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Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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Three accrediting agencies plan joint visit to Southern Seminary

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Three accrediting agencies will make a joint visit to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Nov. 8-10 to investigate concerns arising out of turmoil on the Louisville, Ky., campus last spring.

The visiting team will include representatives from the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada -- the seminary's primary accrediting agency -- as well as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Council on Social Work Education, which accredits the seminary's Carver School of Church Social Work.

The team's investigation reportedly will focus on President Albert Mohler's firing of Diana Garland as dean of the Carver School after she told students Mohler's hiring policies jeopardized the school's accreditation.

The investigation also is expected to focus on events after the firing, including trustee-adopted changes in the faculty hiring process and implementation of what critics have called a "gag" order banning employees from criticizing the president or trustees publicly.

The accrediting agencies do not discuss specifics of investigations until final rulings have been made.

However, sources at the seminary said there were problems related to scheduling of the joint visit. The team reportedly wanted to visit the campus early in the semester, preferably in September, but could not work out a date when Mohler was available.

The date finally selected comes a month after the Oct. 9-11 meeting of seminary trustees, rather than a month before.

That is a crucial difference, seminary sources say, because trustees are expected to decide the future of the Carver School at their October meeting. Since options include either closing the Carver School or transferring it to another Baptist institution, questions focusing specifically on accreditation of the social work school could be moot by the time of the team's visit.

Even with removing the Carver School from the equation, however, the seminary still faces its most serious threat to accreditation in recent history, according to several sources familiar with both the seminary and the accreditation process.

ATS, for example, does not evaluate the particular policies an institution sets but requires member institutions to follow those policies. Actions like sudden changes in the hiring process that might affect future advancement opportunities of current employees tend to attract particular scrutiny from accrediting agencies.

The visiting team will include staff members from the three accrediting agencies and representatives from peer schools.

ATS official Dan Aleshire, a former professor at Southern Seminary, has removed himself from the investigation to avoid conflict of interest. Michael Gilligan will be the ATS staff coordinator. Bennett Hudson will coordinate the SACS investigation.

Results of the investigation will not be made public perhaps until early next year, although the visiting team will have an exit interview with Mohler in November.

The ATS team will file a written report with the agency's commission on accreditation, which does not meet until the third week of January. Seminary officials will be informed of any actions taken against the seminary by the ATS commission and will have one month to respond. Only after that period, concluding perhaps the end of February, will any sanctions be made public.

Both SACS and the Council on Social Work Education follow similar procedures.

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Disputes with universities cloud budget talks in Alabama

TALLADEGA, Ala. (ABP) -- Ongoing disputes with two universities have raised questions about more than \$6 million in Alabama Baptist support for the two schools.

In the end, the state convention's State Board of Missions board voted during its Sept. 7-8 meeting to include both the University of Mobile and Samford University as contingency items in a \$31 million state convention budget to be presented to messengers at the state convention this fall.

Before receiving state convention funds, the University of Mobile must live up to a 1994 agreement to answer questions about alleged financial irregularities related to a satellite campus in Central America. And the state convention must approve a new funding plan for agencies and institutions which accommodates a 1994 move by Samford trustees establishing themselves as a self-perpetuating board.

Earlier the Alabama board rejected a suggestion that the \$4.1 million earmarked for Samford and \$1.9 for Mobile in the 1996 budget be designated for scholarships for Baptist students. Alabama Executive Director Troy Morrison said he did not want to hurt the two schools, but that the state convention is prohibited from giving money to institutions that violate its bylaws.

An ad hoc committee monitoring the dispute with the University of Mobile said the school had failed to comply with a 1994 agreement requiring it to submit quarterly financial reports to the state convention. Only one of the three-due reports had been submitted and it contained several omissions, said Glenn Slye, chairman of the committee.

Slye said the university also continues to violate an agreement to stop promoting its Latin American campus as being related to the Alabama Baptist State Convention and is not abiding by guidelines limiting the use of money raised in the "Campaign for a Better Tomorrow" fund-raising effort.

Mac Carpenter, a certified public accountant from Dothan and chairman of the state convention's audit committee, also cited reluctance by university officials to turn over required financial materials and "a pattern of deficiencies that were not being improved" regarding the handling of funds.

Among concerns are a number of questions about expenditures at the university's Latin American campus in Nicaragua, added Chriss Doss, attorney for the state convention.

Doss produced documents describing \$14,000 being spent for a feasibility study used to place the university's Latin American campus in San Marcos, Nicaragua. Two years later, however, state convention employees asking to see the study were told it did not exist.

He also raised questions about Corporation Oro, a Nicaraguan firm that manufactured furniture for the Latin American campus. He displayed a copy of the firm's letterhead, which listed a non-working phone number.

Doss showed copies of checks written to Corporation Oro, endorsed by school officials for deposit into the company's accounts.

Financial records showed a servant of the head of the Latin American campus had been given \$5,000 in one month for construction work for which no documentation is available.

"Who is Corporation Oro and where is this money going?" Doss asked. "We do not know."

Doss called for an independent audit to clear up questions about possible irregularities.

"We are talking about Baptist money," Doss said. "A lot of Baptist money."

James Brooks, an attorney employed by University of Mobile, told board members the school's trustees had set up a special committee to study possible irregularities at the Latin American campus and that a letter sent to state convention leaders detailing charges against the school was written by a disgruntled university employee.

University trustees felt "deep sorrow," he said, because state convention officials had questioned their integrity and ability. "Allow the trustees to control the University of Mobile. If our work is not sufficient -- if we are inadequate for the task -- then slam-dunk us, but give us a chance," he pleaded.

University of Mobile trustee Gary Enfinger said trustees "have a lot of anger about the way we have been treated by the hierarchy of the convention." Trustees would never condone fraud or embezzlement, he said.

State convention president Fred Lackey said he had asked for a meeting for the various parties to discuss concerns at the university and that such a meeting should have been held prior to the state board meeting. He said he felt the call for an audit was premature. "The trustees were elected to run the University of Mobile and we ought to trust them," he said.

Another study committee recommended a "new paradigm" for relating to Samford University after a 1994 decision by trustees to make the university's governing board self-perpetuating.

The plan calls for funding of agencies and institutions based on their contribution to the purposes of the convention. Under the proposal, agencies receiving state-convention funding would have the option of continuing to have their trustees elected by the convention or presenting a slate of nominees to the state convention for affirmation with no possibility of amendment.

Ron Madison, chairman of the study committee, compared the new pattern to changing relationships in families which have to adjust as children grow into adulthood. "We are saying to our entities that you are adults and we are willing to relate to you as adults relate to parents. We are going to give you the right to choose. You do not have to usurp it."

The State Board of Missions approved the plan two-to-one. It now goes up for approval at the state convention's annual meeting this fall.

Samford trustees voted to amend the school's charter to make the board self-perpetuating to prevent stacking of the board with fundamentalist trustees. During the 1980s, that method was used in the Southern Baptist Convention to turn moderate seminaries sharply to the right.

Samford Provost William Hull told board members that Samford University is closer to Alabama Baptists than ever before and that trustees "are committed to keep us right in the middle of Alabama Baptist life."

Asked what it would take to get trustees to change the charter back to allow the state convention to elect board members, Madison replied, "a change of history."

"The Samford trustees repeatedly said that if we could guarantee them that what happened on the SBC level ... would not happen to Samford, then they would change the charter back to the way it was," Madison said.

"Of course, we could not guarantee that. No Baptist can guarantee what other Baptists are going to do," he said.

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-- By Bob Terry and Bob Allen

Texas executive board approves change in CP fund division

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Texas Baptist executive board has lent its approval to a 1996 budget that keeps a greater share of gifts from churches in Texas and reduces the percentage sent to the Southern Baptist Convention.

The executive board voted Sept. 12 to recommend to the state convention this fall a \$42.6 million Baptist General Convention of Texas budget and \$21 million for "worldwide causes," mainly missions and ministries of the SBC.

Those figures are based on a division of funds sent by Texas Baptist churches to a unified budget. Currently the state office divides gifts to the Cooperative Program, keeping 64.5 percent for work in Texas and forwarding the rest to the SBC. Next year, if the budget is approved, the Texas convention's share will rise to 67 percent, while the SBC portion will fall 2.5 percentage points to 33 percent.

Texas Baptist leaders expect the change to generate about \$1.5 million in new money to be used to help start 1,400 new Baptist churches in Texas over the next five years.

The state convention's administrative committee first proposed the funding change, based on recommendations of a committee established to study ways the state convention and the SBC's Home Mission Board might work together to help Texas Baptists reach its church-starting goal.

"Texas is a mission field," said Ed Schmeltekopf, associate executive director and chairman of the study committee, noting that 42 states and 94 countries have smaller populations than the estimate of unchurched people living in Texas.

SBC leaders have criticized the proposal, saying the cutback in funding will hurt national and international church-starting efforts of the convention's Home and Foreign Mission boards.

State convention leaders will attempt to minimize the effect on SBC foreign missions, by proposing an additional "challenge budget" which calls for any gifts over budget to be divided 50-50 between the FMB and Texas church-starting efforts.

Currently, Cooperative Program receipts are running about 8 percent ahead of last year. If that rate should continue, total gifts for worldwide causes in 1996 would be between \$22 million and \$23 million, said Roger Hall, the Texas convention's treasurer and chief financial officer.

The Executive Board also adopted a recommendation by a theological education study committee to create an ongoing committee to correlate theological education in the state.

The traditional Southern Baptist model limiting state conventions to baccalaureate ministerial-education programs and the SBC to graduate study is no longer a reality, the committee noted.

Denominational controversy has prompted state-owned colleges and universities to offer more ministerial training, paralleling shifts in educational trends to train ministers closer to home and emphasizing mentoring approaches and hands-on learning.

Some SBC seminaries, meanwhile, have begun to investigate adding undergraduate programs to their traditional master's and doctor-level degrees.

The theological education study committee report, adopted with 12 opposing votes, calls for setting up an informal network allowing the state convention to help keep tuition for ministerial students at state-sponsored schools comparable to those charged by denominational seminaries.

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-- By Bob Allen, with Ken Camp and Orville Scott

RTVC trustees affirm ACTS/VISN negotiations

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- A new agreement is in the works to keep ACTS, Southern Baptists' TV network, on the Faith and Values Channel, but details of the agreement are not being released.

Trustees of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission, which owns ACTS, adopted a resolution Sept. 12 affirming -- at least in principle -- negotiations that RTVC President Jack Johnson said are aimed at keeping ACTS on the channel.

The proposed agreement now on the table includes a "confidentiality clause," prohibiting the discussion of terms, according to an agency news release.

In August, Johnson said those negotiations were at an impasse and ACTS might be forced off the air. Since 1992, ACTS has shared time on the Faith and Values Channel with VISN, an interfaith network based in New York.

With the channel-sharing agreement due to expire this summer, VISN complained privately that ACTS -- with its eight hours of evangelical programming a day -- targeted too narrow an audience.

At a meeting Sept. 12, RTVC trustees authorized Johnson and his staff to hammer out final wording of a new programming agreement with VISN. Any agreement reached would be approved by the commission's executive committee and executed by the staff, the resolution says.

"I think we're going to be able to reach a satisfactory conclusion in our negotiations," Johnson told trustees. "We're getting close."

In New York, VISN spokeswoman Portia Badham confirmed there is a "short-term agreement" to keep ACTS on the air at least until the end of the year, but she declined to discuss details of the agreement or the negotiations.

Johnson said he hopes a new agreement can be reached within two months. ACTS has a temporary agreement to remain on VISN through Dec. 31. Programming changes reflected in a new agreement would likely begin Jan. 1.

Recently VISN's founder, the National Interfaith Cable Coalition, announced that TCI, the nation's largest cable system operator, would become joint owner of VISN. With that move came a philosophy change to remove some of ACTS' more overtly evangelical programs to gear the channel more toward a family audience.

"It is not our intent to make it less religious but to make it appealing to a broader audience," Badham said in August.

The National Interfaith Cable Coalition is a non-profit consortium of 64 Protestant, Jewish, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faith groups and evangelical traditions.

In August, Johnson said he was convinced negotiations would fail because Faith and Values management was not negotiating "in good faith" about placement of ACTS programming.

In other business at their Sept. 12 meeting, RTVC trustees appointed a transition team to prepare for the restructuring voted by the Southern Baptist Convention last June.

The plan calls for combining three denominational agencies -- the Radio and Television Commission in Fort Worth, Texas; the Brotherhood Commission in Memphis, Tenn.; and the Atlanta-based Home Mission Board -- into a new North American Mission Board, to be based in Atlanta.

Ray Finch, businessman from Catoosa, Okla., will chair the transition team. Other members include trustees Wyman Copass, a pastor in Owensboro, Ky.; Dallas Bumgarner, a pastor in Millersville, Md.; Gary Underwood, executive vice president of Beech Street Communications in Texarkana, Ark.; and staff members Johnson; Jerry Stamps, senior vice president of administration, and Richard McCartney, executive consultant.

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-- By Bob Allen and C.C. Risenhoover

Senate panel explores religious expression

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Hearings on a proposed religious equality amendment to the U.S. Constitution got underway Sept. 12 with a Baptist pastor urging the Senate Judiciary Committee to avoid tampering with religious liberties.

The nation should look to religious institutions, not government, for moral and religious leadership, said James Forbes, senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City.

"Government would do best to remain neutral and allow churches, synagogues and mosques and other religious institutions to do our job without even well-meaning meddling from government officials," Forbes said.

Current laws already protect "many rights to truly voluntary religious expression" in public places, said Forbes, one of five witnesses to testify in the first of a series of hearings.

Another witness recounted her family's struggle against school-sponsored prayer in a small Mississippi town. Lisa Herdahl sued to stop officials in Pontotoc County from broadcasting prayers over a school intercom system and providing religious instruction in classes, she said.

"I am a Christian, and I am raising my children as Christians," she said. "I believe that it is my job as a parent, and not the job of the public schools, to teach my children about religion and prayer. Religion is something that my children learn at home and in church, and I did not and do not want the public schools telling them when and how to pray."

Herdahl said her children have been ridiculed and harassed and she has received death threats because of publicity about her suit. She said her family's experience demonstrates that public schools are not as hostile to religious practices as some people suggest.

"I have heard from families all over the country, many of whom have faced similar violations of their religious freedom," she said. "The pressure these families face to accept religious oppression is, in my opinion, far greater than the pressure against those who push for government-sponsored prayer."

Ronald Rosenberger, whose lawsuit recently went to the Supreme Court, related a different experience, labeling his encounter as "religious apartheid at the University of Virginia."

The university denied Rosenberger funds to publish a Christian magazine while giving funds to other student groups. The high court, in a 5-4 ruling, agreed with Rosenberger that the refusal amounted to religious discrimination.

"What is shocking to me is not the fact that I won," he said, "but that four of the nine justices failed to see the light. Four of the highest judges in our nation, not to mention the judges in the lower courts who ruled against us, believe that the University of Virginia was justified in denying Wide Awake equal access."

"This means that replacing just one justice could give us a strikingly different decision in future religious liberty cases," Rosenberger said.

Rosenberger advocated a religious equality amendment -- a proposal in the Christian Coalition's "Contract with the American Family" that has yet to be introduced in Congress.

Both witnesses and senators cited administration guidelines recently distributed by the Department of Education to public schools that outline what religious expression is permissible under current law. The guidelines drew mixed reviews.

Colleen Pinyan, coordinator in the office of public affairs of The Rutherford Institute, criticized the guidelines, testifying they "oversimplified" some of the issues while ignoring others. For example, they did not address the right of elementary school children to form Bible clubs, she said.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and committee chairman, said the guidelines probably won't have much impact because it contains no "enforcement mechanism."

However, he quickly added that the guidelines represent an important first step, indicating this issue concerns Americans from the president on down.

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Marv Knox to join Baptist Standard staff

DALLAS (ABP) -- Kentucky Baptist editor Marv Knox has been elected associate editor of the Baptist Standard of Texas.

The Texas newspaper's board of directors elected Knox Sept. 12 to work with editor-elect Toby Druin. The board chose Druin, the Standard's longtime associate editor, in June to succeed editor Presnall Wood, who retires at the end of 1995.

Knox, who turns 39 Sept. 16, has been editor of the Western Recorder, Kentucky Baptists' weekly newspaper, since 1990. Previously he was feature editor at Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist Convention's news service, 1986-90, and assistant editor of the Baptist Message of Louisiana, 1984-86.

"Marv Knox is known across the nation as an outstanding editor and journalist," said Druin. "Under his leadership, the Western Recorder has become what many consider the most exciting of all of our state Baptist papers.

"It will be a pleasure to work with him as we attempt to continue and build on the tradition of the Baptist Standard and its service to Texas Baptists."

A native Texan born in Fort Worth, Knox is a graduate of Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene. He is also a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where he worked on staff while earning the master of divinity degree.

Knox was editor of the Hardin-Simmons University newspaper, The Brand, while in college and worked as a reporter for the Abilene Reporter-News before becoming assistant news editor for the Home Mission Board in 1979, where he worked until entering seminary.

His election is a reunion of sorts with Druin. In 1960, when Knox was 3 years old, his father was pastor of a mission church in Borger, Texas. The elder Knox invited Druin, then city editor of the Borger News-Herald, to be his music director.

While expressing reluctance to leave the Western Recorder, Knox said, "It has been a dream of mine to be at the Baptist Standard since I was a very young person in late high school or early college and beginning to think of being a journalist and serving the Lord at the same time."

"The opportunity to come back home to Texas is very exciting, rewarding and fulfilling," he added. "And the opportunity to serve alongside Toby Druin is exciting and for me has a kind of poetic balance. Considering my early memories, the opportunity to serve with him is special to me."

With a weekly circulation of 260,000, the Standard is the largest of the 39 Baptist state papers.

Under Knox's leadership, the Western Recorder has maintained a circulation of 50,000 while many other state papers have seen declining subscription totals. The paper has led the way in innovations designed to attract new and younger readers, including a strong emphasis on family issues and a popular personal column written by Knox.

Knox is expected to begin duties at the Standard Dec. 4. A search for a new Kentucky editor is underway.

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