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**Seminary employee lobbies students
for support of conservatives in state**

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A staff member at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has acknowledged meeting with students in an effort to elect conservative officers at this year's Kentucky Baptist Convention.

A student who attended one of the meetings said Jerry Johnson claimed to be working on behalf of seminary President Albert Mohler. However, both Mohler and Johnson denied the president was directly involved.

"I have not been a part of endorsing any candidate for office in the Kentucky Baptist Convention," Mohler said.

Mohler said he hoped conservatives who support both the Louisville seminary and the Southern Baptist Convention would be elected to state offices when the convention meets Nov. 16-17 in Covington. He denied, however, that the seminary is backing anyone. "Southern Seminary has not and does not endorse candidates for office," he said.

Southern is one of six seminaries owned and operated by the Southern Baptist Convention. Questions surfaced about the seminary attempting to influence leadership in the state convention, which is autonomous from the SBC, after an interoffice memo to selected students received wider circulation.

Johnson, the seminary's assistant director of development, held two meetings on campus with student pastors. A memo from Johnson's office said the purpose of the meetings was "to discuss electing [a] conservative KBC president."

A staff member in Johnson's office wrote and distributed the memo, on seminary letterhead. It invited selected students to "please meet with Jerry" in the seminary cafeteria on Nov. 3 or 4. "Specifically, our goal will be to elect a conservative president of the KBC," the memo said.

Mohler called the use of seminary letterhead "inadvertent" and said it "will not happen again." He said the memo "was intended as an internal document and should be seen as such."

Johnson called the memo "a mistake."

"It was not intended as any official memorandum from a seminary employee to students," he said. "I think the person who prepared the memo misunderstood I was asking for this contact on an informal, personal basis."

Johnson is no newcomer to convention politics. He was chairman of Southern Seminary's board of trustees before enrolling as a doctor-of-philosophy student and going to work for the seminary. He made an immediate splash a decade ago, when, as a new, 26-year-old trustee, he accused then-President Roy Honeycutt of not believing the Bible.

A student who attended one of the recent meetings said, "The seminary plans to use its influence to elect a conservative president in order to take back control of the convention." He said participants were "asked to use their influence to boost voter turnout in the upcoming election."

The student, who asked not to be identified, said Johnson told the group he "had been meeting with pastors and leaders all over the state.

"In fact, he stated that he had met with President Mohler and Dr. Danny Akin ... to discuss their target list of student pastors and leaders who would be sympathetic to their agenda."

Johnson responded that the student had "really bad information." He said his meeting with Mohler and Akin was to "discuss seminary policy on student absences" for those who wanted to attend the annual meeting. Akin is Southern's vice president for academic administration and dean of the school of theology.

Johnson distributed a list of "announced conservative candidates that support the direction of the Southern Baptist Convention" to students attending the two meetings on campus. They include presidential candidate Paul Badgett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Pikeville, and first vice presidential candidate Dan Ferguson, pastor of Second Baptist Church of Hopkinsville. Although the list had a blank beside second vice president, Johnson said in a phone interview that Tim Mathis, pastor of First Baptist Church of Danville, is the conservative candidate for that position.

None of the three candidates indicated any knowledge of Johnson's efforts to boost their candidacy.

"Theologically, I'm going to fall on the conservative side but I don't have an agenda," Badgett said. "I don't want to be on anybody's side but the Lord's side."

"I'm not one much for wanting to play back-room politics or anything," said Ferguson. "When it comes to lists being sent around, I haven't gotten any information about that. I haven't gone out and politicked for anything. If God's in it, I'm willing to serve."

"No one from Southern has contacted me," Mathis said. "I think it's fine myself if they want to do that. It's sort of the Baptist way -- speak your piece."

Information distributed by Johnson also included convention registration and voting information. It said the seminary "will grant excused absences to all students who miss class as a result of being a messenger," adding that "students must be able to show their convention registration card to their professor to get this excused absence."

Johnson said there was nothing inappropriate about his actions. "I think every Southern Baptist, every Kentucky Baptist, has a right to use their influence," Johnson said.

Mohler said informing students about convention issues is a legitimate educational concern.

"I would emphasize that no denominational institution should be in the business of making political endorsements," Mohler said. "At the same time, we bear the responsibility of informing our students. There is a distinction between political endorsement and the educational role of the seminary for our own students and our own advocacy on behalf of the Kentucky Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention.

"We certainly want to inform our students with our goal in mind" of electing conservative KBC candidates, Mohler said. "I would make a distinction between that and endorsing a candidate."

Virginia Baptists alter ties with university

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Virginia Baptists' 169-year-old relationship with the University of Richmond changed Nov. 9 when they approved a plan to phase out financial support for the school and no longer nominate trustees to its board.

Instead, Virginia Baptists will support a Center for Baptist Heritage and Studies, to be housed on the Richmond campus.

Messengers to the annual meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia Nov. 9-10 adopted the measure in response to the university's decision to add sexual orientation to its non-discrimination policy governing student, faculty and staff recruitment and promotion.

The historic change in relationship, negotiated by Virginia Baptist leaders and university officials, was adopted at an annual meeting concluding a celebration of the BGAV's 175th anniversary.

Virginia Baptists also continued to distinguish themselves from the more conservative Southern Baptist Convention by affirming the 1963 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message" confessional statement - not an amended version that included a controversial paragraph on the submission of wives to husbands.

The 1,478 registered messengers approved a \$15 million budget for 2000 and elected a slate of new officers by acclamation, including Thomas McCann, pastor of First Baptist Church in Martinsville, Va., as president.

The University of Richmond decision effectively ends governing and financial ties with Virginia Baptists, who founded the school in 1830. Those ties were loosened in recent years. Currently, the Virginia Baptist Mission Board nominates four of the university's 40 trustees and allocates about \$230,000 a year to a scholarship program for Baptist students.

The relationship grew strained last spring when trustees added sexual orientation to the school's non-discrimination policy. Many viewed the action as contrary to the state Baptist group's stance that homosexual behavior is a sin.

The Virginia Baptist Mission Board's executive committee responded by naming a task force to examine the issue. Both the mission board and university trustees approved the task force's recommendations before they came before the state convention.

Under the plan, Virginia Baptists will no longer nominate trustees to the university, although those presently serving will complete their terms. About half of the board's current members are Baptists.

Financial contributions will be phased out over four years, allowing current students in the scholarship program to finish degrees. As scholarship funds become freed, they will be transferred to the budget of the Center for Baptist Heritage and Studies.

The center's mission will be to "champion Baptist distinctives and Baptist heritage; ... provide educational opportunities related to Baptist distinctives, history and heritage; ... make available Baptist records and historic materials; and ... serve as a research center for undergraduates, scholars and local church historians," according to the recommendation.

A self-perpetuating board will govern the center.

Not everyone favored the compromise. During debate, Martinsville pastor David Adkins called it "an abandonment of one of our first Virginia Baptist institutions."

"The worst thing we can do is to imagine that the University of Richmond would be better with fewer Baptists," said Adkins, pastor of Starling Avenue Baptist Church in Martinsville, Va.

But others called it a win-win proposal. "I love the University of Richmond but [the BGAV and UR] are on two very different paths," said James Baucom Jr., a graduate of the school and pastor of Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va. "We need to build a new relationship that will allow us to love each other for what we are, not what we would pretend to be."

A non-binding resolution on the "Baptist Faith and Message" affirmed the confession of faith adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1963 as "a sturdy and comprehensive statement of the shared values, convictions and distinctives of Virginia Baptists as we enter the new millennium."

In 1998 the Southern Baptist Convention amended the confession of faith for the first time in 35 years. The new article on marriage and family was praised by some evangelical organizations, including Campus Crusade for Christ, but drew fire in other quarters for its interpretation of the husband-wife relationship.

"A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ," the statement reads. "She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation."

While the Virginia resolution did not specifically attack the new article on marriage and family, a messenger's attempt to include the revised version in Virginia's affirmation failed decisively.

A day earlier, the Baptist General Convention of Texas took similar action in a move designed to take issue with the family amendment.

A second resolution adopted by Virginia messengers commended the SBC's Woman's Missionary Union for its "steadfast commitment to sharing the gospel with all persons, and ... willingness to reshape programs and structures to meet changing challenges."

Recently the missions education organization eliminated one-fourth of the staff positions in its Birmingham, Ala., headquarters in an effort to "stabilize expenses."

"Some denominational leaders have applied pressure upon WMU to maintain a narrow focus," said messenger Walt Harrow of Deltaville, Va., who supported the resolution. "In addition, competition exists now from other publishers of materials which heretofore have come mostly from WMU. The decision to decrease staff was a good business decision, but it was difficult from a personal angle."

The \$15 million BGAV budget for 2000 is almost \$84,000 less than the amount allocated for the current year. Most of the cuts were in allocations to three agencies and six colleges and schools affiliated with the BGAV.

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