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Patterson predicts SBC split in article for Baptist paper

By Steve DeVane

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- The president of the Southern Baptist Convention says he believes a split will occur in the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

In an upcoming article for a Baptist newspaper, SBC president Paige Patterson predicts that churches "desiring greater allowance for diversity" and those disenchanted "with present conservative leadership" will at some point break away.

Patterson says he is unsure whether the split will follow fault lines already established by churches that have affiliated with the 8-year-old Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or some other configuration. However, he wrote, "It does appear certain to me that such a division is inevitable."

Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., said he believes 600 to 3,500 churches will leave the SBC, which has about 40,000 churches and 15.8 million members.

"Several new entities and relationships will evolve as a result of this action," he wrote in an article for an upcoming special issue of the North Carolina Baptist newspaper Biblical Recorder. The article is one of several forecasts by prominent Baptists for a Jan. 1 issue focusing on the millennium.

In a telephone interview, Patterson said such a division is likely for the best. "We're much farther apart theologically than some people imagine," he said. "Why sit around and cripple what everybody's doing?"

He noted that division between Paul and Barnabas described in the New Testament resulted in two evangelistic movements instead of one.

Patterson said he does not know when such a split might occur but guessed it could be within three to five years.

Patterson's comments about a possible split in the SBC come as the controversy between conservatives and moderates heats up in several Baptist state conventions. The groups have been at odds since the late 1970s when conservatives, spearheaded by Patterson and Texas Judge Paul Pressler, gained control of the SBC.

Moderates were eventually shut out of SBC leadership and in 1991 formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as a missions-and-ministry alternative to the SBC.

CBF leaders have continually said the organization is not interested in becoming a convention. Most churches that support the CBF still have ties to the SBC.

Conservatives in Texas and Virginia formed separate organizations after failing to gain control of state conventions there.

The moderate Baptist General Convention of Texas is moving toward allowing churches from other states to join its organization and is studying its funding of the SBC and its agencies.

Last year, Baylor University Chancellor Herbert Reynolds proposed creation of a Baptist Convention of the Americas that would span from North America to South America. Reynolds recently said he had secured articles of incorporation for the group with the Texas secretary of state and filed federal papers to preserve the organization's trademark.

Patterson said in his interview that Texas is the only state convention likely to be affected by an SBC split. He said the 3,500 he used to estimate the maximum number of churches to leave is based on the unlikely result of the Baptist General Convention of Texas leading its churches to leave the denomination. "I don't think it will be that large, but I decided to err on the side of the maximum number I could see," he said.

The lower-end estimate of 600, he said, represents the number of churches he believe are strongly committed to the CBF.

Patterson said Baptist churches in North Carolina, despite the presence of a lot of moderate pastors, are overwhelmingly conservative. "That will become increasingly evident as the months go by," he predicted.

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Students shot in Oklahoma

By Dave Parker

FORT GIBSON, Okla. (ABP) -- Fort Gibson, Okla. joined a growing list of communities hit by school violence Dec. 6 with the shooting of four students at the town's middle school.

All of the wounded were stable and expected to fully recover.

Students were waiting outside the school, just as they do every morning, when 13-year-old Seth Trickey arrived.

Witnesses said Trickey set his back pack on the ground, pulled out a 9-mm handgun, fired twice into the ground and then several times into the crowd of students.

One student reported that he said, "I'm crazy, I'm crazy" before opening fire.

The crowd quickly dispersed as students took cover in the middle school building. A teacher who also is trained as a safety officer took the gun from Trickey, who was reportedly still pulling the trigger after all the rounds were fired.

The wounded students were Savana Knowles, 12, shot in the cheek; Bradley Schindel, 12, shot once in each arm; Cody Chronister, 13, shot once in his forearm, and William "Billy" Railey, 13, shot in his leg.

Knowles was airlifted to St. Francis Hospital in Tulsa, where she underwent three hours of surgery. She was listed in fair condition. Schindel was airlifted to Tulsa Regional Medical Center and was also in fair condition.

Railey and Chronister were treated at Muskogee Regional Medical Center and listed in good condition.

A fifth student, whose name was not released, was treated for minor injuries suffered while trying to avoid being shot.

Fort Gibson is a quiet town of 3,300 eight miles east of Muskogee in northeastern Oklahoma. About 450 students attend the middle school where the shooting occurred.

The school system's administrative offices are in the center of the school complex, with the elementary school to the north, the middle school to the northeast, the cafeteria to the east and the high school to the south.

Carol Cook, a member of First Baptist Church of Fort Gibson, works in the administration building as a financial secretary. She was scheduled to attend a workshop in McAlester that day, but stopped by the office for a minute.

"There were cars backed up all over the place," she said. "I asked what was going on and someone said some kids had been shot. Needless to say, I never made it to McAlester."

Cook said the Knowles girl is very active at First Baptist. Her father is a member of Promise Keepers, and Cook described the whole family as "strong Christian people."

She said the school shootings were a shock to the whole community.

"I've lived here all my life," she said. "There have been political difficulties on occasion, but as far as a shooting, I don't know of any."

Gary Sparks, a deacon at First Baptist, is also the high school principal. He said he was unaware of the shooting until afterwards.

"We're just keeping them in our prayers," he said. "We're thankful that there weren't any killed."

Sparks said the high school had security cameras installed this year, and the middle school was next on the list to receive them. Since the shooting occurred outside, though, it is doubtful that cameras would have made any difference.

One immediate need at the middle school was counseling. Within hours of the shooting, counselors arrived from Project Heartland, formed in Oklahoma City to counsel families and victims of the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

Kent Mathews, son of former Oklahoma Baptist Messenger associate editor Bob Mathews, said counselors were there to help students deal with anger, shock and fear that occur naturally when people suffer trauma.

"We are here to offer whatever services we can," he said. "We're just doing the same thing we have been doing since the bombing."

Counselors recommended that parents and family members talk to students about the shooting and allow them to express their feelings, whatever those feelings may be.

The suspect was described as an honor-roll student and a churchgoer who was popular among classmates. The gun reportedly belonged to his father. Prosecutors would not say whether they will charge the teen as an adult. They also would not comment on if any action would be taken against the parents.

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Billy Graham planning fall crusade in Jacksonville, Fla., media report

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Evangelist Billy Graham is planning a four-day crusade in Jacksonville, Fla., in the fall of 2000, according to local media reports.

Officials at the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association declined to comment on the effort, which was to be announced officially in January, the Florida Times-Union reported Dec. 4.

The 81-year-old Graham previously announced 2000 dates for a June 1-4 crusade in Nashville, Tenn., and a preaching conference July 29-Aug. 6 in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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-- By ABP staff

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