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'Conservative resurgence' founder to be nominated as SBC president

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Paige Patterson, the theologian who helped engineer a conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1980s, will be nominated as the convention's next president.

Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., will be nominated for the unpaid leadership post when the SBC meets June 9-11 in Salt Lake City. If elected, he will succeed Tom Elliff, an Oklahoma pastor who is ineligible for re-election.

Patterson's candidacy was announced Feb. 3 at an annual pastors' conference at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., and reported by Baptist Press. He will be nominated to the post by James Merritt, who chairs the influential SBC Executive Committee.

"It is time to say to the world that we believe in our seminaries and do not hesitate to select as president a man who has put his life and ministry on the line because of his commitment to the fidelity of the Word of God," said Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga.

Patterson and Texas layman Paul Pressler are credited with devising the "conservative resurgence" which displaced moderates from leadership of the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group during the 1980s.

Patterson, who at the time taught at Criswell College in Dallas, and Pressler, an appeals-court judge from Houston, first met in the 1960s to discuss their frustration with a perceived liberal drift in the SBC. They hit on the idea of mobilizing conservatives to capture and retain the SBC presidency, using the office's appointive powers to gradually return the convention to what they considered its conservative roots.

Traveling at their own expense, Patterson and Pressler visited churches across the country to urge other disenchanted conservatives to come in force to the 1979 Southern Baptist Convention in Houston. Memphis, Tenn., pastor Adrian Rogers won the SBC presidency that year, setting off a string of conservative presidencies that continues today.

The only interruption in the juggernaut came when Florida pastor Jim Henry won the office in 1994 and 1995. Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, is a conservative but sought the presidency without the

blessing of party leaders. Henry was succeeded by Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla., who was elected in 1996 and again last year.

Elliff was unopposed for the office and was presented as a compromise candidate between conservative-resurgence hardliners and those who affirmed Henry's more moderate stance. In his presidential appointments, however, Elliff returned closer to recent practice of demanding strict adherence to biblical inerrancy and loyalty to the conservative resurgence than to less-rigid criteria used by Henry.

Patterson would be the sixth sitting president of an SBC seminary to serve as the convention's president and the first since 1942.

Patterson said his election as SBC president would not create a conflict of interest with his role as an agency head. The convention president serves ex officio on convention boards, including the powerful SBC Executive Committee, which conducts business for the convention between annual meetings, including development of the SBC's budget. Patterson said he would not vote and would speak to issues at board meetings only when asked.

Due to "wise foresight of the SBC fathers," Patterson also noted, the convention president has only an indirect role in nominating members of trustee boards. The SBC president appoints a Committee on Committees, which in turn recommends a Committee on Nominations. The Committee on Nominations is elected by the convention to nominate individuals to SBC boards of trustees. Those nominees must be ratified by the full convention.

Patterson and Pressler's genius was to manipulate that process by running presidential candidates who pledged to name like-minded conservatives to the Committee on Committees. Those appointees in turn nominated fellow conservatives to the nominating committee, who recommended only conservatives to leadership posts. Conservative majorities attending SBC annual meetings kept the string of presidential wins going and voted down attempts to challenge nominees from the floor.

Most moderates withdrew from the 12-year battle for convention control after a devastating defeat in New Orleans in 1990. The next year, they formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which is not technically a new convention but appoints its own missionaries and supports a variety of moderate ministries.

Merritt cited historical precedent for nominating a sitting seminary president. Between 1939 and 1942, the convention elected presidents of three seminaries to successive terms as SBC president.

Earlier, James Boyce, founding president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, served as SBC president in the 1800s, and E. Y. Mullins, was elected to the post while he was also president at Southern Seminary in the 1920s.

Other individuals have served both as SBC president and as employed leaders, but not at the same time. For example, James Sullivan presided as SBC president in 1977 after retiring as president of the Baptist Sunday School Board. Jimmy Draper, who now holds that job, was SBC president in 1993-94, before he was hired by the convention agency.

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Texas convention takes step away from church that ordained homosexual

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Texas Baptist convention has taken a step toward distancing itself from a church which has ordained a homosexual deacon.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas' Administrative Committee voted to recommend "the BGCT not receive any funds from University Baptist Church in Austin." It also urged the church "discontinue the publication of any materials that indicate they affiliate with the BGCT."

The recommendation will be considered by the state convention's Executive Board Feb. 24.

University Baptist Church has been acquainted with convention controversy since 1995, when it ordained a homosexual as a deacon. That fall, the church was removed from Austin Baptist Association.

Shortly thereafter, the BGCT formed a committee to study whether the convention should amend its constitution to bar affiliation with churches that ordain homosexuals as pastors or deacons. At the convention's annual meeting in 1996, the study committee recommended no change in the constitution. It noted the credentials committee already has authority to refuse seating to messengers from churches perceived to deviate from standard faith and practice.

During that 1996 meeting, a motion to withdraw fellowship from University Baptist Church was ruled out of order, since the congregation had not sent any messengers to the annual meeting.

Still, the church's affiliation with the convention remained an issue for some Texas Baptists, said Charles Davenport, chairman of the Administrative Committee and pastor of First Baptist Church in Tullia, Texas.

"We're getting lots of concern from across the state," Davenport said. On its Internet page, the church mentions it has ordained a homosexual deacon and notes its sponsorship of a homosexual group, and it also cites its affiliation with the BGCT, he said.

Davenport said he appointed a subcommittee to study the matter after it repeatedly came up from "many churches of all persuasions" statewide. "They feel this is a moral issue," he said.

D.L. Lowrie, a member of the study subcommittee and pastor of First Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas, presented the issue to the Administrative Committee, reading a prepared statement.

The church's ordination of a homosexual deacon is "a practice that Baptists in Texas consider to be in conflict with scriptural guidelines," the statement notes.

Consequently, the committee approved a proposal to the Executive Board that says: "We recommend that the BGCT not receive funds from University Baptist Church in Austin or from any other church which openly endorses moral views in conflict with biblical teaching. We request that University Baptist Church discontinue the publication of any materials that indicate that they affiliate with the BGCT."

One participant in the meeting noted the church itself should not be characterized as evil: "They do some wonderful things -- ministries in the community, participation with Habitat for Humanity. This [homosexual agenda] is not their main thing. ... I don't like having to do this. But on the other hand, I don't like the idea of them linking their affiliation with us."

University Church Pastor Larry Bethune said the church linked its affiliation with the BGCT because it is a Texas Baptist church of long standing. He expressed grief at learning his church may be rejected by the BGCT.

"University Baptist Church has made an important contribution to the BGCT through the years," Bethune said. He described the church as an "enthusiastic contributing supporter" of BGCT and Southern Baptist mission causes.

Baptist student ministry began in Texas as a partnership between the church and the state convention, he noted. In addition, the church has been a leader in racial reconciliation, "especially active in the movement to include women as equal spiritual partners in the church and in ministries to the poor, the homeless, the hungry and other 'despised and rejected' members of our society," he said. "I grieve that Texas Baptists would repudiate such an open gospel."

Bethune noted the church has not had time to formulate a congregational response to the proposed action. However, he made several comments regarding the issue of homosexuality.

"Homosexual persons have been abused by the wider church in the same manner as persons of color were in times past -- lumped into a single category, assumed to be all alike and all alike condemned," he said.

If the recommendation is approved, it "will add to the grief of homosexual persons and their families who have been told from many Baptist pulpits that God hates them," he added.

The ongoing discussion of "precisely what homosexual behaviors the Bible condemns and how we should minister to a group of people who experience a sexual orientation they did not choose but who seek to follow Christ" is "not purely an academic debate," he affirmed.

"Our church has heard the pain of many Baptist families whose children have been hounded from the church merely for saying they were homosexual in orientation, and sometimes the whole family has been ostracized," Bethune said. "We have not blessed all homosexual behaviors, but sought to learn from scripture and Spirit what behaviors are appropriate to the Christian who is homosexual in orientation. ...

"I grieve that Baptists are afraid of this scriptural debate and refuse even to hear those who, on the basis of faithful study in the original languages, disagree with the traditional reading of those texts which address particular forms of homosexual behavior."

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Execution of Karla Faye Tucker saddens pastor who baptized her

By Bruce Nolan

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- Shortly after CNN reported that Karla Faye Tucker's last appeal had failed, David Crosby and his wife, Janet, clasped hands in their Metairie, La., home and prayed for her. A fire smoldered untended in the fireplace near the droning TV. There was no thought of dinner.

It was 5:30 p.m., and the state of Texas was about to kill the prisoner Crosby had met about 15 years ago, baptized, tutored in faith and come to admire. As a young pastor in small-town Texas, he had played guitar and sang "One Day at a Time" with Tucker and her cellmates on death row. She dazzled him with what she had become. She was, he said, an ax-murderer turned saint, "the poster child for God's grace."

But Tuesday [Feb. 3], Texas was executing the ax-murderer, and Crosby was sick at heart.

"For the last two weeks, I've been asking people to pray for her," said Crosby, pastor at First Baptist Church of New Orleans.

"I feel like she's a member of my congregation."

Because Tucker apparently made a personal transformation from violent druggie to gentle apostle, her approaching execution triggered another national debate on the death penalty.

As dusk fell Tuesday, hundreds gathered outside the prison in Huntsville, Texas, where she would be executed. The event became grist for a live CNN broadcast.

"Frankly, we never thought it would come to this," Crosby said. "Most of the women on death row knew that Texas had not executed a woman in over 100 years."

Crosby first encountered Tucker in the early 1980s, when he was assigned to the Texas women's prison in Gatesville.

Crosby was pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Gatesville and often worked with the women prisoners with his brother, Tim, the full-time prison chaplain.

The Tucker they met then was already changing, having encountered her first prison ministers in Houston's Harris County jail before her conviction, he said.

"Once she got free of the drugs, she just began to open to the world," he said.

"Her knowledge of God and Jesus Christ was rudimentary." But she was curious, open.

In time, he said, she seemed to grow into faith.

"It was almost like a child discovering life for the first time. It's hard to believe, but there was an innocence about her. I can't explain it except to say it's the grace of God.

"She was under constant scrutiny, 24 hours a day, and I knew the people who were guarding her. They were in my congregation," Crosby said. "And I never met a guard, or volunteer or anyone who ever met her who questioned her sincerity after they got to know her. She was, and is, a very kind human being."

Within a year or so of meeting her -- Crosby said he did not remember the year -- he and his brother baptized Tucker in the prison chapel.

She left an indelible effect on him, Crosby said Tuesday.

A conservative pastor in a denomination whose members generally favor the death penalty, Crosby has come to a different place.

"When capital punishment gets a face on it, it changes how you feel, and it ought to," he said.

"I thought for years that capital punishment sometimes was the only punishment that fits the crime. But now I'm questioning whether I want to participate not only in the execution of Karla Faye Tucker but of other people I don't know so well."

In Crosby's mind, the justice system, though well-intentioned, is too deeply flawed by politics, inequities in finances and other forces to administer the death penalty fairly.

"If this is the best a civilized society can do, we'd be better off in almost every area giving convicted murderers life without parole," he said.

But ultimately, he said he believes good will come from Tucker's death, if only from what he called the powerful redemptive example of her life.

"God can turn this tragedy inside out. He specializes in that, you know. He can turn this around and do something with her death I can't imagine. It may well be her execution will bring reconciliation and forgiveness to people we'll never know."

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Friends of Karla Faye Tucker find respite at Hospitality House

By Ken Camp

HUNTSVILLE, Texas (ABP) -- The eyes of the world turned to the prison in Huntsville, Texas, Feb. 3 to see if Karla Faye Tucker would become the state's first woman to be executed since the Civil War. Meanwhile, a few blocks away at Texas Baptists' Hospitality House, all eyes were closed in prayer.

Forty-two friends and family of Tucker, a pickax murderer turned born-again Christian, gathered to pray at the Hospitality House, a place of refuge for those with a family member in prison.

"It was a haven for them away from the 1,500 to 2,000 people who were thundering around the prison," said Chaplain Bob Norris, who has directed the Texas Baptist ministry since its beginning in 1986.

Those who spent time at the Hospitality House not only included the executed woman's husband, minister Dana Brown, but also Ronald Carlson. Tucker was convicted of using a 3-foot-long pickax to kill Carlson's sister, Deborah Thornton, and Jerry Dean during a burglary of Dean's Houston apartment in 1983.

Carlson publicly stated he had forgiven Tucker and opposed her execution, citing her Christian conversion and changed life.

At least 70 families of death row inmates have stayed at the Hospitality House in the hours surrounding their loved one's execution, but Norris said it was only the second time a member of a victim's family also was present.

"[Carlson] gave up a lot of family ties to take the stand that he did and to be a witness," Norris said. "He's such a sweet Christian, a genuine Christian -- just as real and humble in person as he appeared in television interviews."

Bobbi Braziel, a member of Lamar Baptist Church in Arlington, worked weekends for about six months last year as a volunteer chaplain in the Mountain View Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, near Gatesville.

Braziel, a secretary in the Baptist General Convention of Texas church-extension department, visited Tucker an average of two times a month and traveled to Huntsville for her execution.

"We all prayed together and just waited," she said, describing the hours spent at the Hospitality House, hoping for a last minute stay of execution.

Just prior to 6 p.m., when Tucker was taken to the death chamber, strapped to a gurney and given a lethal injection, Braziel joined several others in walking from the Hospitality House to the Walls Unit.

"It was the closest I'd ever been to the crucifixion," she said.

Tucker's pastor led the group to kneel in prayer. Some who were assembled to show their support for the death penalty spat upon those who were kneeling, while others cursed at them and laughed.

"It was the strongest sensation, and in talking with the others later, we all felt the same way," she said. "We'd never felt nearer to the foot of the cross. And we all felt the Lord speaking to us: 'Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.'"

Tucker's execution attracted international attention, with televangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell joining Pope John Paul II and Amnesty International in pleading for mercy on her behalf. The widespread attention that this execution garnered set it apart from the other 144 in Texas since the death penalty was reinstated in the mid-1970s, according to Norris.

"Another execution is scheduled on Monday. We'll probably have five or six people here for that one. Some of those who were executed last year weren't even popular enough to get their pictures in the Houston paper," he said.

"Part of what was different this time was the idea of killing a beautiful young woman. Somehow, it's different with some of the ugly old guys down here. But I've known some tremendous Christian men who have died, and nobody said anything."

Both Norris and Braziel noted that Karla Fae Tucker's lasting legacy may be that she helped many Texans attach a face and a personality to prisoners on death row.

"She was a perfect picture of rehabilitation and regeneration, if that's what the state is really looking for," Braziel said.

"In God's eyes, her past was forgiven. Working in prison ministry has taught me two things. One is the awful consequences of sin. The other is the greatness of God's grace."

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Alabama abortion-clinic blast linked with Atlanta bombings

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Following the nation's first deadly abortion-clinic bombing in Birmingham, Ala., Jan. 29, federal investigators are exploring a possible link between recent bombings in Atlanta to an abortion clinic and gay night club.

Within hours of the 7:30 a.m. bombing of the New Woman All Women Health Care clinic in Birmingham, the Reuters news agency and The Atlanta Journal and Constitution received a letter alleging the explosion was the responsibility of the Army of God. The block lettering is similar to that in letters received after the Atlanta bombings last year, for which the militant anti-abortion, anti-homosexual protest group claimed credit.

Authorities are also searching for Eric Robert Rudolph of North Carolina, who is considered a material witness to the bombing.

Killed in the explosion was 35-year-old Robert "Sandy" Sanderson, an eight-year Birmingham police veteran who moonlighted as a security guard at the clinic. Injured in the bombing was Emily Lyons, 41, the head nurse and a counselor at the clinic. Lyons, who lost the vision in her left eye and has severe muscle damage in both of her legs, was recently upgraded from critical condition.

Although abortion doctors and clinic workers have been shot to death in the United States, this was the first fatal bombing at an abortion clinic.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation, the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms plus the Alabama Bureau of Investigation set up shop at the University of Alabama at Birmingham's Baptist Student Center for on-site investigations that shut down several city blocks for three days.

Doris Harris, director of the center for family resourcing and development at the Birmingham Baptist Association, believes the bombing steps over the line of Christian protest.

"I think our lives bear witness to our beliefs and values, and we have to live out of those," Harris said. "I have a hard time understanding how the taking of another's life in any situation is a Christian principle in the way we ought to live."

Sue McFadden, president of Alabama's Woman's Missionary Union, was particularly dismayed over the loss to the policeman's family. "I really feel like there is no justification for this kind of violence," McFadden said.

While pro-lifers have a right to protest abortion, McFadden said, that right ends "when their rights overshadow the rights of others."

In prepared statements released the day of the bombing, both President Bill Clinton and Alabama Gov. Fob James condemned the abortion-clinic bombing.

Clinton called the violence "senseless."

James encouraged the state to pray for the victims and their families. "Let me assure you that the state of Alabama will react as aggressively as we can. Those who destroy and destruct need to be brought to justice as swiftly as possible. The full resources of your state government will be put behind the effort," James said.

Bob Foust, executive director of Alabama's Save-A-Life Inc., also condemned the violent act. "I hate and deplore that it happened," said Foust, a member of Valleydale Baptist Church in Birmingham.

"We are praying for the families that are involved and that the perpetrator would be brought to justice," Foust said. "We are also praying that people would understand that those types of actions are not pro-life. Jesus came to the world not to condemn or destroy, but to save.

"We are here to save people from having an abortion as well as show a new life to those working in the abortion industry, not to destroy them."

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-- The Alabama Baptist

Religious freedom panel issues interim report

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A U.S. State Department advisory panel has proposed dozens of ways the federal government and religious groups can fight religious persecution and promote religious liberty around the world.

The Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad, established in 1996, has submitted an interim report to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. The report outlines steps the State Department and other federal agencies are already taking to promote religious freedom and lists 89 "preliminary recommendations" to make them more effective or identify new approaches to advancing religious liberty.

A final report to be issued later will "build on these recommendations," according to Alexandra Arriaga, special coordinator for external affairs at the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor and executive director of the advisory panel.

Albright welcomed the report and said she would immediately implement the recommendation that the State Department designate a new, senior-level coordinator to ensure that efforts to advance religious liberty will be integrated into broader U.S. foreign policy.

"In this way, we can assure the American people and the committee that its best ideas will be brought to life, not studied to death," Albright said.

"I also assured the committee that I consider the promotion of religious freedom to be an integral component of U.S. foreign policy to be pursued not in isolation, but as part of our efforts to increase respect for human rights around the world," Albright continued.

The panel was established in the fall of 1996 and is scheduled to operate through December 1998 unless its charter is extended. It is made up of 20 religious leaders and academics representing a wide spectrum of religious views. Its members represent evangelical, Protestant, Orthodox, Mormon, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Baha'i and other religious perspectives.

Baptists on the panel include Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.; Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla.; and Samuel Billy Kyles, pastor of Monumental Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn.

In a prepared statement, President Clinton said he is "pleased that the committee has recognized the considerable efforts we have already made to raise the profile of these issues and invigorate our advocacy, and we will carefully study the committee's recommendations on how we can do more."

The report states that "throughout the world aggressive acts of religious intolerance and persecution still occur, along with the exploitation of religious and ethnic differences for ulterior and violent ends."

To fight religious persecution, the committee said the United States should have "a broad range of concrete policy options" to "meet the challenge of promoting the universal human rights necessary to enjoy religious freedom."

The report notes that while governments have the task of protecting and promoting human rights, religious and other non-governmental groups "can contribute both to promoting and expanding observance of and respect for human rights in general."

The report identifies four guidelines for policies designed to promote religious freedom:

- Religious freedom is a universal human right, deserving attention in its own right.
- Policy makers should strive for "effective, results-oriented policies."
- The reactions and concerns of local victims meant to be aided by the policies should be fully understood and considered.

- Religious freedom is often best protected in the context of a broad range of human-rights objectives.

"The aim of U.S. foreign policy in this area should be to influence governments, with both positive and negative inducements and through public and private diplomacy, to live up to international standards of religious freedom," the report states.

Among the report's preliminary recommendations:

- The president should deliver a major address on the importance of religious liberty.
- The president should give greater weight to religious freedom among issues considered in foreign policy decision-making.
- The president should instruct agency heads to support U.S. policies to promote religious freedom.
- The secretary of state should dedicate more resources to integrating policies that promote religious freedom.
- The State Department should incorporate religious freedom concerns into all high-level meetings and visits.

-- State Department officers should be evaluated on how they address religious liberty and other human rights concerns.

-- U.S. embassies should assign priority to monitoring and reporting on issues of religious freedom.

-- Protection of religious freedom should be integrated into annual mission plans of embassies.

-- Embassy staff should regularly intervene on behalf of victims of religious persecution and raise their cases with the host government.

-- The State Department's annual "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices" should include expanded coverage of religious freedom.

-- Reporting on religious freedom should be a criterion for performance awards to U.S. personnel.

-- Training of Immigration and Nationalization Service and State Department personnel should include courses promoting sensitivity to religious persecution and other human rights issues.

-- The United States should work to ensure adequate funding for governmental and non-governmental programs promoting religious freedom and reconciliation.

-- The U.S. government should encourage business principles that promote strong adherence to universal human rights standards.

--Religious groups should promote dialogue with other religions and with members of their same faith in other countries.

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