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Florida mission board poised to sever ties with Stetson

By Greg Warner

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- The Florida Baptist Convention is expected to sever all ties with Stetson University over the school's new policy permitting limited drinking on campus.

The convention's State Board of Missions is expected to hear a recommendation Sept. 7-8 to end the fraternal relationship Florida Baptists have had with Stetson for most of the school's 112 years.

In May the state board, echoing the feelings of many conservative Florida Baptists, voiced its opposition to the new drinking policy, which permits students of legal drinking age to consume alcoholic beverages in most residence halls and at approved social gatherings.

John Sullivan, executive director of the convention and an outspoken critic of the policy, is drafting a recommendation to end the strained relationship with Stetson and eliminate all remaining state convention funding, which has dwindled from \$1.3 million in 1987 to \$20,000 a year now.

In addition, the convention will no longer recommend Baptist students attend Stetson, will no longer accept church contributions designated for the school, and will ask Stetson to return a \$500,000 endowment established in 1946 to fund ministerial scholarships. Stetson says it will return the money once a dispute over the amount has been resolved.

If approved by the State Board of Missions, the proposal would go to the annual Florida Baptist Convention Nov. 13-15.

Steve Rayburn, chairman of the state board, said he endorses the action against the DeLand, Fla., school. "If they are not willing to reconsider the alcohol policy, it definitely leaves us with no other alternative," said Rayburn, pastor of Delaney Street Baptist Church in Orlando.

That also has been the overwhelming sentiment of Florida Baptists who have written letters to the editor of the Florida Baptist Witness, the convention's newspaper.

Although convention officials would not predict the outcome of the dispute, criticism of Stetson has run high at the convention's meetings in recent years. Complaints about a lack of Christian influences on campus in 1990 produced an agreement that gradually reduced funding of Stetson and granted the school more autonomy in the election of trustees.

Even that agreement came within a few votes of being overturned by Stetson critics in 1991. And a 1992 school policy permitting late-night room visitation for opposite-sex students weakened Baptist support even further. That year Florida Baptists removed Stetson from the state convention budget, leaving only \$20,000 a year for ministerial scholarships.

Although chartered as a Baptist institution in 1883, Stetson was never under the control of the Florida Baptist Convention. It recently changed its charter to include more non-Baptists on its self-perpetuating trustee board. While the school still claims a religious heritage, it is softening its Baptist identity and claims an ever smaller number of Baptists among its 1,900 students.

In a statement prepared for the Sept. 7-8 meeting, Stetson President Doug Lee says severing the ties that remain between the school and convention is in the best interest of both. While the two have "enjoyed a special relationship" over the years, Lee wrote, the convention is now more committed to church development than higher education.

"Stetson had not wished to walk away from its historic partnership, but it was evident that only through formal separation could either Stetson or the convention maintain integrity of purpose," Lee wrote.

Lee acknowledged some Florida Baptists find certain Stetson decisions unacceptable. And, he added, they have found it increasingly problematic to fund a school they can't control.

But, he said, there is a need for an institution like Stetson, "where young people can receive an academically excellent university experience in an atmosphere that encourages them to deal with contemporary issues in the context of a religious commitment."

Jackie Kersh, a Stetson spokeswoman, said the loss of Florida Baptists' funding and endorsement will have little effect on the university.

Sullivan was traveling and unavailable for comment.

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African-American Baptists critical of SBC racism stand

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention's recent apology for condoning racism in its history came too late, the president of a mostly black Baptist group said Sept. 4.

"There's been a whole lot of time since slavery for good, Christian people to apologize," E. Edward Jones, president of the 4.5 million-member National Baptist Convention of America told Associated Press.

In comments the day before the start of the National Baptist Convention of America's annual meeting in Dallas, Jones questioned the "sincerity" and "validity" of the SBC's apology, which he said was made only in hopes of attracting members from the growing black middle class.

The SBC resolution, which for the first time acknowledged slavery's role in the founding of the predominantly white, 15 million-member convention, was expected to be a topic of discussion at the National Baptist meeting in Dallas, scheduled Sept. 5-8.

Willie Range of Dallas told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram that he expected National Baptists to accept the SBC apology. However, Range added, "I think there is some concern about sheep-stealing."

"I think they also are concerned about the hidden Republican agendas in the Southern Baptist Convention. Many of the white Baptists are archconservatives (politically)," he said.

At another major meeting this week, the annual convention of the 7.5 million-member National Baptist Convention USA in Birmingham, Ala., the SBC resolution is not on the agenda but is likely to come up in speeches, said Michael Bell, a Fort Worth pastor.

"The Baptist resolution may have been meant for good, but many are interpreting it as a means of seducing black congregations and trying to sucker African-American churches into joining the Southern Baptist Convention," Bell said.

The SBC resolution was a hot topic at a National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Congress of Christian Education held in San Diego in June.

"Speaker after speaker condemned the Southern Baptist resolution," said Bell, who spoke at the San Diego meeting. Critics called it an effort by Southern Baptists to barge in on the African-American community, he said.

Bell will be among the estimated 25,000 delegates to attend the Birmingham gathering of the National Baptist Convention USA, the nation's largest African-American faith group.

While most African-American congregations belong to predominantly black conventions, Southern Baptists are making rapid inroads into the black community. African-American churches make up about 1,900 of the SBC's 37,000 congregations.

Jones told the Star-Telegram he believes Southern Baptists are "going more into the African-American community because we have the largest and fastest growing middle class among any ethnicity today."

In a recent statement to churches, Jones warned: "Southern Baptists with their belated apology have not had such a heart and mind to so love us. ... We must not be swept away by hidden agendas."

"We must realize our own potentialities," he added. "The black church must see a need for its continued existence."

In his interview with the Star-Telegram, Jones noted links between many Southern Baptists and right-wing Republicans. He said he will urge churches to redouble their efforts to aid the minority community, which is threatened by the Republican agenda calling for cuts in affirmative-action programs."

Gary Frost, the SBC's only black officer, said he understood concerns in the black community, but hoped African-American Baptist leaders would give Southern Baptists time to show they were sincere about their apology.

"We hope that over a period of time, we are able to express the genuineness of the apology beyond words into deeds," Frost told Associated Press. "I would pray they would allow time for the sincerity of the apology to be manifested."

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-- By ABP staff

Human rights takes center stage at U.N. women's conference

BEIJING (ABP) -- Human rights took center stage at a global women's gathering as U.S. First Lady Hillary Clinton electrified delegates with a pointed address.

Observers had predicted Clinton would tread lightly on subjects that might embarrass the Chinese hosts of the U.N.'s Fourth World Conference on Women. While she didn't name names, she decried a series of human-rights abuses against women, including forced sterilization, a custom experts say has led to a population deficit of 100 million females in Asia.

According to Associated Press, Clinton's Sept. 5 speech denounced the crime, prevalent in India, of dousing wives in gasoline and setting them on fire because they don't contribute enough wealth to the family.

She attacked the practice of mutilating young girls' genitals, which is prevalent in some African and Islamic cultures.

She also lamented "thousands of women (who) are subjected to rape as a tactic or prize of war," apparently referring to the Bosnia conflict.

She told delegates that freedom "means the right of people to assemble, organize and debate openly," not "taking citizens away from their loved ones and jailing them."

She drew loud applause when criticizing China -- again, not naming it -- for the "indefensible act" of preventing many women from participating fully in the conference. Chinese officials have harassed some delegates with agendas the government doesn't like and refused visas to others.

Clinton later told reporters she hoped China got her message.

"It's important that all governments which in any way infringe on human rights know that this conference is taking a strong stand about human rights and that the entire world is trying to move toward realization of human rights," she said.

Chinese officials did not immediately comment. The state-run news agency, which has carried reports about every other major speech at the conference, ignored Clinton's.

But some critics accused the conference of seeking to impose Western values. Westerners argue that human rights are universal, while some Eastern or Islamic cultures believe that human rights vary according to each country's social and economic circumstances.

While human rights took center stage on the conference's second day, delegates from 181 countries plunged into debate over birth control, sex education and lesbian rights.

Conservatives oppose parts of the conference's 120-page "Platform of Action," which emphasizes sex-related health problems. Catholics and conservatives worked behind the scenes to oppose statements endorsing abortion, while liberals and feminists urged delegates not to roll back previous U.N. conference agreements on human rights, abortion and contraception.

In a human-rights chapter, conference delegates resolved a dispute over references to "feminist groups" but could not agree on a call to end discrimination because of "sexual orientation," a reference to lesbians and homosexuals.

A section on reproductive issues has many phrases and paragraphs in dispute. A long paragraph on sex education for adolescents was sent to a committee for negotiation, according to Associated Press.

The platform statement proposes sex education without parental consent, which some countries oppose. The platform "should not be completely against the culture and tradition and religion of different countries," said Attiat Mustafa Abdelhalim, a pediatrician in the Sudanese Ministry of Health.

Players can kneel to pray, NCAA committee says

By Greg Warner

SHAWNEE MISSION, Kan. (ABP) -- The NCAA now says it is OK for college football players to kneel in prayer after a play, apparently averting a legal showdown with Jerry Falwell's Liberty University.

Liberty and four of its players filed suit against the National Collegiate Athletic Association Aug. 31, saying the NCAA's plan to restrict on-field prayer is a violation of religious liberty and civil rights.

The NCAA, which governs college athletics from its base in Shawnee Mission, Kan., issued a statement one day later saying it did not intend to prohibit prayer and will permit players "to kneel momentarily at the conclusion of a play, if in the judgment of the official the act is spontaneous and not in the nature of a pose."

Liberty officials said they are satisfied. "This is all we have ever done and all we are asking the NCAA to allow us to continue to do," said Sam Rutigliano, head football coach at the conservative Christian school in Lynchburg, Va.

Falwell, chancellor of Liberty, commended the turnaround by the NCAA's rules committee. "These are decent men, many of whom I know to be evangelical Christians, and they were honorable enough to correct an unfair rule," Falwell said in a statement.

The conflict arose over the NCAA's attempt to strengthen enforcement of a three-year-old ban on "excessive celebration" in football -- taunting, showboating, dancing, spiking the football and any other "delayed, excessive or prolonged act by which a player attempts to focus attention upon himself."

An NCAA videotape distributed to explain the crackdown depicts several behaviors that would warrant the 15-yard penalty, including a player kneeling in prayer in the end-zone. A spokesman said the kneeling -- not the praying -- would single the player out for attention and therefore attract a penalty flag.

But the clarification, issued by rules chairman Vince Dooley, athletic director at the University of Georgia, said limited kneeling will be allowed. So will brief on-field prayer by a group of players.

"We have said all along that the rule allows for religious expression," Dooley said in a statement. "Once people understand what the rule is about, they realize it is about drawing attention to yourself to the exclusion of your teammates."

Dooley said the rules committee, which includes three coaches affiliated with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, initially considered creating an exception to the celebration rule that would allow prayer, but the committee decided it would be impossible for on-field officials to distinguish real prayer from showboating.

"Such an exclusion would open a window for a variety of attention-drawing displays under the guise of prayer," Dooley said. "Thus the committee has taken a position against any action -- regardless of intent -- that detracts from the team spirit of football."

Several college coaches -- including Bobby Bowden of Florida State University and Gene Stallings of the University of Alabama -- said earlier they could accept the strict enforcement of the rule because it permitted some prayer while promoting sportsmanship. But others said religious liberty was at stake.

"When our players kneel in prayer," argued Liberty's Rutigliano, "they are not trying to draw attention to themselves but rather to focus attention on God."

Liberty University had filed a lawsuit and sought a temporary restraining order to block enforcement of the rule. Because of the NCAA's clarification, however, the request for a restraining order was declared moot by U. S. District Court Judge James Turk Sept. 1. A Liberty attorney said he is "optimistic" the lawsuit likewise can be resolved.

Move to Prague complete; seminary ready for fall semester

PRAGUE, Czech Republic (ABP) -- The International Baptist Theological Seminary's move to Prague, Czech Republic, is complete, easing fears that the new campus might not be ready to receive students when the fall semester opens Oct. 3.

The seminary's president, John David Hopper, promised students in March that the relocation of the school from Ruschlikon, Switzerland, would be completed by fall. Many wondered if that deadline was realistic.

"Let's face it," one student told European Baptist Press Service, "if you had seen the campus last spring when we came here for our visit, you too would have wondered if it were really possible to get the campus ready by this fall."

As the fall semester approaches, however, things look brighter. The move to Prague is complete, construction on essential buildings is nearly complete and the campus "quad" perimeter marked by four main buildings begins to convey the mood of an academic setting.

Trustees of the school voted in 1993 to move the school, citing rising operating expenses, tighter immigration laws and the changing religious landscape in Eastern Europe. The sale of the picturesque Ruschlikon campus -- six buildings on five acres overlooking Lake Zurich -- is expected to bring \$20 million.

The school's 55,000-volume library and large periodical collection were placed in 1,800 labeled boxes, loaded into five large containers and shipped by rail over the 300-mile route to Prague. There, 25 volunteers unloaded the containers, carried boxes into newly remodeled library rooms, unpacked books and placed them on shelves.

"The whole job of unloading was completed in just three days," said Alice Boerrigter, the new librarian.

Eight trucks carried furniture, mostly for offices. Student apartments are furnished with new furniture, as well as a private bath with shower.

Thirteen new students will join the 20 returning students. The students come from 19 countries. Last year's student count in Ruschlikon was 44.

The seminary was founded in Ruschlikon in 1949 by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. The FMB, which transferred the property to the European Baptist Federation in 1989, cut all funding to the seminary in 1991 because of charges of liberalism at the school.

Several FMB administrators resigned over the decision. Shortly thereafter, FMB President Keith Parks announced his retirement, saying he could no longer work with the board because of philosophical differences. Eventually Parks accepted a position with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which funds its own missions program, including the international seminary.

Professors interviewed while moving into the new faculty office building on the quad said they were satisfied with the arrangement.

Work on several buildings has not yet begun, including a conference center which will eventually house the chapel. Chapel services will be held in a temporary location this fall.

One of the four main buildings is more than 200 years old and will require extensive renovation. It eventually will house administrative offices, which will take up temporary quarters during construction.

Only one faculty member was lost to the move. Thorwald Lorenzen chose not to follow the school to Prague. He and his wife have moved to her native Australia.

Three professors from Ruschlikon moved with the school to Prague: Heidrun Barenfanger, who teaches Hebrew and Greek; Kent Blevins, ethics and practical theology; and Phyllis Rodgerson-Pleasants, church history.

A fourth professor preceded all others to Prague. Don Berry moved to the city with his family in 1994 to begin language study. Berry succeeded Earl Martin as director of the Institute for Mission and Evangelism. His time will be divided equally between IME and the seminary, where he will be professor of mission and evangelism.

Others who have taught as adjunct professors over the years plan to continue to teach at the seminary in Prague. Adjunct teachers this fall include Jan Kiwiet of the Netherlands, who taught 20 years at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and George Beasley-Murray, a British New Testament scholar who has taught at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Errol Simmons, continues to direct the International Baptist Lay Academy in Hungary. The academy is related both to IBTS Prague through its board of trustees and to the European Baptist Federation. IBLA's financial support comes through the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

Administrators said the move was possible largely due to the work of volunteers from the United States and Europe.

More than 600 volunteers from the U.S. and 100 others from 14 nations in Europe traveled to Prague to do non-construction tasks during the numerous remodeling projects.

At any given time, up to 30 volunteers have been on campus. Some performed menial housekeeping tasks for the others, such as purchasing and preparation food. Others were involved in such non-construction tasks as painting, scraping and sanding after construction companies had completed their heavier work.

The general supervisor for all construction workers, including the work of the volunteers, is Don Murray, a Baptist construction engineer from North Carolina.

Murray said he has "enjoyed this project immensely." He said the job was more difficult than projects he has supervised in Saudi Arabia, "because here no one speaks English." A translator works with Murray full-time.

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-- By ABP staff

Baptist work in Albania continues to expand

TIRANE, Albania (ABP) -- Baptist work in Albania continues to expand, according to a European Baptist News Service report.

On June 30, 53 new believers were baptized at a beach in Lezhe, a two-hour drive from Tirane -- 33 from the Tirane church and 20 won by Brazilian ministers working in Lezhe and Burrel.

"There was a sense of excitement and celebration as the candidates went into the water and made their profession (of faith) before their families and friends," said Gill Jones, a Baptist Missionary Society worker. "It was a time of praise," Jones added.

Only three years ago, there was no Baptist work in Albania and very little organized Christianity. Today, there are several developments.

The Tirane Baptist Church has moved to a new location, less convenient to members but safer and less expensive.

Two youth teams, sponsored by the European Baptist Federation's Youth Committee, recently completed mission trips to Albania, organizing children's Bible clubs in Tirane and working in a mission area of the capital city, Llaprak.

Two volunteer teams from the United States also went to Albania this summer, working at Lezhe in a school and a beach ministry. In Tirane, the American team worked with the vacation Bible school and did repairs to the guest house at the Baptist Center.

A Baptist congregation at Bregu, near Tirane, continues to grow and also baptized new believers this summer.

Another ministry in the south at Gjirocaster continues to grow. Three baptismal services were scheduled for this summer, two at Gjirocaster and one in the town of Fier.

Members of the European Baptist Federation team in Albania organized the water supply to the hospital in Vlora, to the south of Tirane. The project greatly helped the team's credibility in that city.

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-- By ABP staff

ADDITION: Please insert this response from Jerry Rankin after the 22nd paragraph in the Aug. 31 ABP story, "WMU leaders 'furious' with Rankin letter."

Rankin said he was "surprised at the anger and emotion" in O'Brien's response, which he said "instead of speaking objectively to the matters of concern," focused on criticism of the Foreign Mission Board.

"This reactionary statement clearly reflected why we felt it necessary to communicate our concern to pastors and WMU leadership in the churches," Rankin said.

The WMU response included "no acknowledgement" of FMB concerns about the Fellowship's "disruptive effects on cooperation and unity within the SBC" and WMU's "clear departure from their historical role that has been obscured in explanations to Southern Baptists," Rankin said.

END