

Associated Baptist Press

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April 25, 1995

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Clinton, Graham lead service of prayer, healing in Oklahoma

By Ken Camp

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP)--Before a watching nation, a Baptist president and the world's best-known Baptist evangelist encouraged Oklahomans mourning the mass murder of family and friends to "let the healing begin."

"In the face of death, let us honor life," President Bill Clinton told the more than 9,000 people who filled the Oklahoma State Fairgrounds Arena on April 23 for a statewide prayer service honoring victims of the April 19 Oklahoma City federal building bombing.

Another 10,000 listened to the service on loudspeakers in a nearby exhibition hall and baseball stadium, and millions viewed it on television at home or in satellite locations such as the sanctuaries of Del City Southern Baptist Church and Council Road Baptist Church in Bethany, two Oklahoma City suburban congregations.

Grieving family members of the 78 people confirmed dead and the more than 150 missing in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building blast listened as Clinton, evangelist Billy Graham and others offered words of consolation.

As they listened, some parents clutched stuffed animals or photos of their children. Twelve children are known to have died in the blast and others are still unaccounted for.

"Though we share your grief, your pain is unimaginable. We know that," Clinton told the hurting families. "We cannot undo it. That is God's work."

He reminded the families that while they had lost much, they had not lost everything.

"Those who are lost now belong to God. Someday, we will be with them. Until then," he said, "their legacy must be our lives."

Clinton called on all Americans to "purge" themselves of hatred and "the dark forces which give rise to this evil." Quoting the Apostle Paul, he urged them to "be not overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good."

At the same time, he pledged swift and certain punishment for those who caused such pain to innocent citizens, and he pointed to promises of an eternal reckoning for evildoers.

"Let us teach our children that the God of comfort is also the God of righteousness. Those who trouble their own house will inherit the wind," he said. "Justice will prevail."

Graham likewise offered hope and comfort to the more than 1,900 grieving family members present at the service, and to citizens of America's heartland whose sense of security had been shattered by the bomb blast.

"We stand together today to say, 'Let the healing begin,'" Graham said to the Oklahomans and the nation.

"Times like this make us hard, bitter and angry at God, or they make us tender, open and able to reach out in faith," he said. "Do not let bitterness and the poison of hatred creep into your soul. It is better to face times such as this with God than to try to face them without Him.

"The forces of hate and violence must not be allowed to gain their victory, not just in our society, but in our hearts."

Graham told the mourners that there is a mystery to suffering, and some questions defy easy answers. But he assured them God was present in the midst of their pain, and He stood ready to offer them comfort if they would respond to Him.

"Experience God's comfort. He loves you and shares in your suffering," he said, reminding the hurting families and neighbors of victims that the painful reminder of evil's reality came to Oklahoma City just three days after Easter -- a reminder of "God's triumph over evil, death and hell."

"The cross tells us that God understands our suffering," Graham said. "Our Lord on that cross asked the question, 'Why?' And the answer was that He died to redeem us, to save us. He was saying from the cross, 'I love you.'"

Rob Masteller, pastor of Putnam City Baptist Church in suburban Oklahoma City offered the invocation for the "time of healing" prayer service. Masteller, a trustee of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, was one of several local clergy who helped to lead the service.

Worshippers began gathering outside the arena up to five hours before the scheduled start of the memorial service. Long before the 3 p.m. service, streets around the fairgrounds were jammed with cars, nearly all with their headlights on, as if in a giant funeral procession. Most in attendance wore multicolored ribbons honoring the dead, the missing and the mourning.

Earlier that day, and in services throughout Oklahoma City in the days since the federal building bombing, people of faith gathered in churches to offer prayers for the hurting and to seek answers.

At First Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, seven blocks north of the bomb site, worshippers met in an unusually darkened sanctuary. Plywood covered 12-foot high openings where sunlight normally streamed through stained glass windows. The windows were among eight at the church that were shattered by the bomb blast.

Several laypersons in the church read scriptures and led in prayers at the special 10:30 a.m. Sunday worship service.

"We pray with gratitude to God for mercies shown to those of us who have been spared in this disaster -- and for a deepening sense of purpose in our lives," said deacon Jerry Barnett, an employee of the Oklahoma Water Resource Board who escaped the blast only because he was on a trip to California.

"Two of my co-workers were killed. Many were hurt. Several are still hospitalized," he told the congregation. Barnett testified of strength he gained from the prayers, calls of support and expressions of love he had received from around the country.

"I am thankful for feeling the presence and the grace of God. I encourage you to pray. Pray for strength and for the Spirit of God to be with all of us. Pray. I know it works and is working. I have felt the Spirit of God in these days."

Pastor Gene Garrison called on his congregation not to focus on the shattered remnants of a manmade structure but on the things that cannot be shaken by forces of hatred and terrorism.

"In the midst of a world where everything nailed down comes loose, there are some things that cannot be shaken," Garrison said.

"Our only security is in God, and He has a kingdom that cannot be shaken -- a kingdom of love."

Earlier in the week, Garrison had participated in an ecumenical prayer service at First Christian Church attended by many family members who were waiting for rescuers to bring news about their loved ones.

"I read the 23rd Psalm. And as I read the scripture, you could hardly hear it for the sobbing," he said. "Mothers, fathers, daughters, sons were there waiting, and still there was no word."

Council Road Baptist Church held prayer services on the Thursday and Friday evenings immediately after the downtown explosion.

"There are a lot of hurting people," pastor Mark Hartman said at the April 21 prayer service. "And for many families in the next few days and hours, as their string of hope is snapped, a lot more will be hurting."

When he asked for prayer requests, practically every family represented at the service called the name of someone who had been touched by the act of terrorism. Some mentioned neighbors whose children were still missing. Others named co-workers who were killed in the blast. Still others asked God's comfort and strength for the rescue workers who were risking their own lives working around the clock at the bomb site.

And one man had a very special request.

"Pastor," he said, "as hideous as this is, Jesus died for the men who did this. We need to pray for them, too."

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Mark Coppenger nominated to lead Midwestern Seminary

By Bob Allen

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Mark Coppenger, the Southern Baptist Convention's top public relations officer, has been nominated as president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Trustees of the school in Kansas City, Mo., will meet with the candidate in a called session June 1-2 to interview and vote on the nominee, trustee chairman Lewis Adkison announced April 24.

Coppenger, 42, is currently vice president for convention relations with the SBC Executive Committee. If elected, he would become Midwestern's third president, succeeding Milton Ferguson, who has held the post since 1973.

A seven-member presidential search committee chaired by Adkison, pastor of Circle Drive Baptist Church in Colorado Springs, Colo., gave its report to the full board of trustees, meeting April 24-25 in Kansas City, in an executive session.

After visitors -- mostly seminary faculty and staff and media representatives -- were readmitted, Adkison announced the called meeting to consider Coppenger's nomination.

If elected, Coppenger will take office Aug. 1, 1995.

Coppenger told Baptist Press: "My wife, Sharon, and I love missions and the Midwest and we see Midwestern Seminary as uniquely positioned to equip ministers to reach the Midwest and Great Plains for Christ. And of course Midwestern is a great resource to all Southern Baptists across the nation and world. If the full trustee board pleases, we will be gratified to serve,"

Ferguson, 66, who announced to trustees last April his plans to retire at the end of July 1996, told the board he is "fully committed to serving the two years to my retirement date" but repeated his offer to step down sooner "if in the judgment of trustees it is in the best interest" of the seminary.

"Our primary concern is the welfare of the seminary," Ferguson said. He pledged a "very positive and constructive" role during the transition in leaders.

Trustees approved a retirement benefit of \$50,000 to be disbursed at Ferguson's discretion "in honor and appreciation" of his leadership. The package will become available when the new president takes office and must be appropriated by Aug. 1, 1996.

The action has no bearing on the date of Ferguson's termination of employment. In addition to the gift, Ferguson will continue to receive salary and benefits through July 1996, Adkison said.

Trustees considered the retirement package at length in an executive session. In an open session, they approved the recommendation without discussion.

Ferguson noted three-to-six months is a common transition period in academic institutions. That typical time frame will be compressed considerably in the "eight short, busy weeks" proposed between Coppenger's election and his assuming full leadership of the seminary, he said.

The "shortened time frame" presents "a very significant challenge" for both the new president and the current administration, Ferguson told trustees.

Adkison told reporters that Coppenger was the only person interviewed for the post. The committee received 24 resumes and recommendations, narrowed a short list to six and then again to four finalists, and then chose to consider only one candidate at a time, he said.

Coppenger was "very clearly" the No. 1 candidate of the search group, Adkison said. He described the committee's recommendation as "unanimous and enthusiastic."

Adkison said Coppenger possesses several characteristics sought by the search committee and reinforced in listening sessions with faculty, staff and students.

Among qualities Coppenger would bring to the post are academic credentials, Midwest connections, pastoral experience, evangelistic focus, the fact he is "a known conservative" and "vision and leadership," Adkison said.

Coppenger earned a doctorate at Vanderbilt University and taught philosophy at Wheaton College six years before entering Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1981. He received the master of divinity degree from the seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1983 and then served five years as pastor of First Baptist Church in El Dorado, Ark.

In 1988 he became executive director-treasurer of the State Convention of Baptists in Indiana, serving there until joining the newly created SBC Executive Committee position in 1991.

Among his responsibilities for the Nashville, Tenn.,-based Executive Committee is to function as editor of SBC Life, a monthly promotional newspaper.

Coppenger grew up in Arkansas. He is married to the former Sharon South. Her father, Rheubin South, was an executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention for whom the state's mission offering is named. He died of leukemia in 1986.

The Coppengers have three children: Caleb, 18; Jedidiah, 15; and Chesed, 11.

Coppenger is also a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserves, attached to the Army's Office of Public Affairs at the Pentagon.

Adkison said the search committee purposely set out to find a candidate who affirms the inerrancy of the Bible. "I think we all feel, both our search committee and board of trustees, this is a direction of our convention," he said. "It's just very important we have one who believes the Bible without any reservation and is an inerrantist."

Another search committee member, Ronnie Rogers, a pastor in Hot Springs, Ark., said Coppenger would encourage dialogue among differing viewpoints on theological issues "within the framework of inerrancy."

Coppenger has been a key spokesman for the SBC's inerrancy movement, first as a conservative trustee at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, later as executive of one of the most conservative state conventions, in Indiana, and most recently through the pages of the SBC's national publication, SBC Life.

Adkison said Coppenger will emphasize missions and evangelism. "We are very excited and enthusiastic about Midwestern Seminary becoming a mission seminary with a lot of focus and emphasis on the Midwest and Upper Midwest," he said.

He suggested one emphasis might be to establish satellite learning centers in addition to the main Kansas City campus.

Asked if he anticipates confrontations between the new president and faculty, similar to those at other SBC seminaries which hired new presidents with an agenda of moving the schools to the right, Adkison responded, "I don't expect it to be a problem."

Much of SBC's internal strife in recent years has focused on the denomination's six seminaries. Conservatives who systematically gained control of the 15 million-member religious body frequently pledged to rid the schools of alleged liberalism.

With Coppenger's election, a sweep of seminaries would be almost complete. All but one would have called a new president since the onset of the inerrancy movement in 1979. Trustees of that sixth school, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, are currently involved in a presidential search to replace Landrum Leavell, who retired officially at the end of 1994, but continues to serve as acting president until his successor is named.

In other business, trustees:

-- Re-elected Adkison as chairman of the 35-member board by acclamation. Other officers for 1995-96, also elected unanimously, are Ronnie Rogers, pastor of Lakeside Baptist Church in Hot Springs, Ark., first vice chairman; Bob Lilly, pastor of Catonsville Baptist Church in Catonsville, Md., second vice chairman; and Lowell Socolofsky of Omaha, Neb., secretary-treasurer.

-- Adopted a 1995-96 budget of \$3,841,935, about 3 percent higher than the current year's budget, and increases in student fees. Housing costs to students will increase about 3 percent. The basic student matriculation fee will increase \$100, to \$800 per semester.

-- Passed resolutions affirming recommendations of the SBC Program and Structure Study Committee and against homosexual conduct. The statement on homosexuality, recommended by Kent Cochran, a trustee from Kansas City, called homosexual practice "morally unconscionable learned conduct" and protested "growing cultural acceptance" of homosexuality.

Attorney sees legal problems with Southern's new policy

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE (ABP) --Restrictions on the speech faculty and staff, adopted recently by trustees of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, are "legally suspect," according to a Baptist attorney who normally defends businesses in lawsuits filed by employees.

Lee Cave, a partner in the Louisville, Ky., law firm Clark, Ward and Cave, analyzed the new seminary policy at the request of the Western Recorder, newsjournal of Kentucky Baptists. Cave is a Baptist layman who specializes in helping companies avoid or defend lawsuits from employees.

The seminary statement, adopted by trustees April 18 in a closed-door meeting, is an addition to the Faculty/Staff Manual.

The new statement says: "The board of trustees of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary understands the terms and conditions of employment by the seminary to include an obligation on the part of all faculty and staff to support and relate constructively to the institution, its policies and administration. Faculty members may not use class time (or any forum designated for instructional purposes) for the purpose of undermining or obstructing the policies of this institution. Faculty members and staff of this institution are not to act in ways that are injurious or detrimental to the seminary's relationship with the denomination, donors or other constituencies within and without the seminary community."

Cave said employees may not lose their legal rights to free speech by the terms of their employment. And even though the seminary is a private religious institution, the administration does not have "free reign" to restrict employee actions, he added.

A primary problem with the seminary document is its vagueness, Cave said. "There is no doubt that the documents as apparently incorporated within the Faculty/Staff Manual are so vague that they are legally suspect.

"If the employer is going to set some guidelines, which they have the right to do, they have to be at least clear enough so the employee can know what their rights are," Cave explained.

Not only is there a potential for litigation out of such a vague regulation, Cave said, but he would recommend legal action on behalf of anyone disciplined based on the seminary policy.

Legal action by a faculty or staff member against the seminary would not become a live option until the seminary actually used the policy as the basis for discipline, he said.

However, the policy is further suspect because it clearly appears to address after the fact the firing of Diana Garland as dean of the seminary's Carver School of Church Social Work, he continued. "It's very basic law that you can't do something one day, think up something to justify it the next day and then justify your actions."

Seminary President Albert Mohler fired Garland March 20 after she made a report to social work students which Mohler deemed to be against the best interests of the seminary and in opposition to his leadership. The situation was further aggravated when other faculty members and students began contacting donors, trustees and alumni with complaints about Mohler's handling of the case.

The kind of restriction adopted by seminary trustees is "very uncommon," Cave reported.

"Employee manuals commonly restrict certain kinds of conduct, but they very rarely restrict employee speech, especially within the context of the institution," he said. "In fact, they will very often encourage the expression of opinion, especially within the group involved. ... If there are problems, they want to hear about it."

Trustee actions at Southern bury faculty in despair

By Marv Knox

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- An avalanche of recent trustee decisions has buried faculty morale at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, professors report.

In what President Albert Mohler himself described as "a defining moment for the seminary," trustees consolidated Mohler's control over the Louisville school, giving him ultimate authority to choose professors and silence criticism. They affirmed his controversial decision to fire the dean of the social work school and applauded his view that women cannot become pastors.

They also approved his budget proposal, which calls for a reduction of almost \$1 million in expenditures and elimination of an unknown number of jobs.

Afterward, faculty members were unusually silent for a group whose careers depend on talking. They cited an addition to the seminary's faculty-staff manual that threatens them with dismissal if they express negative feelings regarding the seminary, its policies and the administration.

James Chancellor, chairman of the Faculty Committee, which represents faculty concerns to trustees, pointed to the new policy as his reason for not commenting on faculty feelings.

"The rule that the trustees passed about faculty relating to other constituencies is, in my mind, so unclear at this point that I do not feel I can speak with anyone about the seminary," said Chancellor, a professor of Christian missions and world religions.

Other faculty also expressed concern about commenting on the trustee actions, fearing reprisals from the administration for any negative comments they might make. However, some professors agreed to describe the faculty's feelings, as long as their identities would not be revealed.

"A neutron bomb went off on this campus," one professor said of the combined effects of the trustees' actions. "All the buildings are standing, but all the people are dead.

"All the facilities are here; everything Southern Baptists have invested in is here," the professor elaborated. "But what is the essence of a school? People and relationships, just like a church. And they are all dead, mostly victims of violent death."

One word -- "evil" -- describes the kind of power that quenched those spirits, another faculty member added.

"What we are seeing has biblical precedent in the people who killed Jesus," the professor said. "The persons who are willing to exercise power and who seek to be controlling tend to be the ones who are portrayed in the gospels as the enemies of Jesus, not his followers. He did not seem to have a kind view toward the wielders of that power."

The actions by trustees reflect "a move to centralize power in the hands of a small group in the upper echelons of the Southern Baptist Convention," a professor claimed. "That's not even including our board, but above them. They receive a great deal of pressure."

"The SBC leadership is so far from anything resembling servanthood that it cannot be discerned," the professor said. "The disregard for the pain their actions cause in the interest of policy is unconscionable. In the interest of true doctrine, people can be bloodied and bruised, and no one takes note. I don't think that's a model you find associated with Jesus."

Mohler, however, defended the actions, many of which "were taken in direct response to what trustees perceived to be actions by faculty members that were unconscionable and irresponsible," he told Associated Baptist Press.

In addition to the faculty's general reaction to the board meeting, they also expressed strong feelings about specific board actions:

-- Prohibition of criticism.

Although the wording of the policy is ambiguous, professors realize they cannot publicly differ with the president or trustees. Some professors dubbed the policy "the gag rule."

"There's a great deal of anxiety," about the new policy, one faculty member said. "It's so nebulous that people don't know what it could mean.

"It leaves open for the president, who quite obviously has an adversarial role over against the faculty, to interpret what those terms mean and to discipline faculty for any kind of criticism, even in the positive sense. There's no way of knowing what might be implied there. With the level of trust at virtual zero, it's very frightening."

The policy is more inhibiting in a school than it might be in a business, a professor said.

"An academic community is about the expression of different ideas, sifting various positions in hopes of reaching the truth," the professor noted. "This kind of thing is an inhibitor on the very nature of what an academic community is supposed to be."

Mohler said the purpose of the policy "was not to silence or stifle the healthy conversation which should take place within the seminary community. But it was clearly intended to remind faculty that inappropriate statements and actions cannot be tolerated by any responsible administration."

"This policy does not affect or alter the professor's responsibility in the classroom," he continued, "and it is not concerned with the curriculum. It is concerned with behavior and speech which is injurious to the institution and seeks to alienate students and other constituencies."

-- Retirement incentive.

Trustees approved an early-retirement package for faculty. Professors whose age and years of service to the seminary total 65 are eligible. They may receive one year's pay and \$500 per year of service, along with some medical benefits. Twenty-nine professors are eligible.

"There is considerable disappointment in the level of the early retirement package," one professor reported. "Many more people wanted to take it and leave than will be able to financially. It turned out to be not such a good package. There's a great deal of depression."

Several faculty members explained that slightly more than a year is not enough time for a middle-aged faculty member with a narrow vocational specialty to find new work.

Professors generally agreed that between eight and 10 faculty, mostly those almost ready for retirement anyway, will be able to afford the early-retirement package. "You've got to be around 60 for this to be meaningful," one said.

"Most of us have families," another added. "It's just not a simple matter to pick up stakes. Some of us have children in college, and you don't leave with nowhere to go."

The low number of early retirees will be a benefit to students, a professor said. "There will be stability that will serve our students well," the professor said of the non-exodus. "There will be faculty to teach them. I'm pleased about that."

The full-time faculty, which currently numbers around 60, also is expected to lose six to eight contract professors within the next 18 months.

That's not to say more professors don't want to leave, the faculty members said.

"I would not think there are more than 10 people on the faculty who, if confronted with an attractive position somewhere, would not do it," one reported. "I don't think I could name 10."

Not only are long-time faculty members contemplating leaving, but so are some of the conservative evangelicals added to the faculty by trustees in recent years, observers noted.

"The conservative hard-hitters have basically said they're out of here," a professor reported. "They've got the credentials and experience to leave."

-- Faculty-selection process.

A new procedure gives the president ultimate control over the addition of faculty, a responsibility formerly shared by the president and faculty.

"The trustees and administration want to remold the seminary in their own image, and the only way to do that is to bring in faculty in their image," a professor insisted.

"The faculty members added this April and approved by the faculty were conservative evangelical scholars from Bethel and Dallas seminaries -- quite conservative schools -- and the faculty was moving in that direction. But that apparently wasn't quickly enough."

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Supporters of seminary's past rally, remember amid changes

By Melanie Childers

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Students, faculty and friends of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary voiced strong feelings for their school in two contrasting observances April 18 and 20.

During a tense week of seminary trustee meetings, concerned members of the seminary community found two expressions for their own deep emotions -- a spirited rally "for support and encouragement" and a solemn service of remembrance.

"We rake our fingers through our hair, pound our fists against the walls and lose the battle to hold back the tears," Joni Paterson, a doctoral student, said to open a celebrative two-hour-long "community witness service" April 18.

About 550 people attended the event in the seminary's central lawn, including a large constituency of students and faculty members from Louisville Presbyterian Seminary and other nearby schools.

Faculty robed in academic regalia and students carrying banners and signs heard speakers and musicians address the crowd. Hosted by the seminary's graduate club, the service featured Jewish, Catholic and Protestant speakers as well as those from Southern Seminary.

Speakers included Marion Soards, professor of New Testament at Louisville Presbyterian Seminary; William Hendricks, retired theology professor and director of doctoral studies at Southern; Dixie Petrey, president of the Southern's student government association; and Eugene Zoeller, professor of theology at Bellarmine College in Louisville.

"I come from a church that has written sad chapters of history, with its arrogance and abuse of power," said Zoeller, a Roman Catholic. "... I am saddened then, when I hear such things have happened here."

"When I see losses of fine professors and deans," he continued, "when I see the dismantling of a unique school of mission and social work, when I hear the anguish of students about decisions autocratic and anachronistic, I have to wonder with the words of T.S. Eliot, 'Where is the wisdom that we lost in knowledge?'"

"Tonight we are holding a vigil ... for an institution we love, to whom so many of us are indebted," said Molly Marshall, former professor of theology at the school who was asked to resign last August.

"When persons arrogate to themselves the authority to dictate whom God can call and gift for ministry -- and how the churches must respond -- that is usurping the place of God. That is blasphemy."

Marshall also participated in a more solemn service later in the week.

About 45 women and men of the seminary community gathered in the balcony of Crescent Hill Baptist Church, adjacent to the school's campus, April 20 at 7 a.m.

With hymns and prayers, the group commemorated the second anniversary of a stand-in balcony protest in the seminary's Alumni Chapel. The original service offered a protest of the rightward shift of seminary trustees, which had resulted in the election of President Albert Mohler and numerous faculty and staff resignations.

"This year, even more voices have been silenced," explained Dixie Petrey, president of the student government association.

Not all voices on campus opposed the transition at Southern.

"I support President Mohler," said Hunter Crowder of Roanoke, Va., a master's student since 1994. "When I got here, I was kind of surprised at how liberal the school was, and I think he's trying to bring it back in line with where the convention is.

"When I see him on campus and in the news, he seems to be genuinely heartbroken about everything that has happened. He seems to feel like God has called him to do this, but he's not taking the scorched-earth approach. He's genuinely concerned about students. ... He tried to do things as slowly and non-confrontationally as possible."

"The most pitiful thing about all this is that the fundamentalist mindset doesn't care what happens to people," countered Lou Rich of Jefferson City, Mo., a master's student since 1992. "The trustees and president view us as a cancer that needs to be cut off to save its little fundamentalist body."

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Acceptance of women pastors growing among evangelicals

By Mark Wingfield

GLENDALE, Calif. (ABP) -- A nationwide poll of evangelical Christians -- of which Southern Baptists are a part -- shows surprising support for women serving as pastors.

The idea of women pastors is acceptable to 45 percent of all evangelicals, according to pollster George Barna, who noted millions of Christians reject the doctrinal basis usually cited as a prohibition against female clergy.

"The acceptability of female pastors ... has made major inroads in conservative Protestant Christianity," said Barna, president of the Barna Research Group. "It is difficult to see a future America where there will cease to be pressure for women to be a major force in most professional circles of the Protestant church.

"Though many conservative churches and denominations will hold out, they are already in the minority," he continued. "A major reason for precluding women from the pastorate is doctrinal -- an argument few Christians understand and which millions reject. Churches can expect this issue to persist in its intensity and significance."

Opposition to women pastors has been a hallmark of the conservative movement that has risen to power in the Southern Baptist Convention in recent years. Apparently no national polls of Southern Baptist opinion alone have been taken on this issue, but a few non-binding resolutions opposing the ordination of women have been passed at SBC annual meetings.

The issue surfaced recently at the SBC's oldest seminary, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where trustees said April 18 that Southern Baptists "overwhelmingly" reject the idea that God might call a woman to be a pastor.

In adopting their statement on "women in the pastorate," the seminary trustees cited the support of those SBC resolutions, their perception of the view of SBC churches and Scripture, which they understand to prohibit female pastors.

The seminary "exists to serve the autonomous churches of the Southern Baptist Convention, which overwhelmingly reflect this view individually and have expressed this collectively in annual convention by adopted resolutions," the trustees said.

But a significant number of conservative evangelical scholars disagree with that blanket assessment. While a majority of evangelicals still oppose women pastors (55 percent), people in the pews -- as well as conservative scholars -- are more open to debate on this idea than the trustee statement would indicate, these conservatives argue.

Southern Seminary trustees got a shocking introduction to this reality in 1992 when they elected the first six faculty members under new guidelines designed to ensure election of biblical inerrantists only. All six of the candidates -- each of whom held conservative theological beliefs and affirmed the inerrancy of Scripture -- expressed some degree of support for the ordination of women either as deacons or pastors.

It is not fair to describe all conservative evangelical Christians as opposed to women serving as pastors, these professors explained at the time. This is true because people who affirm the authority of Scripture often interpret Scripture differently, the conservative scholars said.

Polling by Barna, a conservative Christian agency based in Glendale, Calif., bears this out. In a nationwide poll, nearly half (45 percent) of all "evangelical" Christians interviewed agreed with the statement, "It is perfectly acceptable for a woman to be the pastor or head minister of a church."

The Barna Group defines as "evangelicals" anyone who meets all the following criteria:

-- They say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important.

-- They believe when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as Savior.

-- They believe God is the "all-powerful, all-knowing Creator of the universe who rules the world today."

-- They believe the Bible is accurate in all its teachings and read it regularly.

When the group is broadened to include all "born-again" Christians and not just "evangelicals," 67 percent affirm the possibility of a woman serving as pastor. For Barna's purposes, the difference is that a "born-again" person affirms at least the first two criteria listed above, while "evangelicals" affirm all four.

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Mississippi school prayer halted by federal court

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) -- A federal judge has ordered a Mississippi school district to stop allowing a student organization to broadcast morning devotionals and prayers over the intercom system.

Judge Neal Biggers Jr. ordered the Pontotoc County School District to halt the practice in response to a complaint filed by Lisa Herdahl on behalf of herself and five children.

Biggers granted Herdahl's request for an injunction after concluding that she likely would prevail on the merits of the case.

Biggers said the school district's practice violates the First Amendment's prohibition against government-established religion because it does not clearly have a secular purpose, its primary effect advances religion and it creates entanglement between government and religion.

"Invoking the name of Jesus Christ and broadcasting it throughout the school at times when attendance is mandatory necessarily chooses religion over non-religion and, moreover, Christian beliefs over other religious beliefs."

The district's practice of turning over its public address system to the Aletheia Club "places the district's seal on approval" on the practice, Biggers wrote.

Biggers rejected arguments that the policy's establishment-clause problems can be resolved by allowing Herdahl's children or other students to be excused from the religious exercises.

"The plaintiff's children are likely to feel ostracized and stigmatized if their beliefs do not coincide with those of the majority," Biggers wrote. The judge said a "method of accommodation that is inclusive of those students who wish to participate is far better than a practice that excludes those that do not."

The court order permits secondary school students to meet in the gymnasium for religious devotionals before the school day begins.

Biggers' handling of the controversy drew praise from a Baptist church-state specialist.

"I applaud Judge Biggers for affirming the free exercise of religion by public school students and for recognizing that coercion of a captive audience of children has no place in public education," said James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington, D.C.-based religious liberty agency.

The Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission generally favors student-led school prayer, but General Counsel Michael Whitehead was unavailable for comment on the specifics of the Mississippi case.

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-- By Larry Chesser

ABC of South notes 25 years of ministry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The American Baptist Churches of the South celebrated 25 years of ministry during their April 19-22 annual session in Washington.

Delegates also accepted 13 new churches into the region, elected officers and heard challenges from various speakers.

ABCOTS was begun in 1970 to fulfill a distinctive role as an integrated witness in the South. The first official ABCOTS listing had 111 churches, a number which has grown to 275 churches. Since its inception, the organization has remained committed to inclusivity in hiring and electing staff and officers.

During worship services, New York City minister James Forbes told the group they should be about more than just saving souls. Their calling is saving souls and transforming systems, he said. "If you're not prepared to do both, you are going to be limping into the Kingdom," he said.

Forbes pointed to a hurting nation in which too many people are losing their jobs and don't have adequate health care. He also chastised the audience for allowing "people who don't even care about folks" to define the welfare reform debate.

When Jesus performed miracles, he didn't just heal people's illnesses but the "sick systems" that entrapped them, he said.

Quinester Calloway, of First Baptist Church of Capitol Hill in Nashville, Tenn., was elected president of the organization.

-- By Pam Parry