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

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Golden Gate trustees reverse decision to close music school

By Bob Allen and Laurie Lattimore

MILL VALLEY, Calif. (ABP) -- Trustees of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary have reversed their April 8 vote to close the seminary's Dixon School of Church Music after two faculty members resigned.

Polled by telephone April 19, trustees voted unanimously to restructure the music program to "make it financially viable," President William Crews reported April 21.

Earlier, trustees declared a "financial emergency" and instructed Crews to shut down the program July 31. Afterward, faculty members Craig and Beth Singleton offered to resign their positions if it would keep the school open. Their resignations are effective July 31. The seminary declined to release details of the severance agreement.

"Such a turn of events has obvious impact on the long-term financial concerns of the music school and warranted reconsideration of the matter by our board," said Crews. "We want to honor the steps initiated by our faculty as they seek the best interest of the seminary and the benefit of the churches."

Craig Singleton is former director of the music school. He and his wife, Beth, have both taught at the seminary in Mill Valley, Calif., since 1980.

Neither could be reached for comment. A seminary news release said the Singletons did not wish to make a public statement about their actions.

Observers say trustees have criticized the traditional music style emphasized in the seminary's program and faculty members have reluctantly accommodated more contemporary songs and choruses.

A trustee leader denied, however, that music style has anything to do with the board's recent decisions.

"I can tell you for an absolute certainty that philosophical differences were never a part of it," said trustee chairman George Mullinax, pastor of Western Branch Baptist Church in Portsmouth, Va.

"We wanted to keep the school anyhow and could not afford to do so," Mullinax said. The original decision to close the school was in response to a 5-year financial plan projecting annual deficits of \$120,000, he said.

With savings from the two vacated faculty positions, "we'll be able to stay afloat financially," Mullinax said.

The April 8 trustee decision to close the school came as a joint recommendation of the board's executive and instruction committees based on rising costs and falling revenues brought on by years of declining enrollment, trustees said.

Sixty students have graduated from Golden Gate's music school since 1985. Enrollment has declined since 1989. When trustees met in early April, only one student had pre-registered for classes next fall, said William Trapp, a trustee from Alabama.

"The school was operating \$200,000 a year above its revenues, and enrollment over the years had dropped from 35 to 17," Trapp said. "We all were saddened, but we felt it was such a financial emergency, the best solution was to close, said Trapp, pastor of Woodmont Baptist Church in Florence, Ala.

The seminary news release said 25 students are currently enrolled in two music-degree programs, generating a "full-time equivalency" -- the number which drives funding from the Southern Baptist Convention's unified budget -- of 17.

Crews had recommended restructuring the school rather than closing it and music faculty members complained the trustee decision was premature.

"It was never the desire of anyone connected with Golden Gate Seminary that the church-music program be stopped," Crews said in an April 22 seminary press release. "Rather, it was the desire of all persons involved in this decision that the music program be both helpful to the churches and financially viable. We believe the future of shaping effective leaders for music and worship in the churches will be enhanced by these actions."

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-- Cameron Crabtree contributed to this report.

Louisiana College trustees hope election signals 'new day'

PINEVILLE, La. (ABP) -- The unanimous election of 47-year-old Rory Lee as president of Louisiana College was hailed as a "new day" by trustees of the school, divided in recent years by Baptist politics.

Lee, currently president at William Carey College in Hattiesburg, Miss., recently accepted a five-year contract as president of the Louisiana Baptist school in Pineville. A starting date has not been announced.

Lee told the Baptist Message newspaper he hopes the unity behind his election will transfer into other areas of the school's operation.

"People are showing a cooperative spirit, wanting to work together so that Louisiana College can continue its academic excellence and be the kind of Christian influence on its students that it should be," Lee said.

The school has experienced a turbulent transition with the approaching retirement of President Robert Lynn. Last year, trustees rejected a prospective faculty member, raising cries of academic freedom from faculty, and four professors sued a prominent conservative in the state for defamation after he circulated letters charging them with heresy.

Lee said he is confident he can work with Louisiana Baptists on both sides of the conflict. "I believe one of the reasons that I was elected is because of my desire to work with all Louisiana Baptists," he said. "We as Louisiana Baptists are conservative by nature, and I believe I can work with all Louisiana Baptists to bring about a great future for Louisiana College."

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-- By ABP staff

Campolo a biblical 'conservative,' but his views still controversial

By Laurie Lattimore

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Tony Campolo admits he's abrasive. He even regrets not articulating some of his strong opinions in a more diplomatic manner. But Eastern College's acclaimed sociology professor is not ashamed of criticism, and he's particularly not afraid to confront his attackers -- especially when it comes to matters of faith.

Campolo, labeled an evangelical liberal by his critics, would argue he is as theologically conservative as any Southern Baptist. "I could be a president of one of your seminaries, I'm so conservative," Campolo stated recently to a group of Southern Baptists in Alabama. "You can't get me doctrinally. I'm in."

But while he takes the Bible literally, the American Baptist theologian is also one step ahead of most religious leaders. And with such vision comes criticism.

"People pick on the minor things I say to keep from hearing the major thing, and that bothers me," Campolo said, equating it to the woman at the well who did not want to acknowledge her sin. "They try to shift the subject to a theological fine point."

Campolo has been called a homosexual activist, a heretic, a feminist. And that is just the beginning. But those labels come from people who do not listen to Campolo's message, he claims.

He doesn't believe homosexuality is right, but he does not tolerate those who say "hate the sin, love the sinner" and show absolutely no compassion toward homosexuals. Campolo said he cannot understand why Southern Baptists are so opposed to women standing behind American pulpits but will place them in ministry positions halfway around the world. And he has little patience for those who try to put God in the Republican party.

"What I see happening is a culture war," Campolo said of religion in America. "Everybody is polarized, and there is a tendency for each side to make sure you are one of them. And if you are not, they get really mad at you."

Campolo acknowledged that his friendship with President Bill Clinton is a barrier for many conservative Christians. He added that he has disagreed with Clinton's policies numerous times -- including his veto of the partial birth abortion ban -- but those disagreements do not interfere with the friendship. In fact, Campolo was arrested in March 1995 on the White House grounds for protesting Clinton's policies. The next day he had lunch with Clinton.

Campolo says evangelical Christianity in America is steering away from being about a belief in the Bible, conviction about inerrancy of Scripture and a call to win people to Christ. If that were the case, Campolo insists, evangelical Christians would not oppose him "because I have those same convictions."

"But when evangelical Christianity becomes an invitation to enter the culture wars and to demonize people who are not part of a particular group, I cannot go along with that," Campolo said. Although Southern Baptists are not the only evangelical Christian group at fault in this "culture war," he maintains, few are as influential.

"The problem with Southern Baptists is that you are so successful, so big, so effective and so theologically sound that you lose the ability to undergo self criticism," Campolo said. In theory, Southern Baptist theology is on target, he said. It is in the practice where the denomination falls down. "When all these things are true, it is easy to be convinced that [the denomination] is everything God wants it to be."

Although the theology and evangelism of the Southern Baptist Convention is "wonderful," Campolo said he is uneasy with the growing impression Southern Baptists give that membership also must include buying into a particular brand of politics.

"I'm not sure where the Southern Baptist ideology ends and the Republican Party begins," Campolo said, noting he is not trashing the GOP but believes the gospel should transcend politics. "So many Southern Baptists think that if conservative political ideology is realized, the Kingdom of God will be reached." Campolo said this trend is detrimental and even counterproductive to spreading the gospel.

"This wedding of the Christ with the Religious Right seems incredibly dangerous to me," Campolo said. "If we recreate Jesus so he becomes an example of political ideology, then we are guilty of idolatry because we have made Jesus in our own image."

Campolo said he opposes evangelicals in general and Southern Baptists in particular who aim for achieving a "Christian nation" through political means rather than helping people develop a personal relationship with Christ.

"I want to see a Christian elected to office, but I don't want Christian candidates who mobilize the church, making it a block vote for the purpose of getting elected," Campolo said.

Campolo applauded the effort of the Christian Coalition for involving Christians in government, but said he believes the Coalition has strayed from its intended mission.

"Ralph Reed is a good man, and he is trying to transfer faith into political action, but the movement has now wedded Christ with conservative politics. Anyone not in it is suspected of not being a Christian," Campolo said. "The conservative political agenda is a legitimate option, but it is not the only option. Seeing something good in the Clinton administration does not make you evil any more than seeing something good in the Republican agenda makes you evil."

Campolo said he admires the Southern Baptist Convention for its ability to organize Christians into an effective evangelistic ministry and influence the American political agenda, but he is concerned about the narrow-mindedness Southern Baptists nurture.

The Southern Baptist Convention resolution to boycott Walt Disney Inc. was a good moral stand, Campolo said, but it was too narrow. He agreed Southern Baptists were right to take a moral stand against Disney's practices, but Campolo would like to see the SBC also speak out against Disney's exploitation of the poor in Disney factories in Haiti.

"Southern Baptists needed to stand up for sexual purity, but why not for economic exploitation as well?"

Campolo said he is afraid that tunnel vision in the Southern Baptist Convention will keep the denomination from realizing that the future of evangelism is in Pentecostalism rather than fundamentalism. "The United States is the last bastion against Pentecostalism," Campolo said, noting that Southern Baptist preachers in Latin America and many other continents have embraced it.

"The future of the Southern Baptist movement is highly contingent upon whether it can come to grips with the fact that the Holy Spirit is doing something that they better get a hold of. Organizational genius will carry you only so far."

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St. Louis woman tapped to lead Missouri CBF

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- A St. Louis woman took over as moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Missouri when the group met April 11-12.

Cynthia Holmes, a member of Overland Baptist Church in St. Louis, succeeded outgoing moderator Bart Tichenor in the top elected post of the state affiliate of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Barry Pennington, a pastor from Independence, was elected moderator-elect. In other business in the meeting at Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis, more than 300 participants approved an annual budget of \$141,582 for the state group. The budget includes salary and benefits for a full-time coordinator, funds for church starts in Missouri and support for Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kan.

Coordinator Harold Phillips characterized the Missouri CBF as an "experiment" energized by "healthy" Christians and churches, "Baptist values" including "freedom, responsibility and respect" and the proclamation of the gospel message through Fellowship missionaries.

"When we stay focused on good news -- the good news -- this Fellowship experiment will thrive," Phillips said.

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-- By ABP staff

'Friendless' Kurds drew hope from Baptists in America

By Robert O'Brien

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Kurdish leaders returned to Iraq last summer from private meetings in Tennessee, Texas and Georgia with a startling message.

"The main hope for Kurdish people in Iraq lies with Baptists in America," two Kurdish representatives, an educator and a political leader, told their predominantly Muslim people.

They met with Baptist church leaders and related their story of despair about Kurds beleaguered by poverty and targeted for death by Saddam Hussein. They were "deeply moved by the response they got," said Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary Robert Anderson.

"They took to heart the hugs, prayers and tears shed after hearing their story and did a remarkable thing for Muslim people -- bonded with Baptists," Anderson recalled. "They came home with the unshakable belief that Baptists in America gave them their hearts -- and would stand with them."

Now, many of them, even those who didn't know about it, are seeing that prediction come true as they settle in communities across the country. Many have found homes through the efforts of Anderson and his wife, Roni, after they fled Iraq and relocated their Concern for Kids humanitarian organization temporarily in Georgia.

The latest wave of Kurdish refugees has brought in nearly 5,000 people to locations around the United States, many dumped in major urban areas to contend with the dangers of already-troubled inner cities.

Baptists certainly have not been the only ones to care properly for the incoming strangers. But reports from a variety of Baptist churches across the country indicate that the bond forged by the two Kurdish leaders was no fluke.

"Our experience with four families has been one of the greatest blessings we've received," said Joel Snider, pastor of First Baptist Church in Rome, Ga. "Several members have said this is more of a revival than a week of services."

"The Kurdish project has been a galvanizing event," he said, as church members and people in the community have seen their church slogan -- "Seeking His heart ... being His hands" -- move off the church letterhead and into the lives of people.

Church members have seen sadness and fear in the eyes of strangers turn to wonder and joy as people of all ages cleaned and furnished the Kurds' apartments, fed them, helped them find jobs, cared for their children, and showed them love, said Harold Storey, a church member who has helped spearhead work with the refugees.

Snider said he has watched Kurds who attend the church's Wednesday night supper "go from being clearly at a loss in another culture to jumping up and smiling and shaking hands, even when they can't speak the language."

"We knew we would be helped, but we didn't know we would be liked," a Kurdish woman told a local reporter in Rome.

Over the generations, the much-persecuted descendants of the Biblical Medes have come to feel they have no real friends, Anderson said. Gestures of friendship, especially from Christians, overwhelm them and open them up to Christian witness.

People at First Baptist Church in West Point, Ga., worried that they might be hovering too much over their family, said Barbara Williams, a church secretary. "Oh, no, please come," the family responded through an interpreter. "When you come, we feel like we are in the presence of angels."

"The fact remains that Kurdish people still need 'angels,'" said Anderson, who has focused on joining efforts by Christians to rescue Kurds dumped in the inner cities where they, indeed, are usually friendless.

"Our goal is to show Kurds, who believe they're friendless, that we really care. We want to show our faith by showing them the love of Jesus Christ. We need still need churches and others to step forward and help."

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