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Southwestern trustees hire former dean to teach

By Greg Warner

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Bruce Corley is returning to teach at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, which he said is on the road to recovery after two years of turmoil.

Corley, 53, resigned as Southwestern's theology dean last March, one year after conservative trustees fired President Russell Dilday and one month after that firing brought a ruling of probation from the seminary's primary accrediting agency.

Since then Corley has remained in Fort Worth, site of the seminary, and served as professor of Christian scriptures for Baylor University's new Truett Theological Seminary, with hopes of starting an off-campus program in nearby Dallas. But plans for the Dallas center have not materialized, Corley said March 14.

Meanwhile, he said, "positive steps" have been taken to mend differences between Southwestern's faculty and the board of trustees, whose sudden firing of Dilday in March 1994 ignited a firestorm of criticism among Southern Baptists.

On March 13 those trustees elected Corley as professor of New Testament -- a role he filled for 15 years before becoming dean in 1990 -- despite opposition from some trustees displeased with the circumstances of Corley's departure and his support for Dilday, whom trustees said was blocking conservative reforms at the seminary.

Two trustees voted against the recommendation to rehire Corley, who will return to the faculty June 1.

The "primary factor" in his decision to return, Corley told Associated Baptist Press, was the feeling he can be more effective in his teaching ministry at Southwestern, Southern Baptists' largest seminary.

"The past can never be changed," he said. "The only thing that can be changed is the future. I'm trying to move beyond the mishaps of the past several years."

"My family and I believe this to be God's will for us in the best stewardship of our lives in ministry," Corley told trustees in a prepared statement.

Ken Hemphill, who succeeded Dilday as president, said Corley's return "sends a clear and certain signal about the health of our institution" and "a very positive message about our trustees."

Hemphill said he has found those trustees "to be very fair in their judgments and desirous of doing only that which they believe to be in the best interest of Southwestern. They listened to Bruce's testimony about how God has worked in his life during these past two years and his apology for personal statements that might have been injurious."

In his statement to trustees, Corley endorsed Hemphill's leadership and added: "I express my regret for past misunderstandings with hopes to move forward together."

"I reaffirm my commitment to conservative theology and practice in the Southern Baptist Convention," he continued, "especially at Southwestern, where the Bible is honored as the Word of God and the world mission task is focused upon the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the unsaved."

Trustee Miles Seaborn, who supported Dilday's firing and privately opposed Corley's reelection, said those assurances from Corley are "important."

Seaborn, pastor of Birchman Baptist Church in Fort Worth and a leader of Southern Baptists' conservative movement, said Corley indicated "he was supportive of the direction of the conservative theology and the direction of the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as the seminary."

"I have never been anything other than a conservative," Corley told ABP. But while he is supportive of the seminary's direction under Hemphill, Corley said, "this is not a political decision on my part."

Corley credited Hemphill with creating "a very productive communication process" that will help Southwestern resolve its problems and remove its two-year probation from the Association of Theological Schools.

Corley will teach only. He said he is not interested in seminary administration. His dean's post has since been filled by Thomas Lea, another New Testament professor.

When Corley left Southwestern for Truett Seminary, he joined Robert Sloan, a former Southwestern colleague who was Truett's first dean, and Dilday, who served as Truett's interim dean after Sloan was elected Baylor president.

But Corley never moved to Waco, where Baylor and Truett are housed, focusing instead on plans for the off-campus center in Dallas, 30 miles east of Fort Worth. So far the classes have attracted only a handful of students.

"The [Dallas] venture with Baylor was always up in the air," he said. "In terms of the university, they never saw the kind of support that was needed to begin any further work [outside Waco]." Without the money or students to support the Dallas center, Corley said, Baylor focused instead on building up Truett's program in Waco.

While he could have moved to Waco to teach at Truett, Corley said, he and his family were committed to remaining in Fort Worth. "The sense of place has been very significant for us," the Oklahoma native said.

Corley's return is expected to be well received by Southwestern's faculty. During the turbulent year after Dilday was fired, Corley was credited with keeping the faculty intact and serving as a mediator between the faculty and Hemphill.

When he left Southwestern for Truett, he was considered by many to be the leading candidate to succeed Sloan and Dilday as Truett's dean. Instead, Baylor recently promoted associate dean Brad Creed to the position.

But Corley said the dean's post was not a factor in his decision to go to Truett or to return to Southwestern. Teaching and writing -- not administration -- are where his heart is, he said.

As for Truett, Creed said the new seminary is still committed to exploring off-campus centers -- in Dallas and elsewhere -- as one component in its approach to theological education.

"Dr. Corley has a long history with Southwestern," Creed said, "and its approach to theological education is familiar to him." Creed said he respects Corley, both as a teacher and as a colleague. "Our faculty and staff wishes him well as he makes this transition."

Baptist clergy more open to politics, journalist says

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Baptist clergy's attitudes about politics have undergone a sea change in the past 20 years, a denominational journalist told a Baptist ethics conference in Nashville, Tenn.

Marv Knox, associate editor of the Baptist Standard in Dallas, gave an address titled "From Carter to Clinton: Twenty Years of Evangelicals in Politics" at a March 11-12 conference on culture wars, sponsored by the Nashville-based Baptist Center for Ethics.

Knox cited a study by Furman University political scientist James Guth describing a shift in the thinking of Southern Baptist clergy toward politics.

The willingness of Baptist pastors to cooperate politically with non-Baptist clergy grew from 54 percent in 1984 to 63 percent in 1992. By 1992, three-fourths of Baptist pastors claimed more than a "mild interest" in politics, he said.

In the 1970s, progressives were more likely than conservatives to be involved in politics. By the 1990s, the opposite was true, Knox said.

"The old relationship between liberal theology and political involvement has been reversed, at least among Southern Baptists," Knox quoted Guth. "The more conservative a minister is, the more active."

Previously, conservatives were more likely to consider faith "a private realm," Knox said. They emphasized a "don't" religion, focusing on personal morality and venturing into politics only to influence an occasional horse-racing or local-option liquor election.

Now, with the rise of conservative activist groups like Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition and the American Family Association, "conservative religious voices echo across the public square," said Knox, former editor of the Western Recorder of Kentucky.

Conversely, membership in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group, was termed by Guth "a powerful negative influence on activism."

"When it comes to politics," Knox said, "moderates are just too moderate -- neither hot nor cold, right nor left, angry nor happy. Lukewarm."

After voting for Jimmy Carter by a three-to-two ratio in 1976, Southern Baptists voted against his re-election bid by the same margin in 1980. Ironically, Knox said, Carter "helped erase the stigma against political activity" that had kept many religious conservatives on the sidelines, clearing the way for the election of Republican presidents in the 1980s.

Anger over Supreme Court rulings against prayer and Bible reading in public schools, the 1973 Roe vs. Wade abortion ruling and other social developments galvanized religious conservatives into the Moral Majority, which formed in 1979, he said.

To get to that point, Knox said, conservative Christians had to overcome a "natural reticence to cross the intersection of faith and politics." Knox summarized six developments in that transformation:

-- A changing South, marked by increased urbanization and the migration of Yankees and other immigrants seeking jobs and bringing new ideas into the region.

-- Socio-economic advance, leading formerly blue-collar Baptists to increasingly "vote by their pocketbooks."

-- Threats to emotional and physical security, which led many Americans to respond conservatively. George Bush's 1988 "Willie Horton" ad epitomized that fear, Knox said.

"Scratch beneath the surface of virtually any community struggle across the land and you'll find racial tension at the core," Knox said. "Southern Baptists may have apologized for our racist past, but our churches and their members still live segregated lives."

-- A "spiritual and moral decay" in the nation that "appalled" many Christians.

"Many conservative Christians think America is going to hell in a big yellow school bus driven by a Democratic lesbian gang member who grew up to become a school teacher who makes pornographic movies and rock music on the side," he said.

-- Effective organization by groups like the Moral Majority, which in 1980 ironically helped elect Ronald Reagan, "an adulterer-cum-divorcee who frequented the Hollywood and Washington party circuits, almost never attended church, was estranged from his children, almost never saw his grandchildren and consulted with astrologists," and defeat Jimmy Carter, a Baptist Sunday school teacher who read the Bible and volunteered to help the poor.

-- A conviction that "political activity works" or "that it's the only hope." Guth's study found many ministers who take political stands say they have done so because they believe it to be effective, Knox said.

Ministers who become involved in politics have a "disproportionate influence," despite their small numbers, because many lay people consider them role models and in politics even "a little bit of difference" can change an election, Knox said.

Knox said neither conservatives nor liberals should any longer be averse to politics. "Liberals blazed a trail in the '60s and conservatives paved a highway in the '90s," he observed. "Political involvement no longer carries a stigma."

It is incumbent on Christians who enter the political arena "for the sake of their reputations if not for the gospel's sake to elevate political action to a higher plane," Knox continued.

"Christians could make a tremendous contribution to the political arena by reintroducing civility to politics" and by "declaring loudly and clearly that God is not a Republican nor a Democrat," he said.

Christians should "refuse to allow politicians to politicize religious images and symbols" and should force a redefinition of terms like "pro-life" beyond the narrow anti-abortion position it now connotes toward "consistent terminology that embraces and affirms the whole range of life," Knox said.

Christians have a message to both political parties, Knox said.

"Democrats need to do a better job of examining moral values according to godly standards," he said, while "Republicans must rectify their failure to critique the nation's materialistic culture that condones profit-taking on Wall Street and in board rooms while decent citizen workers suffer when their jobs are taken so the company can show a better bottom line."

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Religion amendments draw support, criticism at forum

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Two church-state attorneys debated the merits of amending the Constitution's religious-liberty protections during a bipartisan congressional forum March 13.

Elliot Minberg, legal director of People for the American Way, and Steve McFarland, general counsel for the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, addressed the Constitutional Forum and answered questions from members of Congress. The forum is chaired by U.S. Reps. David Skaggs, D-Colo., and James Leach, R-Iowa.

Minberg and McFarland both voiced opposition to a "religious liberties" amendment introduced by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., which declares that nothing in the Constitution "shall prohibit acknowledgments of the religious heritage, beliefs or traditions of the people, or prohibit student-sponsored prayer in public schools."

But they disagreed on the merits of a "religious equality" amendment offered by Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., and Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah. That measure would bar government from denying benefits to or otherwise discriminating against individuals or groups "on account of religious expression, belief or identity."

McFarland said an amendment is needed to fix judicial "misinterpretations" of the First Amendment in religious-liberty cases. Minberg said an amendment is not needed and that it would be harmful to religion.

"Voluntary prayer has not been taken out of the schools. As long as there are math tests, there will be prayers," Minberg said. He said the Hyde-Hatch measure would directly subsidize religious proselytizing and that government would then have its "heavy hand" involved.

McFarland said it would be "plain wrong" to exclude religious schools from a government program that provided vouchers to low-income families.

"The government should not be in the business of disqualifying people to participate" on the government's assessment of how religious they are, McFarland said.

Participants discussed an analysis of the proposed amendments released Feb. 14 by the Library of Congress' Congressional Research Service.

The analysis, written by David Ackerman, described possible effects of the proposed measures.

The CRS's analysis stated that under the Hyde-Hatch measure, a religious institution that "administered government-funded social service programs would seem not to be constitutionally precluded from engaging in religious activities or religious proselytizing in the funded programs." It also said a voucher program for religious schools would be considered constitutional.

Although the measure would alter substantially the present legal standards concerning public assistance to religious institutions, the CRS report stated, it would appear to "have only a minor effect on the legal standards governing religious activities in the public schools and religious speech in the public square."

In contrast, the CRS analysis said, Istook's "religious-liberties amendment" would have its "greatest impact" on religious expression in the public square and would allow "prayer in the public schools, including, perhaps government-sponsored devotional exercises."

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-- By Kenny Byrd

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