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Texas Baptist leader Pinson announces retirement plans

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- William Pinson has announced his plans to retire as executive director of the 2.7 million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas, effective Jan. 31, 2000.

Pinson announced his retirement plans at the Jan. 28 meeting of the state convention's administrative committee. He was elected executive director by the BGCT executive board in May 1982 and assumed the post in January 1983.

At its Feb. 23 meeting in Dallas, the executive board will elect a search committee to find Pinson's successor.

"August of this year, the Lord willing, I will celebrate my 65th birthday," Pinson wrote in a memo to the executive board. "Although 65 is no longer a required age for retirement, it has always been in my mind the age at which I would retire from my present position. However, believing that age is not an arbitrary factor in retirement and that God's will is the essential matter to consider, for a number of months I have sought his direction. I believe God has given me clear affirmation for the timing of my retirement as executive director."

Pinson said he has "been feeling this sense of God's direction to retire early in 2000" for more than a year, "but to have made this announcement earlier would have created a period of uncertainty about executive director leadership longer than necessary in Texas Baptist life."

Among reasons for the timing of his decision, Pinson cited the strong condition of the BGCT and upcoming retirements and the need for long-range. The filling of key positions and possible restructuring ought to be done by a new leader, he said.

He also cited "stable leadership" in convention boards, a number of major projects that should run smoothly for the next one to three years and "the number of dedicated persons" qualified to succeed him. "From among these God will provide an executive director for the 21st century in Texas Baptist life," Pinson said.

As executive director, Pinson has served as coordinator and liaison between the executive board and the universities, hospitals, child- and elder-care homes and missions enterprises supported by about 6,000 Baptist churches throughout Texas.

He also has supervised the work of about 300 employees on the executive board staff in Dallas.

During his tenure as executive director, Pinson led the statewide Mission Texas emphasis, resulting in the starting of 2,000 new churches and missions in the 1980s. Currently, he is guiding the Texas 2000 campaign to reach every Texan with the gospel by the year 2000.

A native of Fort Worth, Pinson came to the BGCT after five years as president of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif.

He was pastor of First Baptist Church in Wichita Falls from 1975 to 1977. From 1963 to 1975, he was professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. He served as associate secretary of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission from 1957 to 1963.

Pinson earned a bachelor of arts degree from North Texas State University (now the University of North Texas) at Denton in 1955. He holds masters and doctorate degrees from Southwestern Seminary.

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Religious leaders discuss civility amid impeachment trial

By Ashlee Ross

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious leaders met Jan. 26 in Washington to address what one described as "a frightening degree of incivility" in the nation's public debates.

The Interfaith Alliance Foundation, a nonprofit institution, sponsored the "National Religious Leaders Summit on Civility in Public Discourse and the Future of Democracy" on Capitol Hill. Welton Gaddy, the group's executive director, moderated the discussion.

"An openness to learning from each other has been lost to an eagerness to condemn one another because of differences between our opinions and beliefs," said Gaddy, pastor of Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La.

He said the purpose of the meeting was to engage in "dialogue that sensitizes people to the importance of civility and creates within people an instinctive intolerance for uncivil behavior."

"We have arrived at a critical moment in the life of our nation," Gaddy noted. "Amid the harshness of the present political climate, even a call to civility is being used as a political weapon."

He also said he hopes the summit would influence the U.S. Senate's debate over impeaching President Bill Clinton. "Yes, we want to impact the impeachment process -- not to determine the final decision that it should produce but to influence the manner in which a final decision is reached," Gaddy said.

Along with Gaddy, the panel included Robert Drinan, law professor at Georgetown University Law Center; and Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

During the panel discussion, Gaddy asked Land about approaching members of religious groups that hold different opinions about the nature of humankind and society.

Land said it is important to remain civil in these discussions and to "disagree on issues without being disagreeable." He quoted civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. saying "those whom you must change, you must first love."

Rep. Tom Sawyer, D-Ohio, another panel participant, said it is important while discussing a different view to "acknowledge its authenticity without surrendering to its validity" and to have a discussion about issues and not "dissing" people.

Rep. John Anderson, president of the World Federalist Association and the Center for Voting Rights and Democracy, discussed righteous anger versus self-righteous anger in regard to being passionate about an issue.

He said "if the anger is motivated by love and compassion," the individual's point of view is taken more seriously.

Drinan, a former Democratic congressman, said anger is not always a bad thing. He noted that angry people have brought about positive change, such as the abolition of slavery and the advancement of civil rights.

He said he is angry a "white male posse" has come to the Senate with the goal of removing the president.

Drinan also said he is angry because the United States doesn't give more money to foreign aid and world hunger relief.

Gaddy said: "Civility is not an inconsequential issue. If we can't handle the present crisis claiming the attention of our nation without rhetoric and behavior that tear us apart as a nation, we have a far larger problem than that at the center of deliberations in the United States Senate."

Also on the panel were: Martin Marty, director of the public-religion project at the University of Chicago; James Forbes, senior minister at Riverside Baptist Church in New York; Rabbi David Saperstein, director and counsel of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism; Jane Holmes Dixon, an Episcopal bishop; and Azizah Al-Hibri, law professor at T.C. Williams School of Law.

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-- Ashlee Ross is an intern at Baptist News Service, a division of the Baptist Joint Committee.

Baptist leaders disagree on what's civil, what's not

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- During a three-hour conference Jan. 26 in Washington, a conservative and moderate Baptist leader agreed on the need for civility in public discourse.

In interviews afterward, however, both questioned whether recent public remarks by the other lived up to that standard.

The conference was convened by the Interfaith Alliance Foundation. Welton Gaddy, the group's executive director, said the faith community has a contribution to make concerning the spirit and attitude of national debate.

"Our concern is much broader than the impeachment proceedings now before the Senate," Gaddy said. "We have to learn or re-learn about how to talk with each other about differences of opinion without destroying each other."

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission said he doesn't want liberal groups like the Interfaith Alliance to "co-opt, the issue of civility."

Land said civility in public discourse is important to the health of the nation. "I know a lot of evangelical Christians and most of them agree that you should disagree about issues without 'dissing' the people," he said. "They would agree with me wholeheartedly and completely that to carry around a placard in the name of Christ that says 'God hates fags' is blasphemy. It's just blasphemy. It's as blasphemous as using the cross to promote the racial bigotry of the Ku Klux Klan."

But in response to a reporter's questions, Land said there was nothing uncivil about a comment he made in October that the influence of three moderate Baptist leaders was partly responsible for the moral flaws of Bill Clinton.

A Newsweek article that sought to explain Clinton's moral failings in light of his growing up as a Baptist quoted three moderate leaders. They were: James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs; Foy Valentine, former executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission; and Glenn Hinson, a former professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who now teaches at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.

Commenting on the Newsweek article, Land said "liberal antinomianism" of those three "is partially responsible for producing people with the tragically flawed moral compass of a Bill Clinton."

Asked about the comment, Land stood by his October remarks.

"I didn't say Foy Valentine was immoral. I didn't say James Dunn was immoral," Land said. "I do think Southern Baptists have to take some responsibility for Bill Clinton being who he is. I stand by that statement."

Land said the comment was civil because he did not attack the individuals but pointed out that the theology they and other moderate Baptists hold has consequences. "And Bill Clinton's ability to do this kind of hairsplitting is one of the consequences."

Land defined antinomianism as "an overemphasis on grace." It means "that we do not have to accept responsibility for our actions -- that if we do things that are immoral, God died to save us of our sins and we don't have to spend a lot of time being sorry about it," he explained. "I think that is a misunderstanding of salvation by grace through faith," he said.

Asked if he agreed with Land that his theology contributed to Clinton's actions, Dunn replied: "That's a stupid question. We all know that each pot sits on its own bottom."

Dunn said he is "highly honored to be identified with the generation of Baptists who rejected legalism and literalism" along with "propositional theology, hierarchical control and creedal Christianity."

"I reject the notion that salvation by grace ever has or ever will lead to an 'anything goes' morality," he said.

Gaddy said he viewed Land's October comments as an attack on the three men. "I think you easily could have made the point Richard was trying to make by saying that what's happened to the president is the product of rampant antinomianism in our society," Gaddy said. "Why tie that to three people, unless you're trying to hurt them and attack them as individuals?"

But Land cited recent statements by Gaddy about the Religious Right, which he said undermine civility.

He pointed to a news article in which Gaddy said that Rep. Bob Livingston, R-La., could not pass the "dangerous, dangerous litmus test" of the Religious Right, which disqualifies individuals from high political offices for an act of moral wrongdoing.

"I'm certainly at least suspicious, if not confident, that the Livingston scenario developed with an eye on the influence of the Religious Right, which holds the Republican Party captive," Gaddy said in an article published by the Deseret News of Salt Lake City.

"Now is that civility?" Land asked.

Gaddy said he viewed his statement "as an observation of factual data." He added, "I'm sure Richard probably sees his stuff about the three men in the same way."

Asked about a lack of civility in the struggle for control of the Southern Baptist Convention, Land blamed moderate leaders for firing the first shots. "The James Dunn generation of leadership poisoned the well of debate at the very beginning of the public discourse in the debate on the issues in the Southern Baptist Convention," he said.

Land said Ken Chafin, a moderate leader during the SBC battles, attacked the motives of conservative leaders Paige Patterson, Paul Pressler and W. A. Criswell.

Land also criticized journalistic work during the struggle of Stan Haste, now director of the Alliance of Baptists, and W. C. Fields, former head of Baptist Press.

Haste, chief of the Washington bureau of Baptist Press until 1989, responded to the charges in a phone interview.

"When I covered SBC news, I made a deliberate and ongoing effort to be fair and to be civil to those I disagreed with," Haste said. "I think in the case of most news people, it's folly to pretend that one can have total objectivity. Of course I had a viewpoint, but I made every effort when I was covering SBC events to be fair, to seek out comments from both sides and, especially in my demeanor, to be civil."

Hastey said, "it is a real stretch to say the moderates poisoned the well. Because after all, the moderates were under attack, and they were trying to defend an attack. They evidently didn't defend very well, because they were routed."

Hastey added: "I object to Land's use of W.C. Fields more than I do of myself. W.C. treated those people with deference and he was unfailingly kind and generous even when they were after his job. On the other hand, Pressler's attacks were relentless. They were exaggerated and vicious at times. He had an absolute obsession with getting Baptist Press under control."

The Interfaith Alliance conference was called in response to partisan debates and accusations in the midst of the impeachment process.

Criticizing Clinton's behavior in events that led to his impeachment, Land said it is a half-truth to assert the president's relationship with Monica Lewinsky was consensual.

"He exploited and used a young woman less than half his age. And I think it says something about Bill Clinton that it took him that long to acknowledge that he needed to ask for their forgiveness," Land said.

Land said he wanted to reiterate that "Bill Clinton is responsible for his behavior, not James Dunn. I said his theology is. There's a difference."

"I think that James Dunn's theology has consequences and I think that Bill Clinton is one of the consequences. And I think my theology has consequences and I'm responsible for those consequences," Land said.

Asked to identify any faulty consequences of his own theology, Land said, "I'd have to think about that."

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CORRECTION -- Please replace the final paragraph in the Jan. 26 ABP story "Texas Baptists may cut funds to SBC agencies, Dilday says" with the following:

According to the SBC's distribution formula last year, the undesignated SBC Cooperative Program gifts of Texas Baptists provided \$11.33 million to the International Mission Board, \$5.16 million to the North American Mission Board, \$1.38 million to Southwestern Seminary, \$926,794 to Southern Seminary, \$788,568 to Southeastern Seminary, \$401,082 to Midwestern Seminary and \$337,634 to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

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