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**Longtime Southern Seminary librarian
fired after challenging SBC leader**

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The longtime reference librarian at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was fired Sept. 26, apparently because he wrote a personal letter questioning statements made in a chapel address by Southern Baptist Convention President Tom Elliff.

Paul Debusman, a 35-year employee of the seminary in Louisville, Ky., was 10 months away from retirement. He was given one month's severance pay and immediately dismissed.

As a result of the "involuntary retirement," Debusman, 64, will lose some retirement benefits he otherwise would have received.

Seminary President Albert Mohler did not return a phone call seeking comment on the firing. Seminary spokesman David Porter said Mohler would not comment because of the confidential nature of personnel matters.

Friends and colleagues of Debusman described him as one of the most "gentle" and "mild-mannered" people they know. "Paul is the kindest man in all the world," said his pastor, Ron Sisk.

Debusman reluctantly spoke about his situation, noting that he still has "a lot of positive feelings for the seminary" and that he's "not trying to recruit any people" to his side of the firing dispute.

SBC President Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church of Del City, Okla., spoke in chapel at Southern Sept. 16, as part of the seminary's Pastor Appreciation Day.

According to seminary-produced news reports, Elliff lauded the changes toward conservatism that have occurred at Southern under Mohler's administration. Debusman said in that context Elliff suggested he would not have been invited to speak in chapel under previous moderate administrations.

"At least the tone of what I felt he was saying was that in the former days he would not have been invited," Debusman explained.

That prompted the librarian to write Elliff a personal letter in which he attempted to correct what he perceived as historical inaccuracies in Elliff's comments. Studying and working at the seminary since the 1950s, Debusman has witnessed the administration of three presidents: Duke McCall, Roy Honeycutt and Mohler.

"I reminded him that [in the past] we had heard SBC presidents and other ranking members of the Southern Baptist Convention," Debusman said. "Chapel as I remembered it from the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s was a time when we heard everyone. There was a deliberate strategy to bring in different points of view."

"That's no longer true," Debusman said he pointed out to Elliff. Under the Mohler administration, "some people will not be invited," he explained. "My pastor will not be invited."

Debusman is a longtime member of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, the Baptist church nearest the seminary. In the past, the moderate congregation was closely linked with the seminary. In recent years that relationship has faded, as moderate faculty and students were gradually replaced by conservatives during the 1980s.

"The ironic thing to me is I was attempting to be conciliatory," Debusman said. "I'm not naive, and I don't mean to sound Pollyanish. But I closed my letter by saying my heart had been broken since 1979 by the way we had sniped at each other and I would to God that we could unite around the larger mission of sharing the gospel, discipling and equipping believers."

"Although critical, I was intending to be in my little tiny way some kind of conciliatory spirit and expressing the fact that I'm brokenhearted because we can't find bigger objectives and unite even through our differences," he added.

Elliff declined to comment on Debusman's letter and firing. "This is, apparently, a matter concerning the personnel policies at Southern Seminary. I have no statement to make," Elliff said in a faxed response to an interview request.

However, Debusman said it was obvious to him that Elliff had communicated with the seminary. Debusman did not receive a personal reply from Elliff until the Monday after he was fired.

Debusman said seminary administrators told him his actions had been "harmful" to the seminary.

In April 1995, in response to controversy over Mohler's firing of Carver School dean Diana Garland, seminary trustees adopted a new "policy on constructive relationships." That policy originally stated: "Faculty members and staff of this institution are not to act in ways that are injurious or detrimental to the seminary's relationship with the denomination, donors or other constituencies within and without the seminary community."

In April 1997, after extensive consultation with faculty and staff, the policy was amended to state that faculty and staff "should seek to relate constructively to the denomination, donors and other constituencies."

Debusman said he was shocked that his writing a personal letter to Elliff would be construed as bringing harm to the seminary. "I just did not see that a personal letter which I was intending as conciliatory" would be perceived as harmful.

Debusman said he had come into conflict with seminary administration earlier this summer over another matter where he was accused of being harmful to the seminary.

Soon after the SBC passed a resolution calling for a boycott of the Disney Co. in June, Debusman was interviewed by a newspaper reporter from Cleveland, Ohio. Debusman said he was unfamiliar with the publication at the time but learned later it serves a predominantly gay audience. He said he found the paper's content "rather astounding" when he finally did see a copy after the interview.

Debusman said the reporter mainly asked factual questions such as what it meant to be a messenger to the SBC annual meeting, what power SBC resolutions had on churches and the like. Debusman said he responded with factual answers.

Finally, the reporter asked Debusman, "Is there anything we can tell the gay community other than that the Baptists hate them?"

"This to me was an entree to tell them that God loves them, to be a witness," Debusman said. "I think we're all sinners. I'm not so much impressed with the sinfulness of any one group as I am with the sinfulness of all of us."

The seminary administration was not pleased that Debusman had been interviewed by the gay newspaper, he said. "They said I had brought harm to the seminary."

News of Debusman's firing shocked and angered his fellow church members at Crescent Hill, Sisk said.

"He is held in enormous respect in our church," Sisk said. "He has been elected term after term to our board of deacons, frequently heads our nominating committee because of his knowledge of the church and sensitivity to persons. You won't find anyone to fault his character or suggest he would ever be guilty of indiscretion.

"We announced his firing and the basic terms on Sunday morning. The congregation rose as one and gave him a prolonged standing ovation in celebration of his integrity."

Sisk said Debusman has been "unfailingly helpful" to generations of students doing research at Southern.

At Crescent Hill, he sings in the choir and "visits in the nursing homes more than I do," Sisk said.

"He is a devoted husband, father and grandfather, and in my mind is a sterling example of the very best of Baptist faith. He is simply a gentle man who spoke his mind in an ungentle venue."

Sisk said Debusman "believes as a Baptist that when you have a disagreement with someone, it's your responsibility to speak to them about that with respect. That's what he did. To put his job at jeopardy for that is unconscionable arrogance.

"He was one Christian going to another Christian according to tenets of Matthew 18. How can you fault him for that?"

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story.

European Baptist seminary shifts focus of academic program

By Bob Allen

NOVI VINODOLSKI, Croatia (ABP) -- The International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic, will radically alter its academic program away from a traditional seminary model to supplementing the theological education offered at Europe's 45 national Baptist seminaries.

The change, recommended by seminary trustees, was approved 66-6 by the European Baptist Federation's executive committee Sept. 26. It will be phased in during the next year, allowing current students time to complete their degrees or transfer to other schools.

The plan, unveiled at an EBF executive committee meeting in Novi Vinodolski, Croatia, calls for discontinuing coursework for the seminary's bachelor of theology, its "topping up" courses students use to build on basic theological studies at other schools, and its five-year master of theology program.

In their place, courses will be developed to offer specialized instruction in missions and evangelism, Baptist and Anabaptist studies, Christian education and human rights/religious freedom. Those courses are intended to supplement, rather than duplicate, basic programs offered at seminaries and Bible schools across Europe, many of which have sprung up in recent years.

The restructuring is designed to make the international seminary the hub for a network of seminaries sponsored by national Baptist unions which offer basic ministerial training. The new focus will "shift direction to concentrate on those things that will most help the mission [and] life of European Baptists," said Keith Jones, a British Baptist who chairs the seminary's board of trustees.

It is also hoped to expand influence beyond the seminary's relatively small student body by networking thousands of European Baptists by offering advanced or specialized training, continuing education and courses for lay people.

The seminary will continue to provide research facilities and maintain Europe's largest English-language Protestant theological library, according to a news release.

The change also calls for a realignment of faculty, meaning professors in discontinued areas will lose their jobs.

The seminary trustees drafted the proposal at a two-day meeting in mid-September. Many details remain to be worked out, Jones said. The trustees will meet in November to begin the process of selecting personnel to implement the plan.

The plan also redirects a search for a new president of the international seminary to succeed 61-year-old John David Hopper, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary who retired this year.

Instead of electing a new president, the trustees will search for a "general director" to oversee a team of four directors of specialized studies, as well as a "pastor/spiritual director" and directors of administration and library services.

Trustees had agreed on a presidential nominee this spring, German Baptist scholar Stefan Stiegler, but he withdrew suddenly in June over a disagreement with faculty on how to fill a vacant teaching position.

Jones said the seminary's role amid changing needs and expectations of Europe's 50 Baptist unions has been discussed since the early 1990s. The EBF council issued seminary trustees a series of formal requests related to the nature and future of the school at a meeting in Tallinn, Estonia, last September.

Leaders of the school expected a gradual shift in focus under a new president, but Stiegler's surprise withdrawal and pressure from member unions sped up the process, Jones said.

Students and faculty reacted with shock at news that current academic programs are being discontinued. "We are in the midst of reorganizing our course offerings for this academic year so that current students can take maximum advantage of the year remaining," said Kent Blevins, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary who teaches at the seminary.

"Our primary objective at this point is to assist the students who will not be able to finish their degrees by next summer at IBTS to obtain placement at other seminaries/divinity schools where they can complete their studies," Blevins continued.

Despite the overwhelming vote, reaction from EBF board members was mixed.

"We could really benefit, at least in Denmark," said Ole Jorgensen, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Denmark. "I feel we are moving in the right direction."

The All-Ukrainian Union of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists enrolls 1,500 students in its seminaries and Bible institutes but needs a place for scholars to meet, for professors to update studies and to unify European Baptists, said Victor Kulbich, the union's general secretary.

Renato Maiocchi, president of the Union of Christian Evangelical Baptists of Italy, said he voted for the proposal to promote unity among European Baptists despite personal reservations. Italian Baptists are on the "losing side," he said, because they do not have their own seminary.

Latvian Baptist leader Edgars Mazis said his union had been looking to Prague "as a place to deepen our education," saying the change in focus would be a "loss" to Latvia.

Russian leader Vladimir Ryaguzov, meanwhile, lauded the plan's emphasis on human rights and Baptist distinctives. "We are often asked about Baptist beliefs and often are unable to answer those questions," he said. As a result, he said, Baptists in Russia are losing some of their best educated and most intelligent members to the Orthodox Church.

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board established the international seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, in 1948 for the training of European leaders.

The school became a flashpoint of conflict between moderates and conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention in 1991, when FMB trustees defunded Ruschlikon over charges of liberalism at the school.

The newly formed Cooperative Baptist Fellowship rallied around the seminary, restoring funds cut by the SBC and taking over support for missionaries in the faculty. The defunding was one factor prompting Keith Parks to take early retirement as head of the FMB to become the Fellowship's missions coordinator in 1992.

In 1993, the seminary's trustees voted to move the school out of Switzerland because of rising operating expenses, tighter immigration laws and the changing religious landscape in Eastern Europe. The picturesque Swiss campus -- six buildings on five acres overlooking Lake Zurich --- was sold to an insurance underwriting firm for \$20 million.

Proceeds from the sale allowed the seminary to move to its new location in Prague and set up an endowment fund to help offset operating costs.

An estimated 1,300 volunteers from Europe and America who donated thousands of hours of work to help the seminary get established in Prague. Some returned to the Czech Republic for the official dedication of the new campus in April.

Parks, who oversaw the transfer of the Ruschlikon campus to the European Baptist Federation in 1989, called the recent action a "promising approach" to reshaping the seminary's purpose "in light of current realities in the theological landscape in Europe."

"The adjustments they are making now will give a real opportunity for the unification of European Baptists around this institution," Parks said.

Jim Smith, the Fellowship's Europe liaison, said the shift will result in reassignment of two Fellowship missionary families. Two current faculty members, Kent Blevins and Don Berry, are CBF missionaries.

Another U.S. scholar on the faculty, Phyllis Rodgerson Pleasants, is not a Fellowship missionary, but the CBF has provided support for her position in "an indirect manner," Smith said.

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-- Martha Skelton and Robert O'Brien contributed to this report.

Church in women's ordination dispute withdraws from Kentucky association

By Mark Wingfield

DRAKESBORO, Ky. (ABP) -- Faced with an ultimatum to come in line with "the position of the association" against women's ordination or be kicked out, First Baptist Church of Drakesboro, Ky., voted Sept. 24 to remove itself from Muhlenberg County Baptist Association.

Pastor David Flack said the church voted by an 83 percent majority to leave the association.

The vote came one month after the eastern Kentucky association adopted a motion to remove the name of Angie Flack from a listing of ordained ministers in its annual book of reports. The association also voted to place the Drakesboro church under watchcare status for one year, during which time it could come in line with the association's unwritten policy against the ordination of women or be expelled from the association.

Angie Flack is an ordained pastoral counselor and a member of the Drakesboro church, although the church did not ordain her and she holds no official position with the church. Her husband is the church's pastor.

"The church felt it was an issue of integrity, with the action the association took at the annual meeting," David Flack explained. "We did not feel we could remain a part of a group that conducted business in that manner, specifically altering the record of minutes within the association."

"We reported Angie's ordination in good faith on our annual profile," he added. "The association should in good faith report that. An alteration of our church record speaks of the integrity of what the association is willing to do."

The Aug. 28 action by the association brought to a climax a controversy that had been brewing for nearly a year, since Angie Flack's name had been listed in the association's 1996 Book of Reports.

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Panel to take up religion measure, spokeswoman for Istook says

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A House panel will take up Rep. Ernest Istook's proposed "Religious Freedom Amendment" to the Constitution in October, according to a spokeswoman for the Oklahoma Republican.

The House Subcommittee on the Constitution will begin consideration of Istook's proposal (H.J. Res. 78) Oct. 23. The Istook spokeswoman also said House Speaker Newt Gingrich has promised a vote on the measure in the spring of 1998.

A subcommittee spokesman described the Oct. 23 date as "tentative."

Istook's amendment would significantly alter the degree of church-state separation required by the First Amendment.

According to a Congressional Research Service analysis, Istook's proposal would "introduce a reference to God into the Constitution for the first time, substantially lower existing constitutional restrictions on aid to religious institutions, and reinforce existing constitutional law regarding private religious expression in public schools and on other public property."

The CRS analysis also notes that the proposal would possibly "allow government to sponsor and promote religious exercises and recognition of religious beliefs and traditions in the public schools and on other property."

Religious groups are lining up on both sides of Istook's proposal.

Among supporters of the measure are the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, National Association of Evangelicals, Christian Coalition, Concerned Women for America and Family Research Council.

Opponents include the Baptist Joint Committee, American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Other groups, such as the Christian Legal Society, favor a constitutional amendment dealing with religious liberty but have declined to endorse Istook's proposal.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Vouchers split House, Senate lawmakers; issue delays D.C. bill

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A perennial showdown over education vouchers again is delaying a funding bill for the District of Columbia.

The voucher plan appears to be gliding through the U.S. House of Representatives, but it has hit a snag in the Senate.

The House Appropriations Committee approved the voucher plan Sept. 29. It would provide up to 2,000 "scholarships" to low-income parents to pay tuition at private and parochial schools. The measure is set to move to the full House for a vote next week.

The plan faces a tougher battle in the Senate where proponents failed Sept. 30 to limit debate on whether it should be added to the D.C. funding bill.

The Senate fell two votes shy of the 60 votes needed to end a filibuster led by Democratic Senators. The cloture vote failed 58-41, with one Republican joining 40 Democrats in continuing the filibuster and four Democrats voted to end the debate.

Lawmakers are expected to resolve the differences in the D.C. funding bill in a House-Senate conference. If approved in the conference, however, the voucher plan faces a likely veto from President Clinton.

Clinton said Sept. 30 that he would "veto any legislation that damages our commitment to public education and to high national standards."

Clinton said the D.C. proposal would "diminish our country's commitment to public education by siphoning badly needed funds away from our public schools into a voucher program that would support private academies for a very limited number of students."

The proposal, sponsored by Sen. Dan Coats, R-Ind., and House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, would allow up to 2,000 D.C. students to use public funds to pay tuition at a private or parochial school in the D.C. area. Under the plan, low-income parents could receive as much as \$3,200 for private education.

Following the Senate vote, Coats said that members voting against vouchers in the procedural vote "were willing to stand at the school house door rather than allow poor and minority children into safe, working schools." Coats charged that lawmakers against vouchers were too committed to the teachers' unions.

Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., said the D.C. plan would "subsidize private school tuition for 3 percent of the students in the public schools and leave the other 97 percent of the students even worse off."

The Congress approved a temporary resolution to fund D.C. and various agencies of the government through Oct. 23. Since lawmakers have completed only three of 13 bills that fund the government, a continuing resolution is needed to keep the government running into the new fiscal year that started Oct. 1.

This is not the first time the D.C. funding bill has been held up over a voucher provision. A D.C. voucher proposal was one of many controversial measures in spending bills for fiscal year 1996 that led to a partial shutdown of the government. The House had approved the voucher provision, but it was finally removed in March 1997 after the Senate failed three times to end a filibuster over the plan.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Congress renews visa law for religious workers

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Congress renewed immigration law provisions Oct. 1 that enable up to 10,000 religious workers to enter the United States every year.

Religious workers and Senate lawmakers lost their bid, however, to have the provisions extended permanently.

Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, chairman of the House subcommittee on immigration, refused to back the measure unless the sunset clause, requiring the provisions to be renewed every three years, remained.

A spokesman for Smith said the law should retain the sunset provision because of evidence of fraud and abuse under the religious visa law.

The bill to extend the provisions first passed the Senate without the sunset clause, but after the House added the clause, the Senate accepted the measure on a voice vote.

One religious-worker provision, which expired Sept. 30, allows 5,000 ministerial workers and 5,000 non-ministerial workers to enter the United States every year and receive permanent resident status. Another measure allows an unlimited number of temporary visas for religious workers who work at churches and charities.

The Senate also added a measure to waive the fees to process a visa for a religious worker engaged in charitable activities.

The extension must now be signed by the president.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Church near bankruptcy resurrected to new life

By Mark Wingfield

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. (ABP) -- Seven years ago, Hillvue Heights Baptist Church had dwindled to less than 50 active members, had a \$400,000 debt, was on the brink of bankruptcy and had been without a pastor for more than three years.

Experts on church growth pronounced the small church on the southern outskirts of Bowling Green, Ky., virtually unsalvageable.

"There weren't any pastors who wanted to come to a church in that kind of situation," explained member Keith Ward. "So we had a meeting and everybody said, 'We've gone as far as we can go; we'll have to put it in God's hands.'"

About the same time, Steve Ayers was preparing to graduate from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville and wanted to start a church in Bowling Green, his hometown. He knew about the plight of Hillvue Heights and contacted them about becoming their pastor.

"They didn't call me; I called them," he explained. "I said, 'I have a vision for a church in Bowling Green and you have a building.'"

More conversation ensued, and then the church took a vote -- not on Ayers as pastor but on his vision. The struggling congregation adopted the new vision, called Ayers as pastor and began to remake itself.

Today Ayers jokes that he took a pay cut from a seminary pastorate to accept the full-time pastorate at Hillvue Heights. The church agreed to pay him \$7,000 a year.

His wife, Elizabeth, recalls moving light bulbs from room to room in the church because there was no money to buy more light bulbs.

Nevertheless, ignited by a renewed vision, the congregation embraced Ayers' often non-traditional ideas and pressed on. Within a month, the congregation had tripled in size.

After that, growth continued exponentially. People began making professions of faith in Jesus Christ in every service. Others who had been out of church for years came to renew their commitments and clean up their lives.

When the little country church building filled up, people would stand on the porch and peer in through the doors. What's more, those coming to Hillvue Heights increasingly included the boomers, busters and generation-Xers most churches have trouble reaching.

Today, Hillvue Heights has up to 2,400 in Sunday morning worship, baptizes more than 220 people a year and has annual offerings of more than \$1.1 million. A new worship center that seats 1,600 has been built adjacent

to the outgrown sanctuary. On Sunday mornings cars overflow the gravel parking lots and spill onto grassy fields nearby.

This, according to administrative pastor Steve Dorris, is the result of a group of original members of the church who "laid down their personal preference [about how church should be done] to allow God to move. Once they were able to see God can move in a powerful way in a non-traditional setting, it wasn't a matter of preference. The Spirit brings unity."

That assessment is shared by Ward, who was among the members of the dying congregation. "It took a lot of praying," he admitted.

And while the changing worship styles and approach to church life might have been hard for older members to accept, they responded to the immediate good that came.

"I never saw a church reach some of the people we reached," Ward explained. "It's worth anything."

"The easiest way for me to describe how you can put aside all preference is to look at those people you saw come here in pain and see the difference later," added Dorris.

Indeed, Hillvue Heights has drawn people from the most unlikely places -- from the bar scene, from every addiction imaginable, from emotional brokenness, from absolute ignorance of the gospel message.

Those people have come into the church, found emotional and spiritual healing, been energized and now offer their gifts to help bring others.

The church has four praise bands that rotate responsibilities for worship leadership. Many of the members of those bands previously played together in bars or other bands. Now they draw upon what God has done in their own lives not only to perform but to write music that tells the story.

A typical service at Hillvue Heights is loud and bursting with energy.

The band pumps up the volume while the congregation stands and sways and claps during more than a half-hour of worship music. Ayers moves around the stage without the aid of pulpit or notes as he preaches.

When new converts are baptized at Hillvue Heights -- which is usually several people every week -- they give verbal testimony that Jesus Christ died and was resurrected to pay for their sins. And the congregation applauds and shouts.

"How can you contain crack addicts whose lives have been changed?" Ayers said to explain the atmosphere. "They didn't just get promoted from one adult class to another. They got converted."

While the worship is contemporary in format, Ayers is the first to point out that it's definitely not "seeker-sensitive," the label most often attached to churches like this. "There's nothing sensitive about me," he explains with a huge laugh.

Indeed, while many of the traditional trappings of church have been removed -- hymnals, pews, stained glass and robed choirs -- Ayers makes no effort to sugar-coat his message. He preaches with the intensity and brutal honesty of an old-fashioned evangelist but without using churchy language.

In a recent sermon on Jesus' parable of the sower, for example, Ayers' primary illustration was this: "You can't grow corn on I-65."

People come to Hillvue Heights from a 10-county region, with some driving from as far away as Paducah, 150 miles away. As a result, the church recently birthed an extension congregation in adjoining Logan County, with about 200 people attending. The church's vision is to continue spreading out and multiplying itself.

The irony, Ayers points out, is that this is the church the so-called experts once said couldn't grow. Among the critiques at the time was the assertion that Hillvue Heights location on the far south side of Bowling Green was the wrong place to grow.

As it turns out, Ayers said, "It may be a bad location for a local church, but it's a great location for a regional church."