflective thinking about the future and destiny of this institution."

However, one of the two board members who voted against the change, Calvin Kelly of Birmingham, said: "Samford University has effectively been stolen from the state convention. There is no way that the relationship between Samford and the state convention will not change. As I see it the ties have been severed."

Dewey Corder, the president of the state convention and an ex-officio member of the Samford board, was not present at the meeting and said he could not predict the impact of the decision.

"I don't want to be reactionary, although I was surprised," said Corder, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Trussville near Birmingham. "I respect the integrity of the board members, and Dr. Corts has affirmed to me Samford's relationship with the state convention. I personally regret that we have an environment that has created what they see is a necessity to take this action. I want to give this decision as much space as I can without being judgmental and without compromising my responsibilities as state convention president."

Troy Morrison, the executive secretary of the Alabama Baptist State Convention, also could not attend the meeting. Morrison said he was "disappointed" by the trustees' action, which was not discussed with him in advance. "This is an Alabama Baptist matter and should be discussed within the family of Alabama Baptists," said Morrison.

Corts, who called both Morrison and the convention's attorney after the vote, said giving prior notice to convention officials would have placed them in "an untenable position."

Samford, which enrolls 4,500 students and whose endowment is among the top five percent of institutions in the country, currently receives approximately \$4 million out of its \$68 million budget from the Alabama Baptist State Convention's Cooperative Program budget. University officials stated that Samford gives back almost half

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that amount in direct scholarships to the dependents of ministers and to ministerial students.

The Samford move follows a new trend for Baptist colleges. Hoping to avoid the turmoil felt in recent years by seminaries coming under control of trustees elected by the conservative faction running the Southern Baptist Convention, several state convention-owned schools have taken steps to distance themselves from the denomination's political process.

Furman University in South Carolina, Wake Forest University in North Carolina, Baylor University in Texas and Stetson University in Florida have all distanced themselves from their respective state conventions in the last few years, in some cases severing all legal ties.

Some observers, however, say such moves often signal a first step away from a distinctively Baptist heritage. "The record of history shows that, in the long term, most institutions that have broken ties with their constituency do not retain a lively commitment to the Christian faith but only a thin veneer of religiosity, if even that," observed Timothy George, dean of Samford's Beeson Divinity School.

George, who added, "I do not think history must necessarily repeat itself," said the Beeson school, which receives no receive state convention money, will remain "explicitly evangelical" and "continue to nurture a close and mutually supportive relationship with the Alabama Baptist Convention."

Corts said Samford did not follow the models of other Baptist universities in changing its board selection process.

"Our advice to counsel was to change only the board selection process," Corts said. "The attorneys advised us that we could have changed other requirements, such as to allow non-Baptists or persons from outside Alabama on the board. But this was the only change the board wanted to make. We see ourselves relating differently to the state convention than other Baptist universities."

Each year, the state convention approves nine of the university's 36 trustees, who may serve for three consecutive four-year terms. Besides the 36 trustees, Samford has four life trustees who are voting members and who have been elected life trustees by the state convention because they had served at least 30 years as trustees. In addition, the president of the state convention and the executive secretary serve as ex-officio, non-voting members.

Corts said recent events "alarmed" trustees about the potential for political manipulation of the trustee process.

"It appears that political factors increasingly impact the Southern Baptist Convention, with obvious potential to disrupt the Alabama Convention," said the board in "A Report to Alabama Baptists," a six-page question-and-answer statement that was mailed to pastors following the vote.

"These factors, along with proposals concerning denominational trustees here in Alabama, have raised the possibility that great harm could come to Samford. If the election of Samford trustees -- who have ultimate responsibility for Samford University -- is placed in doubt every year, and the threat of 'stacking' the board of trustees with persons of particular political loyalties is ever-present, and Samford is regularly harassed with minor charges only to be exploited for what appear to be political objectives, then the university's current operations and future progress are jeopardized."

Board chairman Gerow Hodges of Birmingham said all long-range studies for the university showed continuing progress and growth but that the politics of board selection remained a glaring vulnerability. Hodges said the board feared the possibility of an organized "takeover."

"Our trustees saw this situation as extremely grave," said Hodges. "To deal with it, our board chose a far-sighted course of action that allows us to remain vitally close to the Alabama Baptist State Convention, while safeguarding the university's future."

Dissenting trustee Kelly, pastor of Birmingham's Valleydale Baptist Church, said he resented the "slick, orchestrated" way the vote took place. "I frankly think that this is a raw and arrogant abuse of power, stealing Samford from a constituency that has loved it, nurtured it, and given sacrificially to it for 150 years. All of this was broken in a hour's time.

"It reeks of distrust and paranoia on Samford's part. It's terribly ironic that what we have said is that we cannot trust 1 million Alabama Baptists, but we are asking the state convention to entrust 36 individuals with absolute control of this institution."