

Associated Baptist Press

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Mobile University trustees vote to leave Latin America

By Bob Terry

MOBILE, Ala. (ABP) -- University of Mobile trustees voted April 28 to withdraw from the school's struggling Latin American branch in San Marcos, Nicaragua, within two years.

In the meantime, trustees agreed to raise \$500,000 by June 30 to cover expected deficits in the operation of the Nicaragua campus and satisfy accreditation concerns which threaten to close the Alabama Baptist university.

The deficit would be higher, trustees learned, except for a decision by the University of Mobile Foundation to sell bonds it holds from Nicaragua and apply proceeds of about \$125,000 from the sale to the deficit.

Trustee Yetta Samford of Opelika, Ala., said it is important that American-style education continue to be available in Nicaragua, but he said it is unlikely the University of Mobile can afford to provide it.

In recommending Mobile's withdrawal from Nicaragua, Samford said the two-year plan would provide an opportunity to sell the operation to another accredited college or university.

UM President Mark Foley added that the two-year time frame would also allow the main campus to consolidate clear titles of all university-related properties in Nicaragua to an entity accountable to the university's board of trustees. Presently, title to the San Marcos campus is held by a foundation under the direction of Roger Gonzalez, a former university vice president who was responsible for the Latin American branch.

Gonzalez negotiated a separation from the University of Mobile which included resigning from the Latin American Branch Campus Foundation. However, the foundation refused to accept his resignation, leaving him as president of the group and holding title to the campus.

"If we were to close the San Marcos campus abruptly, we would not be able to recover any of our assets," said Foley. "That is not a prudent approach."

Foley added the university wants to conduct itself in such a way that it can convert approximately \$3 million in assets in Nicaragua to a sellable form.

The Latin American campus has been a financial drain on the university since it was established in 1993.

The university's trustees approved an agreement with the state convention in 1994 to limit funding for the Latin American branch to gifts specifically given to or earmarked for that school and to return about \$2.3 million to the Mobile campus that had been used to start up the Nicaraguan school.

Later, however, trustees were told that under President Michael Magnoli, the university had continued to pour funds into the Nicaragua campus in violation of that agreement. Trustees terminated Magnoli's contract last May, with severance benefits reportedly worth \$400,000.

The state convention voted last fall to withhold from its budget allocation to the university an amount equal to any money the school might send to Nicaragua after Jan. 1 and required quarterly financial updates on the situation.

Foley, who took over as president March 1, reported that the nearly \$3.5 million debt in place at the beginning of 1998 did grow to nearly \$4 million at one point in the first quarter, but the university had reduced the debt to less than \$3.46 million by March 31.

Foley predicted the university would be able to operate the branch campus on a "break even or better basis." He said the campus has a strong student body of about 500 students. New electronic accounting procedures have been installed, placing administrative control on the Mobile campus.

But selling the Nicaraguan campus in 2000 will not be an issue, Foley said, if the trustees do not raise \$500,000 by June 30.

In August 1997, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the university's regional accrediting agency, placed the school on probation. That probation was extended for a year in December, 1997. The school will be reviewed again in September.

"We are on probation with SACS for one reason and one reason only -- our financial situation," Foley declared. "We have to demonstrate to SACS that the university has the financial viability to remain in operation."

That means the university has to close its fiscal year on June 30 in the black, Foley stated. "We are in a 'pass-fail' situation with our accreditation," he added. "This is the critical area facing UM. We have to have our financial house in order to demonstrate financial viability to SACS."

Trustees responded to the \$500,000 fund-raising challenge by turning in checks for \$56,000 before leaving campus. Foley said he was pleased with the response.

Foley reported that although Mobile was able to close out its first quarter without going into further debt, little money has been raised during the last several months because of the turmoil surrounding the school.

"Now there is growing optimism the university will do what it needs to do to solve its problems," he added.

Elected chairman of the board was Gary Enfinger, pastor of Thomasville Baptist Church in Thomasville. He defeated Jerry Gunnells, pastor of Spring Hill Baptist Church, Mobile. Enfinger succeeds Robert Maxwell, attorney from Atmore, who served as chairman for three years.

Trustees also learned that officials are projecting a decline in student enrollment this fall. The 1997 student enrollment was down about 9 percent from the prior year. If the accreditation issue is resolved successfully in December, Foley said he anticipates enrollment figures will rebound.

Wake Forest divinity school names first three faculty

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- A feminist Bible scholar, a Baptist theologian and a Catholic priest have been hired as the first faculty members of Wake Forest University's divinity school.

The divinity school, set to open in the fall of 1999, will be "Christian by tradition, ecumenical in outlook and Baptist in heritage," said Bill Leonard, the school's dean.

The initial faculty appointments reflect that diversity.

Phyllis Trible, an internationally acclaimed Old Testament scholar, has been named associate dean and professor of biblical studies.

Frank Tupper, a former professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., will be professor of theology.

Samuel Weber, a Catholic priest and Benedictine monk from Indiana, will be associate professor of early Christianity and spiritual formation.

Trustees of the Baptist university in Winston-Salem, N.C., approved the hirings in April.

Trible, who began her career teaching at Wake Forest from 1963 to 1971, has since 1981 been a professor at New York's Union Theological Seminary. She is the author of books including "God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality" and "Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives." Recently, she was among scholars offering expert commentary in Bill Moyers' "Genesis: A Living Conversation" television series on PBS.

She will join the new divinity school's faculty in July.

Tupper has been a visiting professor of religion at Wake Forest since last year. He taught 25 years at Southern Seminary before being removed from the classroom over conflict with the school's conservative president.

Weber will join Wake Forest's faculty in July 1999. Since 1976, he has taught early and medieval church history, liturgy and other courses at the St. Meinrad School of Theology in St. Meinrad, Ind. In addition, he is on the faculty of St. Meinrad College and is the organist at St. Meinrad Archabbey.

Leonard said the divinity school will train students from a variety of church backgrounds, using a curriculum that combines seminary subjects with courses taught by faculty of Wake Forest's undergraduate, graduate and professional schools.

Leonard said the school will open with five faculty members and an inaugural class of about 35 students.

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-- By ABP staff

Supreme Court rejects challenge to school attended by religious group

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Sidestepping a First Amendment dispute, the U.S. Supreme Court turned away a legal challenge to a Minnesota elementary school attended solely by children of a religious group which eschews technology including televisions, radios and computers.

The Supreme Court left standing a ruling by a federal appeals court that the multi-age classroom attended by 19 Brethren children does not violate the constitutionally required separation of church and state.

Located in rural southwest Minnesota, Independent School District No. 640 operated elementary schools in Wabasso and Vesta until it closed the Vesta school and sold the building in May 1984. After that, Vesta students attended school at Wabasso, about 14 miles away.

In August 1992, Lloyd Paskewitz, a member of the Brethren, proposed to school Superintendent George Bates that the district reopen a multi-age classroom at Vesta. Paskewitz had purchased the building in 1991 and offered to lease the space for free if the district would provide a teacher and supplies.

The district signed a three-year lease with Paskewitz and the Brethren, agreeing to operate a classroom at Vesta and to limit the use of technological equipment such as televisions, radios and computers to the extent permitted under state law.

Although the Vesta school was open to any student, it was attended only by Brethren children when it reopened.

Two Minnesota taxpayers challenged the arrangement. Matthew Stark and Marcia Neely argued that the Vesta school violated the First Amendment's ban on the establishment of religion.

A federal district court agreed, saying the arrangement amounted to "state sponsorship" of religion in violation of the First Amendment.

But in a 2-1 ruling, a panel of the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals disagreed. The appeals court applied a legal standard known as the "Lemon test." Under that test, church-state separation is not violated if government actions have a secular purpose, neither advance nor inhibit religion and avoid excessive entanglement between government and religion.

The court concluded that neither the decision to reopen the Vista school nor its policy of exempting Brethren students from use of technological equipment violate the Constitution.

Citing a 1992 Supreme Court ruling, the appeals court said: "The Establishment Clause is not violated when government accommodates religious beliefs 'by relieving people from generally applicable rules that interfere with their religious callings.'"

In a dissenting opinion, Judge Diana Murphy said the district's actions violate the First Amendment "because they have the effect of singling out the Brethren for a special benefit."

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Alternative altar calls offer repenters options

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Fewer people are walking the aisles of some of Southern Baptists' leading churches. And the pastors couldn't be happier about it.

Traditionally, Baptist church services end with an invitation for individual worshippers to come forward during a hymn to register a religious commitment or join the church.

While it is unlikely that practice will go the way of the funeral-home fan, some contemporary churches are offering alternatives such filling as out response cards, stopping by the ministers' office during business hours or visiting hospitality rooms after worship services.

Some examples:

-- Sixth Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., still extends a rather traditional invitation. But when Pastor John Porter says, "The doors of the church always are open," he means it almost literally.

New Christians and other prospective members may come by the church office weekdays to complete a membership card.

-- Inquirers at Lake Pointe Baptist Church in Rockwall, Texas, a burgeoning suburb east of Dallas, drop by a glass-walled hospitality center after worship services Saturday nights and Sunday mornings.

There, they visit with Pastor Steve Stroope, other staff members or trained lay greeters. In a homey, low-pressure setting, they can enjoy refreshments, ask questions of faith and, yes, make a commitment to Christ.

-- Thousands of members of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, Calif., have recorded new-found faith on commitment cards distributed during worship service.

This Easter, more than 1,000 people indicated on those cards they were accepting Jesus as their Savior. Pastor Rick Warren leads an experienced staff and key lay counselors who follow up every commitment.

-- Near the end of Winter Park Baptist Church's contemporary service in Wilmington, N.C., Pastor Michael Tutterow tells worshipers, "Maybe you're sensing God is trying to speak to you in some way."

He then tells them he will remain near the front of the auditorium, specifically to talk with them.

-- One Sunday night a month, 30 to 50 non-Christians and non-Baptists gather at Bob Roberts' home to talk about what it means to follow Christ.

Roberts is pastor of Northwood Church in North Richland Hills, Texas. The sessions in his home provide the church with its most fertile moments of commitment, when half the people in the room decide to become followers of Jesus.

Whatever method the churches use, they follow up a first-time commitment to Jesus with an older Baptist rite, baptism by immersion.

Innovative alternatives to the altar call are new. But so is the traditional Baptist invitation, at least when compared to the long span of Christian history.

"The altar call actually is a modern invention," Warren noted. "Asahael Newton began using it in 1817."

And famed evangelist Charles Finney popularized it in the 1820s, reported church historian Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest University's divinity school.

Finney created the "anxious bench" -- later known as the "mourners' bench" -- where repentant sinners could come to confess their transgressions, Leonard said.

Finney drew scorn from followers of church reformer John Calvin, who said God would decide to save whomever God wanted to save, and the sinner had nothing to do with it, Leonard added.

"The invitation is an outgrowth of the revival meetings of the 19th century, and primarily the emphasis on free will -- 'whosoever will' may come," he explained.

"Calvinists said this was salvation by works. By walking down to the bench, the sinner was earning salvation. They said the invitation and mourners' bench took the attention off of God and put it on the sinner. They felt the invitation implied persons could choose salvation on their own."

Such protests aside, the invitation was an idea in sync with the times, Leonard observed. "Out of urban and frontier revivalism, the invitation became a church institution."

Revivalist Dwight L. Moody of the late 19th century and 20th century evangelists Billy Sunday and Billy Graham refined the altar call to beckon the masses to Jesus, Leonard said.

However, both times and church trends change, and increasing numbers of ministers are discovering compelling reasons for offering alternatives to invitations.

"There are people like me who don't like to walk forward in front of people," said Frank Pollard, pastor of First Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss. Pollard's church extends an altar call but also allows people to record their decisions discretely on cards or in a parlor near the auditorium.

"A lot of people by their natures don't feel comfortable coming down before a large group," echoed Stroope, whose Lake Pointe congregation receives members through commitment cards as well as its hospitality center.

When the church moved to a new facility with the hospitality center and combined the commitment card option, "our total number of responses [to the invitation] went way up," he said.

In some cases, the decision to implement alternative invitations is forced by necessity.

Warren recalled Saddleback's first service, in a high school theater, 18 years ago. "As I concluded my message, ... I noticed there was no aisle in the building," he said. "The chairs were welded together, and the building was designed to empty to the outside." Worse, the area in front of the podium was a deep orchestra pit.

"I nearly cracked up thinking about saying, 'I'm going to ask you to come down and jump in the pit for Jesus!'" he said.

Warren experimented for a while before he felt comfortable with the form of the church's decision card. It's effective: The church has baptized more than 5,200 new Christians in the past five years. And about 6,000 other churches now use the card.

For Lake Pointe, the shift was pragmatic. "We haven't had a shift in theology," Stroope said. "It's always been a personal decision to follow Christ."

"We're just trying to make it easy for people to get the information they need to make a meaningful decision to follow Christ," he said.

That idea has theological implications as well, others asserted.

"In the past, the invitation was designed to 'get 'em down the aisle,'" Roberts said. "But we have to come to grips with the fact God does the saving."

Most new Christians at Northwood Church visit the congregation for six months to a year before deciding to follow Christ, he said. They process their decisions "not just emotionally but intellectually."

"If we manipulate their emotions to get a decision -- if they don't know what they're doing -- then it's not conversion," Roberts stressed.

He compared an emotionally manipulated decision to baptizing infants, a practice which Baptists reject. "What's the difference between hooking people emotionally and infant baptism?" he asked. "A conversion involves intellect and understanding, as well as heart and the will."

Consequently, whatever the form, an invitation to become a Christian must have integrity, insisted Ted Elmore, an evangelism consultant with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"Tell people up front what you're going to ask them to do," Elmore said. "You cannot manipulate someone into the Kingdom of God. You can manipulate them to walk down an aisle, and you can convince them that just because they've done what you've asked that they're now a Christian.

"Don't manipulate. If we trust the Holy Spirit, we can depend on him to do what he said he would do" in bringing people to Christ.

More often than not, that encounter with Christ is the culmination of a journey, not a spontaneous event, Tutterow acknowledged.

"While there is a moment in which people make a conscious decision to take Christ as their Savior and Lord, there is a process involved," he explained. "Seldom does that process culminate at 11:55 on Sunday morning. It usually takes several contacts and an unfolding of understanding from Scripture and from mentoring before a person recognizes the need to become a Christian.

"So, we don't want to manufacture a moment and force people to make a decision. Then, a month down the road they're really confused -- they finally understand what it means to be a sinner, but they've already 'walked the aisle.'"

"That doesn't mean we don't have a sense of urgency," Tutterow said. "But we recognize that is a moment the Holy Spirit, not us, needs to control."

The Holy Spirit has made improvements, he added. "For a church that had not worked well in baptisms, this past year we doubled our baptisms. Most of them came through our seeker-oriented service, and the majority were adults."

The pastors pointed to a common criticism they get for not demanding that new converts walk the aisle. "People ask, 'Don't you require people to make a public profession of faith?'" Stroope reported.

"The public profession of faith is baptism," replied Roberts, voicing a conviction stated by all the pastors. They get strong support from Roy Fish, longtime evangelism professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"Some people would think lost people ought to be given an opportunity to openly confess Christ," Fish said. "And they would say that's why we give invitations -- to openly confess him.

"But the New Testament confession is baptism. If a person is baptized, they meet every New Testament requirement."

For several generations, "we Baptists have required two professions of faith" -- response to the altar call and baptism, Pollard pointed out.

"Over time, the invitation has created the 'sacrament of walking the aisle' -- an outward sign of an inward act," Leonard observed. "People would refer to their conversion experience as 'when I walked the aisle.'

"Often in many Baptist churches, walking the aisle became the central conversion experience. You didn't have to say anything. When you stepped into that aisle, people knew what you meant."

By centralizing their focus on baptism, churches that offer alternative invitations hark back to a biblical ideal, the pastors said.

"We firmly believe you have to make a public profession of your faith. We emphasize baptism," said Warren, whose church has an outdoor baptismal pool that holds three pastors and may churn for 400 new Christians in a single day.

"Baptism is a big deal."

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Pollard gives SBC's 'best invitation,' evangelism professor Roy Fish says

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- "The pastor in the Southern Baptist Convention who is giving the best invitation today is Frank Pollard," insisted Roy Fish, longtime professor of evangelism at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"All of us feel inadequate at this point in the service," when the time comes to ask people to make a commitment, said Pollard, pastor of First Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss.

"So, we've incorporated every way [of responding to Christ] we've ever heard of into our invitation," Pollard explained. "We present people with three ways to respond."

The first invitation is the traditional walk-the-aisle altar call, he said.

"We invite people to come forward" during the invitation hymn, he noted. "We tell them this is what we would recommend, and we would like for them to come forward so that we can meet them. But we also acknowledge that may be difficult for them to do."

That leads to the two other opportunities for responding.

The second is an invitation to meet with trained counselors in the sanctuary parlor, just outside the auditorium, immediately after the worship service, he said.

"We invite people to this room," Pollard said. "I tell them: 'People are waiting to talk with you about membership in our church, about faith in the Lord Christ, and about ways to help you. We want to help you.'"

The third invitation is an appeal for people to complete a decision card and place it in the offering plate, which is passed at the conclusion of the service.

Pollard tells people: "This is a way you can make a life commitment to God. Fill out the decision card and put it in the offering plate. ... We'll find you and talk to you."

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-- By Marv Knox

Registration card provides mechanism for response

LAKE FOREST, Calif. (ABP) -- The registration/commitment card used by Saddleback Valley Community Church in Lake Forest, Calif., has helped more than 5,000 new Christians record their faith in Jesus Christ during the past five years.

The card was developed by founding Pastor Rick Warren, author of "The Purpose Driven Church."

In addition to registering basic information -- name, address, phone numbers and family data -- the card provides people with six options under the heading, "My decision today":

- "I'm committing my life to Christ."
- "I want to be baptized."
- "I'm renewing my commitment to Christ."
- "Enroll me in the next" membership, spiritual maturity or ministry-gifts class.
- "I'm willing to help where needed."
- "I'd like to talk to a staff minister."

The card also allows people to request specific information from the church. These topics include "how to begin a relationship with Christ," "how to join this church family" and information about the full range of church programs, groups and activities.

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-- By Marv Knox

Most churches unprepared for change, sociologist says

By David Winfrey

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- Few churches are prepared to respond to their constantly changing communities, sociologist Nancy Ammerman recently told a group of Baptist pastors in Kentucky.

Ammerman, a professor of sociology of religion at Hartford Seminary, described her research of churches in nine changing communities in America to the Georgetown (Ky.) College pastors' conference.

Ammerman and other researchers studied how congregations were reacting to changes in their communities during the last decade.

"Because people move, congregations are constantly being reconstructed," said Ammerman, who wrote the book "Congregation and Community" as a result of her research.

Mobility also means that communities are constantly changing. As a result, the relationship between the church and its community also is changing, she added. "How we think about our relationship to a given ... neighborhood will constantly have to be reconstructed."

Because of that, she said, the group estimated that 60 percent to 75 percent of the congregations they studied won't exist 20 years from now.

"Their soil was simply a little too-well trod," she said, alluding to Jesus' parable of the sower in which seed falling on hard ground was eaten by birds instead of producing fruit.

About a quarter of the congregations in the 1992 study were relatively new -- having been started since 1980, she said. About another quarter were determined to respond to change in a healthy manner.

About half, however, were plateaued or declining and gave no indication they were willing to adjust in order to meet the spiritual needs of the changing neighborhood, she said.

Ammerman observed distinct differences between non-adapting churches and those involved in the "very hard work" of transition.

Comparing the work of transition to the Israelites' journey out of Egypt or a Lenten journey, she said churches involved in change:

-- Take stock of where they are.

Churches that were trying to adapt to changes recognized they weren't in Egypt anymore, Ammerman said.

Many churches unwilling to change had their collective heads in the sand, she added. When asked how they were responding to changes in their neighborhood, they often replied, "What changes?"

"The changes were so obvious and so much a part of the communities in which they were living, and yet they didn't notice," she said.

Churches which responded positively, she said, had taken stock of what resources, leadership and skills they had and what needs they could fulfill in the changing community, she said.

Such congregations also were beginning to recognize the abilities of other congregations in their community to work together. "No one of us is called to be the whole body. We need each other."

-- Gave up some old ways of doing things.

Just as some Christians give up a habit for Lent, churches find they must give up some old habits to reach their changing communities, Ammerman said.

"I guarantee you that whatever new groups of people come into a congregation, they'll have new ideas about how you do things," she said.

A corollary of that process is that conflict will be inevitable, Ammerman added. But congregations that are unwilling to disagree with each other about how do things will not change, she said.

-- Engaged in constructive self-discipline.

Some Christians also add constructive habits during Lent, Ammerman noted.

Churches that are responding well to change often are creative and intentional about making new ways of doing things.

Among the best ways to integrate the old and the new, she added, are meals and worship. "I have become a great believer in potlucks."

In a Chicago church that is half Anglo and half African-American, the worship styles were intentionally integrated to include both groups' music at each worship service, Ammerman said.

A Boston church used breads from different nationalities in the community when members observed the Lord's Supper. "The key here is bringing in the old and the new," she said.

When churches start using space differently, older and newer members should be encouraged to share their stories about how the space has been used and how it can be used, Ammerman said. Often buried in the stories of the past are nuggets that the church can use to energize members for the future, she said.

-- Experienced new birth.

Just as with the Easter story that is the focus of Lent, congregations that go through this process often come to the realization that they have been reborn to meet the new challenges of their communities, Ammerman said.

She noted that such change doesn't often happen in older institutions.

"The primary way that adaptation happens is not by changing the existing system, but by finding new ones," she said.

Ammerman added, however, that older institutions often have many strengths to draw from if they are willing to confront the hard work of changing. "They've got some remarkable institutional resources to draw on."

She also said creative pastoral leadership is a necessary but not always sufficient ingredient for helping congregations to change. "We also came across some churches that had run off some creative leaders because they didn't want to change."