

# Associated Baptist Press

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Another issue of ABP is planned for Friday, Feb. 10.

## **Critics say Southwestern probation shows ATS bias against 'confessional' schools**

By Bob Allen

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- The two-year probation assessed Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary by a major accrediting agency has renewed criticism that the agency discriminates against conservative schools.

Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram that the Association of Theological Schools discriminates against seminaries that require professors to sign professions of faith. He charged ATS with disregard "for the freedom of a confessional people to be self-determining and faithful to their most cherished belief," the newspaper reported Feb. 4.

However, in the Jan. 27 letter to Southwestern announcing probation, the accrediting agency's associate director said the seminary's confessional nature had nothing to do with probation.

ATS, Southwestern's primary accrediting agency, imposed probation Jan. 6, saying trustees violated school procedures when they fired President Russell Dilday in March 1994 and have impeded academic freedom at the Fort Worth, Texas, school. Conservative trustees fired Dilday charging he was too sympathetic to moderate Southern Baptists and had tried to block conservative reforms at the 3,117-student school, the largest of the Southern Baptist Convention's six seminaries.

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., issued a statement charging the ATS decision "appears to be rooted in a context of retribution, rather than in a redemptive and constructive intention."

Mohler also delivered a one-hour speech to the Fellowship of Evangelical Seminary Presidents in early January in which he accused ATS of being insensitive to conservative schools that demand their professors adhere to doctrinal requirements.

Mohler said in an interview that a text of his speech was unavailable but that his remarks to the presidents' group focused on a "major divide among theological institutions" between schools that are "confessional and those that are non-confessional."

Mohler charged that ATS's "prevailing understanding of theological education," reflected in its committee appointments, literature and actions in recent years, "has been inclined toward the non-confessional model of theological education."

One example centers on "the nature of academic freedom in an academic environment," said Mohler.

"Non-confessional institutions may exhibit an understanding of academic freedom that is tied to the larger secular academy," he said, which is "an understanding of academic freedom which respects no confessional parameters."

"Confessional institutions, on the other hand, must understand academic freedom first in terms of fidelity to the confession and then in terms of the professor's legitimate freedom effectively to teach within those parameters," Mohler said. "Academic freedom in a confessional institution cannot mean freedom to violate the confessional parameters."

Mohler said he believes the accrediting agency's "explicit standards" for academic freedom "are met and exceeded by all six of the Southern Baptist seminaries," but that a problem lies "with the "interpretation and implementation" of those standards.

"I believe there is a proper role for accreditation and Southern Baptists must respect the need for a proper model of accreditation, even as Southern Baptists must demand that such a model respect our denominational convictions," Mohler said.

But most seminaries accredited by ATS are "confessional," and "the ATS standards support the confessional nature of these theological schools," said ATS Associate Director Daniel Aleshire in his Jan. 27 letter to Southwestern President Ken Hemphill.

"The confessional nature of Southwestern Seminary and the board's authority to terminate the president are not the reasons for the ATS action," Aleshire wrote in the letter, obtained by Associated Baptist Press.

Aleshire told Hemphill ATS's "central concern" is that the seminary's board of trustees "appears to be either unaware of or unresponsive to ATS understandings of appropriate governance of a theological school."

Over a period of "several years," trustees failed to implement their own procedures for presidential evaluation, Aleshire wrote, and decisions regarding the hiring or promotion of faculty "created the persistent perception that published criteria and the formally adopted confessional statement have not always been carefully followed."

The trustee violations constitute "a serious inadequacy" which probation is intended to correct, he said.

Southwestern's probation has rekindled talk of a new accrediting agency, formed by the SBC seminaries and other evangelical schools as an alternative to ATS. Similar suggestions surfaced a few years ago when Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary was placed on probation because of trustees actions.

In his interview with ABP, however, Mohler stopped short of calling for a new accrediting agency. "It is my hope that we can work within the ATS toward a common understanding which respects the legitimate concerns of accrediting standards and the absolutely necessary role of confessional fidelity within Southern Baptist seminaries," Mohler said.

Neither Patterson nor Aleshire could be reached for further comment.

Southeastern's probation stemmed from the 1987 resignation of President Randall Lolley. Lolley quit, along with several other top administrators, after trustees instituted changes to ensure that only biblical inerrantists were added to the faculty.

In 1990, a motion was made at the SBC annual meeting to study the feasibility of establishing a denominational accrediting agency. The motion was referred to the SBC Education Commission, which

recommended against forming any accrediting body that would "interfere with or attempt to substitute for the existing good relations with the regional accrediting associations."

Meanwhile, the SBC Executive Committee appointed its own task force to study accreditation of the convention's seminaries. Working with a similar group on the Education Commission, the task force recommended that trustees be better trained to understand accreditation issues and presented a resolution asking accrediting agencies to "strive for greater consistency" in evaluation of schools and to take care to avoid "the appearance of pressure designed to affect the theological posture of educational institutions."

Both the ATS and another regional agency, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, assessed probation against Southeastern Seminary. After two years, both agencies found sufficient improvement to restore the North Carolina school's full accreditation -- SACS in December 1993 and ATS in June 1994.

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## **Alternative pastors' conference set in Atlanta prior to SBC**

By Greg Warner

TAMPA, Fla. (ABP) -- A Florida pastor is organizing a "middle-of-the-road" conference for June 18-19 in Atlanta as an alternative to the SBC Pastors' Conference.

The two-day "preaching and worship conference" will feature messages from Richard Jackson, Jess Moody and Frank Pollard -- all longtime Baptist pastors and former candidates for SBC president -- among others.

The meeting will begin Sunday night, June 18, and continue with three sessions on Monday, all held at Wieuca Road Baptist Church in north Atlanta.

The SBC Pastors' Conference, which annually draws 15,000-20,000 people, will be held simultaneously in the Georgia Dome downtown. The Southern Baptist Convention opens Tuesday, June 20, also in the Georgia Dome.

"My goal is not to compete with the Pastors' Conference but to say 'This is a contrast,'" said Don Letzring, pastor of Wellswood Baptist Church in Tampa, Fla., and organizer of the meeting. "I believe God can bless two conferences simultaneously. But I'm prepared for some criticism."

Letzring said the traditional Pastors' Conference is "more limited in who it invites" and is skewed to the right theologically. "There are still a lot of people who go to the Southern Baptist Convention who like the middle-of-the-road preaching that used to be a part of it," he said.

The SBC Pastors' Conference, which precedes the annual Southern Baptist Convention each year, has been used by fundamental-conservatives to promote their candidates for SBC president in a successful 15-year campaign to gain control of the SBC.

In 1984 moderates formed the rival SBC Forum to compete with the Pastors' Conference. Now defunct, the Forum was a precursor to other moderate organizations like the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Since 1990, when fundamental-conservatives solidified their hold on the SBC and the Fellowship was formed, most moderates have quit going to the Southern Baptist Convention and its related meetings.

But many "middle-of-the-road" Southern Baptists who are not attracted by the Fellowship continue to attend the annual SBC yet feel left out of the new power structure, say Letzring and others. In 1992 Letzring promoted Jess Moody as a middle-of-the-road candidate for SBC president, finishing second.

Letzring said there is nothing political about this year's alternative preaching conference and that he is not promoting a presidential candidate to oppose incumbent Jim Henry of Orlando, Fla.

In fact, Letzring said, he plans to invite Henry to address the alternative conference. "If he would make an

appearance at the Pastor's Conference, I hope he would do the same for this conference," the Tampa pastor said.

The theme for the meeting is "Building His Church." Scheduled preachers include Dan Francis, pastor of First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tenn.; Brian Harbour, pastor of First Baptist Church of Richardson, Texas; Jackson, former pastor of North Phoenix (Ariz.) Baptist Church and now an evangelist and conference leader in Brownwood, Texas; Phil Lineberger, pastor of First Baptist Church of Tyler, Texas; Moody, pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Church in Porter Ranch, Calif.; and Pollard, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jackson, Miss.

Letzring said he tried to get "some from the fundamentalist side" to preach. "Several almost said 'yes,'" he explained.

Ike Reighard, president of SBC Pastors' Conference last year, said the absence of any "glaring conservatives" on Letzring's lineup demonstrates that "it's going to be a very narrow group of people."

"It looks like the Forum took a hiatus and is making a comeback with a new name," said Reighard, pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Ga. The alternative conference represents "the same philosophy," if not the same people, as the Forum.

But, Reighard added: "If there is a group of people who want to do that, it's their privilege and prerogative to do so."

Conservatives have done the same thing at the state level, forming alternative meetings in several states where moderates control the platform, Reighard said. "I would see it as no different."

James Merritt of Snellville, Ga., president of the 1995 Pastors' Conference, was unavailable for comment.

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## **Whittsitt Society to honor author, activist Will Campbell**

CLINTON, Miss. (ABP) -- The William H. Whittsitt Baptist Heritage Society will present its Baptist Courage Award to author and civil-rights activist Will Campbell, the society's president has announced.

Campbell will be honored at the society's 1995 annual meeting scheduled July 20 in Fort Worth, Texas, said Whittsitt Society President Loyd Allen of Clinton, Miss.

The award is presented annually to an individual "who has in the face of strong opposition made a lasting contribution in preserving religious liberty, championing soul freedom, pursuing intellectual integrity, upholding human rights or advocating social justice," Allen said.

Campbell, he added, has "made contributions in all of the areas the Baptist Courage Award seeks to uphold."

The theme of the annual meeting will be, "The Baptist Struggle for Soul Freedom." Other speakers include Baptist historian W.R. Estep, who until his retirement was distinguished professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Also, Fred Anderson, executive director of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, will do an impression of John Leland, a Virginia Baptist minister who is credited with influencing the writing of the Bill of Rights.

Campbell, a Baptist minister from Mississippi, has lived on a farm near Mt. Juliet, Tenn., since 1956. He is a graduate of Wake Forest University and Yale Divinity School.

He has written 13 books. His "Brother to a Dragonfly," a Book of the Month selection, was reviewed by Time Magazine as one of the 10 best books of the 1970s. A novel, "Glad River," won the Friends of American Writers first prize for fiction. Campbell was also the first recipient of the Alex Haley Memorial Award for Literary Distinction.

The Whittsitt Heritage Society was formed in 1992 to foster the study of Baptist history against fears that

conservative domination in the Southern Baptist Convention might bring revision or downplaying of certain elements of Baptist heritage.

It honors William Whitsitt, who resigned in 1898 as president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary under pressure for challenging Landmarkism, the then-popular view that Baptist churches progressed in an unbroken succession from John the Baptist. Whitsitt, a church historian, determined that research indicated the first identifiable modern Baptist church was started in about 1609 in England by John Smyth.

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