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Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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Joel Gregory philosophical about rise, fall of ministry

By Greg Warner

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Joel Gregory has found that destiny isn't all it's cracked up to be.

Many people believe that Gregory, once the most promising preaching star on the Baptist horizon, missed his destiny -- to be pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, the most powerful pulpit in the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

He reached that pinnacle in 1990 but shocked Southern Baptists and millions of Texans 21 months later when he walked away from the coveted pastorate. His departure -- sudden, brazen and shrouded in intrigue -- is the stuff of Texas legend. So naturally it's now a book.

But destiny isn't what troubles Gregory now. His time is consumed with more mundane matters, like making a living, recovering from divorce and paying for his children's college education.

"I don't live with any sense of missing personal destiny," Gregory said in a recent interview at a restaurant in Fort Worth, Texas, his boyhood home, the place where it all began and where he has returned to put his life back together.

Thirty miles east but light-years away is the power and opulence of First Baptist Church of Dallas, arguably the most influential church in America. Once the largest landowner in downtown Dallas, First Baptist boasts 300 staff members and a five-square-block campus with 47 kitchens. Two radio stations, two schools and a college round out the multimillion-dollar empire.

Gregory, 46, no longer oversees that massive ecclesiastical empire. Now the preaching phenom with the booming voice spends his days selling funeral services and burial plots door to door in Fort Worth.

Gregory's fall -- or leap -- from Baptist stardom is detailed in the book, "Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America's Super Church," in which he says Senior Pastor W. A. Criswell broke his promise to surrender leadership of the 28,000-member church within "a few months."

But if Gregory is dissatisfied with the course his life has taken, he gives no clue.

"I have been more relaxed, more in a sense peaceful, than any time since I was in high school," Gregory said, sipping coffee at La Madeleine, a pastry shop on Fort Worth's trendy west side that is one of his favorite haunts.

"I had a furious pace of life," said Gregory, who at least this day has abandoned the silk suits and French loafers that have become the uniform of megachurch preachers in favor of deck shoes, a plaid shirt, and tan slacks in need of ironing.

Gregory's life as a Baptist pastor began early, before he was fully a man. He was preaching at 16 and, as a 20-year-old junior at Baylor University, became pastor of Edgefield Baptist Church in Waco in 1968.

"Over the next quarter century, more happened to me than I would have ever thought could have happened to me in several lifetimes. I can't even express it."

Bookish, shy and slight of build, Gregory was an unlikely candidate for preaching fame. His fast track to the pastorate cost him, compressing his adolescence and young adulthood into too few years. He had "no real teenage or young-adult life," Gregory recently told Texas Monthly magazine.

But his preaching prowess was already evident, and Edgefield Baptist -- like the other churches that would follow -- grew rapidly under its young pastor, nearly tripling during his short pastorate. Then it was on to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, 90 miles north, and another student pastorate in the rural town of Acton.

In a manner some say foreshadowed his sudden exit two decades later from First Baptist of Dallas, Gregory abruptly resigned the Acton church during a Wednesday night service in 1971. He later blamed depression and burn-out.

He returned apologetically to the Acton pastorate several months later. After graduating from Southwestern, we went back to Baylor for his doctorate and to serve two more churches -- Cottonwood Baptist Church in rural Falls County (1974-75) and Emmanuel Baptist Church in inner-city Waco (1975-77).

His next move, to Gambrell Street Baptist in the shadow of Southwestern Seminary, propelled him into the Baptist fast lane. Preaching weekly to seminary students and faculty -- including President Russell Dilday -- Gregory immediately attracted the committed and the curious.

First-time visitors to a Gambrell Street worship service typically would quickly scan the platform to determine which of the handful of staff members was the talented new pastor, usually a simple process of elimination. The diminutive Gregory, with Chaplinesque mustache and thick glasses, was usually the first one eliminated. Perhaps he was there to bring the Sunday school report but certainly not the sermon.

But when he strode into the pulpit to preach, surprise quickly turned to awe as he opened his mouth, unleashing his most potent ministerial tool -- the Voice. It was a rich, booming bass that didn't fit his frame but would become his trademark, recalling masterful pulpitcers of centuries past, such as Gregory's idol, Charles Hadden Spurgeon.

Attendance at the small, neighborhood congregation skyrocketed from 400 to 1,200 during Gregory's five years. There would be bigger churches and broader fame in his future. But Gregory concedes it was at Gambrell Street that he was at his best.

"I didn't have national notoriety. The church wasn't politicized. We had a good time. ... I think those were good years, formative years of study, leadership and challenge."

It was also, he admits, a hard time, trying to manage burgeoning growth with only three full-time staff members. "By the same proportion of staff to people," he said with a hearty laugh, "we should have had 12 staff members at First Baptist of Dallas" -- not 300.

Gregory laughs easily, at times it seems uncontrollably. Once a master of ministerial decorum and seriousness,

he now sports an uninhibited manner that suggests a tremendous burden has been lifted. Gregory laughs longest when he recounts his tumultuous days at First Baptist and the eccentricities of the legendary Criswell.

"The only way I survived the 21 months was to sit back, even while I was there, and just look at some of the lunacies. Because of the sheer size, the program, the personnel interactions, I really started detaching from it and laughing. I don't think anyone could survive if they took it with an ultimate seriousness."

Gregory's book paints an unflattering picture of the "Great White Father," as Gregory and others call Criswell. The venerable patriarch of Baptist preachers is depicted as out of touch with the city and church that made him great. But Gregory retains a schooled reverence for the man.

"I don't have any personal bitterness against Criswell. He is who he is. To me he's like Mt. Everest. And saying, 'I just don't like that mountain,' just doesn't make much sense. ... He's a man of great depth in some areas and corresponding peculiarities in some others."

"There are parts of the old gentleman I will always admire. But, like many great men, there are also shadowed parts that have contributed to a tragedy in the institution and in my own life."

After Gregory resigned Sept. 30, 1992, leaders of First Baptist asked him to reconsider. He finally convinced them the decision was irrevocable. Since then Gregory has been locked in a long-distance feud with embarrassed and embittered church leaders over why he left. He says they have circulated false rumors to discredit him.

Criswell supporters have waited anxiously for Gregory's book to debut, fearing he would trash the venerable pastor and the church. A few church members tried to sneak into a private June press conference at which Gregory described the book, and others impersonated reporters to try to get advance copies, according to the publisher, the Summit Group.

"There were some Criswellites who tried to shellac me with being a grasping young man who couldn't wait to get my hands on the whole thing," Gregory said. "Nothing could have been further from the fact. I rather enjoyed W. A.'s company, his banter, his persona. He's larger than life, very entertaining. But the fact was it was impossible to lead the church while the church had ambiguity about what was going on."

Gregory likened the situation to the Dallas Cowboys in 1989, when new owner Jerry Jones replaced legendary coach Tom Landry with Jimmy Johnson, who later led the Cowboys to two Super Bowl victories. "Suppose Tom Landry had stayed down the hall as senior coach, and at every practice was present looking over Jimmy Johnson's shoulder and saying, 'We didn't run the play that way when I was coach.'"

Boys growing up in Texas dream of playing quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys. And budding preacher boys – although they won't all admit it – dream of commanding the pulpit at First Baptist Church of Dallas. Most surrender that dream to more earthbound realities.

But by the time Gregory was pastor of Gambrell Street, Baptist wonks already were talking about him as a possible successor for Criswell, then in his fourth decade at First Baptist. The thought had occurred to Gregory too, but much earlier.

As a teenager with a calling to preach, Gregory occasionally drove to Dallas to hear the Baptist icon. Later the idea that Dallas might be his destiny began to take shape.

"It's hard to say this without sounding ... arrogant or something, but I think very early in my ministry, in my early 20s or mid-20s, I had some sense of that when I read about (Criswell's predecessor George) Truett and Criswell and the place. But I would also say that left me. I became more interested in other directions."

Some who observed Gregory's ministry say he made career decisions to position himself to succeed Criswell, like leaving Gambrell Street in 1982 to teach preaching at Southwestern Seminary and later endorsing the reform movement of Southern Baptist fundamentalists and conservatives. But Gregory says such charges are off the mark.

"No, I don't think I made career choices or tried to posture myself for that. ... If I had been trying to posture myself to be more appealing to the First Baptist Church of Dallas I could have done a lot of things."

Gregory's move to Southwestern did launch him into a national arena. And when he delivered five impressive messages at the 1983 Southern Baptist Convention meeting, it propelled him on a meteoric rise to Baptist stardom.

"I virtually booked a decade out of that. It was crazy."

Fame brought new pressures. "People started calling from all over the country. 'We want you in New York.' 'We want you over in California.' I wasn't prepared for that. I felt I had an obligation to go everywhere."

He also was invited to be part of an unusual parade of preachers to fill in for Criswell during Sunday night services at First Baptist in 1983. The beauty pageant of sorts was used by Criswell to screen potential successors. Gregory wowed them, and he immediately became the odds-on favorite. He returned in 1984 for a four-month engagement. But church leaders balked at the idea of Criswell picking his own successor. Criswell seemed in no hurry to leave and nothing happened.

Gregory left Southwestern in 1985 to become pastor of Travis Avenue Baptist Church, Fort Worth's largest. He convinced the church to go on weekly television, which gave the new telegenic version of Gregory -- now without his mustache and sporting contact lenses -- even wider exposure. Observers said the makeover was designed to groom him for bigger things.

In 1990, with the SBC controversy approaching critical mass, Gregory endorsed the conservative candidate for SBC president and joined the inerrancy bandwagon. That move more than any other, Gregory said, was viewed as a calculated attempt to pass muster with the conservative forces at First Baptist, a mainstay of the inerrancy movement. But Gregory said those actions were unrelated to First Baptist, and he was under "the conscious impression" he was out of the running for Criswell's job.

"There have been people who have kind of remythologized my life, that I had this plan to wind up in Dallas. From inside my own life, that is very humorous. There were a number of things that really went the opposite way" -- such as consistently refusing to nominate conservative presidential candidates.

While his time at Travis Avenue would be regarded as successful by normal standards, some of the fun and fulfillment was gone out of the work, Gregory recalled. "By that time I was really spread out, traveling every week. There for a while Baptists couldn't have a barn-raising without Joel Gregory showing up. ... (And) the tensions in the denomination inevitably invaded Travis Ave."

Meanwhile, First Baptist had formed a committee to choose Criswell's successor. But the committee was at an impasse, divided between Gregory and Criswell's choice, O. S. Hawkins, pastor of First Baptist of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. The committee offered the position to a third candidate, James Merritt of suburban Atlanta, but withdrew when Merritt insisted that Criswell announce his departure date. Finally, after 27 months of wrangling, the committee agreed on Gregory.

But the long-awaited invitation from First Baptist didn't feel much like destiny calling, Gregory said. "I didn't have any strong sense of destiny when I went there." Rather it was the committee, he said, that seemed convinced. "They said, 'We feel like this is God.'"

It took the church longer to decide on Gregory than it took Gregory to decide the situation was unworkable. Twenty-two months after tearfully accepting the pastorate, he resigned -- again suddenly and on a Wednesday night. He walked out of the sanctuary Sept. 30 and into a new life that, for the first time in 30 years, lacked a pulpit.

Lingering over his morning coffee at Le Madeline, Gregory describes his new job with Greenwood-Mt. Olive Cemetery and Funeral Homes with the same seriousness and intensity that he formerly used to describe the mysteries of God.

"I counsel people about memorial estate planning, and that is the prearrangement of trusts for funeral services and the acquisition of indoor or outdoor property, mausoleum or cemetery lawn space." His voice is firm and full of conviction, suggesting he is pretty good at selling cemetery plots. He took the job "not because that was the only option, but that was available and respectable." Years of helping widowed parishioners make burial arrangements convinced him of the need to plan funerals, he said.

"The company has been very good to me," he said. He reportedly made \$45,000 last year -- not bad but a far cry from the estimated \$170,000 salary he was paid at First Baptist. Proceeds from his book, if there are any, will go into a trust fund to pay college costs for his two sons.

After Gregory left First Baptist, Criswell finally had his way, and O. S. Hawkins was quickly chosen to succeed Gregory. Criswell remains senior pastor and still preaches but less frequently.

A few months later, Gregory ran into Hawkins at La Madeleine. Hawkins was accompanied by his longtime friend Jack Graham, another young conservative Dallas pastor and rising Baptist star. All three grew up in Fort Worth — Gregory at Connell Baptist Church on the westside and Hawkins and Graham at Sagamore Hill Baptist Church on the eastside.

The three reportedly exchanged pleasantries. Gregory wished Hawkins well. According to Gregory, Hawkins told him that "because of what I endured there, some things have been made easy."

"I'm a member of a very small club who knows what he is facing," Gregory said. "... He is a very able man and leader."

Could Gregory ever return to a Baptist pulpit? "I haven't even addressed that," he said, but he added, "I've learned not to foreclose anything. I do not see myself having a place in Southern Baptist life. I think the stigma of divorce is still such in Southern Baptist life it's unlikely I would have a place at a Southern Baptist church or institution."

Perhaps in another denomination? Maybe, he said. But any return to the pastorate "would be altogether at the initiative of somebody else."

Even while at First Baptist, he noticed the fun was gone. "... I longed for earlier, simpler days when I would play dominoes with humble folk after Sunday night church, sit on a front porch and crank homemade ice cream with a deacon or crawl around in the attic of the church trying to fix the air conditioning," he wrote in his book.

He admittedly misses preaching, plying the gift of his youth in service to God. But church work no longer holds any allure.

"Asking me if I'm going to get involved in another church right now is like asking a man who just got washed up on the shore after nearly drowning if he wants to go back out for a swim," he told Texas Monthly, which profiled Gregory in its October issue.

He has dabbled in what he calls "homiletic consultation," tutoring preachers one on one in pulpit techniques. "That's one thing I wish I could do more of," he said.

Gregory is still looking for a church where he can worship without becoming a spectacle. "When I walk in any church in this area, it has been an event." He has visited Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran and Bible churches. "I hope to find what I want -- just somewhere to go and sit and worship in anonymity."

"A few people ask me if I've left Baptists. But I feel like they've left me. I feel like my whole world disappeared. That's a shock."

But Gregory admits no bitterness toward his Baptist brethren.

"I hope you can use this because I mean it," he concludes emphatically. "Southern Baptists have been good to Joel Gregory. My home church, Baylor, Southwestern and all the churches I served, all seven of them, have been good to Joel Gregory. I place no blame on Southern Baptists for anything disappointing in my own life and career."

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-- Marv Knox contributed to this story.

**'Seduction' of super-church pulpit
led to his downfall, Gregory says**

By Marv Knox

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Why would a gifted, ambitious preacher willfully walk away from the pinnacle of Baptist prestige?

Joel Gregory attempts to answer that question in "Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America's Super Church."

His new book about why he suddenly quit the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Dallas went on sale in late September, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the church's senior pastor and his nemesis, 84-year-old W. A. Criswell. Gregory claims the book is his story, but also the story of power and temptation among the nation's hugest churches.

"The stated and actual reason for my departure was the dysfunctional transition with the previous pastor of 48 years, the legendary Dr. W. A. Criswell," Gregory writes. "I had been promised a transition of 'a few months.' After two years, he had announced his intention to remain for two more. I quit."

Gregory, 46, fell far from the peak of Baptist power. Today he sells funerals door to door in Fort Worth, his hometown 30 miles west of Dallas.

The preacher had far to fall because he climbed so high. His ascent began in 1977, when he became pastor of Gambrell Street Baptist Church, next door to the mammoth Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. The church tripled in size by 1982, when he became an associate professor of preaching at the seminary. As a professor, he traveled the nation preaching at some of Southern Baptists' largest gatherings. Then, in 1985, he moved to the pastorate of Travis Avenue Baptist Church, the largest church in Fort Worth.

From Travis Avenue, Gregory admits, he was seduced by the allure of First Baptist Dallas. With 28,000 members, First Baptist is Southern Baptists' largest church. For almost 100 years, the church has had only two pastors -- legendary statesman George Truett and the already-mythic Criswell.

During the middle decades of Criswell's tenure, First Baptist and its pastor practically invented the concept of a megachurch -- a giant congregation with full-service staff, programs and facilities. It's the kind of church where U.S. presidents worship while in Dallas. It has more millionaires than most churches have members. It owns five blocks of downtown Dallas.

The trappings, the opportunity and the sense of destiny seduced Gregory to leave a thriving congregation in his hometown. The glittery brightness of First Baptist blinded him to the perils of accepting the job -- even when his longtime predecessor remained on the scene as senior pastor, even when respected friends warned him not to go.

"When Eve looked at the apple, she could scarcely have felt more ambivalence than I did in dealing with FBC," he admits.

Before Gregory accepted the post, in a meeting in Criswell's office Nov. 14, 1990, Criswell pledged to stay in the senior post "a few months ... just to keep things going," Gregory wrote. "It did not occur to me ... that I would be totally misled."

A short transition would be vital, Gregory contends, because of the importance of charting a course for the huge congregation. A new pastor only has 12 to 18 months to establish leadership in a church like First Baptist, he maintains. The downtown church had lost hundreds if not

thousands of members to suburban congregations, its facilities were in poor repair, its debt staggering and its sense of direction out of focus, he insists.

He soon realized his expectation of a transition of "a few months" wouldn't materialize. After 21 months, Criswell still shared preaching duties and "remained constantly visible at every occasion." Gregory came to believe he had not been hired to lead the church so much as to relieve enough of Criswell's load to allow the patriarch to reach his 50th anniversary at the church this fall.

In retrospect, Gregory says Criswell had no intention of leaving. In fact, the rumor that Criswell wants to die in the pulpit is true, Gregory said in an interview. "Absolutely. Absolutely. Literally."

To make matters worse, Gregory also felt the wrath of Criswell's wife, Betty, he says. Crediting her with the ouster of previous heirs apparents, such as James Bryant and Jimmy Draper, who outshone her husband, he claims she began to use the mighty influence of her large Sunday school class to foment discontent with his leadership.

Betty Criswell had wanted the church to call O. S. Hawkins, pastor of First Baptist Church of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., an outgoing, personable preacher whose personality is strikingly similar to her husband's, Gregory claims. The bond between the Criswells and Hawkins had been sealed before the search committee settled on Gregory, when Criswell dreamed he was to choose Hawkins to succeed him.

"The worst-kept secret at First was Mrs. Criswell's desire that O. S. Hawkins become the pastor," Gregory says. Hawkins "was the man of Criswell's vision, an affable, friendly 'people person' whose interpersonal skills and pastoral dynamics had propelled him to the front rank of young fundamentalist leaders."

Indeed, 11 months after Gregory resigned, the church elected Hawkins as pastor, to the obvious delight of the Criswells.

Gregory said he did not receive such warmth from First Baptist's first couple. "Criswell and his wife, Betty, had been undermining me since I set foot in the place," he asserts.

Criswell second-guessed Gregory's decisions in staff meetings, blocked his complete access to church membership and threatened to "take back" the congregation, he says. And even though significant numbers of lay leaders in the church favored Gregory's pastorate, the aura of Criswell's authority proved impenetrable, he adds.

The event that precipitated Gregory's resignation, he said in an interview, was "a throwaway line" from Criswell six weeks earlier. In a committee meeting, Criswell casually referred to his 50th anniversary, then two years away. Gregory met with church leaders and told them two more years was unacceptable, he wrote, but the leaders refused to take action and suggested Gregory confront Criswell.

Gregory did, complaining about four factors: Criswell's criticisms to staff, Betty Criswell's criticisms, Criswell's refusal to vacate his office, and the shared preaching schedule. Criswell's response? "Ambiguity, ambiguity," Gregory said.

"I began to see the Catch-22 for what it was," he writes. "The only way for the whole thing to work would be a voluntary resignation by Criswell. By that time, I knew that he would not give

up anything not taken from him. The lay leaders would not fire him, and I was not about to sacrifice myself in a no-win situation that would brutalize me, enrage Mrs. Criswell, make W. A. a martyr, raise hell in the church, make headlines in the papers and polarize the entire conservative wing of the 16 million-member denomination.

"The power and glory of pastoring the big kahuna was not worth it to me."

So Gregory stepped to the podium on Wednesday night, Sept. 23, 1992, and quit. Escorted by security guards, he left the building and has not returned since.

Most First Baptist leaders either declined to talk about Gregory's charges or disputed them outright.

"No one's going to say anything (officially) about it," says Tim Hedquist, the church's administrator. "We just don't have any comment. ... We just don't think there's any value in it."

Ralph Pulley, vice chairman of the search committee that called Gregory, stresses the church's focus is on honoring the Criswells' 50 years with the church and celebrating the first anniversary of its new pastor.

"All of that is past history," Pulley says of Gregory's assertion that he had to quit because of Criswell's intransigence. "We've got so many exciting things going under Dr. Hawkins' leadership, and we're not going to be involved in responding to Dr. Gregory's book," adds Pulley.

But Criswell himself claims Gregory is wrong. In a Fort Worth Star-Telegram story, he insists he supported Gregory. "Before God, I did everything in my power to help him before, during and after what happened. I tried everything."

And nobody reneged on a promise that Criswell would move out of Gregory's way "in a few months," says Ken Stohner, secretary of the search committee that brought Gregory to the church.

"The committee itself never discussed that issue and never made that representation to Joel," Stohner says. "I cannot ascertain what any individual would have said to Joel, but certainly the committee never made that promise."

"Neither the search committee nor Dr. Criswell to my knowledge ever promised Joel Gregory that Dr. Criswell would only be here two to three months. That is a false premise he based his book on," adds Jack Pogue, Criswell's business partner and one of the pastor's closest friends.

For his part, Gregory says Criswell and his supporters simply are not telling the truth.

"Dr. Criswell and those around him are giving a revisionist history that even the people in the pew by the thousands know is not the case," he says in response to his accusers. "They know that there wasn't supposed to be a four-year transition. I never would have gone under those conditions. I knew it would be dicey even trying it for a few months."

As evidence, he points to a 1989 letter in which Criswell promises to move his office to the church's Criswell College in exchange for a large financial gift, which was made by the H. L. Hunt family. He also notes leaders in the church didn't try to deny their pledge of a short transition when he met with them a month before his resignation.

"All this is revisionism to protect Criswell's presence, power and position," Gregory charged. Other theories abound to explain Gregory's sudden resignation:

— Since Gregory left First Church, the Baptist grapevine has buzzed with the rumor that he

was having an affair. Gregory doesn't write about the rumor in his book, but he vigorously denies the charge in interviews.

Gregory and his first wife, Linda, ended their 26-year marriage last year due to "long-term differences in our understanding of marital roles." He has little else to say about his divorce or his remarriage in July to Sherry Lemon, 41, whom he met while pastor at Travis Avenue. But he denies there was anything improper in the relationship. Their first date -- to a concert in July 1993 -- was his first outing with a woman since his separation three months earlier, he insisted.

Rumors of a moral lapse are part of "an orchestrated campaign of defamation against me from the highest circles of the church," Gregory claimed. "When pressed for evidence, they give none because there is none."

-- An article in the October issue of Texas Monthly suggests Gregory suffers from depression, and that his resignation mirrors a time early in his ministry when he suddenly quit a Baptist church in Acton, Texas, due to ministerial burnout.

Gregory said he is "mystified" by the article, which he said paints him as an "episodic depressant" -- subject to bouts of mental, emotional and spiritual fatigue that render him incapable of leadership. Such a reading varies from his own view and that of First Baptist, he said.

-- Criswell confidant Jack Pogue -- and others -- say Gregory couldn't relate to people. Unlike Criswell, who mingles with people at all times, Gregory is an introvert, Pogue said. "You can't be that way and be pastor of a major church."

Gregory admits he isn't a gregarious extrovert like Criswell. But he noted no one could get to know all 28,000 members of the church.

-- Gregory couldn't handle the pressure of big business, Pogue suggested. First Baptist isn't just a church. It owns a college, two schools, a radio station, a homeless shelter and mission churches. "Only people who have business ability can do this thing," Pogue says. "He just drowned in it."

Gregory acknowledges the job's immensity but says the reason he couldn't lead was Criswell wouldn't get out of the way. "Defections from the church were like the enormous debt; they would not be laid at the feet of Old Teflon but sooner or later be attached to me," Gregory said.

-- It was a mistake from the beginning, some insist. "We chose to go outside the will of God," Pogue admitted. First Baptist should have hired Hawkins, not Gregory, to begin with, Pogue said. "Dr. Criswell absolutely had a vision about O. S. Hawkins," Pogue recalled. "I'll go to my grave believing Dr. Criswell was right about that. In all fairness to Joel, because we were out of the will of God, he didn't have a chance."

Was it God's will for Gregory to go to First Baptist? "I can't say that it was or wasn't," Gregory mused. But the search committee was convinced it was, he added. "They ... said, 'We feel like this is God.'"

Was it God's will for Gregory to fail? "I think there was an inevitability that something like what happened to me would have happened there," he said in an interview. Some church members, and even Hawkins, have told Gregory his travail has made it easier for the church to move on, he reported.

"Where God's will fit into my experience with First Baptist Church of Dallas belongs to a higher venue than presently available," Gregory wrote in the book. "I have yet to learn how God's will directed my days at First Baptist, although I believe such illumination will someday come my way."

Despite their differences, Gregory said his relationship with Criswell was not hostile. "One on one, we had a respectful, even prayerful, relationship. I don't think we ever parted his office or mine that we didn't have prayer together. I don't have any personal bitterness against Criswell. He is who he is. To me he's like Mt. Everest. And saying, 'I just don't like that mountain,' just doesn't make much sense. ... He's a man of great depth in some areas and corresponding peculiarities in some others."

Regardless of who's to blame for the bungled transition and failed pastorate, and despite the personal damage to Gregory or Criswell, the episode inflicted the worst injury on First Baptist, Gregory says. "The loser was not Criswell or Gregory," he writes, "but the good people of the church."

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Excerpts from "Too Great a Temptation: The Seductive Power of America's Super Church."

– "First Baptist breathes the spirit of old Dallas. Power and money are taken for granted. ... However spiritual an aspirant to that pulpit might have been, it was impossible to separate the church from its setting. Every material security, emolument, perquisite and fetish that a powerful city could offer belonged to the pastor of its biggest church. ... The church is Dallas. Dallas is the church."

– "I never met any finer individuals than the Christians at First. ... Yet collectively, the people of First Dallas had created an icon in Criswell, a man whom they venerated to the point of worship. This shot the entire church through with a spiritual vertigo."

– "What Criswell believes he believes with all his heart at that moment. Having observed him invent reality by the yard, however, I grew somewhat skeptical."

– "Talking with Criswell was often to enter a fairy tale land in which reality was whatever he felt at the moment. ... Reality is the reality of that moment."

-- "Criswell ultimately guaranteed the failure of anyone who attempted to follow him. ... When it came to authority, he wanted it all. When it came to responsibility, this Teflon titan wanted me to have it all."

– "To say that First Baptist had a high identity with the Republican Party is to say that fish have a high identity with the ocean. If there were Democrats in the church, they could have gathered in a janitor's closet."

Gregory says his Dallas experience teaches about pitfalls of megachurch

DALLAS (ABP) – America's megachurches face "a pastoral crisis" in the next decade, says Joel Gregory, and he hopes other large congregations will learn from his failed attempt to succeed the legendary W. A. Criswell at the 28,000-member First Baptist Church of Dallas.

In the closing chapter of his book, "Too Great a Temptation," Gregory warns of pitfalls that can befall megachurches.

"Church growth experts feel that the decade ahead will witness the growth of more larger churches in North America than ever before. Is this development to be welcomed or feared?" Gregory writes.

Size alone is neither bad nor good, Gregory says. "There is more to it than that." But, he adds, the large church has its own special dangers.

Gregory says the real danger is the "addiction to bigness" that drives the church-growth movement, which can "give way to triumphalism, believing our own press releases about being 'the greatest church in the world.' Then we are prey to institutional hubris."

First Baptist Church of Dallas "stands as a striking illustration of this process," Gregory said. "I never met any finer individuals than the Christians at First. ... Yet collectively, the people of First Dallas had created an icon in Criswell, a man whom they venerated to the point of worship. This shot the entire church through with spiritual vertigo."

The preoccupation with bigness can skew the Bible's definition of success, Gregory adds.

"Jesus made it clear that the greatest Christian would be servant of them all," he says. "To me, size and servanthood are linked together in the life of a church. When a church becomes so large that it is master rather than servant, it has become too large."

Gregory says he found himself acting more like mayor or governor than pastor at the Dallas church. The church of Jesus Christ should reflect "simple structure," he writes. "Simple does not have to mean small, but simple does mean understandable, workable and responsive. When church structures become so complex that they no longer work, cannot be understood and do not respond, they have ceased to be what Jesus founded."

Churches also should not permit size to "enable individual believers to hide within the anonymity of large, impersonal structures," Gregory says. The most effective large churches balance large celebrative services with small group meetings. "The ideal is a church large enough to meet a person's needs but small enough to miss that person when he or she is not there."

A "cardinal principle" in church-growth literature is "strong pastoral leadership," Gregory says. There is a difference, however, between "leading" and "driving," he adds, a distinction that can become blurred in the authoritarian leadership model.

Criswell said "a committee-run church is a dead church" and that he "expected the pastor to be master," Gregory says. "This may work so long as the pastor himself is subject to another Master. When ego, competition, recognition and manipulation invade, the pastor as master no longer works for the cause of Christ."

Gregory says the pastor should be "first among equals," and that both small and large churches should establish checks and balances on pastoral authority. The larger the church, the more strictly accountable the pastor should be to the congregation's deacon board. Ironically, he notes, in smaller churches pastors more often find themselves under the tyranny of a deacon board.

"Pastors of lesser-sized churches should be extended more freedom while the pastors of larger churches should be held to a stricter accountability," he writes.

Megachurches should also have a definite policy of pastoral succession initiated and adopted by the congregation. In no case should a younger pastor be called upon to serve alongside the senior pastor. Megachurches need interim periods between pastors more than smaller churches, he says.

Gregory also advises that pastors should have a written contractual relationship with churches, that discretionary funds for pastoral use be prohibited and that pastoral salaries be disclosed.

Gregory said he hid his \$165,000 annual salary at First Baptist because of the common guise that "the average church member would not understand it." In retrospect, however, he adds: "In a Baptist church, every member is a member of the board of directors. No corporate board would be kept in the dark concerning the compensation of the CEO."

Gregory says he understands the dread a pastor feels at the prospect of a critic challenging a compensation package on the floor of a church business meeting, but "if a small cadre of naysayers can knock you out of the saddle, you are not in the saddle and you might as well find out before the old horse bucks you off."

Gregory says his experience has not left him cynical about the church but realistic about its flaws. The church "is an institution divine in its original foundation but tethered to this celestial ball by every frailty to which humans are subject," he writes. "Covetousness, littleness, jealousy, lust for power, sacrilege and a hundred other demons all lurk within the hallways."

"The church on earth at its best is a crippled institution that God may elect to use for his purposes," Gregory says.

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-- By Bob Allen

**Sunday School Board trustees
take hard look at financial status**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) – Despite a projected budget deficit this year of more than \$3.7 million, trustees of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board adopted a 1994-95 budget that anticipates an overage of almost the same amount.

The \$250,480,000 budget for next year, adopted by trustees Sept. 27, projects \$3,374,000 in funds provided from operations -- what normally would be called profit -- for the non-profit agency.

Board finances was the major topic of discussion during the trustees' Sept. 26-28 meeting in Nashville. During that meeting trustees also learned of a plan to "downsize" the number of board trustees from 93 to 55 by the year 2000 and voted to close four Baptist Book Stores.

Board officials expressed optimism that the financial situation of Southern Baptists' publishing board will "turn around" beginning next year.

The board expressed similar optimism last year, predicting product sales would jump 16 percent in 1994. Instead, said President James Draper, the board remains in a 13-year trend of flat or declining sales of church literature, constituting a "major concern."

Draper predicted changes, including a redesigned adult and youth Life and Work curriculum, remodeling of Baptist Book Stores and upgrades in computer ordering systems, "will pay off in the future."

Total revenue for 1993-94 is up about \$16 million over last year, but will fall short of the budget by about \$13 million, according to Ted Warren, vice president for the board's business support group and chief financial officer. Revenue for the 1993-94 year, which ends Sept. 30, is projected around \$224 million, against a budget of nearly \$238 million, Warren said.

In his report to trustees, Draper acknowledged the board "has a cash flow problem, but we're not broke."

Draper projected the loss of revenue will be reversed by next year, with all loans paid off by 1997. Draper said the board has borrowed money, with trustee approval, for investments in curriculum research and changes, expenses related to Baptist Book Stores -- such as a computer system, remodeling and relocation of stores -- and in the development of "Secret Adventures," a family-oriented video series.

The board elected to borrow money "rather than use reserves because we could borrow money at a lower interest rate than our reserve funds were earning," Draper said.

The board had about \$13.6 million in outstanding loans as of Sept. 15, but has reserve funds of \$49.9 million, Draper said.

Draper, who began his fourth year as president in August, said the board's goal is profitability. "We realize that year in and year out we can't spend more money than we bring in," he said.

While the bottom line is profit, the primary priority of the board is ministry, Draper added, acknowledging there is a tension between ministry and business.

"If we don't have any money, we don't have any ministry. The more money we have, the more ministry we can do. But ministry comes first," Draper said.

In his report, Draper characterized his tenure as years marked by change. Those changes

have caused a perception of chaos, he said, but they were needed to meet the demands of today's world.

Concerning staff changes Draper reported, "We are nearing the end of this massive process of restructuring." Staff cuts have resulted in 121 less employees than when he came -- or 1,646 rather than 1,767 -- a 6.8 percent reduction. Draper said the number of employees will continue to change as announced staff cuts become effective and as further "organizational fine tuning" is conducted.

During three years of downsizing and reorganization, the board has lost 599 employees to termination or retirement, while 480 employees have been hired to new or reorganized positions, creating a net loss of 121 employees.

In other business, Tommy French of Louisiana reported on a plan which would reduce the trustee board to 55 members by the year 2000. French chaired a committee a few years ago when the board, as did other SBC agencies, began to eliminate "local members."

French told trustees the board spends about \$185,000 a year in meetings for trustees. Cutting the number of trustees to 55 would reduce costs to the board and give the board "a more workable number," he said.

Currently, a state with 20,000 Southern Baptists has one trustee, with an additional trustee for every 250,000 church members. The new plan would keep the 20,000 minimum in place, but would add a trustee for every additional 500,000 members.

The plan, if approved by the trustees in February, would be enacted through attrition, resulting in the desired number of 55 by the year 2000, French said. The plan would also need approval from the SBC Executive Committee and Southern Baptist Convention messengers during annual session.

Trustees were told Bill Taylor, executive pastor of North Phoenix Baptist Church in Phoenix, Ariz., was hired as director of the Bible teaching-reaching division, replacing the retiring Harry Piland.

Draper called Taylor the "premier minister of education in America today." In addition to the Phoenix church, the 55-year-old Taylor has served Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas, University Baptist Church in Coral Gables, Fla., Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., and Memorial Baptist Church in Metairie, La. A Texas native, Taylor holds a degrees from Howard Payne University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The decision to close book stores in Vancouver, Wash., Columbus, Ohio; Phoenix, Ariz.; and the south side of Atlanta was opposed by some board members, primarily those in the affected states.

According to Chuck Wilson, vice president of trade and retail markets, the decision was based on a long history of poor financial performance at the four stores. He noted that the stores in question derive 40-50 percent of their revenue from mail-order business, a channel that will continue to be available to customers in those areas.

The recommendation passed with three dissenting votes.

In other business trustees approved a 3 percent increase over current church literature prices

and several recommendations concerning specific board products. Also, trustees approved creating a new periodical, "Special Education Today," to meet the needs of church leaders and families of persons with handicaps and disabilities.

Trustees also adopted six bylaw changes and dealt with referrals from messengers at the 1994 SBC in Orlando. No specific actions were taken on the referrals.

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-- By Lonnie Wilkey and Connie Davis

Alliance directors receive report on human sexuality

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) – Directors of the Alliance of Baptists recommitted the organization as "a fellowship and ministry of inclusiveness," receiving but not adopting a report by a task force on human sexuality, at a Sept. 22-24 meeting at First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

The board of directors also delayed action on a motion not to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or other factors when selecting Alliance employees or directors.

The board focused on the report from its Task Force on Human Sexuality, which developed a working statement on how the Alliance should relate to persons having same-sex attractions.

The draft report does not advocate homosexuality as a lifestyle but encourages Alliance congregations to refrain from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Designed to promote dialogue, the report acknowledges that well-informed and well-intentioned Baptists can differ on biblical interpretation, but says churches should not take stands that discriminate or foster fear.

The board did not adopt the written statement as policy, as some anticipated, but voted, with one negative vote, to receive it "with profound gratitude."

The motion, offered by Welton Gaddy of Monroe, La., also affirms that the board of directors: "covenant to engage in an ongoing discussion of the issues raised in the report; continue to sponsor workshops and other public forums on the fundamental truths affirmed in that report; utilize the substance of that report in the development of educational materials which will be available to all who request them; make available to any who ask for it the document produced by the Task Force clearly identified as a study document ... and use this action as an occasion for recommitting ourselves to a fellowship and ministry of inclusiveness."

Steve Henderson of Austin, Texas, also made a motion that the board adopt a policy statement affirming that the Alliance "in the practice of hiring staff and selecting members of the Board, welcomes sisters and brothers in Christ without regard to class, gender, marital status, race or sexual orientation."

Paula Dempsey of Mars Hill, N.C., an Alliance officer, recommended the motion be referred

to the executive committee so that it could be handled in accordance with the Alliance constitution and bylaws. The motion to refer was approved by a 15-14 vote.

The Alliance of Baptists formed in 1986 to defend traditional Baptist principles its founders believed would erode under fundamental-conservative domination of the Southern Baptist Convention. Originally called the Southern Baptist Alliance, the group has in recent years adopted a more ecumenical bent -- emphasizing dialogue with kindred groups -- and been dwarfed in size by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the dominant expression of the old-SBC moderate perspective.

In other action, the Alliance board:

– Honored Stan Hastey and Jeanette Holt for five years of service to the Alliance. After 15 years with the Baptist Joint Committee, Hastey became executive director of the Alliance in January 1989. Holt, who also was with the BJC for seven years, has served as associate director. The board hosted a banquet in their honor at the First Baptist Church in Silver Spring, Md.

-- Adopted \$68,700 as its 1995 Global Mission Offering goal.

– Heard an update on the 1995 convocation to be held March 3-5 at Vienna Baptist Church in Vienna, Va.

-- Agreed to recommend a 1995 budget of \$240,626, which will be voted on in March;

– Elected Rebecca Wall of Winston-Salem, N.C., to the board, filling the unexpired term of Wanny Hogewood of Charlotte, N.C.

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Past SBC president endorses Christian Coalition mailing

By Mark Wingfield

CHESAPEAKE, Va. (ABP) -- A former president of the Southern Baptist Convention has joined televangelist Pat Robertson in urging churches nationwide to help get out the vote in next month's elections.

A recent letter to church leaders from Robertson's Christian Coalition is signed by Robertson; Ed Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston and immediate past president of the SBC; and James Kennedy, president of Coral Ridge Ministries in Florida.

Young's signature line identifies him as "Former President, Southern Baptist Convention."

The letter urges church leaders to request two things: materials to help register Christian voters and copies of the Christian Coalition's "Voter Guides."

"On November 8th, the entire U.S. House of Representatives, one third of the U.S. Senate and most governors must face the voters," the letter explains. "These elections will have a

profound impact on the future course of our nation."

The letter describes plans for a "massive Christian voter registration and education effort."

The letter also pledges that the Christian Coalition materials do not endorse any candidate and are in compliance with Internal Revenue Service guidelines for non-profit organizations.

A sample "Voter Guide" enclosed with the mailing shows a comparison between "Candidate A" and "Candidate B" in a particular race, noting whether each candidate "supports" or "opposes" certain issues.

Issues included in the surveys are "increased federal income taxes," "increased state income taxes," "balanced budget amendment," "abortion on demand," "taxpayer funding for abortions," "outcome-based education," "parental choice in education (vouchers)," "voluntary prayer in public schools," "term limits for Congress," "homosexuals in the military," "banning ownership of legal firearms" and "riverboat casino gambling."

A press spokeswoman at Christian Coalition's national headquarters in Chesapeake, Va., could not say how many copies of the letter with Young's signature had been mailed or whether any SBC figures had signed similar letters.

Earlier this fall, the Christian Coalition mailed out a reported 5 million large packets titled "Official 1994 National Referendum on the Clinton Presidency." These packets included a survey for "eligible Christian voters" to express their opinions on 17 questions.

Among questions on this survey: "Would you be more likely or less likely to vote for a politician who supported President Clinton's \$273 billion in spending increases?" and "Would you be more or less likely to vote for a politician who supported President Clinton's proposal to use your tax money to pay for abortions?"

The material says the Christian Coalition has a goal of distributing 40 million "Congressional Scorecards" before the November elections. These scorecards are an enlarged version of the "Voter Guides" mentioned in Young's letter.

The "Congressional Scorecards" report the voting record of all U.S. senators and representatives on 14 issues described in such terms as "Clinton Tax-and-Spend Budget Plan" and "Promoting Homosexuality to School Children."

Names of Republican congressmen are listed in all capital letters, while names of Democratic or independent congressmen are not.

Yet the scorecard also includes this disclaimer: "Christian Coalition does not advocate the election or defeat of any candidate and does not endorse any political party."

In his cover letter accompanying the survey packet, Robertson says too many elected officials talk about Christian values at home but go to Washington and support "the Clinton administration's radical social agenda."

"This scorecard will give America's Christian voters the facts they need to distinguish between good and misguided congressmen," Robertson explains.

Poll finds laypeople more satisfied than clergy with church's influence

GLENDALE, Calif. (ABP) -- People in the pew are considerably more optimistic about the influence of the church than are most of the pastors who lead those churches.

That's the finding of two new polls by the Barna Research Group of Glendale, Calif.

About half of all pastors of Protestant churches in the United States say the Christian church is not making a discernable difference in society. Overall, 41 percent of pastors say the church is having a limited impact and 3 percent say the church is "failing miserably."

Only 2 percent of pastors say the church is doing "tremendous, highly effective work." Another 41 percent believe the church is doing a "respectable, if not wholly successful job."

But a companion survey found 67 percent of American adults believe the clergy are doing an "excellent" or "good" job and 70 percent believe churches serve people's needs "very well" or "pretty well."

George Barna, president of Barna Research Group, said it appears that pastors have a different set of expectations than laypeople about what makes an effective church.

"For millions of individuals who are associated with churches, simply being able to attend or take advantage of church programs is seen as sufficient," Barna said. "Pastors, however, want their churches to be more than just a sponsor of 'feel-good' events. Many of them expressed their disappointment that people's lives do not seem to be noticeably changed by exposure to what the church has to offer."

The first survey, among 413 senior pastors of Protestant churches, has a margin of error of plus or minus 6 points, with a 95 percent confidence rate. The second survey, among 2,211 adults, has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points, with a 95 percent confidence rate.