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**Editor of moderate newspaper
Baptists Today steps down**

By Bob Allen

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- The executive editor of the moderate newspaper Baptists Today has resigned, according to a terse news release dated Oct. 6.

Barely a year after accepting the job as editor, 41-year-old Bob Ballance has become interim pastor of Heritage Baptist Church in Cartersville, Ga., according to the press release. Baptists Today's board of directors has begun a search for his successor, it added.

"We wish Bob the very best in his future endeavors," said James McAfee of Atlanta, chairman of the newspaper's board.

Ballance could not be reached for comment.

Oby Brown, a secular journalist who was hired last year as Baptist Today's managing editor, will serve as interim executive editor and continue to help produce the monthly publication, according to the news release.

Ballance resigned last October as pastor of Highland Park Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, to become executive editor of Baptists Today. His election was one of several changes aimed at getting the 16-year-old independent paper, which has struggled in recent years, on more solid footing.

Other changes included restructuring the paper's board of directors, kicking off a marketing effort to help the paper become self-sufficient within three years and contracting parts of the newspaper's production with Smyth and Helwys Publishing, an independent publisher of books and Christian education resources in Macon, Ga.

As part of that arrangement, Baptists Today moved its offices from Atlanta, where it had been based since the paper was started, to Macon. A Smyth and Helwys spokesman said at the time the newspaper would retain its editorial independence.

Under Ballance's leadership, the paper implemented a redesign, changing its focus from news and extensive commentary on Baptist issues to church resources and news articles geared more to a lay audience. It also launched a Web site, in an effort to reach younger readers.

According to a report to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Coordinating Council in late February, circulation of the paper grew from 7,000 to 8,000 during Ballance's first six months. The paper had raised \$280,000 in contributions to that date, and the Coordinating Council kicked in another \$50,000 to help market Baptists Today, in addition to ongoing CBF support approved previously for newspaper operations.

Baptists Today, originally called SBC Today, was founded in 1983 by Walker Knight, who took early retirement from an editorial job with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board to start the paper.

Knight retired as editor in 1988, staying on another five years as part-time publisher. Jack Harwell, a longtime Baptist journalist who retired early from the Georgia Baptist newspaper The Christian Index, followed Knight as editor.

Under Knight and Harwell, the paper became the flagship publication for moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention in their unsuccessful fight to prevent a conservative SBC takeover in the 1980s.

In 1991, directors voted to change the paper's name to Baptists Today to reflect a broader focus and closer ties to the newly formed Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Harwell announced his retirement in May 1998, citing plans by Baptists Today's board of directors to "move the paper in another direction for the coming millennium."

After Harwell stepped down, Knight came out of retirement to serve as interim editor until the Baptists Today board hired Ballance last October.

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Clinton, Moyers, others recognize career of religious-liberty advocate James Dunn

By Bob Allen

ARLINGTON, Va. (ABP) -- "If anything further was needed to confirm James [Dunn's] apostate status with the [Southern] Baptists, my presence here ought to do the job," President Bill Clinton quipped at an Oct. 4 banquet honoring the recently retired head of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Clinton dropped in for brief remarks during a three-hour event at the Key Bridge Marriott in Arlington, Va. Despite working busily on an upcoming Senate vote on ratification of a global nuclear-test ban, Clinton said he wanted to come by and pay tribute to the colorful Baptist minister whose efforts defending religious liberty "have been a constant source of inspiration for me."

"Our country's a better place because of you," Clinton told Dunn at the banquet in his honor attended by 275 friends and colleagues. "Our religious liberties are more secure because of you."

"Even those with whom we disagree on politics and religion are better off because you rather than they were more likely to carry the day over the last two decades," Clinton said.

Clinton, a Southern Baptist whose policies have been criticized in Southern Baptist Convention resolutions, turned tables with a joke about a recent controversy involving the denomination. Spotting Congressman Martin Frost (D-Texas) in the audience, who is Jewish, Clinton said to Dunn, "I don't know if you have fulfilled the admonition of your convention and converted Rep. Frost yet."

Jewish leaders harshly criticized a prayer guide urging Southern Baptists to pray that Jewish people might accept Christ during recent Jewish holidays. Clinton also criticized Southern Baptists by saying they were against gun control.

Dunn's longtime friend Bill Moyers compared Dunn's own rhetorical battles against conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention with Baptists in colonial America who were jailed or whipped for defending their faith.

"Not all stripes of conscience are physical; not all wounds inflicted for liberty are visible," the veteran broadcast journalist said.

Calling soul freedom the "bedrock" of Baptist belief, Moyers credited Dunn for opposing the conservative takeover of the SBC, which he charged was part of a larger political effort to promote an agenda of state-sanctioned religion.

"Exploiting an unsuspecting laity's" reverence for the Bible, Moyers said the takeover group replaced priesthood of the believer with pastors who preached only the interpretation sanctioned by a "cabal" calling the shots.

"The laity would be subjugated to the preacher, who would serve the denominational politburo, who would decide who was and wasn't a Baptist," Moyers said. "The entire apparatus could then be aligned with political operatives."

"It was a brilliant, if heretical strategy, and it worked," Moyers said. "James Dunn saw the implications immediately."

"When he spoke out, they tried to silence him," Moyers said. "When he would not be silenced, they tried to fire him."

When Dunn's board, which included representatives from eight other Baptist denominations in addition to the SBC, refused to abandon the executive, "the theological Stalinists cut his budget," Moyers said.

While the SBC leaders succeeded in defunding the agency, Dunn's perseverance and courage allowed the BJC to survive by raising funds from other sources, Moyers said. "He and the BJC lived to fight another day."

Moyers said Dunn's tireless effort and political savvy have made him one of the most influential Baptist voices of the last quarter century. "A lesser man would have been blindsided" by stealth tactics of Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed, he added.

With his instincts and ability, Dunn could have become wealthy as a lobbyist, said Moyers, who was President Lyndon Johnson's press secretary. But "James chose a different path," Moyers said. "Rather, he was chosen."

Moyers said he decided only a week earlier how to frame his remarks for Dunn's retirement, after visiting a worship service at Austin Heights Baptist Church in Nacogdoches, Texas, a 100-member church that, among other things, supports women in ministry. Moved by the service, Moyers observed: "This is what the fight has been about. This is what Dunn and so many others have sacrificed to defend, the right of these people to take the church where it would go as conscience inspires." Moyers wrote on his worship bulletin, "Dunn would be at home here."

After the service, Moyers described his thoughts to the church's pastor, Kyle Childress. Childress told Moyers that Dunn had preached the church's first revival service 10 years ago. "Ten years ago we were a suburban church poised for greatness," Childress described. "James Dunn came and preached and put us straight and we've been a little church ever since."

As laughter died down, Moyers observed: "This is how the kingdom grows. God works in the wedges, through the cracks, across the fault lines of schism until conformity and orthodoxy no longer hold the mind hostage to habit or the spirit captive. You see, the fight had to happen for the kingdom to spread in a little-bitty church that witnesses to a great and mighty faith."

Also at the ceremony, Gary Parker of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship announced establishment of a scholarship fund in Dunn's name for internships at the Baptist Joint Committee. An initial \$20,000 gift will be managed by the CBF Foundation, Parker said, and additional gifts will be accepted.

A member of the BJC board presented Dunn and his wife, Marilyn, with a \$5,000 certificate for a trip. A portrait of Dunn that will hang at the BJC offices was also unveiled. Dunn's pastor, Lynn Bergfalk, presented him a book of letters written by friends across the nation. Smyth and Helwys Publisher Cecil Staton announced official publication of a new book, "James Dunn: Champion for Religious Liberty." Another old friend, former SBC president and agency head Jimmy Allen, was master of ceremonies.

In his response, Dunn noted that friends had jokingly referred to the celebration as his "funeral" and that some of the remarks reminded him of a eulogy.

"I am Dunn, but I'm not yet finished," he reminded the crowd. His new task, he added, is to work on raising money for the agency's \$1 million endowment goal. He also is teaching in a new divinity school at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C.

"I've never experienced anything like this," Dunn said. "I don't know how to tell you how moved I am and how important this is. We'll remember it a long time. It's so indelible."

Closing the evening with a benediction prayer was Brent Walker, the BJC's general counsel who earlier that day was elected unanimously to succeed Dunn as executive director.

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Leadership transition highlights Baptist Joint Committee meeting

By Bob Allen and Kenny Byrd

ARLINGTON, Va. (ABP) -- The Baptist Joint Committee marked its last board meeting of the millennium with a change in leadership of the 53-year-old religious-liberty coalition in Washington.

The Sept. 4-5 meeting in Arlington, Va., marked both the official farewell for James Dunn, who retired Sept. 1 after 18 years as the agency's executive director, and the election of Dunn's successor, Brent Walker, who previously served as the BJC's general counsel.

BJC directors passed a resolution honoring Dunn's work. "For us, James has been the face of religious liberty," it said in part.

Since retiring, Dunn, 67, now has two jobs. He has assumed duties as president of the Baptist Joint Committee Endowment, where he is working on raising the last \$100,000 of a \$1 million fund-raising goal by the end of this year. He also is professor of Christianity and public policy at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Board members also voted unanimously to elect Walker, whose nomination had been announced earlier by a search committee.

Walker, 48, becomes the agency's fifth chief executive. He has worked for the BJC since 1989, first as associate general counsel and more recently as general counsel and associate executive director. An 11-member search committee interviewed several candidates before recommending Walker.

Board chairman Aidsand Wright-Riggins, executive director of National Ministries of American Baptist Churches in the USA, said the search committee was particularly concerned about receiving a pool of applicants that included persons of color and women.

Wright-Riggins told the board that Walker brings the ability to both "stand upon the broad shoulders of James Dunn and the wonderful work he has done" and to lead the organization "in his own right." He predicted Walker would both relate well to current constituents and "reach out to a whole new generation of people."

Walker told the board he was "humbled and honored" by his election. He said religious freedom is challenged today by some on the right who seek to "privilege their religion to the exclusion of others" and some on the left who "have lost sight of the pre-eminence of their religious freedom" in their willingness to "negotiate some of the free-exercise rights away."

Walker pledged to "always keep in mind that this is a Christian, Baptist ministry" but added that in the age of post-denominationalism, structures must change. "We must at all costs defend the principles upon which we stand -- soul freedom and religious liberty and the autonomy of the church and the priesthood of the believer."

Walker commended Dunn's tenure, saying that "but for the dynamic, tough leadership of James Dunn over the last 18 years, this body would not exist today."

In addition to electing Walker, BJC directors also chose new officers of the board. June McEwen of Chattanooga, Tenn., was elected president. McEwen serves on the BJC board as a representative of the 762-member Religious Liberty Council, a dues-paying group set up in 1988 that allows individual involvement in the BJC. She succeeds Wright-Riggins, who completed a two-year term.

Boyce Brannock of Staunton, Va., a representative from the Baptist General Association of Virginia, was elected first vice president. Charles Weber of Wheaton, Ill., who represents the North American Baptist Conference, is the new second vice president. Walter Parrish of New York, representing the American Baptist Churches in the USA, is secretary.

Directors adopted a 2000 budget of \$911,075 that begins with a deficit of almost \$10,000. Wright-Riggins urged board members to encourage denominational bodies they represent to increase funding levels to make up the shortfall.

They also approved a bylaw change that allows the board by a two-thirds vote to withdraw representation from groups that do not contribute to the BJC or participate in meetings. They also authorized the staff to secure liability insurance for officers and directors.

They also heard a report that the board's executive committee had named Larry Chesser, communications director, as associate executive director of the agency.

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