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**Seminary denies politicking charges
in flap over course on state convention**

By Bill Webb and Bob Allen

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- The executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention has withdrawn from teaching a seminary course on history and polity of the state group, perceiving a political agenda.

Executive Director Jim Hill said he at first accepted an invitation from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., to speak to a class about a strategic plan being proposed to messengers to the state convention this fall.

However, the executive said he learned only after reading a Sept. 23 memo that a conservative candidate for the state convention's presidency and the leader of an organization supporting his election were also scheduled for the one-day course scheduled Oct. 11.

Jay Scribner, the convention's current first vice president who is expected to be nominated as president this fall, and Roger Moran, a layman coordinating a "Project 1000" campaign aimed at electing conservatives to leadership posts in the state convention, were also invited to address the class, according to the memo.

The memo to students was distributed by seminary registrar and church history professor Steve Prescott, who will teach the course. It encourages students to participate in the annual meeting, preferably as voting messengers, and it announces that acting president Michael Whitehead waived tuition fees for the one-credit-hour course as an incentive.

Whitehead also authorized professors to cancel classes Oct. 26-27, the final two days of the three-day meeting.

"When I received a copy of the memo, it appeared to me that the course at least had the appearance of having a political agenda, because one [presidential] candidate was being asked to speak and the head of a political organization that was seeking to get him elected was being asked to speak," Hill said.

"The reason I didn't think it was appropriate is that I serve all Missouri Baptists, and I've tried to stay out of the political activity in the convention," Hill explained. The executive director said he still had an

interest in sharing information about the "New Directions" strategic plan being considered by messengers to the convention's annual meeting, scheduled Oct. 25-27 in Liberty, Mo.

Whitehead said he understood Hill's decision to withdraw, but he contends that the goal of the course is simply to teach students about the work of the state convention and encourage them to be involved.

Baptist Press reported Oct. 7 that representatives of Mainstream Missouri Baptists, a moderate group formed to oppose Project 1000, would also speak at the class, which to date has 62 students preregistered.

But Rob Marus, the Mainstream group's paid coordinator, said no one was contacted about representing a moderate viewpoint until word got out that the Missouri Baptist newspaper Word and Way was working on a story about the course.

Marus said he was asked to participate only after he called the professor and "basically invited myself to speak to the class." While he said he is glad to have the opportunity for Mainstream Missouri Baptists to be represented at the class, Marus described his last-minute inclusion as "damage control" by the seminary.

Whitehead said he recognizes that some people think the seminary, an agency of the conservative-led Southern Baptist Convention, is trying to take a political position in encouraging students to become involved in the state convention.

"It's almost regrettable that anyone would even ask that question," he said. "We want them to be involved. We want all Baptists to be involved. Every Baptist who goes as a messenger ought to vote and vote his conscience. And we'll not do anything to try to influence or coerce anybody's conscience as to how they're going to vote."

Whitehead defended the invitations to both Scribner and Moran. Scribner is a current officer of the state convention, he said, and the president is unable to attend. Whitehead said he does not believe the fact that Scribner may be nominated as president should disqualify him. Moran, a layman who has been highly critical of what he views as moderate control of the state convention, is one of three Missouri representatives on the SBC Executive Committee.

In more recent discussions, the class is being described as dealing with state conventions in general, instead of the Missouri Baptist Convention specifically, and an executive from a neighboring state convention has reportedly been invited as well.

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Clinton pledges to forgive debt of 36 poorest nations

By Sarah Griffith

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton pledged to ask Congress to cancel 100 percent of debt owed to the United States by 36 of the world's poorest nations at the annual meeting of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund Sept. 29.

"Unsustainable debt is helping to keep too many poor countries and poor people in poverty," said Clinton in his address.

His debt-reduction promise totals \$5.7 billion and is contingent on the affected nations spending the savings for education and health care.

Debt relief would cost approximately \$1.20 per American for three years, according to a Washington Post editorial endorsing Clinton's proposal.

President Clinton's pledge "wouldn't have happened without Jubilee 2000 and other campaigns by Christians," said Paul Montacute, director of the Baptist World Aid for the Baptist World Alliance.

Jubilee 2000 is part of a worldwide movement to free impoverished nations of debt and thereby establish hope in the new millennium. The movement is inspired by the Old Testament concept of "Jubilee" -- where debt was to be forgiven every 50 years. The movement is not limited to religious organizations, however, according to its Web site.

The Jubilee 2000/USA Campaign began by Protestants and Catholics in Denver in June 1997. Members include the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church/USA and United Methodist Church/General Board for Church and Society.

"We have supported the call in a meeting a few years ago and again recently in Dresden when we called on our Baptist people around the world to have the debt of the poorest nations in the world eliminated," said Wendy Ryan, the director of communications for the Baptist World Alliance.

A 1999 BWA resolution stated that "a billion people living in the 40 poorest nations of the world are burdened with staggering national debt." The resolution called on "all Baptist unions and conventions to support the Jubilee 2000 campaign."

Most of the 36 debtor nations are in Africa, and much of the debt is the result of "ill-conceived development, flawed policies, and short-sighted decisions of their own leaders," according to the Jubilee 2000 Platform. "The borrowing benefited only elites in receiving countries, whereas the burden of paying the debt is falling upon the most impoverished members of society."

A Baptist ethicist affirmed Clinton's initiative.

"The president's debt-reduction proposal deserves the support of Congress," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. "I hope congregational leaders will demonstrate their commitment to justice through public policy by encouraging their congressional representatives to support this initiative. It would provide a wonderful gift at the dawn of a new millennium to many of the countries where we have mission work."

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-- Sarah Griffith is a writer for the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn.

Unlike Europeans, Americans don't worry about designer foods

By Sarah Griffith

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- While consumer boycotts have forced grocery chains and food producers to make a pledge against using biotechnology in producing food in Europe, most Americans aren't concerned about eating foods that have been genetically altered, according to a recent survey.

A September Gallup Poll survey finds only 27 percent of Americans believe such food could become a health threat. A 51 percent majority of Americans are in favor of biotechnological food, according to the survey.

"The biotech controversy focuses on concerns that specialized strains of corn, soybeans and other agricultural products may not be safe for human consumption when they utilize genetic manipulation rather than traditional cross-pollination methods," reads a report from Gallup News Service.

The survey reports that 80 percent of Americans are confident food available in most grocery stores is safe to eat while 69 percent feel confident in the safety of food served at restaurants. According to the poll, few Americans question the ability of the United States Food and Drug Administration to ensure safe food.

"Americans today seem quite relaxed about food-safety issues," reads the report from the Gallup News Service.

Dennis Sansom, professor of religion and philosophy at Samford University, said an ethical issue arises at the point where food is being created rather than enhanced.

"From a biblical perspective, we have been commanded by God to find the way to get the most energy out of the earth," Sansom said. "The temptation there would be to always look at nature as not having value until we give it value. That's an extreme that needs to be avoided."

"I don't have a problem with engineering a genetic code, if it is available to enhance the uniqueness of the plant," Sansom said. However, he said he believes that using technology to create or clone food would be "a major abuse of the goodness of the creation process God put into the world."

"There can be good Christian reasons [for biotechnology] if it is a way of enhancing the natural characteristics of the plant or food," Sansom said. "But there are no good Christian reasons for cloning or creating food. It's a denial of the creative process rather than an enhancement of it."

A former missionary to Europe said he believes Americans' relative lack of concern over the issue can be attributed to differences in American and European lifestyles.

"In Europe there is a connection between food from the ground and the food on your plate," said Kent Blevins, associate professor of religion and philosophy at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, N.C.

"Many people have gardens and mom-and-pop vegetable stands," said Blevins, a former missionary in Portugal, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic. "The food itself is fresh-garden produce from local plots rather than processed agri-business. [In America] there are additives and a whole lot more processed food. We are already accustomed to eating processed food, and things are just beginning to change for them [in Europe]."

The Gallup News Service proposes three factors that could contribute to the lack of American concern: low public awareness, widespread faith in the FDA, and an error attribution of plus-or-minus 3 percentage points.

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Women, working mothers among world's most-stressed people

By Sarah Griffith

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Women feel more stress than men by a 21 percent to 15 percent margin, according to a survey reported in August.

The most-stressed women in the world are working mothers with children under 13, according to the Roper Reports Worldwide: Global Consumers 2000 study. Non-working mothers of preteens feel slightly less stress. Among females feeling the least stress are teenagers, followed by women who are not mothers.

"Whether being a working mother of young children is inherently the issue, or whether it is a matter of living up to societal or cultural expectations, the world needs to develop stress-busters to ease the lives of these women," said Tom Miller, director of the global consumer study.

Miller said solutions may come from business, government or community and may come in the form of new services, technology or other life-enhancing remedies. "Whatever their form, the need to develop stress-reducing solutions will remain one of the great challenges -- and opportunities -- of the millennium," he said.

Researchers interviewed 1,000 consumers age 13-65 in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, France, Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Russia, Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Korea, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, China, India, Indonesia, Turkey, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela.

Roper Starch Worldwide is a marketing-and-research consulting firm based in New York.

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CORRECTION: Please replace the version of this story sent Oct. 6 with the following. This version corrects errors in the first, second and sixth paragraphs.

Leadership transition highlights Baptist Joint Committee meeting (corrected)

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 63-year-old religious-liberty coalition in Washington.

The Oct. 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, 49, 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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