

Associated Baptist Press

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Mississippi College changes charter to make board self-perpetuating

By Bob Allen

CLINTON, Miss. (ABP) – Trustees of Mississippi College voted Sept. 22 to alter the way trustees are chosen for the Baptist school in Clinton, Miss. Under an amendment to the school's charter, no longer will the entire board of trustees be elected by the Mississippi Baptist Convention. Instead, a majority of its members will be self-perpetuating.

Trustee chairman Harry Vickery said the change is not intended to distance the school from the state convention, but to shield it from the internecine struggles between conservatives and moderates, which have dominated Southern Baptist Convention life for 15 years and now, observers say, are beginning to spill over into Baptist state conventions.

"Our charter did not protect the institution sufficiently from outside influences," Vickery said in a statement released to reporters. "The trustees felt that it was our responsibility to provide the necessary insulation for Mississippi College from the potential actions of various factions that could compromise our ability to serve all Baptists."

Formerly, the Mississippi Baptist Convention has elected the 15-member board of trustees. With the change in the school's charter, the board will be expanded to 24 members, six of whom will be selected by the convention.

The vote approving the change was not unanimous, Vickery said, but "an overwhelming majority."

The Mississippi College action came nine days after Samford University's board of trustees took similar action, declaring the Birmingham, Ala., school independent from the Alabama Baptist Convention. Other Baptist universities have taken steps in recent years to distance themselves from sponsoring state conventions, including Baylor in Texas, Furman in South Carolina and Stetson in Florida.

Vickery said the intent is not to distance the school from Mississippi Baptists, but only "from the politics of the convention."

"We want a harmonious and supportive relationship with the Mississippi Baptist Convention, a relationship that is cordial and meaningful, yet free of the politics of the denomination," he said.

The board has not taken a position in denominational infighting, Vickery said. "We do not consider that our

role as trustees." The action, he added, "was a step to ensure that the college could remain true to its mission without fear of being shaped by influences beyond its control."

All trustees still must be Baptists and the charter change includes a recommitment to Baptist heritage, Vickery said. The revised charter states the college will operate "within the Christian-oriented aims and ideals of Baptists, under the control of Baptists," he said.

In addition to guarding the college from convention politics, the charter change will help fund-raising efforts by enlarging the board and allowing Baptist leaders from other states to qualify as trustees, Vickery said.

Trustees have discussed the change informally "for several years," Vickery said. College President Howell Todd, elected by trustees in March, was informed of the board's interest in changing the charter "only in recent days," Vickery said. Trustees asked him not to take a position on the action, Vickery added.

About 2,000 students attend Mississippi College, which was established in 1826.

William Causey, executive director of the Mississippi Baptist Convention, was unavailable for comment Sept. 23. A spokesperson in his office said the convention's executive committee, meeting that day, was expected to issue a response to the action of the college's trustees.

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Former Baptist college president indicted in federal court

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) -- Former Mississippi College president Lewis Nobles faces felony charges in a 19-count federal indictment issued Sept. 21 in Jackson, Miss.

The indictment accuses Nobles, 69, president for 25 years of the Clinton, Miss., private school affiliated with the Mississippi Baptist Convention, of diverting \$1.7 million in donations intended for the college and squandering the money on a lavish lifestyle, prostitutes and personal investments.

Nobles is charged with four counts of violating the Mann Act, also known as the White Slave Traffic Act, a rarely applied law which bars transportation of a female across state lines for "immoral purposes" and five counts of money laundering, six counts of mail fraud and four counts of income tax evasion.

If convicted, Nobles could be sentenced to 165 years in prison and fined \$5.15 million.

Nobles pleaded innocent at a Sept. 22 arraignment in U.S. District Court, where he was released on a \$15,000 personal recognizance bond and ordered to continue seeing a psychiatrist until his trial, scheduled for Nov. 7. He was ordered not to leave Mississippi and must report to probation officers twice each week.

The indictment covers transactions alleged between Jan. 1, 1989 and Aug. 3, 1993. An audit ordered by the college's board of trustees found \$3 million missing over the last 17 years, but statutes of limitations allow charges to go back only five years.

Federal prosecutors also seek forfeiture of Nobles' assets including more than \$1.4 million in cash, stocks in six different brokerage accounts and four parcels of property. Any assets recovered would not automatically return to Mississippi College, but the college could file a civil suit to seek the return of any money recovered in the criminal investigation, said First Assistant U.S. Attorney Kent McDaniel.

Nobles, for years a trusted and highly regarded leader among Mississippi Baptists, was fired by the college's board of trustees in 1993 after they confronted him with evidence of embezzlement.

The federal case accuses Nobles of diverting large donations intended for the college into his personal bank accounts, hiding the money through a complex set of banking transactions and spending it on himself. The indictment alleges that 16 percent of the misappropriated funds -- \$272,000 -- was spent on women not related to Nobles,

including known prostitutes in various states.

Nobles, at a hearing last year, said he used most of the money for scholarships for needy students.

His attorney, Grady Tollison of Oxford, Miss., said he will "vigorously contest" all the charges. "I would hope someone who is a World War II veteran of the U.S. Navy, honorably discharged, and who has served 41 years as an educator ... would be given the same presumption of innocence as anyone else," Tollison told the Clarion-Ledger newspaper in Jackson.

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-- By Bob Allen. Adapted from stories in the Jackson, Miss., Clarion-Ledger.

Religious leaders applaud developments in Haiti

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Protestant and Jewish religious leaders hailed the use of diplomacy rather than bullets in Haiti at a Sept. 23 press conference in Washington.

"We applaud the use of diplomacy even under the most adverse circumstances," the leaders said in a statement to reporters. "We commend the extraordinary efforts of the administration to avoid bloodshed and achieve a peaceful solution."

Last-minute negotiations between the United States and Haiti's ruling military leaders avoided a U.S. invasion of the Caribbean nation.

U.S. negotiators, led by former President Jimmy Carter, persuaded the military junta led by Lt. Gen. Raoul Cedras to agree to step down no later than Oct. 15.

The junta's departure will permit the return of elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who was toppled in a 1991 coup led by Cedras and others.

The religious leaders expressed gratitude "for every guarantee of progress in the realm of human rights" and encouragement to "President Clinton in his dedication to ensure maximum expression of democratic freedoms in this transition period

"We commit ourselves to pray for and support our troops in their delicate and difficult peacekeeping assignment and faithfully to stand by this noble endeavor for the time it may take."

Signers included Oscar Bolioli, director of the Office of Latin America and the Caribbean, and Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary, National Council of Churches of Christ; Robert Brooks, government relations officer, the Episcopal Church; James Dunn, executive director, Baptist Joint Committee; Bishop Fred James, African Methodist Episcopal Church; James Nash, The Churches Center for Theology and Public Policy; Tyrone Pitts, general secretary, and Bennett Smith Jr., president, Progressive National Baptist Convention; and David Saperstein, Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

In remarks at the news conference, Dunn said the religious community "has a stewardship of influence and an opportunity for public witness that should not be neglected at this time."

Dunn added: "Without crossed fingers, caveats or qualifications, many of us are deeply grateful for the steps taken in Haiti. We applaud the avoidance of a shooting war, the promotion of democracy and the protection of human rights."

Dunn commended Carter, Clinton and U.S. Ambassador Bill Gray for acting "from a profound faith commitment."

"Their championing of democracy, upholding the standard of a free and open society and defending of human rights stem from their genuine religious and spiritual character," he said.

Brooks said the Episcopal Church "applauds the courageous efforts of President Clinton and his representatives to avert violence and bloodshed by seeking a middle course with the ruling junta.

Brooks told reporters that the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti is the second largest in the church.

"For us, Haitians are more than neighbors -- they are family," he said.

Pitts, representing himself and newly elected PNBC President Bennett Smith Jr., noted that his denomination approved a statement in August calling for a peaceful solution to the problems in Haiti.

"We want to commend the administration," Pitts said. "We are committed to a peaceful solution. We also are committed to economic development."

Pitts and other religious leaders at the news conference emphasized that democracy will not be restored until the properly elected government is returned to power.

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EEOC withdraws guidelines on harassment in the workplace

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Following months of controversy, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission voted Sept. 19 to withdraw guidelines designed to help interpret what constitutes workplace harassment based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

An EEOC spokesperson said the agency has no plans to redraft a new set of guidelines.

Virtually every religious and civil liberties group, including the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Baptist Joint Committee, criticized the guidelines as open to misinterpretation. Some, fearing the guidelines would lead to "religion-free" workplaces, asked the EEOC to drop religion from the guidelines; others urged EEOC to keep religion in the guidelines but clarify them to ensure legitimate religious expression is not stifled.

The EEOC withdrew the guidelines entirely because it became apparent that the objective for drafting them had not been accomplished, the EEOC spokesperson said. The objective, she continued, was to clarify what the Civil Rights Act of 1964 said about workplace harassment.

Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, said, "It's probably good that the guidelines were withdrawn in their entirety. The worst thing would have been to withdraw only religion and move forward with the rest of the guidelines. Religion would have been left at the station as the train departed.

"If we are going to have new guidelines, religion should be there too, but with improvements that will protect religion, not impede it."

Michael Whitehead, general counsel for the Christian Life Commission, commented "the EEOC has seen the light, because they felt the heat" from thousands of letters and a 94-0 Senate vote against the "one-size-fits-all" harassment guidelines. Still, he said he expects the issue will resurface next year, after the election.

"Our view is that Title VII already protects employees from religious discrimination in the workplace and we would rather not invite the EEOC to enumerate what religious speech is acceptable or unacceptable to Caesar," Whitehead said.

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