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GOP presidential hopefuls line up to address Christian Coalition

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Christian Coalition flexed its political muscles as a parade of Republican presidential hopefuls sought the support of the 4,000 conservative activists attending the organization's fifth annual meeting.

The Sept. 8-10 "Road to Victory" conference in Washington, D.C., firmly established that the six-year-old organization -- which received much credit for helping Republicans gain control of Congress in the 1994 elections -- will be a key player in the GOP's aims to secure the White House in 1996.

In a keynote address, the Christian Coalition founder, televangelist Pat Robertson, said the organization is well on its way to a goal of gaining substantial influence, if not outright control, of Republican Party apparatus in all 50 states.

Robertson said one of the goals he set when starting the coalition in 1989 was to elect a "conservative majority" in both houses of Congress by 1996, a deadline Robertson said was reached two years ahead of schedule. Another original goal was to elect a "conservative president" by 1996, which Robertson said is now attainable.

He also wanted the organization to have "a significant voice" in one of the political parties by 1994, a goal undoubtedly attained by the movement, which claims 1.7 million members nationwide.

Robertson cited a 1994 magazine article which described the coalition as "dominant" in Republican parties in 18 states and "substantial" in 13 more.

"That's 31 states," Robertson said. And while the organization is capable right now of putting together a grass-roots network that is unparalleled, "we are only a portion of the way there," he continued.

"We must complete the job in all 50 states," he said. "I'm glad to see all this that they say about 31, but that leaves, my goodness, a lot more. We've got more work to do. I like 100 percent, not 60 or 70."

Christian Coalition Executive Director Ralph Reed, while extolling the group's political influence, sought to distance the movement from partisan politics. He vowed the grass-roots organization would never become "a wholly owned subsidiary of the Republican Party."

"We do not bear the name of Ronald Reagan or Bob Dole or Newt Gingrich," Reed said. "We bear the name which is above every name. We bear the name to which every knee shall bend."

However, Reed reserved one partisan shot for President Clinton, mocking Clinton's recent speeches on issues of faith and family as coming not from the bully pulpit but from "the pulpit of bull."

Reed said in a speech that the conference was held neither to endorse or "be courted" by the Republican presidential candidates. "The question is not who we will endorse but who will endorse our agenda," he said. "We seek to do more than just elect a president. We seek to restore and heal a nation."

All but two of the nine GOP candidates, plus House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), addressed the annual meeting of Reed's group, which formed six years ago as an offshoot of Robertson's failed bid for the presidency.

Only Pennsylvania Sen. Arlen Specter, who has strongly criticized the Religious Right's influence in the party, wasn't invited. Specter reportedly fought, both before and during the three-day meeting, for a chance to speak to challenge the group's opposition to abortion.

California Gov. Pete Wilson, who like Specter is pro-choice, was invited to speak but said he could not attend because of state business.

The crowd received Indiana Sen. Richard Lugar warmly but without much enthusiasm as he warned that cities and states are becoming too reliant on gambling revenues. Former Tennessee governor Lamar Alexander got a lukewarm response to his speech calling for a massive transfer of spending and regulatory power from the federal government to states.

The crowd registered far stronger support for Alan Keyes, an African-American radio talk-show host from Baltimore and former Reagan-administration appointee, who used preacher-style rhetoric to drive home a message about the importance of two-parent families and the legitimate role of God in public life.

A speech by former television commentator Pat Buchanan was interrupted by applause several times for comments like, "We don't need some secular humanist in sandals and beads at the Department of Education telling us how to educate our children."

Buchanan also attacked four of his opponents in the contest for the GOP nomination -- Kansas Sen. Bob Dole, Texas Sen. Phil Gramm, Lugar and Specter -- for voting to confirm Supreme Court nominations for Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Stephen Breyer, who both support a woman's right to choose an abortion. "When the time came to stand up for life in '93 and '94, they stood instead with Bill Clinton," he chided.

Gramm and Dole also sparred over Dole's refusal to sign a pledge supporting the Republican Party's strict platform plank on abortion.

Gramm waved his copy of the pledge distributed by the Republican National Coalition for Life and urged conservatives to ask Dole why he refused to sign. "There is a divine spark in every human life and I will fight for that life," Gramm said to applause.

Later, in a speech interrupted by chants of "Sign the pledge," Dole defended his anti-abortion credentials but refused to sign the Republican plank. "Don't look at pledges, look at the record," he said.

Privately aides said Dole was considering signing the pledge but dropped the idea after Gramm's theatrics.

"I am annoyed at Phil Gramm for doing that," said Sandy Tiller, the Coalition for Life's political director, complaining that Gramm's actions made it tougher to bring Dole on board. Gramm signed the pledge a few months ago, under pressure from social conservatives.

Just after President Clinton's 1992 election, both Gramm and Dole refused to give unequivocal support for the abortion plank.

Along with seeking a ban on late-term abortions and cutting off all federal funding for abortion and family-planning groups that advocate abortions, the Christian Coalition's legislative agenda includes measures to protect voluntary prayer in public schools, end public funding for the arts and humanities, eliminate the Education Department and enact a \$500-per-child tax credit.

Reed said the Christian Coalition must not become just another special-interest group, like the AFL-CIO and feminist leaders have become for the Democrats. "They are no longer servants, they are power brokers," he said. "We will not become what they have become."

"Politics for us is a mission field, not a smoke-filled room," Reed said.

The conference provided a lightning rod for critics of the coalition's conservative agenda. Joan Campbell-Brown, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, warned "all candidates for public office" that "there are far more religious Americans who profoundly disagree with Pat Robertson's vision for America than agree with it."

"I assure you we will be working very hard to make sure those majority voices are heard on election day," she said.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, an advocacy group often at odds with the Christian Coalition, said: "Ralph Reed told one truth during his speech, that he doesn't want the Christian Coalition to be a subsidiary of the Republican Party. Instead, he wants the Republican Party to be a wholly owned subsidiary of the Christian Coalition."

"This is still Pat Robertson's organization," Lynn said, "and he still wants a Christian America."

Reed, however, told USA Today he takes issue with "those who would suggest that religion and politics don't mix."

"We don't have to pretend to be mainstream. We are mainstream," Reed added.

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-- By ABP staff. Compiled from various sources.

Christian Coalition's growing clout dividing Americans, author warns

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Christian Coalition's heavy political clout -- demonstrated in the 1994 elections and the emerging 1996 presidential race -- points to a more polarized, divisive American future, warns evangelical author/professor Tom Sine.

Sine is currently making talk-show rounds promoting his new book "Cease Fire: Searching for Sanity in American's Culture Wars."

At a Sept. 6 news conference in Washington, Sine said the coalition formed by the religious right and the secular right has the upper hand in the nation's culture wars and predicted the movement will continue to gain strength through the 1996 elections.

"What I think we're moving into is replacing the social engineering of the liberal left with the moral engineering of the religious right," he said.

Lost in that development, he predicted, will be "the Judeo-Christian commitment to the common good," which will be replaced by a "Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest economics where everyone pursues their own self interest."

"It's ironic to me that those on the religious right have adopted this Darwinian (view), but it's very much the center of their agenda," he said.

Sine told reporters he is frustrated by the polarization that marks church and society.

"To be a mainline Protestant in many churches, you have to be a liberal Democrat," he said, "and you cannot be considered a born-again Christian, an evangelical in America, if you are not a right-wing Republican."

That type of division is not found among evangelicals worldwide, he said. "Only in America."

Evangelicals in other countries are in the forefront of those advocating increased funding to help those in need, Sine noted. "Only in America are conservative Christians lobbying for cutbacks" in programs that help the needy, he said.

Noting the American evangelical movement has never been known for its "intellectual prowess" on public policy issues, Sine rejected the notion that the religious right's positions are biblically based.

"They take the Bible literally," he said. "I'm not sure they take it seriously when it comes to framing public policy."

A parade of GOP presidential hopefuls addressing the Christian Coalition's "Road to Victory" gathering Sept. 8-9 offered fresh testimony to the group's growing political clout. Moderate religious leaders, however, have begun to question the degree to which the Pat Robertson-founded organization actually represents or reflects American evangelicals.

While the Christian Coalition's moral values emphasis has struck a chord with many conservative Christians, National Association of Evangelicals official Richard Ciznik believes that many evangelicals have concerns about the coalition's methodology and its claim to speak for evangelicals.

"The Christian Coalition is on shaky turf when it attempts to speak for evangelicals on issues on which there is no moral consensus," Ciznik said, citing the coalition's focus on economic, trade and foreign policy issues.

In May a group of evangelicals led by American Baptist sociologist Tony Campolo and "Sojourners" magazine editor Jim Wallis, noted that the Christian Coalition had received a lot of media attention but suggested that it does not speak for half of the nation's 60 million evangelicals. Other voices need to be heard, they argued.

Wallis told reporters the "secular left and the religious right" are both inadequate to deal with the unravelling of American culture.

"In my (D.C.) neighborhood, two of the biggest reasons people are poor is 13-year-olds having kids and the lack of jobs," he said. The left has a hard time talking about pregnancy with teen-age kids and the right can't talk about the lack of jobs and racism, he noted.

The polarization between liberal left and the religious right also hinders realistic progress in addressing violence, Wallis said.

Both the right's concern about cultural violence in television and movies and the left's concern about structural and systemic injustice are real and both must be dealt with, he said.

"We're serving up moral pollution to our kids on the streets," he said. "It's not that they haven't gotten our values, but that they have gotten our values and that's the problem."

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Former Florida Baptist editor takes new job with Samford

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Former Florida Baptist Witness editor Jack Brymer has taken a job at Samford University.

Brymer, 59, has been named to a newly created post of director of publications at the Baptist school in Birmingham, Ala., effective Oct. 1. He will also teach occasional courses in Samford's journalism and mass communications department, according to a Sept. 12 news release.

"Jack Brymer brings a wealth of expertise in the publications field which will benefit Samford University as it seeks to build a unified program in this area," said Samford President Thomas Cortis. "His teaching abilities and his broad knowledge of the Southern Baptist denomination will serve Samford well and make him an even more valuable member of the staff."

Brymer resigned abruptly last August after 10 years as editor of the Florida Baptist news journal, citing "continued harassment" from the newspaper's governing board.

Members of the Florida Baptist Witness commission consistently gave him positive job-performance ratings but continued to criticize his handling of controversial stories and use of news stories from Associated Baptist Press, he said.

Members of the board, who denied harassing Brymer, accepted his resignation with regret.

Since leaving the Witness, Brymer has worked as a free-lance writer and publications consultant.

Brymer is a native of Alabama and a 1967 Samford graduate. He worked 17 years as managing editor of The Alabama Baptist before moving to Florida in 1984.

He holds a master's degree in journalism from the University of Alabama.

Brymer is immediate-past president of the Southern Baptist Press Association. In 1990 he was the first editor of a religious publication to be chosen as guest-editor-in-residence at the University of Alabama School of Communications.

"I'm excited about returning to my alma mater and the school that has made a significant contribution to my life and to hopefully be able to make a contribution to the life of the school," Brymer said. "I admire Dr. Corts and look forward to working with him and the administration."

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-- By Bob Allen

Liberian Baptist leader hopeful but cautious about cease-fire

By Wendy Ryan

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The recent peace celebrations in Liberia have left Baptist leaders hopeful, but cautious and eager to see roads reopened so they can visit Baptists all across the country.

"We feel a sense of relief, but we are cautious," said Emile Sam Peale, executive secretary of the Liberia Baptist Missionary and Education Convention.

Sam Peale, while visiting the United States on his way home from the 17th Baptist World Congress recently held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spoke to leaders of the Baptist World Alliance about Liberia and the role of Baptists there.

On Sept. 1, Liberians celebrated in the streets over a cease-fire signed the week before by Liberia's leaders and rebel leader Charles Taylor, apparently ending five years of war.

"Now that the main players are directly involved, especially Charles Taylor, I feel more hopeful," Sam Peale said.

Remaining challenges include the disarmament of 60,000 people and the opening of roads, which will allow Baptist leaders to visit areas of the country cut off since before the war, he said.

More than 100 Baptist churches have been closed since the start of the five-year war. In 1989, there were 253 churches in the Liberian convention, but in 1994 only 54 churches were represented at the organization's annual meeting.

Reports from missionaries and others say there are 39 churches that meet regularly in the areas once controlled by Charles Taylor.

"We want to see the state of our churches, schools and properties, and also our refugees who need help," Sam Peale said. "We have a great rebuilding process ahead of us and we need the prayer and support of Baptists around the world."

The war has turned most Liberians into beggars, Sam Peale said, while drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and AIDS have all escalated.

"We have a long way to go," said Sam Peale, "and the church has a vital role in all of this."

During the conflict, Baptists prayed and fasted for peace and protested human-rights abuses, Sam Peale said. "It doesn't make us popular, but we must speak out," he said.

All the major players in Liberia's recent political history have been Baptists, a fact that has hurt Baptist work there, noted Emmett Dunn, director of the BWA youth department and a Liberian.

Rebel leader Taylor, a Baptist, claims the war he led was of God. He was educated at the Riggs Institute, described by Dunn as "the finest Baptist school in Liberia." Taylor's forces later destroyed that building.

Taylor fought alongside Sergeant Samuel Doe, who also attended a Baptist church. It was Doe who, in 1980, overthrew and assassinated Liberian leader William Tolbert, a leader among Liberian Baptists. Tolbert served as president of the Baptist World Alliance from 1965 to 1970.

"The Baptist church in Liberia needs to be neutral," said Dunn, "and stand its ground in the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It needs to continue to preach peace based on God's word and embrace each other, regardless of race or tribe."

Dunn said "national reconciliation is needed for lasting peace" in Liberia. The BWA's youth department plans to hold a reconciliation training meeting in Monrovia next April as part of a larger conference in Liberia sponsored by the group's division of evangelism and education.

Baptist World Aid, the relief and development arm of the BWA, has a 1995-1996 funding goal of \$50,000 for reconstruction of churches and help for Liberian Baptists.

Last April, Denton Lotz, BWA general secretary, visited Liberia. "We may be helpless, but not hopeless," Liberian Baptists assured him.

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Missionaries played key role in helping Vietnamese orphans

By Russell Rankin and Susan Simko

DALLAS (ABP) -- Vietnamese war-orphans who recently marked the 20-year anniversary of their arrival at Buckner Baptist Children's Home in Dallas Aug. 25-27 might have had little to celebrate but for the actions of Southern Baptist missionaries serving in war-torn Southeast Asia in 1975.

Amid the chaos of the fall of South Vietnam, Ha Nguyen, director of the Cam Ranh City Orphanage, loaded 82 orphans onto buses and fled for the coast in a cloud of gunfire and confusion.

The orphans were packed below deck into the hold of an old, leaky fishing boat that would have comfortably held about one quarter of their number. After the boat's engine died, they drifted in the South China Sea until being rescued by a Taiwanese merchant ship and towed to Singapore Harbor.

Southern Baptist missionaries Bob Wakefield and his wife, Margie, were running the Singapore Baptist hostel in 1975, during the fall of South Vietnam.

"This was a time when things were happening real fast," Wakefield said. "Missionaries serving in Vietnam were evacuating the city of Saigon and most of them came through our hostel."

Wakefield said he was approached by a Singapore police inspector, who told him about the stranded and starving orphans. Running down a list of contacts, Wakefield found shelter for the group on an island, where they recuperated while other missionaries arranged for their air passage to the United States.

Missionaries Jim and Margaret Gayle had contact with the Cam Ranh orphanage while serving in Vietnam from 1965 to 1975. Gayle, who grew up at Buckner, knew the Texas-Baptist children's home was the ideal place for the Vietnamese orphans. R.C. Campbell, president of Buckner Baptist Benevolences at the time, agreed, and the children were accepted.

Gayle said he was at the right place at the right time to help the orphans come to Buckner.

"I had heard the orphans got out of Vietnam and heard they reached Singapore," said Gayle, who at the time was working with refugees at Fort Chaffee, Ark. "At first the (U.S) State Department was hesitant to let a group in the country claiming to be orphans, but after some persuasion and upon learning they were a Baptist group, they were permitted passage into the States."

Gayle pulled strings to have the orphans transported to Fort Chaffee and immediately began working to get the children into Buckner Baptist Children's Home, where, two months after leaving Vietnam, they arrived safely at the home.

Many of those orphans, now grown, returned to Buckner Aug. 25-27 for a 20-year reunion, recalling their difficult exodus and thanking those who helped.

According to Gayle, the Vietnamese orphans were blessed by God to have been led by the strong hand of their leader, Ha.

"God has really blessed that group of people," Gayle said. Since leaving the foreign mission field, Gayle, who lives in Denton, has worked in the Vietnamese church started by Ha.

"Many of the orphans attend that church and there is a core group I have really gotten close with," he said. "What God has done in the lives of all those children through the years is remarkable, not just that they got out of Vietnam, but that they ended up at Buckner."

Thirty-six of the Vietnamese children were adopted by families around the country. The rest grew up at Buckner Children's Home.

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Values linked to public policy, Clinton tells religious leaders

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Values and public policy go hand-in-hand, President Clinton told a group of U.S. religious leaders at a Sept. 8 breakfast at the White House.

Hosting the third such breakfast in three years, Clinton reminded the leaders of his administration's efforts to assure the free exercise of religion, protect the religious expression of students and promote character education in public schools.

Students should be taught, Clinton said, "to be honest and trustworthy, reliable, to have respect for themselves, for others, for property, and for our natural environment, to be good citizens, ... to treat one another with civility and tolerance and to exercise personal responsibility."

The president predicted there will be more deliberate and successful efforts to teach such values in public schools. Dropout rates are down and student performance is up in schools that have comprehensive character education, he said.

"That's because you basically can't live without values," he said. "You've got to have some. It's just a question of what they are."

Values are reflected in public-policy choices, such as decisions made in pursuing a balanced federal budget, Clinton said.

All Americans have a "common interest" in balancing the budget, he said.

"We get to the opportunity to lift the burden of debt off our children and grandchildren," he said. "We get lower interest rates. We free up the money that's available to be borrowed by people in the private sector to create new jobs. We get more growth if we do it right."

The key question, he said, is how to balance the budget, "because it's not just a matter of debits and credits, it's also a matter of values and responsibilities."

"If we don't balance the budget, we're going to hurt America's future," he said. "If we do it in the wrong way, we're going to hurt America's future."

Clinton told the leaders he is trying to bring a new spirit to deal with "hot button" issues such as welfare, crime, immigration and affirmative action.

The welfare system, he said, needs to be reformed "because the people that are on welfare hate it." He said welfare "as we know it" should be ended "because our country will be better off if people are successful workers and successful parents."

Clinton told the religious leaders he wants more punishment for criminals but also seeks to "prevent crime by giving our young people some things that they can say 'yes' to as well as say 'no' to."

On immigration, Clinton said it is wrong for people to immigrate to the United States illegally, but it is a mistake to blame immigrants for the nation's problems.

"We're all a nation of immigrants," he said. "Nearly everybody came from somewhere else."

Clinton reiterated his position that some affirmative-action programs don't work right and "ought to be fixed."

But, he added, "we should make a conscious effort to include all Americans in the bounty of America. Conscious effort is not the same thing as giving preference to unqualified people."

"A conscious effort is animated by the belief that God put within everybody the capacity to rise to higher levels, and we need everybody to become what we ought to be."

While he is committed to working on problems associated with welfare, affirmative action, crime and violence, Clinton said those issues are "not the real cause" of middle-class anxiety in America.

The president pointed to a rapidly changing global economy in which Americans no longer feel secure in their jobs. The nation, he said, is going through a level of change "comparable to the change we went through when we moved from being an agrarian society to an industrial, more urbanized society."

"In a time like this, when you're moving into a future you can't fully predict, nobody has all the answers. That's important," he said.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, described the president's remarks as a non-partisan appeal "for compassion and common ground."

Another Baptist in the audience, Jesse Fletcher, past president of Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas, said he was impressed by the fact that both Clinton and Vice President Al Gore would devote an entire morning to meet with the religious leaders, whom he described as "quite an eclectic group, that seemed to represent the whole range of traditional religious life."

He said he found the president "quite relaxed and open" and believes him to be "quite sincere" in an ongoing goal of seeking common ground for Americans.

Fletcher said he was also impressed by Clinton's relationship with his pastor, Rex Horne, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. "Two things he cited," Fletcher said. "One, he cited at some length a recent sermon by Dr. Horne. Two, he referred to his regular Saturday night conversations with his pastor."

Other Baptists who attended the event included Horne; Charles G. Adams, pastor of Hartford Memorial Baptist Church in Detroit and past president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention; Avery Aldridge, pastor of Foss Avenue Baptist Church, Flint, Mich.; Robert Browning, president of the Kentucky Baptist Convention; Denton Lotz, president of the Baptist World Alliance; Charles Carter, pastor of Shades Mountain Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala;

George Childs, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church, Lexington, Ky; John Griffith, Lyon College, Batesville, Ark; Beecher Hicks, pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church, Washington, D.C.;

T.J. Jemison, recent past president, National Baptist Convention U.S.A.; Gerald Mann, pastor, River Bend Baptist Church, Austin, Texas; James Miller, executive director of the Rhode Island Council of Churches; Cessar Scott, executive minister of the Baptist General Convention of Virginia; and Gardner Taylor, pastor emeritus of Concord Baptist Church, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Florida board votes to sever Stetson ties

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 approved a recommendation Sept. 8 to end the fraternal relationship Florida Baptists have had with Stetson for most of the school's 112 years. The proposal now goes to the annual Florida Baptist Convention Nov. 13-15 for approval.

State convention leaders, echoing the feelings of many conservative Florida Baptists, have condemned the new drinking policy, which permits students of legal drinking age to consume alcoholic beverages in most residence halls and at approved social gatherings.

Ken Whitten, state convention president and pastor of Idlewild Baptist Church in Tampa, told state board members the decision was unavoidable. "They [Stetson] have defined who they are. We have defined who we are. There is no other alternative but to sever the fraternal relationship. It breaks my heart, [but] we cannot tell Stetson who they are to be, just like they cannot tell us who we are."

John Sullivan, executive director of the convention and an outspoken critic of the alcohol policy, supported the recommendation.

Stetson President Doug Lee was not present for the Sept. 8 meeting. But in a statement prepared for the meeting, he said severing the ties that remain between the DeLand, Fla., school and the convention is in the best interest of both. While the two have "enjoyed a special relationship" over the years, Lee said, the convention is now more committed to church development than higher education.

The recommendation, approved without opposition, eliminates 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 accept church contributions designated for Stetson, recommend Baptists attend the 1,900-student school, or allow Stetson to participate in the convention's annual meeting or sponsor an exhibit at the meeting. And Stetson has been asked to return a \$568,148 endowment established in 1945 to fund ministerial scholarships; the school has agreed to do so.

Most observers expect the recommendation to pass at the November convention. 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. Later disputes over Stetson policies of abortion counseling, condom distribution and late-night room visitation for opposite-sex students weakened Baptist support even further. As a result, Florida Baptists removed Stetson from the state convention budget in 1992, leaving only \$20,000 a year for ministerial scholarships.

When Stetson established its new drinking policy earlier this year, school officials conceded drinking was a reality on the campus. The new drinking policy is more honest and enforceable, they said.

Liability was another factor, officials said. If a drinking ban is in effect but ignored, the school might be held liable for drinking-related accidents and other problems.

"We certainly felt we were badly exposed from liability standpoint," said Jackie Kersh, a Stetson spokeswoman. "That was not the primary reason why the policy was changed, but it certainly was taken into consideration."

At the request of convention officials, Lee asked Stetson trustees to reconsider the new drinking policy. They declined, Lee said, even though they knew the convention-university relationship was at risk.

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 students.

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

Lee acknowledged some Florida Baptists find certain Stetson decisions unacceptable. And, he added, Florida Baptists 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."

Kersh said the loss of Florida Baptists' funding and endorsement will have little effect on the university. Students who lose their ministerial scholarships under the proposal will receive financial help from Stetson, she said.

Stetson trustees, who meet Sept. 15, are expected to approve a resolution affirming the change in relationship, Kersh said.

The Florida convention now relates only to two schools. Florida Baptist Theological College in Graceville, which provides college-level theological training, is owned and operated by the convention. Palm Beach Atlantic College, an independent school in West Palm Beach, receives money for ministerial scholarships but has no formal relationship with the convention.

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