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O.S. Hawkins elected to lead Southern Baptist Annuity Board

By Toby Druin

DALLAS (ABP) -- Saying he wants to be a "pastor to pastors," O. S. Hawkins announced Sept. 12 he will become the next president of the Southern Baptist Convention Annuity Board.

Hawkins, 50, pastor of prestigious First Baptist Church of Dallas for the last four years, was elected in a special meeting of the Annuity Board trustees at the Hyatt Hotel at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport. He will assume his new responsibilities Oct. 1, succeeding Paul Powell, who has been president since 1990.

Powell, who turns 65 in December 1998, and Chief Operating Officer Gordon Hobgood, who turned 65 in August, asked the trustees last year to begin the search for their successors.

In a prepared statement, Powell lauded the election of Hawkins. "Dr. O. S. Hawkins brings to the office a solid track record of leadership and pastoral ministry," Powell said. "I am excited for him, and I am excited for the Annuity Board."

Powell will continue as a consultant to help raise endowment funds for the Dallas-based Annuity Board. He said he would also be involved with the Baptist General Convention of Texas in developing a new Leadership Training Center.

Hawkins' election will please conservatives in charge of the SBC, who at times have questioned the moderate Powell over the Annuity Board's investment policies. Though Hawkins is an avowed conservative, many moderates also support the choice.

Flanking Hawkins at a press conference following his election, board Chairman Timothy Head of South Carolina and search committee chairman Ray Taylor of Fort Worth, said Hawkins fit a 12-point profile the board had approved at the outset of the search.

Taylor said they wanted someone with a high profile in the Southern Baptist Convention and that Hawkins was the only person they ever seriously interviewed.

Though it was described as "low to mid-range," Head declined to reveal Hawkins' salary, and Hawkins declined to answer when asked if he had gotten a raise or taken a pay cut.

The Annuity Board presidency has traditionally been one of the highest-paid offices in the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1994, the last year for which figures are available, the president earned \$195,900.

Unlike most Southern Baptist agencies, the Annuity Board does not receive funds from the SBC's unified budget, called the Cooperative Program.

With 400 employees and assets in excess of \$6 billion, the Annuity Board manages retirement accounts for more than 80,000 Southern Baptist ministers and other employees of churches, agencies and institutions. Currently, it pays retirement benefits to about 27,000 annuitants totaling \$200 million a year.

Hawkins said the Annuity Board presidency was not more attractive than his pastorate, but he viewed it as an expansion of his ministry.

The decision to accept the new position was "the most difficult of my life," considering his "love for First Baptist Church and my confidence in the future of First Baptist Church." The church, he said, is experiencing its greatest year in giving in history.

He praised Pastor Emeritus W. A. Criswell and Mrs. Criswell, calling them his greatest assets and supporters and noting Criswell is "like a father to me."

"Without his blessing, I could not have done this," Hawkins said.

Hawkins praised the Annuity Board's success and said he had no questions about its current investment policies. He said he approved of the board's divestiture of stock held in the Walt Disney Co.

Hawkins said he hopes to move "retired" pastors to a "retooling" mode where they can be involved in new areas of ministry. One of his dreams is to have 1,000 retirees serving one- to two-year terms with the SBC's International and North American mission boards.

He also will continue a yearly book publishing regimen followed by Powell to provide preaching resources for pastors.

"I have 3,000 manuscripts [of sermons] and will develop them through the Annuity Board's web page," he said.

Hawkins said he hoped through those activities to be a "pastor to pastors" as well as to undergird the focus of the Annuity Board to be a good steward of the funds entrusted to it.

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26 percent of Mormons are 'born again,' Barna says

By Marv Knox

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- Some Salt Lake City Mormons may surprise Southern Baptists who knock on their doors next summer during a witnessing blitz immediately prior to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting there.

One-quarter of them already will be born-again Christians, according to a recent study by George Barna, a leading researcher of religious trends in America.

That's not what Southern Baptists and other traditional Christians would expect out of a group that believes, among other notions, that God had multiple wives and that humans can become divine. But that's what Barna discovered in a survey of 6,242 U.S. adults this year.

"Born-again Christians" are people who "say they have 'made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in your life today' and also believe that when they die they will go to heaven because they have confessed their sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as their savior," Barna said, defining his terminology.

"This classification has nothing to do with whether or not respondents call themselves 'born again' or with the type of church they attend," he added.

And the term fits 26 percent of Mormons, he reported in the latest issue of "The Barna Report," a newsletter produced by his Barna Research Group of Oxnard, Calif.

Some church leaders have asked how Mormons can be Christians, especially since so much of Mormon teaching contradicts orthodox Christianity, Barna acknowledged.

The answer lies in ignorance.

"In short, most Americans are not theologically savvy," he explained. "Most Mormons, Catholics and Protestants are unable to describe the basic doctrinal views of their church.

"Consequently, it is quite possible for people from any of these groups to possess theological perspectives which are inherently contradictory.

"It is also therefore plausible that adherents of these churches may embrace views on Jesus Christ and eternal salvation which are at odds with what their church teaches, but which they personally accept as valid and helpful."

That also could explain another finding in Barna's survey -- 31 percent of Baptists are not born again. They either hold beliefs outside the traditional Baptist understanding of salvation by God's grace through faith in Christ, or they somehow joined a Baptist church without making a personal, ongoing commitment to Jesus.

Still, Baptists trail only the Assemblies of God in the percentage of born-again members of the denomination.

Eighty percent of the members of Assembly of God churches are born again, according to Barna's definition and survey. That compares to 69 percent of Baptists and 68 percent of members of non-denominational Christian congregations.

Other denominations and born-again percentages, according to Barna, are: Lutheran, 50; Methodist, 44; Presbyterian, 43; Episcopal 34; Catholic 31.

Nationwide, 40 percent of adults are born-again, the survey showed.

Ironically, Mormons are more likely to hold several basic Christian beliefs than their traditional Christian neighbors, Barna reported.

"Mormons are more likely to embrace a biblical perspective on a number of fundamental scriptural factors than are the typical Episcopalians, Catholics, Lutherans and Presbyterians," he said.

These include beliefs that "the Bible is totally accurate in all that it teaches; possessing a personal responsibility to evangelize; contending that their religious faith is very important in their life; believing that Satan is real; rejecting the notion that Jesus committed sins on earth; and holding an orthodox, biblical view of God."

More Mormons hold traditional positions than Baptists on such beliefs as "the reality of Satan, personal responsibility to evangelize and the notion that Jesus was a sinner," Barna noted.

Among Protestant groups, less than half of Episcopalians, Methodists, Lutherans and Presbyterians said they are "absolutely committed" to the Christian faith, the survey showed. Similarly, minorities in each of those denominations "firmly content that the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches."

Less than 30 percent of the members of those groups believe they are responsible for sharing their faith with non-Christians, Barna pollsters discovered. They also learned that most of the members of those denominations believe Jesus sinned and that "a good person can earn salvation."

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Texas Baptist church matched with Bulgaria in partnership

By Marv Knox

RICHARDSON, Texas (ABP) -- One congregation doesn't seem like much compared to the needs of a whole country. But The Heights Baptist Church in Richardson, Texas, is making its mark on Bulgaria.

The Heights Church has formed a partnership with the Bulgarian Baptist Union and the Southern Baptist International Mission Board to help reach the formerly communist country in Eastern Europe with the Christian gospel.

Theirs is the first partnership between an individual church and Baptists in a foreign country, reported Darrell Grice, minister of missions at The Heights.

The International Mission Board usually teams Baptists in another nation with an entire state convention in the United States. But based on the church's record of strong involvement in volunteer missions, IMB leaders approached The Heights Church in February 1996 about linking up with Bulgarian Baptists as a single congregation, Grice reported.

Through the years, the Richardson congregation has sent hundreds of members on partnership missions projects overseas, across the nation and throughout the state, he said. So, a partnership focusing on a single -- if massive -- need didn't seem out of the question.

"Obviously, we can't do it alone," Grice said of the project. "We're a liaison. We want to broaden the base as much as we can."

And those efforts are making a difference, reported Theo Angelov, president of Bulgarian Baptists. "The reaction of people ... is always with gratitude and renewed hope," he wrote in a letter to The Heights members. "We can never thank you enough for your selflessness and most generous giving."

"Hope" echoes in the words of Nick Andonov, a Bulgarian Baptist now studying at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

"Bulgaria is going through a great time of upheaval, financially and morally," Andonov said, citing the turmoil that has followed the fall of communism, including political confusion and economic collapse.

"This partnership gives us a lot of hope," he said. "We're trying to build new churches and battle social predisposition against us." In post-communist Bulgaria, Baptists -- who number only about 6,000 -- and other Evangelical Christians face persecution at the hands of the Orthodox Church, which has claimed they are cults intent on "stealing" Bulgaria's youth.

"Living in a situation like this, it makes you feel comforted to know there are Baptists who care enough to come over," Andonov noted. "They bring full cups of hope to pour into our empty cups."

But The Heights members who have been to Bulgaria insisted the blessings are all theirs.

"I've never been any place where Christians are received better," stressed Allie Flo Voss, a veteran of numerous overseas mission trips. "Anybody that has ever done anything for the Lord cannot do anything better than go to Bulgaria with those people who have experienced more than we can imagine."

"The experience was very humbling," added Jolie Willis. "I would fall flat on my face if I faced the challenges they encounter every day."

Willis described the discomfort she felt as she ate while her hosts, who did not have enough food to feed themselves, watched. They insisted she eat and would not let her refuse, she said, adding, "I was so ashamed."

"It is most humbling," agreed Kathy Lemons. "In Bulgaria, you realize these are people who literally understand the passion and persecution of New Testament Christianity. They would not hesitate to claim the Lord Jesus Christ. Our hard times are a piece of cake compared to theirs."

Lemons told how her hosts slept on the floor so she would have a bed and also how they gave up meals so she could have food.

"They were so honored I was there, but I was cringing inside," she recalled. "I didn't deserve it."

Living and working with Bulgarian Baptists provides "an opportunity to regain perspective," said Jim Lemons, a pastor for 15 years who was a member of The Heights but recently became pastor of River Oaks Baptist Church in Fort Worth.

"We fight over the color of our pews, while they face basic life-or-death issues."

He remembered walking with a congregation of 300 people for 45 minutes, traveling into the countryside to find water for a baptismal service. "I'll never forget the pure joy and celebration they felt for an event we take for granted," he said.