

Associated Baptist Press

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December 15, 1994

**SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Historical Commission, SBC
Nashville, Tennessee**

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Stories of upheaval top SBC news in 1994

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- Upheaval in the Southern Baptist Convention topped a ranking of news stories of 1994 by editors of Baptist state papers.

Editors responding to a request to rank the top stories for the year overwhelmingly chose headlines about controversy and transition in the SBC, which is in its 15th year of a conservative power swing.

Four stories outdistanced the rest during the year:

The March 9 firing of president Russell Dilday by trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, was the year's top story, the editors said. Ranking second was the election of Florida pastor Jim Henry as SBC president last June. The SBC's action instructing its agencies to refuse contributions from the upstart Cooperative Baptist Fellowship ranked third.

The other big story was action in November by Texas Baptists to broaden their definition of the Cooperative Program beyond the traditional unified budget of the state convention and the SBC. With the change, Texas Baptists now also allow churches to restrict their gifts for in-state use only or channel money to selected non-SBC ventures including the Fellowship.

Collectively, those stories describe a year of upheaval in Baptist life. The Dilday firing brought the SBC controversy home for Texas Baptists, who were already studying ways to be more inclusive of moderates who feel disenfranchised by the denomination's conservative leaders. Backlash to the Dilday firing is credited for the overwhelming margin of victory for the proposal to redefine denominational support. Critics called the change a first step toward a dismantling of the SBC.

Henry's election, meanwhile, was seen as a rebuke of the conservative coalition which displaced moderates from control of the SBC by capturing its presidency every year since 1979. Though a conservative who in the past had endorsed the so-called "conservative resurgence" in the SBC, Henry was the candidate of choice for a younger generation of conservative leaders who advocate a return to a more open system of electing denominational leaders. He defeated Alabama pastor Fred Wolfe, who chairs the powerful SBC Executive Committee and represented the

old guard conservatives who have dominated convention leadership the past 15 years.

Even as conservative leaders struggled with dissent in their ranks, they put greater distance between the SBC and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a three-year-old alternative missions agency that has inherited the mantle of the SBC's moderate movement. By refusing Fellowship funds, SBC leaders hoped to hinder the organization from making inroads into Southern Baptist churches by stating clearly the denomination's leadership does not consider the CBF a friendly partner in mission efforts.

Those four stories overshadowed other news in editors' rankings. A distant fifth was the abrupt resignation of Florida editor Jack Brymer, who stepped down in August claiming "harassment" by members of the Florida Baptist Witness commission.

A record year in gifts to the SBC Cooperative Program following three straight years of decline tied for sixth with the March release of the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" document, which drew criticism against two SBC agency heads among its signers.

The August decision by Southern Seminary theology professor Molly Marshall to resign rather than face heresy charges initiated by President Albert Mohler ranked No. 8. Baptists' relief response to the civil war in Rwanda ranked ninth.

Rounding out the top 10 was recent action by Virginia conservatives to study forming their own state convention as an alternative to the moderate-controlled Baptist General Association of Virginia.

Other stories mentioned in editors' rankings were Ken Hemphill's election as president of Southwestern Seminary; the release of Joel Gregory's book "Too Great a Temptation;" a former Presbyterian minister's slaying of two people outside a Pensacola, Fla., abortion clinic; and a vote by trustees of Samford University declaring independence from the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

Twenty-two editors responded to the poll by Associated Baptist Press asking them to rank the year's top five stories in order of importance.

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Editors list rankings of 1994's top stories

(ABP) -- Associated Baptist Press polled Baptist state paper editors, asking them to rank their choices for 1994's top news stories. Editors were asked to rank five stories in order of importance from a list of suggestions or to write in their own selections. Twenty-two editors responded. The rankings were compiled by assigning five points for No. 1, four points for No. 2, and so on.

The firing of president Russell Dilday by trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary ranked first with 82 points. But only seven editors rated the Dilday firing their No. 1 pick. Six said the top story was Florida pastor Jim Henry's defeat of Alabama's Fred Wolfe in last June's SBC presidential race (70 points). Four others said the convention's action instructing its agencies to refuse gifts from the upstart Cooperative Baptist Fellowship ranked No. 1 (60 total points).

The top stories, with point totals, are ranked below. The number of editors ranking each story No. 1 is in parentheses.

1. Southwestern trustees fire Russell Dilday, 82 (7)
2. Jim Henry defeats Fred Wolfe for SBC presidency, 70 (6)

3. SBC instructs agencies to refuse funds from Fellowship, 60 (4)
4. Texas Baptists redefine Cooperative Program, 52 (2)
5. Florida Baptist Witness editor resigns, 14 (2)
6. Cooperative Program sets record for annual gifts, 12
Catholic, evangelical leaders sign historic document, 12
8. Molly Marshall resigns Southern after Mohler threatens firing, 10
9. War in Rwanda prompts relief response, 6
10. Virginia conservatives consider forming new state convention, 5 (1)
11. Southwestern trustees elect Ken Hemphill, 4
Joel Gregory's "Too Great a Temptation" released, 4
13. Former minister slays two outside Pensacola abortion clinic, 2
14. Samford University declares independence from Alabama Baptists, 1

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-- By Bob Allen

Leavell surprises seminary with December retirement

By Greg Warner

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- Landrum Leavell, 68, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary since 1975, stunned trustees and administrators alike Dec. 13 by announcing he will retire at the end of 1994.

Leavell told the seminary's trustee executive committee of his decision during their regular December meeting. "We had no idea it was coming in December," trustee chairman Ed Johnson told Associated Baptist Press.

The seminary's administrators likewise did not know the announcement was coming until moments before the meeting, and Leavell reportedly told family members only the night before.

"He wanted to be in control of the situation," said Johnson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Ocala, Fla. "He wanted to announce it on his terms."

Johnson said Leavell was upset last March when word leaked out that Leavell and the trustees had agreed he would retire by December 1996, soon after he turns 70. He has been discussing his retirement plans with trustees for some time.

"You have known for three years of my intention to retire before age 70," Leavell said in his statement to the executive committee Dec. 13. "You sent a committee to ask me to stay till age 70, and then go on a year-by-year basis. I was deeply gratified by this encouragement, but I am presently convinced that I am making the right decision today. This retirement will be effective Dec. 31, 1994."

Johnson said he was so surprised he later asked Leavell, "Did you mean to say 1995?"

Leavell agreed to the trustees' request to stay on as interim president until his replacement is found. He told the trustee committee he would be available "to continue as needed until you name a new president and will be pleased to help my successor become indoctrinated, if desired, for a stated period of time in his transition."

Johnson told ABP he hopes to appoint the search committee by Dec. 19. The 11-member committee will include nine trustees, including the trustee chairman, one faculty member and one student. It is unlikely a nominee could be selected in time for the trustees' next meeting in March, Johnson said, but a special board meeting could

be called once a recommendation is ready.

Among those frequently mentioned as possible successors to Leavell are Timothy George, dean of the Beeson Divinity School at Samford University; Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, Fla., and current president of the Southern Baptist Convention; Charles Kelley, professor of evangelism at New Orleans Seminary; and Richard Land, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission.

Henry, Kelley and Land are graduates of New Orleans Seminary, which now has 1,800 students.

Johnson said nobody has an inside track for the position. "I don't feel anybody on our board is committed to anyone at this point," he said.

Both Leavell and Johnson have insisted Leavell has not been under any pressure to retire.

While other Southern Baptist seminary presidents have had contentious relationships with their trustees, Leavell and New Orleans' board have been spared any major flare-ups over the years.

The Southern Baptist Convention's six seminaries have been at the heart of the 15-year struggle for control of the denomination. Since fundamental-conservatives gained the upper hand in the battle in 1979, they have been able to remove or replace four of the six seminary presidents.

Now the final two schools will be seeking new presidents at the same time. Milton Ferguson, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., plans to retire in July 1996, and trustees appointed a search committee last October. Once the positions are filled at New Orleans and Midwestern, the transition of seminary leadership will be complete.

In announcing his retirement, Leavell thanked trustees for their support.

"You have given me a free hand, within the trustee adopted guidelines, in the day-to-day administration of the institution," he said. "Together we have maintained a direction that has enabled us to become one of the world's largest, and maybe the most efficiently run, seminaries anywhere. It could not have been done without a united and cooperative board.

"I do not leave feeling the best days are past. It is my judgment that the future is as bright as sunlight, and that God has an ongoing purpose for NOBTS," Leavell said.

Under terms of the March agreement, Leavell planned to remain as chancellor of New Orleans after leaving the presidency. Although nothing was said about the chancellor's post in December, Johnson said "the offer would still be open." Johnson said he hopes Leavell will continue to help the seminary raise money.

Leavell came to the seminary from Wichita Falls, Texas, where he was pastor of First Baptist Church. In 1991 he established on the main campus Southern Baptists' first center for evangelism and church growth.

Leavell, a professor of evangelism, has taught at least one course every year since coming to the seminary. He earned a bachelor of arts degree in English from Mercer University in 1948 and completed two graduate degrees at New Orleans Seminary, the bachelor of divinity degree in 1951 and doctor of theology degree with a major in Greek New Testament in 1954.

He is a native of Newnan, Ga.

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FMB trustees approve vision, mission statements

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Trustees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board approved new vision and mission statements for their agency and celebrated a record-breaking year for missionary appointments during

their Dec. 12-14 meeting.

Board president Jerry Rankin called passage of the two statements "one of the most significant things" in his 18-month presidency. He said both were developed with the input of staff, missionaries and trustees.

The one-sentence vision statement -- apparently the board's first -- reads: "We will lead Southern Baptists to be on mission with God to bring all the people of the world to saving faith in Jesus Christ."

"Our vision can be nothing less than God's mission ...," said Rankin. "We must have a vision that identifies with the heart of God -- that all people come to a saving knowledge of him."

Such a "succinct, focused" document will "drive us into the future," he said.

The mission statement, which replaces an earlier one, "essentially defines what we do and how we do it," the president said.

The document reads: "The mission of the Foreign Mission Board, SBC, is to lead Southern Baptists in international missions efforts to evangelize the lost, disciple believers, develop churches and minister to people in need. Leading Southern Baptists is done by mobilizing prayer support, appointing missionaries, enlisting volunteers, channeling financial support and communicating how God is working overseas."

The old statement said: "The mission of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board is to encourage, channel and direct Southern Baptists' overseas missions efforts to evangelize the lost of the world, disciple, plan churches and minister to human needs in partnership with national Baptists and other Great Commission Christians."

Trustees took no action on a set of seven "basic principles." Although the list was distributed to board members, Rankin said officials want to "rethink" some of the "language" and ask trustees to approve it at a later time.

"There's total agreement on the principles, but we want everyone to be fully satisfied," he said later. "There is still some dissatisfaction over wording."

Rankin declined to cite specific problems but said they were not substantive, merely linguistic.

The principles as currently written are:

- (1) Our basic commitment is to the lordship of Jesus Christ and obedience to God's word.
- (2) Our basic belief is that Jesus Christ is God's only provision for salvation and people without personal faith in him are lost.
- (3) Our basic means of understanding and fulfilling God's mission is prayer.
- (4) Our basic purpose is to provide all people an opportunity to hear, understand and respond to the gospel in their own cultural context.
- (5) Our basic task is evangelism through proclamation, discipling, equipping and ministry that results in indigenous Baptist churches.
- (6) Our basic strategy is to send and support gifted, God-called missionaries who carry out the Great Commission with mutual respect, accountability and cooperation.
- (7) Our basic role is to lead and facilitate the international missionary involvement of Southern Baptists in cooperation with overseas Baptists and other Christians fulfilling the Great Commission.

Trustees' approval of 44 new missionaries Dec. 13 brings the number of overseas workers named this year to 534, more than in any previous year. The total breaks the previous record of 498, set last year. The board fields approximately 4,080 missionaries around the world.

Continuing a trend, short-term personnel -- those serving two years or less -- make up 279 of total appointments for 1994. In the past few years, that category has increased to provide much of the growth in Southern Baptists' overseas missions force. Additional short-term workers are expected to be assigned before Dec. 31.

Career and associate missionaries (those serving more than two years) numbered 255 this year, the highest annual total in seven years but below the record 304 set in 1985.

In his report to the board, Rankin paid tribute to an unusually large number of retiring staff members. Among them are Alan Compton, vice president for communications; Bob Ethridge, assistant vice president for strategy and marketing; Bob Stanley, director of news and information; Leland Webb, editor of the Commission magazine; Don Listrom, director of the missionary benefits and tax department; Clark Scanlon, director of the research and planning department; Truman Smith, senior family consultant in the missionary health department; Trudy English, associate to the area director for Middle America and Canada; and Judy Robertson, associate area director for East Asia.

"Our lives have been enriched and the kingdom advanced because of the faithful, dedicated service of each of these," Rankin said.

In other business, trustees:

-- allocated \$1,150,000 to participate in YouthLink 2000, a Southern Baptist Convention-wide effort to evangelize young people and mobilize them for service in the denomination;

-- declined to recommend a different time of the year for promotion of the annual Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions.

A motion at this year's SBC meeting, which was referred to both the FMB and the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, had asked trustees to consider alternative seasons for promotion of the foreign missions offering and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for Home Missions.

-- heard treasurer Carl Johnson describe 1994 as a financial "turnaround year" for the FMB because of increases in the 1993 Lottie Moon offering and in Southern Baptists' Cooperative Program unified budget. "We begin 1995 with financial optimism," Johnson said.

He declined to predict the outcome of the 1994 Lottie Moon offering, currently being promoted in churches and to be collected through next May.

"I'm encouraged the offering will do well," he said, citing an upswing in the U.S. economy and the "more positive things happening in the SBC and the Foreign Mission Board."

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