

Nashville, Tennessee

# Associated Baptist Press

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

April 24, 1997

(97-34)

## In this issue:

- Seminary entering 'season of spring,' but financial woes linger
- Inerrantist theologian, others join Southern Seminary faculty
- Istook revises amendment, gets Southern Baptist Convention support
- Editor's note
- Baptists offer food, comfort to upper Midwest flood victims
- Internal fighting hinders local witness, Tupper says
- Baptist traditions still relevant, historian Walter Shurden says

## **Seminary entering 'season of spring,' but financial woes linger, Mohler says**

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is entering a "season of spring," bringing renewal to the campus in Louisville, Ky., but lingering effects of a winter of discontent will prevent faculty and staff from getting pay raises next year, President Albert Mohler said April 22.

Addressing seminary trustees and presenting a budget proposal for 1997-98, Mohler said signs of renewal include a positive spirit among faculty and students.

A preceding "season of definition," marked by declining enrollment, however, continues to put a pinch on the seminary's finances, Mohler said. This difficult period was necessary to turn the seminary in a new direction, he said.

Because funds from the Southern Baptist Convention are divided among six seminaries based on average enrollment over a three-year period, Mohler said Southern Seminary can expect denominational funding to decline for at least two years.

The seminary's full-time-equivalent enrollment has dropped from 1,685 in 1993-94 to 1,255 in 1995-96. During the same period, two other SBC seminaries -- New Orleans and Southeastern -- have experienced enrollment gains, further compounding Southern's loss in the share of funding through the SBC's Cooperative Program unified budget.

Officials at the Kentucky school say enrollment has stabilized. Even if enrollment increases, however, the effect of the recent decline will weigh against the seminary in the funding formula for two more years.

"We are headed into the two years most likely to cause us budgetary restrictions," Mohler told trustees.

Trustees expressed frustration with being unable to provide salary increases but adopted a 1997-98 budget of \$15.77 million without opposition.

The new budget represents an increase of 0.6 percent over the current year. A major source of change in the budget comes from reallocation of \$234,390 previously used in the Carver School of Church Social Work, which is closing. Due to the school's closing, however, the seminary projects to lose \$181,717 in student fees and \$132,932 in student-housing fees.

Several trustees questioned the absence of salary increases.

David Wilson of Texas said, "I wish there were some way we could express to the faculty that this is not what we want to do." Wilson suggested that if additional funds become available later in the year they be applied toward bonuses for faculty and staff.

Mohler responded that while he was not pleased with the recommendation to forego salary increases, "we want to do what is necessary this year so we can move ahead in future years."

Rick White of Tennessee, who was trustee chairman during three tumultuous years, urged fellow trustees to return to their churches and push for "more money to leave the state."

He advised trustees either to advocate for change in the way Cooperative Program funds are divided between state conventions and the SBC or to bypass state conventions entirely with Cooperative Program contributions from local churches.

Most lay people, he contended, are more concerned with the work of the SBC than with the work of state conventions. "They don't think so much in terms of state conventions as national agencies and boards."

Current trustee chairman Jerry Johnson of Colorado echoed White, adding that the church he serves as pastor sends money directly to the SBC Executive Committee.

The Cooperative Program funds both the SBC and Baptist state conventions. While SBC ministries include foreign and home missions and seminaries, several state conventions also own institutions such as colleges, hospitals and children's homes. A variety of ministries such as state missions, services to churches and retirement programs are administered jointly by state and national agencies.

State conventions typically receive Cooperative Program gifts from churches and determine what percentage to forward to the SBC. Nationwide, more than two-thirds of denominational funding this year is projected to be retained by state conventions, said Bill Merrell, a spokesman for the Nashville, Tenn.-based Executive Committee. In some larger state conventions, the split is nearly 50-50.

While conservatives control the SBC, they have gained fewer inroads into moderate-stronghold state conventions, leading some conservative churches to bypass state ministries to fund the SBC directly.

Also during the April 21-22 meeting, trustees revised two controversial documents related to faculty discipline.

A "Policy on Constructive Relationships," adopted in April 1995 during the heat of a crisis over the Carver School of Church Social Work, was amended to require that all faculty and staff relate "positively" to the seminary, its policies and administration. The word "positively" was substituted for "constructively."

A line that previously said faculty and staff must not "act in ways that are injurious or detrimental to the seminary's relationship with the denomination, donors or other constituencies" was altered. It now states that faculty and staff "should seek to relate constructively to the denomination, donors and other constituencies."

Unchanged in the policy is a line that asserts: "Faculty members may not use class time (or any other forum designated for instructional purposes) for the purpose of undermining or obstructing the policies of this institution."

A policy on "Disciplinary Action Short of Dismissal," also adopted in April 1995, was amended at several points.

The primary change is addition of a five-point preamble outlining "guiding principles" to be used in disciplinary cases. The preamble requires that complaints against faculty members must be written and presented to the accused faculty member.

Both documents originally were adopted by trustees in 1995 upon recommendation of the president, but faculty members at the time said they had not had sufficient input. These two policies were among a list of concerns presented by faculty to the Association of Theological Schools in 1995.

Because of those concerns, ATS and two other accrediting agencies made a joint visit to the campus in late 1995. Ultimately, ATS gave the seminary a notation and planned a series of follow-up visits to monitor the situation.

The most recent of those ATS visits was the week before the trustee meeting, trustee chairman Johnson reported. Johnson said he could not speak in detail about the visit, but he described it as "excellent" and noted the accrediting team "sensed it was a new day here."

In other action, trustees:

-- Re-elected three officers and named one new officer. Johnson was re-elected chairman; Ruffin Snow of Oklahoma was re-elected first vice chairman; Fred Caffey of Virginia was elected second vice chairman; and John Hicks of Kentucky was re-elected secretary.

-- Heard reports of high levels of initial interest in a new doctor-of-ministry degree in church growth to be offered through the Billy Graham School. Mohler said 400 pastors already have expressed "active interest" in the program.

-- Heard that plans are being developed for a new doctor-of-ministry degree in expository preaching. Mohler said classes and seminars would be taught by "the leading expository preachers of this convention."

-- Approved the use of the accounting firm Coopers and Lybrand as seminary auditor after Mohler addressed concerns about the firm's relation to the Texas Lottery.

-30-

## **Inerrantist theologian, others join Southern Seminary faculty**

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) - -A scholar whose writings on biblical inerrancy contributed academic underpinnings for the Southern Baptist Convention's conservative movement is among four new professors named at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary April 22.

Tom Nettles will join the faculty of the Louisville, Ky., seminary under presidential appointment as professor of historical theology. He comes from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill., where he has been professor of church history since 1989.

Before teaching at Trinity, an Evangelical Free Church school, Nettles, 51, taught at another SBC school -- Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas -- from 1976 to 1982 before moving for six years to Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, an independently operated Baptist school in Memphis, Tenn.

One Southern Seminary trustee said the appointment represented Nettles' "coming home" to the SBC.

Nettles' 1980 book "Baptists and Bible" is regarded the theological backbone for the battle for belief in biblical inerrancy that carried conservative forces to power within the SBC during the 1980s.

Nettles also is an ardent defender among Baptists of Calvinism, a theological system which includes the idea that God predestines individuals to be saved or damned. Nettles' 1986 book "By His Grace and for His Glory" is an apologetic for Calvinism. Southern Seminary President Albert Mohler also is a Calvinist.

Nettles is among four professors who will join Southern's faculty next fall. At the same time, six current faculty members have been elected to new teaching posts for the fall.

The group of new appointments and elections was a highlight of the April 21-22 meeting of the seminary's board of trustees.

Trustees and administrators alike spoke in superlatives to describe the new class of faculty.

Mohler told trustees they were helping build "the foremost faculty of any evangelical institution."

"Historians of the future who look back at this day will not be so interested in the quantity but the quality" of those named to faculty positions, Mohler said.

Mohler called the faculty additions "a quantum leap forward" for the seminary, which has lost more than 70 percent of its faculty during four years of campus turmoil.

Others new to Southern's faculty include Herschael York, Robert Stein and Thomas Schreiner.

York, who has been pastor of Ashland Avenue Baptist Church in Lexington since 1990, received a presidential appointment as associate professor of Christian preaching. He holds both a bachelor's and master's degree from the University of Kentucky and the master-of-divinity and doctor-of-philosophy degrees from Mid-America Seminary.

York, 37, also has served as chancellor of Lexington Baptist College, a Bible school affiliated with Ashland Avenue Baptist Church.

Stein, 62, since 1980 has been a New Testament professor at Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minn. At Southern he will be professor of New Testament interpretation.

He holds the bachelor of arts degree from Rutgers University, the bachelor-of-divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary, the master-of-sacred-theology degree from Andover Newton Theological Seminary and a doctorate from Princeton Theological Seminary.

Schreiner, 43, also comes from Bethel Theological Seminary, where he has been a New Testament professor since 1986. He has received a presidential appointment at Southern as professor of New Testament interpretation.

He holds bachelor's degree from Western Oregon State College, two master's from Western Conservative Baptist Seminary and a doctorate from Fuller Theological Seminary.

Schreiner is considered an authority on the writings of the Apostle Paul, and has written four books on related topics.

In addition to these newcomers to Southern's faculty, five current faculty members have been named to new posts or granted tenure:

-- Timothy Beougher was elected with tenure as associate professor of evangelism. Before moving to Southern last fall, Beougher taught at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Ill. He also serves as associate dean of Southern's Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism and Church Growth.

-- Paul House was elected with tenure as professor of Old Testament interpretation. Prior to moving to Southern last fall, he taught at Taylor University in Upland, Ind. He also serves as editor of Southern's new theological journal.

-- George Martin was elected associate professor of Christian missions. A former Southern Baptist missionary to Indonesia, Martin previously taught at North Greenville College in Tigerville, S.C.

-- Esther Rothenbusch was elected assistant professor of church music. She has taught at Southern since 1994 and is associate dean for professional studies.

-- Mark Simpson was elected associate professor of Christian education and leadership. He has been Southern's associate dean of Christian education since 1995, coming from Trinity Evangelical Seminary and Trinity International University in Deerfield, Ill.

Also during the April 21-22 trustee meeting, T. Vaughn Walker, professor of black church studies, was granted tenure, making him the first African-American to receive tenure at Southern Seminary. Walker also serves as pastor of First Gethsemane Baptist Church in Louisville.

## **Istook revises amendment, gets Southern Baptist Convention support**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission has dropped its opposition to a proposed "religious-freedom" constitutional amendment after the bill's sponsor agreed to slight wording changes.

"I'm grateful that we've resolved concerns and will have the active support of Southern Baptists, who are the largest Protestant group in America, are highly-respected, and are active in speaking for America's values, ideals, and individual liberties," Ernest Istook, R-Okla., the bill's sponsor, said April 21.

Earlier, the CLC wrote members of Congress opposing the original Istook proposal, saying it would trample individual conscience by permitting government to "acknowledge" religious beliefs of a majority and would allow taxpayer funding for religious schools, both violations of the First Amendment's religious-freedom protections.

The new proposal, introduced after Istook met with CLC officials, modifies language securing "the people's right to acknowledge God" with a new phrase "according to the dictates of conscience."

Another section saying the "the right to pray or acknowledge" religious belief shall not be infringed was changed to specify "the people's" right and the word "acknowledge" was changed to "recognize."

The revised amendment also changes language against denying a government benefit "on account of" of religion to "due" to religion.

Istook described the new language as "slightly revised" and said in a news release that it was meant to "clarify" safeguards in the original bill while "keeping the same meaning."

Will Dodson, the CLC's governmental affairs director, said Istook's new proposal resolves all the problems the Southern Baptist Convention's moral-concerns and religious-liberty agency had with the original amendment.

The new proposal came after a meeting among Istook, CLC Executive Director Richard Land, Dodson and others.

Land told Baptist Press that the new language clarifies it is "the people's" right to pray and recognize religious beliefs that is protected rather than "the government's" right.

Land also said Istook agreed to include a "statement of intent" when he introduces the proposal which specifies that direct funding for sectarian purposes would still be banned under the First Amendment's establishment clause but not indirect aid through vouchers.

The CLC opposes government aid going directly to parochial schools but supports a voucher plan where public funds are sent to parents in the form of scholarships, which may be applied to either public or private schools.

Other religious groups say vouchers do not resolve church-state concerns and continued to oppose Istook's bill.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the revision of the Istook proposal "is like putting lipstick on a pig."

Melissa Rogers, associate general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty agency supported by 11 national Baptist bodies, called the changes in language regarding funding of religion "inconsequential."

"In terms of barring direct aid to religion, what is the difference between saying that government cannot deny a benefit 'on account of religion' and saying it cannot deny a benefit 'due to religion?'" she asked.

If anything, Rogers said, the "new language appears more imprecise and would open the door to government funding of churches, synagogues, mosques and other pervasively sectarian institutions."

Steve McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, said the CLS is waiting for clarifications from Istook before deciding whether to support or oppose the proposal.

"We're getting mixed signals," McFarland said. He said the group applauds insertion of the phrase "the people's" right but questions Istook's statement that the meaning of the measure has not changed.

"For Istook to move from a place of government preferentialism, which we oppose, to excluding that role for government, which we support, would require more than a fine-tuning of the amendment," McFarland said.

Rogers said Istook's "Religious Freedom Amendment" is not needed.

"We already have a religious-freedom amendment, the First Amendment," she said. "The First Amendment protects students' rights to pray silently or out loud, as long as they are not disruptive. It protects citizens' rights to talk about their religious conviction in town hall meetings and religious leaders to hold rallies in public parks."

Supporters of Istook's amendment, however, including the CLC's Land, say a new constitutional amendment is needed because current religious-freedom protections have been eroded by "judicial prejudice and hostility" since the 1960s.

-30-

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Here are wordings of both the original Istook amendment and the revised wording announced April 21.

Istook's new proposal

"To secure the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience: The people's right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage or traditions on public property, including schools, shall not be infringed. The government shall not require any person to join in prayer or other religious activity, initiate or designate school prayers, discriminate against religion, or deny a benefit due to religion."

The original proposal

"To secure the people's right to acknowledge God: The right to pray or acknowledge religious belief, heritage or tradition on public property, including public schools, shall not be infringed. The government shall not compel joining in prayer, initiate or compose school prayer, or discriminate against or deny a benefit on account of religion."

-30-

## **Baptists offer food, comfort to upper Midwest flood victims**

By Ken Camp

GRAND FORKS, N. D. (ABP) -- Michael Waters traded one Red River Valley for another in March, moving from North Texas to North Dakota. He was greeted by blizzard, fire and the kind of flood that hits the Great Plains of the upper Midwest once every 500 years.

For the 28-year-old former pastor of Corinth Baptist Church in Bonham, Texas, it was a once-in-a-lifetime ministry opportunity involving fellow Baptists from as far away as Texas, Oklahoma and Ohio.

Members of his church, Calvary Baptist of Emerado, N.D., worked alongside Texas Baptist Men, cooking food from a field kitchen owned by Texas Baptists. Volunteers parked the specially equipped 18-wheel tractor-trailer rig inside a hangar at the Grand Forks Air Force Base, 15 miles west of downtown Grand Forks, N.D.

Local officials ordered evacuation of more than 42,000 people in Grand Forks -- about 85 percent of the city's population -- and nearly all of the 9,000 residents of neighboring East Grand Forks, Minn., after a dike collapsed on April 18. As snow continued to melt, the Red River of the North crested at 54 feet, 26 feet above flood stage.

In the first three days of the Texas Baptist relief ministry, volunteers prepared more than 20,000 meals for flood victims and emergency personnel who rallied to their aid. Baptist volunteers cooked meals delivered by American Red Cross workers to evacuees housed in a three-bay hangar at the base and at other shelters throughout the area.

Several members of Calvary Baptist Church, which is about 90 percent military personnel, were assigned by their commanding officers to aid the Texas Baptist Men. Many came in their off-duty hours to continue helping.

Volunteers bunked in Sunday school rooms at the church's building across the road from the air base. Members volunteered to wash aprons and clothes for the relief workers, once local officials eased water conservation restrictions. Though the swollen Red River stretched across 40 miles of flat farmland at some points, raw sewage polluted water supplies, creating a shortage of potable water.

President Bill Clinton, a Southern Baptist, visited the air base on April 22 to meet with about 3,000 displaced local residents and view damage. Mel Goodwin of Kilgore, Texas, on-site coordinator for the Texas Baptist mobile unit, noted that the base general received a call from the White House asking what the Baptist volunteers were serving that day.

The Texans were joined for a time by David Burton, personal evangelism director for the Florida Baptist Convention, who was in the region attending a youth evangelism conference when the flood started. He worked with Ed Pope, Brotherhood director for the Dakota Southern Baptist Fellowship, Bismarck, N.D., and Carl Roach, director of missions for the Siouxland Association of Southern Baptists, Sioux Falls, S.D.

Oklahoma Baptist disaster-relief workers prepared more than 900 meals in their first two days across the river in Red Lake Falls, Minn. Ohio Baptists set up emergency food service at Temple Baptist Church, Fargo, N.D.

Jerry Bob Taylor of Brownwood, Texas, served as on-site coordinator for Baptist relief efforts, working from the American Red Cross mass care temporary office at an abandoned K-Mart near the airport in Fargo, N.D.

Taylor noted that many evacuees were staying with relatives outside the flood area or with families in the region who opened their homes to complete strangers. When the flood victims return to find their homes inhabitable, shelters are likely to be filled, he predicted.

"When the water goes down and the roads open back up, people will try to get back into their homes and start cleaning up. That will take weeks and weeks, and for a while they're going to find polluted water, no sewer and no electricity," Taylor said. "That's when these red and white ERVs (American Red Cross emergency response vehicles) will really be running their wheels off."

In the meantime, Baptists try to provide comfort to those in shelters and private homes.

"Just about every other family in our church has taken someone into their home," said Waters. "I don't know of any who haven't helped one way or another."

When flood waters forced Ken and Carolyn Switzer from their home in southern Grand Forks, they moved to nearby Larimore, N.D., to stay with Mike and Alice Harris, fellow members of Calvary Baptist Church.

Ken Switzer sings in the praise ensemble and his wife plays piano and electronic keyboards at Calvary Baptist. They expect to find their music library ruined, along with their washer, dryer, tools, Christmas decorations and other items all stored in their basement.

"We're ready to go south for awhile. My parents said to come on down to Mississippi, and we're getting ready to go," Switzer said. "We're getting in a vacation that we hadn't planned. It's not the way we would have wanted it, but we'll take whatever the Lord provides."

On April 20, Waters and a praise team from the church led Protestant chapel services in the shelter at the air base.

"It was really about an hour-and-a-half concert with a 10-minute devotional from the 23rd Psalm," he said. "We tried to offer encouragement and comfort. I told them that when God is our Shepherd and we know him personally, we don't have to be afraid."

Penny Douglas understands the fear that can overwhelm the dispossessed and the peace that God offers. Floods forced her family of six from their home in the Griggs Park area of East Grand Forks.

They initially moved across the river into their church building, Faith Community Fellowship, a Southern Baptist congregation in Grand Forks where husband Kirk has served as an associate pastor.

As the flood waters continued to rise, the Douglas family had to move again. Penny, Kirk and their three children, ages 3, 6 and 8, relocated to the shelter at the air base. The family may relocate temporarily to the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, but they hope to return to East Grand Forks soon.

Though living conditions are rugged at the shelter, Penny said it will be hard to leave the friends she and her family have made there.

"There's a family of Bosnian refugees right next to us. They had just been here a week when the floods came. Now they're refugees again," she said.

Penny Douglas said she and her husband tried to be sensitive to the needs of others at the shelter and to minister to them.

"The people here who are without the Lord are so bound up with fear. I just try to pray with them and comfort them," she said. "There's one lady who I would see noticeably shaking. She is living in fear that someone will take her children away.

"Our foundation is not on that kind of sinking sand. We're grounded in the Lord. We have so much to be thankful for."

-30-

## **Internal fighting hinders local witness, Tupper says**

By David Winfrey

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- Internal fighting by Baptists has hurt ministers' witness in their communities, seminary professor Frank Tupper said April 16 at Georgetown College's annual pastors' conference.

"The war has distorted the way," said Tupper, a casualty of conflict between conservatives and moderates who fought for control of the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1980s.

Tupper said the secular methods used by Baptists during recent years of conflict have hindered pastors' witness. "The distortion of the way through the war cripples ministry," he said.

"Now, pastoral ministry looks like any other business," he said. "Therefore, the sense of the holy is in eclipse."

Tupper, a research professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was introduced to the pastors' conference as one of the first professors to have a tape ministry -- a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the days when conservative students would secretly tape his lectures and report controversial teachings to trustees.

After years of conflict with conservative critics, Tupper was removed last summer from teaching and named a research professor. That position will end after the 1997-98 academic year.

In his address, Tupper outlined three reasons the church is important enough to warrant pastors' commitment:

-- The church announces the good news of God's salvation in our world. "For Paul, the route from blindness to sight happened through the church," Tupper noted.

"Nobody can duplicate what you do," he told pastors. "The spirit of God calls others through the life of the church."

-- The church teaches the Christian life for this world. "You are the poets of the gospel whose words give rhyme and rhythm to living the Christian life," he said.

Tupper noted that even while he was growing up in a segregated society, the church still taught, "Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight."

-- The church constitutes the presence of Jesus Christ in the world. "Through your ministry in the church, Jesus Christ actually becomes present in the world in which you live."

Conversely, actions against the church are synonymous with actions against Jesus, Tupper said, "because the church constitutes Jesus in the world."

Although the entire church represents Jesus, Tupper told the pastors they still have a special representation of the church in their community. "Whether you like it or not, you wear a clerical collar," he said.

"The priesthood of the believer does not negate the priestly ministry that is yours as an ordained minister of God," he said. "You are physicians of grace who are able to touch wounds that only God can heal."

-30-

## **Baptist traditions still relevant, historian Walter Shurden says**

By Mark Wingfield and David Winfrey

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- Freedom is the core spiritual value of the Baptist tradition, church historian Walter Shurden said during an April 14-15 pastors' conference at Georgetown College in Georgetown, Ky.

Shurden, who teaches at Mercer University in Macon, Ga., introduced a series of lectures on Baptist traditions by saying the best place to start is by asking "What is the core spiritual value of Baptist life?"

Based on his own reading of Baptist history, Shurden said freedom has been the core value uniting Baptists through the ages.

This emphasis on freedom is seen, for example, in Baptists' belief in baptism by immersion for believers only, in choosing a congregational form of government and in advocating religious liberty, he said.

Shurden outlined Baptist traditions related to four areas that are shaped by this core spiritual value of freedom:

-- The individual. Baptists historically have emphasized freedom for the individual, but this is threatened by addictions from two opposing sides, he said: applause and narcissism.

"I do not believe drug addiction is the biggest addiction in our society," Shurden said. "We love the applause."

This need for affirmation above all else makes humans "more Cocker Spaniel than Bulldog," he said. "We love to be rubbed."

The reason: fear of rejection, he suggested. "Because rejection is so painful, we will do almost anything to avoid it."

Yet a biblical and Baptist understanding of the individual demands "refusal to imitate the world around you," Shurden said. "When there is no autonomy, there is no authenticity."

Authentic Baptists are Baptists who "make up their own minds," he said.

The other extreme, however, is narcissism, or loving self so much that all else is lost.

Both extremes may be balanced by the Baptist tradition of community, Shurden said.

-- Community. "The centrality of the individual in Baptist life has never ever meant Lone Rangerism," Shurden said. "Besides that, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto."

He explained: "Baptist theology and especially the priesthood of all believers has too often been perverted into an every-tub-sits-on-its-own-bottom theology. The correct language is plural, not singular. We really ought to be talking about the priesthood of believers, of all believers."

The sense of community found in the Baptist tradition holds promise for the vast numbers of Americans who feel "homeless" in society, Shurden said.

• For Baptists, church is not found in denomination but in local congregation, he explained. "The local church is where the ordinary Baptist has found his or her meaning of community."

However, Baptists' "current addiction to bigness" may have "slaughtered our search for community in church life," he warned. Large churches especially must find ways to create a sense of community, whether through Sunday school classes or other small groups, he said.

The Baptist tradition also empowers those who feel voiceless and powerless in the world, Shurden said. "In the Baptist tradition, every member has a voice."

-- Religious authority. Baptists' traditional views on religious authority are threatened by relativism in the culture and objectivism in the congregation, Shurden said.

Relativism is expressed by those who contend all religious beliefs are equally valid, Shurden said.

Church members, however, often want clarity and simplicity from pastors who do not always see issues in black and white, he said.

"Many people in church are like I was in seventh-grade math class. They want a book with answers in the back," he said. "They want periods. They want exclamation points. They don't want any question marks."

Instead, Baptists traditionally have held a dynamic view of religious authority, Shurden explained.

Baptists traditionally have recognized four sources of religious authority, he said: Jesus, Scripture, the local church and individual conscience.

-- The state. Fanaticism and cynicism threaten historic Baptist advocacy of a separation of church and state, Shurden said.

The historian said he's appalled at how radical some Baptist churches view the traditional Baptist position on religious freedom to be.

Because many congregations are poorly educated about Baptists' historical position, the valid threats of a secular society cause churches to embrace "un-Baptist" policies that erode religious liberty, he said.

"We're trying to find some easy fix. So we have prayer in public schools or the Ten Commandments in courtrooms."

While fanaticism tries to turn the state into a church, cynicism causes Christians to barricade themselves from public life, Shurden also said.

These Baptist distinctives, while perhaps considered old-fashioned by some, are not out of date, Shurden said. "In a so-called post-denominational age, I still believe what Baptists have stood for historically is more relevant today than it ever has been."