

Associated Baptist Press

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Southwestern Seminary plans to drop appeal of probation

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Administrators at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary have changed their minds and apparently won't appeal the probation imposed by the school's lead accrediting agency.

The Association of Theological Schools placed the seminary on a two-year probation in January, citing violations of procedures by the school's trustees when they fired former president Russell Dilday last March, as well as continuing concerns about academic freedom at the Fort Worth, Texas, school.

Seminary President Ken Hemphill said Feb. 13 the school would appeal the decision. Southwestern notified ATS of that intent, according to Daniel Aleshire of ATS, but has since put the appeal process on hold. "My perception is they are in the process of making a final decision," said Aleshire, ATS associate director.

Hemphill was unavailable for comment.

Members of Southwestern's theology faculty passed a resolution Feb. 14 complaining that they were not consulted about the decision to appeal. The resolution "respectfully" asked Hemphill to "delay the finalization of this decision until there has been ample opportunity and occasion for members of the faculty to discuss this matter with the president and the administrative officers."

The resolution noted that faculty members are "persuaded that there are valid reasons for not making such an appeal."

Hemphill later told them no final decision had been made and he was inclined not to pursue the appeal, according to faculty members.

Meeting with the seminary's full faculty March 6, Hemphill again implied Southwestern will drop the appeal, but no firm decision was announced.

Scotty Gray, Southwestern's executive vice president, would not comment on that decision or the faculty meeting. "I would rather not go into that," he said March 8. "We are considering if it's in the best interest of the seminary to appeal." ATS was notified initially "to make sure the options were open," said Gray, who handles the seminary's dealings with accreditors.

Also at the March 6 meeting, the faculty endorsed a proposal to form a committee to monitor compliance

with one crucial condition of the ATS probation: that academic freedom be assured and that trustees establish "a stable institutional environment."

The committee, as proposed, would consist of faculty, trustee and student representatives. Gray confirmed the committee is under consideration. "We have discussed this in a preliminary way with board and faculty," he said.

The 3,200-student seminary, the largest of the six seminaries owned by the Southern Baptist Convention, must correct problems noted in the probation or risk losing its accreditation.

Accreditation is seen as a seal of approval for educational institutions. It carries prestige and helps student enrollment and fund-raising efforts.

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-- By Greg Warner

BJC panel adopts statements on politics, school prayer

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Americans who promote their politics as "Christian" ought to ensure their "political methods measure up to that lofty label," the executive committee of a Baptist religious liberty agency declared March 6.

The Baptist Joint Committee -- a Washington, D.C.-based agency comprising 11 national Baptist bodies -- encouraged "all Americans of faith to play active and responsible roles in the political process."

The BJC's religion and politics statement said the constitutionally required separation of church and state "does not mean the separation of God and government nor the separation of religion and politics." It reaffirmed the constitutional right and biblical mandate for Christians to be involved in the political process, but emphasized that such involvement must be responsible.

The statement urged Christians "to bring to the public square a full measure of integrity that reflects the high standards of our faith, shunning the hypocritical and immoral politics of personal destruction and deception."

The statement decried such tactics as selling videos that level unfounded charges against public officials, distributing deceptive voter guides and exaggerating the effects of policy proposals in a way that unduly alarms citizens.

"Such actions betray the high principles of our faith and diminish our nation's political process," the statement declared.

The statement was one of two unanimously adopted by the BJC panel. The second statement reaffirmed the agency's long-standing opposition to proposals to restore government-sponsored prayer to public schools.

In its statement on school prayer, the BJC panel said it shares the longing of many Americans for spiritual and moral revival, adding that society's spiritual rootlessness "must be addressed by a rededication of families and churches to prayer, religious education and evangelism."

Schools should do their part to inculcate civic values such as honesty, courage, charity and humility, the statement declared, but should not be empowered to lead or encourage religious exercises.

"Our opposition stems from the conviction that prayer is a holy act that government should not control," the statement said. "We reject the notion that government bureaucrats and public school teachers, who may not share our faith or any faith, should be entrusted or saddled with our children's spiritual formation."

Legislative proposals to restore "voluntary" prayer are unnecessary, the statement said, because the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled out only school-sponsored prayer.

"Students continue to enjoy the right of true religious expression in numerous ways in the public schools," the statement declared.

The BJC officials emphasized their belief in prayer and respect for the Constitution.

"Precisely because we believe in both, we do not want government telling our children when, where and what to pray," the statement concluded. "Prayer should be left to churches, families and students themselves."

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Texas Baptists set up office to deal with forced terminations

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptists have set up an office to deal with the problem of forced termination among ministers.

The state convention's executive board elected Texas pastor Dick Maples to lead the new office of minister/church relations for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Maples, a former president of the Texas convention, has been pastor of First Baptist Church of Bryan, Texas, for 16 years. The new office was set up to deal with an epidemic of forced terminations in Baptist churches. One study said 2,000 Southern Baptist ministers are fired each year.

Maples said he plans to seek to educate both ministers and churches about conflict resolution, build a support network for families of out-of-work ministers and build a cadre of ministers available for "intentional interim" pastorates in churches that have fired ministers.

In other business at the meeting held March 7 in Dallas, the Texas executive board also responded to a proposed restructuring of the Southern Baptist Convention by adopting a resolution supporting Woman's Missionary Union and affirming the missions auxiliary's independent status.

Recommendations of a program and structure study committee call for a streamlining of the 15-million-member denomination's organization. The proposal also reassigns tasks traditionally performed by WMU to other agencies.

Members of the committee told reporters in February they did not give any assignments to WMU because the auxiliary is not accountable to the SBC. The heads of both SBC mission boards say they expect to continue to work with WMU.

Critics say the recommendation appears to strip WMU of any formal role in Southern Baptist missions education or support. Some observers say it settles a score for recent contention with the SBC Executive Committee and over WMU's refusal to surrender its autonomy and become an agency of the SBC and its commitment to help promote missions for non-Southern Baptist groups including the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

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-- By Orville Scott and Ken Camp

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