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Midwestern president confesses 'misappropriation of anger'

By Bob Allen

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Mark Coppenger confessed "misappropriation of anger" to trustee leaders July 30 and pledged to seek reconciliation with people he has offended.

Trustees also required the 51-year-old Coppenger, who has been president of the Southern Baptist seminary in Kansas City, Mo., four years, to follow specific steps to aid "repentance and restoration" for what has been described as a chronic problem with anger. Officials would not say what specific steps Coppenger would take, but a knowledgeable source said they include counseling.

In a four-hour executive session in Kansas City, the trustee executive committee discussed leadership issues with Coppenger raised during a two-month investigation by trustee officers. The report's findings reportedly included other concerns, but the focus of the called July 31 meeting was anger.

Two members of the executive committee, Kent Cochran of Kansas City, Mo., and Tony Mattia of Wamega, Kan., reportedly filed a formal complaint in late May about repeated reports that Coppenger became enraged and used profanity in discussions with seminary employees.

After lodging the most recent complaint, the seminary's dean and vice president of academic affairs, James Cogdill, was reportedly fired by Coppenger, but the trustee executive committee reinstated him the following day. Cogdill declined comment.

Trustee officers interviewed both current and former staff and developed a list of leadership concerns presented to Coppenger when he returned from a two-week mission trip to Africa July 27.

During the closed-door meeting with trustee leaders, Coppenger acknowledged the "problem" of his anger and "embraced" the committee's recommended steps for "repentance and restoration," according to a brief written statement read to reporters.

Trustee chairman Carl Weiser, pastor of Hyland Heights Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., said the committee would "not elaborate on specifics," since the discussion involved a personnel matter.

Coppenger also declined to discuss the agreement, citing privacy issues.

Asked if he believed the trustee investigation would hurt his ability to lead the seminary, Coppenger said "anytime you have sin in your life," it hinders potential. "If you have a flaw in your own life, you're less than you could be," he said.

Asked if he is confident he can re-establish trust with faculty and staff he has offended in the past, Coppenger said he would trust in the sovereignty of God. "Ours is a faith of reclamation and repentance," he said. "All you can do is just take your step. If you try to chart the whole thing out, you are playing God. With integrity, you take your step, and let him be Lord."

In his formal written statement to reporters, Coppenger said he has come to understand his anger has been an "obstacle" to revival and hoped his commitment to reconciliation would contribute to "revival here and beyond."

A trustee statement sounded a similar theme, saying the committee is praying "that the example of this biblical process will serve as an example to the students, faculty and trustees of Midwestern and others."

"It is our sincere and prayerful desire that God will use these events to work revival in this place," the statement said.

Weiser said the executive committee would give a complete report to the full trustee board when it meets next fall. He said that report would be in executive session.

An informed source said the agreement protects current employees who cooperated with the trustee investigation but predicted it would make it more difficult for certain staff members to work with the president.

Coppenger was the only candidate interviewed by a presidential search committee that nominated him to the post in 1995. He is the 41-year-old school's third president, and the first elected since conservatives gained control of the board of trustees during the 1980s and early '90s.

At the time, the search committee cited Coppenger's conservative theology and his "vision and leadership" as qualities that won him the job.

Coppenger came to the post from Nashville, Tenn., where he was vice president for convention relations at the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee. Before that he was executive director of the State Convention of Baptists in Indiana and pastor of First Baptist Church in El Dorado, Ark.

Before earning his master-of-divinity degree at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the early 1980s, Coppenger had a Ph.D. in philosophy from Vanderbilt University and taught philosophy six years at Wheaton College.

In response to a reporter's question, Weiser said the seven of nine executive committee members present for the meeting were unanimous in their support of the arrangement with Coppenger. After the meeting, however, some committee members said privately they doubt the trustee action goes far enough to hold Coppenger accountable for getting help to deal with what one knowledgeable source described as "lifelong problem" with anger.

Sources interviewed by ABP confirmed that Coppenger has a long reputation of alienating subordinates with his volatile temper.

One person who formerly worked for Coppenger at Midwestern said he was "not surprised" that Coppenger's anger had become an issue. "I'm just surprised that it took this long."

A former coworker at the SBC Executive Committee who did not work for Coppenger directly said she had a good relationship with him and that he was often friendly with secretaries in the break room. Even in that setting, however, she recalled women being surprised by his use of what she described as "raw" language.

Two other people who worked closely with Coppenger at the Executive Committee said they preferred not to discuss the matter.

Another former staff member at Midwestern Seminary said she never saw one of Coppenger's angry outbursts firsthand but heard about them from others. She characterized his use of profanity as mild, "PG-type" words, like "hell" and "damn." But it was more the way they were used that upset subordinates, she said -- delivered in "extreme anger" and directed toward the person rather than the situation.

The former staffer said the type of language Coppenger used in the pulpit during chapel differed from what she overheard in the hallway. "The walk and the talk don't match," she said.

Asked if she ever heard Coppenger use profanity, a former secretary replied, "Never in front of me," adding, "Maybe it was out of respect."

Trustee chairman Weiser declined to comment about whether the executive committee discussed specifically Coppenger's alleged use of profanity.

According to SBC Executive Committee directories from past years, three different secretaries worked under Coppenger in five years. In four years at Midwestern, he reportedly has had five.

Shortly after his election at Midwestern, Coppenger unveiled his "dream team" of four top administrators he hoped would help chart the seminary's future course. Two left within 18 months.

Martin King, a longtime friend of Coppenger's hired in October 1995 as vice president of institutional development, resigned a year later to return to his old job as director of news and public relations at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. Lamar Cooper, who came from the SBC Christian Life Commission to become Coppenger's vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty, left in March 1997 to take a similar post at Criswell College in Dallas.

Two of the four "dream team" members remain: Gary Ledbetter, vice president for student development, and Michael Whitehead, vice president of business and finance. Joining them on Coppenger's current leadership team are James Cogdill, vice president of academic affairs and dean of the faculty, since July 1997, and Harold Poage, vice president for institutional development, who came from the staff of Dallas Baptist University in April 1997.

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