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Killinger banned from teaching at Samford divinity school, suit alleges

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- A faculty member at Samford University is suing the Baptist school in Birmingham, Ala., alleging religious discrimination and broken promises have kept him from teaching in the Beeson Divinity School.

In a lawsuit filed last December in United States District Court, Professor John Killinger alleges Beeson Dean Timothy George has refused to let him teach courses in the divinity school because Killinger is a theological moderate.

Killinger alleges religious discrimination, breach of contract and negligence by Samford administrators. He also charges that under George's leadership, the divinity school has become fundamentalist and sectarian, violating terms of the bequest that established the school in 1988.

"The Beeson Divinity School is not interdenominational, but instead advocates the theology, liturgy and biblical interpretation of the fundamentalist wing of the Southern Baptist Convention," the suit alleges.

Samford officials declined to discuss the lawsuit.

Killinger, a Presbyterian, joined Samford's faculty in 1989 as one of a new class of interdisciplinary "university professors" permitted to teach in several areas. But it was the prospect of teaching preaching in the university's new, ecumenical, evangelical divinity school that attracted him primarily, he claims.

"I would not have accepted a position at Samford if I had known I would not be permitted to teach homiletics in the divinity school," Killinger said in a prepared statement released to the press.

Killinger taught preaching, worship and literature 15 years at Vanderbilt University. He has written more than 50 books, including "Fundamentals of Preaching," which is used as a textbook in many colleges and seminaries across the United States.

In meetings with Samford President Thomas Corts, Provost William Hull and George in 1989, Killinger says he was told his coming to Samford would "add prestige and guidance" to the divinity school.

Killinger claims he was assured his "moderate religious philosophy," as expressed in numerous books he had written, was acceptable and that he would have ongoing teaching responsibilities at the divinity school.

A 1989 news release announcing that Killinger was joining Samford's faculty said he would teach English and religion courses both in the undergraduate College of Arts and Sciences and the divinity school. In the release, George described Killinger as "an outstanding scholar and brilliant teacher" who would bring "a rich background of versatile service in preaching and ministry along with expertise in religion, literature and the arts."

In five years, however, Killinger, 61, says he has been allowed to teach only one required course in the divinity school, a worship class in the fall of 1989. Instead of the key role he says he was promised at the divinity school, Killinger maintains he "has been relegated to elective courses which have attracted few students.

Killinger says while he was on a writing and research leave in England in 1993, George cancelled the course he was scheduled to teach that fall. Killinger says he complained, and Hull intervened to restore the course on prayer and pastoral care. Since 1993, Killinger says, George has refused to allow him to teach "or have any role" in the divinity school.

Recently, when the rest of the Beeson faculty moved to a new building, Killinger was not allowed to join them, he says.

Killinger charges that George has directed the divinity school "on a fundamentalist course through his close ties to the fundamentalist wing of the Southern Baptist Convention." As a result, Killinger "has been deliberately and consciously removed from the day-to-day activities of the divinity school," the suit alleges.

Killinger said he was removed from any role at the divinity school because of his "religious philosophy which is opposed by fundamentalist Southern Baptists."

Killinger's suit alleges that George told him that "many fundamentalists in Alabama are opposed to (his) moderate philosophy" and that Killinger has made statements in sermons and speeches which were interpreted "as being contrary to the fundamentalists' strict view of the Bible."

George's actions violate the terms of the Ralph Waldo Beeson will that established the divinity school, Killinger alleges. Beeson, a Birmingham philanthropist, left \$19.3 million to Samford for the creation and establishment of a divinity school that is "Protestant Christian, evangelical and interdenominational."

Beeson gave another \$5 million to fund endowed chairs for five non-Baptist professors and stipulated that professors at the school should not be predominantly from one denomination. When Killinger filed suit, he says, there were six professors and four administrators in the divinity school and only two non-Baptists.

The school "is a fundamentalist institution which is the antithesis of an interdenominational institution mandated under the terms of the Beeson will," the suit alleges.

Beeson's will states that should the school ever cease to be operated "in an interdenominational manner," his gift to Samford will terminate and be given instead to Asbury Theological Seminary, a Methodist school in Wilmore, Ky.

The suit says Killinger's "religious philosophy" is "not accepted or tolerated" by George, "who espouses only a fundamentalist philosophy."

"Because of his religious philosophy, Dr. Killinger has been denied the opportunity to teach at the divinity school," it continues: "There is no basis for Dr. Killinger's being ostracized from the divinity school other than his religious views."

Speaking through an assistant, George told Associated Baptist Press he "has nothing negative to say" about Killinger and the case "is presently in the hands of attorneys."

Corts also declined to comment about the pending litigation. "I think matters of this type are played out in the courts. That's where they have to be dealt with, so we would not address it."

Killinger grew up as a Southern Baptist in Kentucky, but later was pastor of Presbyterian and Congregational churches. "I thought I was a natural for Beeson Divinity School -- and would have been, if it had followed the direction Mr. Beeson intended it to follow," he said.

Killinger said he appealed to university officials to "correct" the course of Beeson Divinity School, but he believes "the officials were afraid George would call in the clout of the state's fundamentalists against Samford if they actively intervened."

Killinger filed his suit in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Alabama, Southern Division, claiming unlawful discrimination based on religion under Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1991. Previously, the complaint says, he filed a charge of discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

The suit seeks compensatory and punitive damages, court costs and asks that Killinger be restored "to the teaching position for which he was hired." Killinger is asking for a jury trial.

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Progressive evangelicals offer alternative to Religious Right

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Progressive evangelical Christians, saying they want an equal voice in the public square, began May 23 to organize an alternative to the Religious Right.

Members of the new progressive evangelical caucus said they offer a different kind of politics that emphasizes spirituality rather than ideology. Approximately 100 religious leaders, representing Baptists, Catholics, Episcopalians, Quakers, Methodists and others, released a joint statement challenging what they called the Religious Right's politics of polarization.

"The Religious Right has been such a strong and singular media voice on matters of politics and morality that even the word 'Christian' now has become associated with a particular brand of very conservative Republican politics," said Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine.

"But the public perception of a right-wing evangelical juggernaut is a false impression that we would like to correct," Wallis continued.

Tony Campolo, an American Baptist scholar, said the loose-knit coalition plans to do three things:

- organize a caucus that will appear at gatherings of evangelical Christians to ask for an equal voice with the Religious Right;

- solidify a grass-roots movement in which college students work with their local churches to combat community problems; and

- initiate a broad-based program of community politics that sheds the traditional labels of conservative, liberal, Republican and Democrat to address teen pregnancy, gay bashing, poverty and racism.

The leaders said they do not expect to become a highly financed political machine like the Christian Coalition. Instead, the new network will borrow the organizational methods of Martin Luther King Jr. in which local communities worked together to effect change.

Members of the group met with congressional leadership, including House Speaker Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., and House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Mo., to discuss their concerns about the Religious Right's political agenda.

Campolo, a professor of sociology at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pa., an American Baptist school, said leaders of the Christian Coalition declined the group's invitation to meet and pray with them.

Campolo said progressive evangelicals do not intend "to declare war on the Christian Coalition."

"We are actually applauding the Religious Right in one respect," said Campolo. "They have made America conscious that political issues are at the heart of the Christian faith. For too long evangelicals have disengaged themselves from the political arena, acting as though this does not concern us."

"What happens politically does concern us, because we believe Jesus Christ is Lord of all, and we want his will done in every sector of human existence. We thank them for making America aware that politics is religious," Campolo said.

Progressives have lacked the Religious Right's "ability to seize the microphone," Campolo said. "We have been so busy doing community work that we haven't spent any time or money doing media work. And so they get all of the attention, because that is where they have put their efforts."

"The time has come for us to speak up and be heard in the media as well," he said.

James Forbes Jr., senior minister of The Riverside Church in New York City, lamented a division in the Christian faith between those who would urge "personal morality and those who would promote justice, societal and structural change."

"What concerns me most deeply," Forbes added, "is the use of the Christian label for a brand of religion which has abandoned prophetic justice and compassion for the poor, the elderly and our children."

"The tragedy is that in the name of the suffering servant of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, some who call themselves Christians encourage politicians to pray the Lord's prayer but without the Lord's spirit," Forbes said.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington, said he is both amazed and irritated to hear the Religious Right purport to speak for the entire evangelical community.

"We violate that holistic essence of Christianity when in self-righteousness we try to come and speak for all conservative Christians," he said.

"The public ethic and personal morality are two sides of the same coin," Dunn said. "If either one is genuine, the other is implied. And if either tries to exist without the other, it's not going to last very long," Dunn said.

Campolo said the group does not oppose the Religious Right's engagement in public discourse but its tactics.

Roberta Hestenes, president and professor of Christian spirituality at Eastern College, said, "It is deeply important to reconsider the way in which we engage in the public square."

In years past, some Christians withdrew from the public forum because they believed their faith was highly personal and private. But their silence left a vacuum, she said. Others chose an even more dangerous and seductive path toward power, she continued.

That path says that "the way in which we should engage in the public square is by gaining power in such a way that we can control the conversation and dominate the realities that are there."

"As an evangelical Christian, I do not believe in salvation by politics," she said.

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Ecumenical group responds to 'contract' with American family

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Any "contract" with the American family must advocate well-being for the poor because they too are part of God's family, a group of religious leaders asserted May 16.

The executive coordinating committee of the National Council of Churches, a mainline Protestant organization, adopted its statement on the eve of the release of the anticipated "Contract with the American Family" by Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition. According to a news release, the statement alluded both to the Christian Coalition's "contract" and the "Contract with America" Congressional agenda.

The committee acknowledged that opposing tax cuts for the rich, protecting immigrants and keeping a federal welfare program are not popular in today's climate.

"We need to stand for what is right, even if it is unpopular," said United Methodist Bishop Melvin Talbert, president-elect of the National Council of Churches. "We cannot remain silent."

The executive committee said it intends to "reclaim the biblical concept of the whole family of God, not simply focus on the nuclear family."

The committee said its action was rooted in "concern for providing an alternative to what currently attempts to be the single voice of Christians in the United States."

The leaders vowed to organize and mobilize a grassroots network including state and local ecumenical and interfaith groups. The National Council's 32 member Protestant and Orthodox denominations comprise 49 million Christians in nearly 140,000 congregations.

"We have our own message for the president and for the Congress," said Mary Cooper, associate director of the council's office of public policy in Washington. "It is that people are more important than weapons stockpiles and tax cuts. The way to balance the federal budget is not by taking money out of the pockets of poor people."

Talbert said the ecumenical organization intends to increase its communication with political leaders "who are being flooded from the Religious Right." The NCC committee expressed concern about a rising tide of racism, a fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners, and pitting of "haves" against "have nots" in the United States.

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-- ABP staff

Religious groups, biotech industry square off over gene patenting

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Life is too valuable to be treated like a commodity, says a broad coalition of religious leaders seeking a ban on issuing patents for advances in genetic research.

The religious leaders argue that human genes and genetically engineered animals are creations of God and should not be patented as human inventions. They want the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office to stop granting such patents while they attempt to convince Congress to bar them by law.

Religious leaders appealed for a patent moratorium during a May 18 press conference. They issued a statement signed by 180 Protestant, Jewish, Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu leaders.

Biotechnology and pharmaceutical research officials, meanwhile, insist that the patents are necessary to assure the continuation of promising medical research.

"The next generation of modern medicines and cures will never get out of the research labs if efforts to halt the patenting of genes are successful," said Carl Feldbaum, president of the Biotechnology Industry Organization.

At the press conference called by religious leaders, Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission Executive Director Richard Land called the patenting of human and animal genes "a particularly egregious abuse of genetic technology."

Granting such patents, Land said, "represents the usurpation of the ownership rights of the Sovereign of the universe."

Land predicted that genetic engineering issues soon will dwarf the abortion debate.

"We are on the threshold of mind-bending debates about the nature of human and animal life," he said. "We see altering life forms, creating new life forms as a revolt against God's sovereignty and the attempt by humankind to usurp God and to be God."

Other religious leaders acknowledged the value of genetic research, but said it should not become totally market-driven.

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said the religious leaders do not deny the "immeasurable benefits" of genetic engineering, but oppose the "turning of all nature, perhaps even humanity itself, into an ownable market commodity."

"Life's building blocks belong in the hands of God, not corporations," Saperstein said.

"Once we allow all of life to be defined as mere products of human invention, to be controlled by government agencies, to be owned by individuals, we denigrate our reverence for God and dismantle the sense of holiness in creation," he added.

Kenneth Carder, United Methodist Bishop from Nashville, Tenn., said his church supports patents for processes and techniques but not patents on genes themselves.

But Baptist medical ethicist Paul Simmons of Louisville, Ky., said in an interview that permitting patents only on the processes is "not sufficient, because the processes are rather widely known."

"What scientists are trying to do is cure diseases, some of which are lethal, some of which are terribly debilitating," said Simmons, an adjunct professor of humanities at the University of Louisville and former professor of Christian ethics at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"With genetic engineering, the prospect is that both neurological and physiological problems can be corrected so the persons can live whole and healthy lives," Simmons said.

Feldbaum and other industry officials said a patent on a gene does not confer ownership of the gene to the patent holder.

"It only provides temporary legal protections against attempts by other parties to commercialize the patent holder's discovery or invention," Feldbaum said.

Patents protect a patent holder for 17 years.

The religious coalition was organized by Jeremy Rifkin of the Foundation on Economic Trends and the General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church.

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Association reaches compromise in flap over use of 'Baptist' label

SAN DIEGO (ABP) -- A Baptist association in San Diego, Calif., averted a floor fight over a motion to require member churches to include "Baptist" in their names. Instead, messengers voted overwhelmingly to approve compromise membership guidelines that "strongly encourage" congregations to use the Baptist label.

San Diego Southern Baptist Association's executive board proposed the membership guidelines in January, sparking a controversy many observers expected to come to a head at the association's semi-annual meeting May 15.

One issue the guidelines sought to address is a trend for some new congregations to adopt "community church" identities while still cooperating in Southern Baptist missions and ministry programs.

The vote approving the compromise is seen as affirming traditional Southern Baptist polity while embracing innovative approaches to Baptist work by non-traditional congregations -- even those which choose to be known by names other than Baptist.

Phil Hester, pastor of Northstar Community Church, told messengers why some in the association felt written guidelines were needed.

"A handshake, which was the way we did business as Americans and Southern Baptists for generations in the past, was somehow inappropriate as we moved into the 21st century," Hester said. Without written guidelines, he said, the association was "flying by the seat of our pants."

Other guidelines urge member churches to identify with Southern Baptist work by:

- -- endorsing the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement of doctrinal beliefs;
- "giving money to the association and the Cooperative Program" through the California Southern Baptist Convention;
- participating in association and state convention meetings;
- and including information about their "Baptist orientation and affiliation with the San Diego Southern Baptist Association" in classes for new members.

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-- Mark Wyatt

All adoptive families special to woman who matches them

By Scott Collins

DALLAS (ABP) -- The voice on the other end of the line urged Teri Blanton to get to the hospital as soon as possible -- one of her clients, a birth mother, was dying. It was 2 a.m.

Blanton, at that time an adoption caseworker for Buckner Baptist Benevolences in Dallas, Texas, struggled out of bed and drove to the hospital, trying to think who the client could be.

When she arrived Blanton found the woman, Teresa, in intensive care. Half of the woman's head had been crushed and an emergency Caesarean section had saved her baby. But hospital officials were not optimistic about the survival of the mother or child.

Looking into Teresa's eyes, Blanton could only wonder. How could this happen? What kind of person would do this? And the most curious question, Who is she? Blanton had never seen Teresa before and she assumed the hospital had made a mistake.

But there was no mistake. Teresa had asked for Teri Blanton, from Buckner.

Teresa had been released from jail at 9:30 that night, only to be beaten with a lead pipe by her pimp, who was angry because the five days she spent in jail cost him money.

Barely able to speak, Teresa asked the nurses to call Blanton. A friend in jail had given her Blanton's name. "This woman is tough, but she's good," the friend had said. "She will help you."

Teresa begged Blanton to take care of her baby. She asked Blanton for permission to sign relinquishment papers giving the child up for adoption.

Because of Teresa's condition and the pain medication she had been given, Blanton knew Teresa could not legally sign the papers.

Teresa's family told Blanton they wanted nothing to do with the young woman. "As far as we're concerned, we just don't have a daughter," they said. That night, Blanton became Teresa's family.

As Blanton held Teresa's hand, the two women shared their dreams. "All I want is to be loved simply because of who I am. Then I can die," Teresa said.

Blanton told Teresa someone did love her. "The Lord is the only one who can fill that void," she said.

Teresa responded that God "could not possibly love me and forgive me for all I've done in my life" but Blanton kept encouraging her to trust Christ.

Throughout the early morning hours, Teresa pleaded with Blanton to let her sign the relinquishment papers. Blanton knew she couldn't.

By mid-morning Blanton had to leave for another appointment. Within a short time, she was called back to the hospital. Teresa was dying.

When Blanton entered the room, Teresa was awake and crying. She told Blanton she wanted the peace and love God could give her. "I want to become a Christian," she said.

"She prayed the sweetest prayer I've ever heard," Blanton says. "She was real honest with the Lord." An hour later, Teresa died.

But before she died, Teresa dictated a letter for her baby daughter to Blanton. In it, Teresa told the child how much she was loved and that she wanted a better life for her.

"The hospital let me spend time with the baby after Teresa died," Blanton recounted. "I prayed over that little girl and asked the Lord to watch over her and find her a good Christian home." A short time later, the baby died.

"I kept asking God how this could happen when there was so much hope for that child," Blanton said. "I could not understand.

"Then I realized that on that day, Teresa was able to hold her daughter in her own hands. What better family to be with than the family of God? Teresa and her child were adopted into a special family."

Blanton, now director of Buckner Adoption and Maternity Services, says there is always something special about working with birth mothers, newborns, and adoptive parents.

"Adoption is an example of God's perfect grace and mercy for everyone," she said.

For the pregnant birth mother, adoption enables her "to know that there is a family that can provide and care for the child," according to Blanton. The adoptive parents "see God's grace and mercy because they can experience the joy of parenthood through adoption," she said. And for the child, "God's grace allows them to reach their fullest potential with an adoptive family," Blanton said.

Blanton's philosophy of adoption can be summarized in the simple idea that Buckner's goal is "finding good homes for children."

Often, that means a new home with adoptive parents. Sometimes it means helping a birth mother learn to be a good parent.

In recent years, Blanton said, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of adoptions Buckner facilitates each year, from as many as 200 in 1975, to an average of 15 in recent years.

There are two reasons for that decline, according to Blanton -- an increase in the number of abortions nationwide since the mid-70s, and wider acceptance of single parents.

And while those factors have combined to lower the number of adoptions of Caucasian babies, Blanton said there is a growing need for parents willing to adopt special needs children.

Adoption workers classify "special needs" children in six categories: minority children, older children, sibling groups, abused or neglected children, mixed-race children, and children with medical needs.

Blanton said Buckner currently has several special needs children needing a home but there is a shortage of parents willing to adopt these children.

"These children are special to the Lord or they would never have been created," Blanton said. "They are children who need a loving family."

Syd and Kathleen Newman have that kind of family.

After adopting two Caucasian children, the Newmans began praying about adopting a third child. When they contacted Blanton, she asked them to consider a special needs child. They agreed to pray about the idea and eventually said yes.

Within six weeks of being approved for a special-needs adoption, the Newmans received a son, David, who is bi-racial.

"We had to make sure that it's what God wanted us to do," Kathleen said, who admits he sometimes worries about David's future and whether he'll be accepted in society. But then she remembers he's no different from any other child.

"There is nothing about his racial heritage that is going to change the fact that this is the child God has given to us," she said.

Syd said he fears David may someday face a difficulty sparked by comments from his peers. "But he'll know he's loved here," he added.

Key to their decision to adopt David has been the support of their families, Syd says. "It's important for your family to be behind you, loving you," he said.

And Kathleen added that David, while adopted by the Newmans, has been accepted by their friends and fellow church members.

"God is using David in our church and our community and in our daily witness," Kathleen said.

Blanton said she continually searches to find other homes for special needs children. When she finds them, she knows her prayers are being answered.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Photos available from ABP.

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