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## *In this issue:*

- **Texas Baptists censure church with homosexual deacon**
- **Troubled Alabama Baptist school hires president, sparking protest**
- **Baptist Peace Fellowship opposes strikes against Iraq**
- **Baptist leader charged with racketeering, theft**
- **Southern Seminary loses in complex budgeting plan**
- **Correction**

## **Texas Baptists censure church with homosexual deacon**

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Baptist General Convention of Texas has distanced itself from an Austin church that ordained a homosexual as a deacon.

The state convention's executive board voted Feb. 24 to no longer accept contributions from University Baptist Church in Austin. The board also asked the church to stop publishing materials indicating it is affiliated with the state convention.

The action additionally called on the convention to decline funds from "any other church which openly endorses moral views in conflict with biblical teaching."

While the rebuke is intended to separate the convention from the church, the only mechanism for an official ouster is to refuse to seat messengers at the state convention's annual meeting. The Austin congregation has not sought to enroll messengers at the convention since 1995, the year it ordained a gay deacon.

That fall, the church was removed from Austin Association, and the state convention created a committee to consider whether to amend its constitution to ban churches that ordain homosexuals.

In 1996, the BGCT declined to amend its constitution, noting the convention's credentials committee already had authority to refuse seating to messengers from churches perceived to deviate from standard faith and practice. However, the convention approved a statement saying homosexual practice is "contrary to God's purposes and thus sinful" and "in conflict with the Bible."

The issue resurfaced last fall, when convention leaders learned the church listed its affiliation with the BGCT on the Internet while also reporting the church has ordained a gay deacon and news about a homosexual group that meets at the church.

In early February, the BGCT administrative committee voted unanimously to present the recommendation considered by the executive board Feb. 24.

Two factors shaped that decision, reported administrative committee chairman Charles Davenport, pastor of First Baptist Church in Tulia.

"The convention clearly has spoken on the issue of homosexuality," Davenport said, through the 1996 statement and other resolutions.

In addition, the Austin church "clearly affirms a position -- through the election of a homosexual as deacon and through public media -- that is in conflict with the convention position," he said.

"If the church was simply ministering to the homosexual community, we could commend them for their effort," Davenport insisted. "But clearly, their position goes beyond ministry to homosexual persons and becomes an affirmation of their practice."

Although the church has an "autonomous right" to determine its ministries, "we need to remember that the convention also is an autonomous body and has the right and responsibility to determine those who will participate," he added.

The action is not "singling out homosexual persons for particular condemnation," Davenport said. He encouraged Texas Baptists to "lovingly minister to them and their families in the same way we minister to all persons."

Still, the convention cannot ethically receive the church's funds if it is not likely to seat the church's messengers, he stressed. He described the executive board action as an effort to "keep faith with the will of the convention as expressed ... on homosexuality."

Larry Bethune, the church's pastor, pleaded with the board to defeat the proposal for three reasons.

"It sends one more damaging, damning message to homosexual persons and their families," he said. The action sounds "a message that can only be heard as hatred in the name of Christ."

"You may not all agree with the way our church ministers with gays and lesbians and their families -- in fact, we don't all agree at UBC -- but we are creating one of the few safe places for your Baptist homosexual children to work out their salvation with fear and trembling," he said.

The proposal also should be defeated because "it's not Baptist," since it overrules the autonomy of an individual congregation, Bethune added.

"One of the most important issues is that the BGCT continue to function as a servant -- not an authoritarian -- organization," he stressed. "Texas Baptists must continue to embrace historic Baptist principles that honor local-church decisions and individual religious freedom."

"Will we require all churches to agree on a matter of biblical interpretation?" Bethune asked. "If so, how long will the list be, or is this the only issue which will be used like a creed as a test of orthodoxy?"

Third, Bethune urged a vote against the measure because "a biblical process has not been followed in this matter." The administrative committee failed to follow conflict-resolution guidelines found in the Gospel of Matthew, he said.

Debate on the recommendation lasted about 90 minutes, and executive board members expressed strong feelings on both sides of the issue.

"Is there anything a church could do to cause us to ask that church not to be part of the BGCT? Yes," insisted Debbie Chisolm, youth minister at First Baptist Church in Duncanville. She cited heretical teachings, such as the requirement of works for salvation, the idea that human documents are equal with Scripture, the belief that Christians could lose their salvation and the practice of infant baptism.

But a church's right to ordain deacons and ministers is another matter, Chisolm contended. "I do not believe it is within our right to make that kind of decision for the local church," she said.

Bob Fagan, pastor of Memorial Baptist Church in Lubbock, countered that it is proper for the convention to censure churches on moral, as well as doctrinal grounds. "This is an open endorsement of a non-biblical lifestyle," he said of the church's action.

"Why this one issue? Why now?" asked Vicki Vaughn, a lay member of First Baptist Church in Brownwood.

She questioned the timing of the action and convention leaders' assertion that the recommendation "has nothing to do with politics." Earlier in the meeting, BGCT Executive Director William Pinson had noted statewide distribution of a false document [apparently linked in some cases to the breakaway Southern Baptists of Texas group] claiming convention leadership supports homosexuality.

"What's going to happen at our next executive board meeting?" Vaughn asked. Will the convention distance itself from "churches whose members would not have an African American, Hispanic American or Native American in their home for dinner?" she asked. Will the convention distance itself from churches "whose leaders would not tithe?"

BGCT President Russell Dilday insisted the administrative committee "did not act in haste, thoughtlessly, carelessly, without undue consideration" in making its recommendation.

"Other issues -- such as ordination of women for ministry -- would not come up [for censure] unless the convention spoke clearly," said Dilday, distinguished professor of homiletics at Baylor University's Truett Seminary. "The attempt is to clarify an issue on which the convention has spoken clearly."

Three attempts to amend the recommendation failed. One sought to continue to accept funds from the church while requesting it stop publicizing its affiliation with the state convention. Another sought to expand the action to forbid inviting members of the church to speak at convention events and to recommend the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship take the same action. A third asked that refusing funds and asking the church to stop publishing its affiliation with the convention be considered separately.

Ultimately, the original recommendation passed overwhelmingly on a show-of-hands vote.

Afterward, Dilday said the board holds a consensus on the moral issue of homosexuality, even though it was divided on an issue of polity.

Board members who voted against the recommendation "were not voting their stand on homosexuality, but on church autonomy," Dilday said. "The concern was not to trample local-church autonomy."

Dilday said the board struck a balance between strong conviction and responsibility and compassion.

"The convention has a long history of ministry to ethnic and minority groups and oppressed people," he said. "We have expressed our compassion."

Still, the board's vote indicates Texas Baptists must "stand on principle," he added.

Bethune expressed grief at the outcome of the vote.

"I feel Texas Baptists are smaller, and not just by one church," he said. "We don't want to break relationship with the BGCT, but it is clear the majority want to break relationship with us."

The pastor said he is encouraged that the vote was "far from unanimous," noting that in addition to board members who voted against the measure, "a number told me they abstained."

"We have heard from many former Southern Baptists and gay and lesbian Baptists hiding out in their churches, fearful of how they and their families would be treated if their orientation were found out," he said. "We're glad to be able to offer ministry and hope to those persons."

Bethune said he is not bitter nor angry. "I disagree with them as they disagree with me," he said. "I pray God's grace for the day we will read the Bible more carefully and not always assume when we have our minds made up we know what it says."

The church will meet in conference March 4 to determine its response to the action, Bethune said.

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## **Troubled Alabama Baptist school hires president, sparking protest**

MOBILE, Ala. (ABP) -- Mobile University trustees unanimously elected a new president Feb. 13, but troubles continued for the financially strapped Alabama Baptist school as its interim president and two other leaders resigned in protest.

Mark Foley, 47, executive vice president at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, will take office as the university's third president March 2. "We believe Mark Foley is God's man for the job," said Ed Massey, chairman of a presidential search committee.

Then, in a surprise move, Walter Hovell, a former trustee who had been the university's interim president since May, resigned abruptly Feb. 16. Hovell had earlier agreed to stay on an additional three to six months to help the new president cope with the school's financial problems.

William Hearin, chairman of the University of Mobile Foundation, and university trustee Charles Story also resigned, joining Hovell in protest.

Hovell told the Mobile Register he left the post two weeks before Foley's scheduled arrival over "grave concerns" about the university's leadership. Hovell said the school's problems were so serious that board chairman Robert Maxwell ought to resign. Maxwell, an attorney from Atmore, Ala., said he had no plans to step down.

Hovell and others cited problems with the process used to find a new president, lack of information provided to trustees about the university's financial condition and a concentration of power in the hands of a few of the 46 members of the board of trustees.

Hovell and some trustees reportedly were concerned that Foley brings limited financial expertise to the post and that they were not allowed to air those concerns before his election. Story said he was upset that a special compensation committee established to review executive salaries was not permitted to preview Foley's compensation package before he was hired.

Hovell said in his resignation letter to Maxwell that one reason he gave for his departure was that he learned only after Foley was hired that the new president would receive three times what the university paid Hovell as interim president.

Officials would not disclose Foley's salary, but it was said to be comparable to the reported \$175,000-\$200,000 paid to his predecessor, Michael Magnoli, who was forced out of office last May.

A trustee interviewed by the Alabama Baptist newspaper called Foley's election a mere formality. "They just wanted us to rubber stamp it," said the trustee, who asked not to be identified.

Another trustee, Drew Gunnells, pastor of Spring Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, said the vote was unanimous "because we want to support our school, especially at this time." Gunnells pointed out that the election was by a voice vote, possibly discouraging some trustees from registering their dissent.

Foley is a former truck stop owner and operator who left the business to enter New Orleans Seminary in 1986. He earned the school's master of divinity degree in 1989 and a doctorate in psychology and counseling in 1992.

Foley describes himself as a "nonpolitical conservative evangelical Christian." He is a native of Wichita Falls, Texas. His home church there is First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls, where Morris Chapman, a conservative leader in the Southern Baptist Convention, is a former pastor.

Foley told the Alabama Baptist he believes his business expertise is "adequate" for helping the university out of its financial crunch, but he will rely on "experts" to assist in his decision making.

Board chairman Maxwell said officials were counting on Hovell's "financial genius" to help get the school out of its financial crunch. Maxwell said Hovell pledged after his resignation to be available for consultation and advice.

Maxwell declined to comment on Hovell's reasons for leaving but said, "I respect his decision." He said trustees pledged full cooperation with Foley but will watch his actions closely, in contrast to the blind faith they placed in Magnoli's administration.

Magnoli, University of Mobile president for 13 years, was dismissed last year after disclosing to trustees a growing financial crunch stemming largely from a decision in 1992 to open a branch campus in San Marcos, Nicaragua.

The San Marcos campus continues to lose money and owes the main campus in Mobile almost \$4 million, according to a recent report.

The Alabama Baptist State Convention has threatened to withhold financial support unless the university cuts that debt by \$500,000 by March 31.

Foley was not offered and did not request a contract of employment. Trustees reportedly paid \$400,000 to buy out the last two years remaining on Magnoli's contract.

Foley joked with faculty and staff that he could understand skepticism: "Here the university is in a crisis point in its history. It's Friday the 13th, and your trustees have just selected a guy from a truck stop to lead you," reported the Mobile Register.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Baptist Peace Fellowship opposes strikes against Iraq**

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Directors of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America have issued a statement opposing the use of military strikes against Iraq.

Meeting Feb. 19-21 in Fort Worth, Texas, the group unanimously approved the statement urging the president of the United States and prime ministers of Canada and Great Britain to support diplomacy as a means to achieve Iraqi compliance with United Nations resolutions banning the stockpiling of weapons.

"We pray that a just and peaceful resolution to this conflict will result before blood is shed and innocent lives are lost," the statement said.

Affirming calls for diplomacy made by other religious organizations, the Baptist group contended "that a military option only compounds the current suffering of the Iraqi people and that steps should be taken to facilitate direct humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable."

After the meeting, Peace Fellowship Executive Director Ken Sehested spoke of the "hopeful initiative" by U.N. General-Secretary Kofi Annan in his diplomatic mission to Iraq.

"We congratulate General-Secretary Annan's negotiated agreement with Baghdad and pray that this hopeful initiative will lead to a de-escalation of hostilities," Sehested said. "But we urge our constituency throughout North America to continue expressing their opinions to elected officials and to continue educating members of their congregations."

The board's statement called on the organization's members to write their elected leaders encouraging them to support U.N. diplomatic initiatives. The board also called churches to pray and fast for peace in the Middle East and to protest publicly should military strikes occur.

In other business, the board heard from its publications committee on plans to produce a book celebrating the 20th anniversary of Baptist Peacemaker, the organization's quarterly journal; the 15th anniversary of the founding of the BPFNA; and the dawning of a new millennium.

The book will include material spanning the publication's entire history. From 1980-1989, Peacemaker was published by a group of Southern Baptist pastors, seminary professors and students at Southern Seminary who organized and hosted the first "Southern Baptist Convocation on Peace in a Nuclear Age" in 1979. The BPFNA began publishing the journal in 1990. A tentative date for publication of the book is the fall of 1999.

Founded in 1984, the Baptist Peace Fellowship is a network linking Baptists involved in justice and peace issues throughout North America. Its board of directors is composed of members affiliated with 12 Baptist conventions and five racial/ethnic groups in Canada, the U.S., Puerto Rico and Mexico.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Baptist leader charged with racketeering, theft**

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (ABP) -- Baptist leader Henry Lyons has been arrested on charges of racketeering and grand theft following a seven-month investigation by prosecutors in St. Petersburg, Fla.

State prosecutors accuse Lyons, president of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., of crimes including stealing nearly \$200,000 intended for burned churches and using the convention's name to swindle nearly \$3 million from corporations. They also say he hid \$4.8 million in a secret bank account with no records of where the money came from or how it was spent.

An 82-page arrest affidavit also sought a warrant for Bernice Edwards, a former convention employee. She was arrested Feb. 25 in Wisconsin.

Lyons turned himself in Feb. 25 and was released on \$100,000 bail.

According to the St. Petersburg Times, Lyons told his church at Wednesday night services he did not understand the charges against him and predicted his name would be cleared.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Southern Seminary loses in complex budgeting plan**

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- While most Southern Baptist Convention agencies and institutions are set to receive about a 4.5 percent funding increase next year, one of the SBC's six seminaries will lose money.

Due to a pattern of declining enrollment, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., will receive about \$100,000 less in the 1998-99 fiscal year than it receives in the current year. That's about a 1.5 percent decrease in funding through the SBC's unified budget known as the Cooperative Program.

Southern will get \$6.3 million in Cooperative Program funding, down from \$6.4 million this year. The SBC's five other seminaries will hold steady or increase: Southwestern Seminary, up from \$8.9 million to \$9.4 million; New Orleans Seminary up from \$5.9 million to \$6.1 million; Southeastern Seminary up from \$4.7 million to \$5.4 million; Golden Gate Seminary up from \$2.9 million to \$3.1 million; Midwestern Seminary holding steady at \$2.7 million.

The problem is not that the denomination's oldest seminary has fallen out of favor with SBC budget makers. Rather, the seminary is feeling the pinch of a complex formula by which the seminaries divide their share of the Cooperative Program pie.

The SBC's budget allocates 50 percent of Cooperative Program receipts to international missions, 22 percent to missions in the United States and about 21 percent to seminaries. While the total amount of money available for theological education is expected to increase next year, the schools experience that impact in different ways.

Driving the seminary-funding formula is a tightly controlled accounting of average enrollment over a three-year period. While seminaries count students in several ways, the formula bases funding on a measurement called full-time equivalents, known in shorthand as FTEs.

An FTE takes the total number of student hours taught during a year and divides it by a benchmark representing the typical course load of a full-time student. This method of enrollment reporting is considered by academic accrediting agencies to be the most accurate means of comparison.

The SBC funding formula also is weighted to give priority to students enrolled in a seminary's basic master's-level and doctoral-level degree programs. Some students counted in a seminary's general head count are not counted in the SBC funding formula, or must be counted at an adjusted rate.

That is why a seminary's funding can decline, even while the school boasts of enrollment increases.

For example, Southern Seminary reported a 14-percent increase in total on-campus enrollment this fall in press releases. But those figures include students not counted in the FTE formula such as those working toward certificates in Boyce Bible School as well as seminary wives enrolled in a new Seminary Wives Institute. About 120 seminary wives attend these one-night-a-week courses taught by wives of seminary faculty and administration on topics such as "The Ministry of Hospitality" and "MasterLife."

Other seminaries have unique programs that produce larger head counts than the SBC funding formula will consider. Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, which enrolls a large proportion of students on branch campuses, has long complained that the funding formula favors schools with higher on-campus enrollments. Despite those debates, the seminaries have accepted the FTE formula as the fairest possible measure for determining funding.

According to this measure, Southern Seminary experienced a 6 percent decline in enrollment in 1997 (from 1,255 to 1,181) and has experienced a 30 percent decline since 1994 (from 1,685 to 1,181).

The impact on funding at Southern has been worsened by the recent turnaround in enrollment at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

In the late 1980s, Southeastern experienced a dramatic drop in enrollment as conservatives took control of the school's trustee board and administration. In the ensuing funding pinch, the SBC Executive Committee allocated special funds outside the funding formula to help the school stay afloat.

In recent years, Southeastern has registered rapidly growing FTEs, thus gaining the school an increasing share of the SBC's allotment for theological education. Southeastern's FTEs grew 14 percent last year, from 993 to 1,135. Southeastern's FTEs have grown 63 percent since 1994, from 695 to 1,135.

The other four SBC seminaries have held relatively steady, although each has shown ups and downs. FTE figures for 1997 for each of the other schools are: Golden Gate, up to 391 from 383 the year before; Midwestern, up to 346 from 325; Southwestern, up to 3,052 from 3,013; and New Orleans, down to 1,137 from 1,295 the year before.

New Orleans is the only school besides Southern that recently has shown a steady pattern of decline in FTEs, falling 17 percent since 1995, from 1,378 to 1,137.

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CORRECTION: In the Feb. 24 ABP story "Fellowship expands services to include annuity, insurance plans," please correct the third paragraph to read as follows:

One action authorized CBF officers to prepare, adopt and implement a retirement-benefits plan for ministers and employees of "member churches and other affiliated organizations."

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