

Associated Baptist Press

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Coppenger elected unanimously to lead Midwestern Seminary

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- In a special meeting June 2, trustees unanimously elected Mark Coppenger president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Coppenger, 42, the Southern Baptist Convention's top public relations officer, will become the seminary's third president Aug. 1. He succeeds Milton Ferguson, who has held the post since 1973.

Trustees of the Kansas City, Mo., school met in closed session June 1 to interview Coppenger, who has been vice president for convention relations with the SBC Executive Committee since 1991. The trustees then met in an open session the next morning to vote.

"We've come with feelings that God has led us in this process, and we're so thankful and grateful to him," trustee chairman Lewis Adkison of Colorado told the 250 people gathered for the open session, including students, faculty, staff and alumni.

Search committee member Ronnie Rogers of Arkansas said God impressed on him several qualifications to look for in a presidential candidate. He said the next president of Midwestern should be a man who has a proven record as a leader, who has a heart for evangelism and missions, who is academically prepared, and who is "decidedly an inerrantist."

Midwestern is the fifth SBC seminary to elect a president since conservatives gained control of the denominational structure in 1979. The sixth school -- New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary -- is expected to announce a nominee to replace its retiring president soon.

Coppenger, who was a leader in the conservative movement, was executive director of the State Convention of Baptists in Indiana until 1988, when he joined the Executive Committee staff.

He earlier 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.

Coppenger and his wife, Sharon, sat on the stage facing the audience, along with Ferguson and Adkison, as board members were led through a roll-call vote. Twenty-six members of the 34-member board were present and voted unanimously to elect Coppenger. The audience then rose in a standing ovation.

"In God's grace, I say that we gladly accept," Coppenger responded. "We are honored. God is a mighty God and a God of grace and grandeur and patience. I ask the Father, before all [of] you, to be more fatherly than he's ever been in my life, to care for us as we seek to lead this seminary with you.

With about 600 students, Midwestern is the smallest of the SBC's six seminaries and is located on the edge of the Southern Baptist stronghold, the Deep South.

"I get so excited about the thought of saying that the Midwest and the Great Plains region can be the next Bible Belt in America," Coppenger said. "... I see also our holding the rope for a convention that has the tendency to turn inward and to feather its own nest and to tend to its own comfort and affairs."

Coppenger will be paid a yearly salary of \$67,400 plus benefits, for a total compensation package of approximately \$88,000.

Following the election, trustees voted to name Ferguson "president emeritus" of Midwestern. A standing ovation for Ferguson followed the vote.

Chairman Adkison thanked Ferguson for his "helpful, healthy, positive Christ-like spirit during this time of transition." Coppenger also noted Ferguson had been "such a gracious gentlemen. We have seen the grace of Christ in his life."

Coppenger grew up in Arkansas. He is married to the former Sharon South. Her father, the late Rheubin South, was an executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

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

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-- By Brenda Sanders and Greg Warner

Georgia pastor Johnny Hunt to nominate Jim Henry

WOODSTOCK, Ga. (ABP) -- Georgia pastor Johnny Hunt says he plans to nominate Jim Henry for re-election as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, which meets in Atlanta June 20-22.

Hunt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Woodstock, Ga., near Atlanta, told Associated Baptist Press June 2 he has been asked to nominate Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla. Henry is expected to face no opposition for a second term, which is traditional.

Henry's election to a first term last year broke a 15-year tradition of electing SBC presidents from a "conservative resurgency" party which wrested control of the convention from moderates in the 1980s.

Henry, who said his election marked a "shift in emphasis, not a repudiation" of the conservative movement, last year defeated Alabama pastor Fred Wolfe, who had the backing of most of the past conservative SBC presidents.

Hunt said he has "not always been a supporter" of Henry, but is "a personal friend and has been for 20 years."

"He requested I nominate him and I certainly had no problems with nominating him. I was honored when he requested," Hunt said.

Hunt's nomination is expected to carry added significance if, as expected, he is elected president of the SBC Pastors' Conference a day earlier. Hunt confirmed he will be nominated for the pastors' post by Fred Lowery, pastor of First Baptist Church of Bossier City, La. The conference president usually is elected without opposition.

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-- By Bob Allen

Group blasts Religious Right's 'exclusive claim' to Christian morality

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- The "radical Religious Right" threatens personal liberties, distorts the gospel and undermines democracy, according to a group of Christian church-state separationists who met May 30 in Dallas.

"We are not willing for the radical Religious Right, with its demagogues, rabble-rousers, opportunists and business entrepreneurs masquerading as Christian evangelists, to go unchallenged in their claim to be the only rightful occupants of the high ground of Christian morality," the group stated in a document drafted at the gathering.

Foy Valentine, president of the Dallas-based Center for Christian Ethics and former executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, convened the Maston Colloquium on "Countering the Radical Religious Right."

The colloquium was named in honor of T. B. Maston, pioneer in Christian ethics among Southern Baptists and professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth. It was organized by the Center for Christian Ethics, a non-profit corporation supported in part by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Drafters of the document included Valentine; James Dunn, executive director, Baptist Joint Committee, Washington, D.C.; John Seigenthaler, chairman of the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tenn.; Barry Lynn, executive director, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Washington, D.C.; and Cecil Sherman, coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Atlanta.

Richard Land, current head of the Christian Life Commission, took issue with the colloquium's participants, while pointing out that he does not consider his agency a Religious Right organization.

"The Maston Colloquium's statement says that 'in sincere Christian love' they are compelled to attack the Religious Right as 'demagogues, rabble-rousers, opportunists and business entrepreneurs masquerading as Christian evangelists.' I shudder to think what they would say if they were not speaking in 'Christian love,'" he quipped.

Maston Colloquium participants criticized politically active religious conservatives for their "shameless identification of Christianity with one extremist wing of a single political party."

In a call to action, the group urged concerned Christians to challenge the movement's "unethical tactics" such as distributing inaccurate and biased voter guides, backing candidates who conceal their ties to conservative political-religious groups when running for office, and "browbeating" public officials.

According to the group, dangers posed by politically active conservative religionists include:

-- "Threatening our personal liberties through government intrusion into our most intimate religious experience, family life and health decisions;

-- "Distorting the gospel by identifying the cause of Jesus Christ with their own narrow political agenda;

-- "Undermining the political process by attempting to merge church and state;

-- "Abusing the powers of government and perverting the soul of the church to force their oppressive religious dogma on all Americans;" and

-- "Stifling free and robust public discussion of political issues through arrogant intimidation that claims the exclusive right to speak for God."

They called on fellow Christians to confront the "distortions, misstatements, revisions and myths of the radical Religious Right" and to speak out, support public officials committed to church-state separation, and give to individuals and organizations opposing the Religious Right.

Neither the Christian Coalition in Virginia Beach, Va., nor the Family Research Council in Washington, D.C. -- both leading voices of the Religious Right -- returned phone calls asking for a response to the colloquium statement.

Land of the Southern Baptist CLC took issue with the reference to "government intrusion into ... family life and health decisions," terming it "widely recognized religious-left code language for defending abortion."

The CLC's Land termed the group "religious-left activists who equate defending unborn babies' right to life, opposing the homosexual lobby's special-rights agenda and arguing for students to have the right to pray voluntarily while in school as 'attempting to merge church and state.'"

While most of the colloquium centered around the drafting of the statement, participants also debated an appropriate name for the movement of politically conservative religionists and questioned what forces are fueling them.

The group finally settled on the "radical Religious Right" label, although Dunn commented, "There is very little religious about them."

Dunn said the "radical Religious Right" is financed by "sin money." He pointed to a Washington Post column in which Colman McCarthy said, "Alcohol, tobacco, gambling and gun interests are among the major donors to the Republican National Committee."

The article cited a Common Cause report noting that Philip Morris had given the Republican National Convention \$338,000 in the first quarter of 1995. The article also noted a \$40,000 contribution from the GTECH lottery equipment firm and gifts of \$414,000 from RJR Nabisco and \$196,000 from Anheuser-Busch to the Republicans last year.

Christians who are committed to church-state separation must point out such ethical inconsistencies within the ranks of politically conservative religionists, Dunn said.

Other signers of the document included were Sarah Frances Anders, professor emeritus of sociology, Louisiana College, Pineville, La.; John Leland Berg, interim pastor of Grace Fellowship Church, Meridian, Miss.; Lavonn Brown, pastor of First Baptist Church, Norman, Okla.; Richard Pierard, American Baptist layman and professor of history, Indiana State University, Terra Haute, Ind.;

Jimmy Allen, former SBC president and denominational executive, now a chaplain in Big Canoe, Ga.; Patricia Ayres of Austin, Texas, trustee of the Center for Christian Ethics; Grady Cothen of Miami Beach, Fla., retired president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board and co-chair of the Religious Liberty Council; Joseph and Carolyn Crumpler, Cincinnati, Ohio;

Calvin Didier, president, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, St. Paul, Minn.; Darold Morgan, retired president, Southern Baptist Annuity Board, Dallas; W. David Sapp, trustee, Center for Christian Ethics, Richmond, Va.; and Daniel Vestal of Houston, trustee, Center for Christian Ethics.

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CORRECTION: ABP's May 31 sidebar story, "Working together becomes ever more complex for Baptists," incorrectly identified an American Baptist historian as the "late" Robert Torbet. Torbet is still living. ABP regrets the error. Please replace the third paragraph with the following:

True to Baptist tradition that would follow, this tiny congregation split, reports American Baptist historian Robert Torbet. Since somebody had to get the believer's baptism chain started, Smyth had baptized himself. Later, he doubted the validity of his baptism and joined the Mennonites. Helwys vigorously disagreed, and by 1611 or 1612, he and a remnant of the church returned to England.

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