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**James Merritt mentioned
as SBC presidential nominee**

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Suburban Atlanta pastor James Merritt will likely be nominated as president of the Southern Baptist Convention when it meets June 13-14 in Orlando, Fla.

Merritt's nomination was mentioned Jan. 31 at a Florida conference that has in the past served as a launching pad for successful presidential campaigns.

Texas pastor Jack Graham said he was sorry that weather-related travel problems prevented Merritt from attending the annual pastors' conference at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville.

"I was looking forward to him being here and hearing him preach and to asking him for the privilege of nominating him as president of the Southern Baptist Convention when we meet next. I hope he'll allow me to do that, but I'll have to ask him another time, I guess," said Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas.

Merritt said he "hasn't spoken directly" with anyone, but he "would be honored" if he were nominated. Graham could not be reached for comment.

If elected, Merritt, pastor of the 11,000-member First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga., would succeed Paige Patterson as the highest-elected official in the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., completes a two-year term this year and is ineligible for re-election.

Merritt is the immediate-past chairman of the SBC Executive Committee, an 81-member elected body that conducts business for the denomination between conventions, and a former president of the SBC Pastors Conference. He preached the convention's keynote sermon in 1998.

His church, located in a suburb east of Atlanta, has reportedly grown from 2,000 members to nearly 11,000 since he came as pastor in 1985. Merritt's "Touching Lives" television broadcasts are seen in Atlanta on the local Fox affiliate and nationwide on TBN and FamilyNet.

If elected, he would become the seventh Georgian to serve as SBC president. The last was Charles Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta, who presided in 1985-86.

Merritt became a Christian at 9 and was called to preach at 21. He has an undergraduate degree from Stetson University in Deland, Fla., and a master of divinity and doctor of philosophy from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

He is married and has three sons.

The Jacksonville Bible conference, in its 14th year, drew an audience of more than 6,300 people from about 38 states. It has launched successful nominations of past conservative presidential nominees including Adrian Rogers in 1986, Jerry Vines in 1988, Morris Chapman in 1990 and the current president, Patterson, in 1998. Each ran as the lone candidate representing SBC conservatives. Rogers, Vines and Chapman defeated moderate candidates. Patterson was unopposed.

One exception to the tradition came in 1994, however, when Graham broke protocol by nominating Florida pastor Jim Henry without the endorsement of past SBC presidents. Henry's subsequent election over fellow conservative Fred Wolfe of Alabama was widely viewed as representing a rift in the SBC's leadership.

Leaders of what is frequently called the "conservative resurgence" that gained control of the SBC during the 1980s said only people who demonstrated loyalty to that movement should serve in key leadership positions. Others, backing the irenic Henry, felt with moderates purged from power it was time to open up a more inclusive nomination process.

Merritt, however, has been identified strongly with the old guard. He nominated Patterson, a co-founder of the conservative resurgence two decades earlier, as president in 1998 and also nominated the SBC's current second vice president, fellow Georgian Frank Cox, at last year's convention in Atlanta.

In his convention sermon in Salt Lake City, Merritt urged Southern Baptists to remain vigilant in their defense of conservative values.

"The battle for the soul of our denomination, our colleges, our seminaries, our churches, even for the Bible itself, will never be over. There may be a cease fire, but ... you can never let your guard down," he said.

"Almost 20 years ago, the Southern Baptist Convention saw how denomination after denomination had been mowed under by the machinery of higher criticism and spiritual liberalism, and took a stand and said, 'We will not go the way of other denominations,'" Merritt said in 1998.

"A battle was fought, a war was waged, blood was spilled, but we took our stand. And if the Lord tarries for another millennium and there is still a Southern Baptist Convention, may our descendants look back at those last 20 years and say, 'That was our finest hour.'"

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-- Gayle White and Marv Knox contributed to this story.

Truett Seminary breaks ground for \$17 million campus complex

By Mark Wingfield

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Meeting under a huge white tent he compared to the Israelites' tabernacle in the wilderness, George W. Truett Theological Seminary Dean Brad Creed led 350 spectators in groundbreaking ceremonies for a permanent "temple" for the young Texas seminary Feb. 2.

"I tell our students and even prospective students that at this stage of our existence Truett Seminary is tabernacle religion," Creed said. "We are moving toward a Promised Land with all of the faith and confidence that God is with us, and someday there will be a temple. When the Ark of the Covenant finally makes it to Jerusalem, it will be a glorious day of praise and celebration."

The seminary at Baylor University has been holding classes at First Baptist Church of Waco since its opening in 1994. Construction should begin in the next few months on the seminary's first building of its own, a three-story 64,000-square-foot brick structure wrapped around a central courtyard.

The \$17 million complex will be built on the northwest corner of the Baylor campus, within view of passing cars on I-35. Creed made note of this fact, explaining that the 100-foot chapel spire on the building will become a visible reminder of the mission of the seminary and the university.

The permanent building is urgently needed to house Truett's growing student body, which now numbers about 200, Creed told the crowd of dignitaries, donors, faculty and students.

"This is a day many of us have imagined, discussed, dreamed about and prayed for. But we've now come to the stage in the life of this young seminary where having facilities of our own on the Baylor campus is no longer just a dream or a nice idea. It is an absolute necessity."

Yet it is not the building that makes the seminary, Creed said. Rather, it is the lives of those who will teach and learn there who will become "a host of gospel ministers ... who will touch the lives of millions" around the world, he said.

Given that understanding, "No price is too high and no cost is too great for completion of this facility."

"It is the students of Truett who will be God's promise to Texas Baptists," Creed said. "We will complete this project ... but we look to God to build the seminary."

Baylor University President Robert Sloan, who was founding dean of Truett Seminary, expressed appreciation to several key donors who have made the new building possible.

First among those he thanked were Herbert and Joy Reynolds. Reynolds was university president in 1993 who took the first steps to found the seminary and name it for George W. Truett, the great Baptist statesman and former pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas.

"It was because of Dr. Reynolds' commitment to Baptist principles ... that we have the opportunity to celebrate this day," Sloan said.

He also thanked John and Eula Mae Baugh, whom he called "founding benefactors" of the seminary; Paul and Peggy Piper; and Robin Rogers and the Robert Rogers Foundation of Tyler. The Baughs, in addition to helping fund the seminary's start-up in 1993, gave a \$5 million lead gift to the building fund.

"By God's grace we have had this outstanding beginning," Sloan said. "And from this point forward we continue to march in faith."

Participants in the groundbreaking ceremony included donors, members of the Baylor board of regents, representatives of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and a number of Texas Baptist pastors.

Initially, only two of the three floors in the new building will be finished for use. The third will be reserved for future growth.

The building will feature a 550-seat chapel, funded by a \$2.5 million gift from the Rogers Foundation and named for Paul Powell, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Annuity Board. A smaller teaching chapel will be named in honor of Sloan.

The facility also will include a number of classrooms, faculty offices and administrative offices.

Truett is the second seminary to be born at Baylor. What is today Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary was founded at Baylor nearly 100 years ago, then separated and relocated to Fort Worth. Southwestern, like Baylor, originally was an institution of the BGCT.

Ironically, Truett Seminary started largely over concerns about the direction of Southwestern Seminary at the hand of conservatives now in control of the Southern Baptist Convention, which has owned Southwestern since 1925.

Today, Truett is one of two graduate-level theological schools affiliated with the 2.7 million-member Texas convention. The other is Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene.

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Baptist groups oppose prayers at high school football games

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- School-sponsored prayer at football games both violates the separation of church and state and denigrates sincere religion, two Baptist church-state organizations argue in a legal brief filed at the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Baptist Joint Committee and the J.M. Dawson Center of Church-State Studies at Baylor University urged the high court to uphold a federal appeals court's invalidation of a Texas school district's policy permitting student-led prayers before football games.

The friend-of-the-court brief, drafted by Derek Davis, director of the Dawson Center and special counsel of the BJC, was also joined by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

The challenged policy was adopted in 1995 by the Santa Fe Independent School District in south Texas.

It allows students selected by their colleagues to deliver invocations and benedictions at graduation ceremonies and a "brief invocation and/or message" during pregame ceremonies at home varsity football games.

A federal district court said the prayer policies would be constitutional as long as they included a requirement that students keep their messages "nonsectarian" and "nonproselytizing."

While agreeing that such prayers are permissible at graduation, however, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the policy couldn't be extended to football games. Unlike a graduation prayer, prayer at a football game does not serve a secular purpose of making the event more solemn, the court ruled.

The friend-of-the-court brief argues that the Santa Fe policy violates church-state separation because it constitutes "state endorsement of religion" and coerces those attending football games to participate in religious activity.

The Santa Fe district sends a "mixed message" to students, the brief argues.

"On the one hand, its policy stands as an endorsement of prayer -- a quintessential religious act," the brief states. "But on the other hand, the school district's policy denigrates and trivializes the act of prayer by portraying an act of religious devotion as a quasi-secular ceremonial practice."

Even more dangerous, the brief argues, is that the state must monitor and censor religious prayers to make sure they are nonsectarian and nonproselytizing.

A clause in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution banning the establishment of religion, "if it protects anything, protects young persons from state instruction in how to compose the prayers they pray," the brief states.

The brief disputes a contention by the school district that the policy does not coerce anyone because students decide whether to have a pregame prayer and which student will lead it.

"Using the voting process to advance the religious views of the majority of students against the conscience of the minority violates a primary purpose of the Establishment Clause -- to protect the rights of members of minority religions," the brief argues.

The brief further argues that an attempt by the Santa Fe district to "secularize" the prayers only served to denigrate religion.

"Prayer cannot be sufficiently secularized or neutralized to change it into anything other than what it is -- an act of religious devotion and supplication seeking divine intervention in human affairs," the brief states.

The high court is scheduled to hear arguments in the case March 29 and issue a ruling by the end of June.

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Illinois governor halts executions, renewing debate over death penalty

By Sarah Griffith

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (ABP) -- Gov. George Ryan declared a moratorium on the death penalty Jan. 31, making Illinois the first state to take such action.

The Republican governor ordered a temporary halt to executions in light of reports by the Chicago Tribune about problems in the state's capital-punishment system.

The Chicago newspaper said that of 260 death-penalty cases that were appealed, half were reversed, with orders for either a new trial or resentencing. Improper rulings, misconduct by prosecutors and other miscarriages resulted in 13 wrongful convictions -- one more than the number of people who have been executed since Illinois resumed the death penalty in 1977.

"I cannot support a system," Ryan said, "which, in its administration, has proven so fraught with error and has come so close to the ultimate nightmare -- the state's taking of innocent life."

Ryan's decision has revived the debate over capital punishment nationwide. An editorial in The New York Times urged other pro-death penalty governors, including George W. Bush of Texas, to "acknowledge the flaws and stop what Justice Harry Blackmun once called 'the machinery of death.'"

Illinois is not the only state with a faulty system, read an editorial in The Detroit Free Press. The editorial referred to a "mountain of evidence" suggesting many innocent people live on death row. "There is no justice in putting innocents to death," read the editorial.

Along with the rest of society, Christians are divided on the death penalty. Those on the left oppose it while conservatives believe it should be used in some cases. Southern Baptist leaders including Paul Pressler and interim seminary president Michael Whitehead have indicated they support capital punishment.

A professor of Christian ethics, however, said he views capital punishment as vengeful and ineffective.

"DNA is finding that in 10 percent of cases, the wrong person was given the death penalty," said Glen Stassen, the Lewis Smedes professor of Christian ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary and the president of the Baptist Professors of Religion in North America.

"When you find out you are wrong, you can't correct it," Stassen said. "That penalty is permanent."

Stassen suggested other ways to reduce murder that have proven more effective than the death penalty, including providing more jobs and having more church involvement with youth.

"One problem with the death penalty is that it takes the emotion that people rightly have against murder," said Stassen, "and turns it into action that isn't effective, also turning it away from the actions that are effective."

Stassen noted that Jesus' own death by capital punishment is portrayed as an unjust and vengeful act in the Bible.

"There's a fundamental biblical commitment to the sacredness of life," said Stassen. "Jesus himself was crucified. Stephen was killed in Acts. Every time the death penalty is mentioned in the New Testament, it's wrong. There is no crucifixion or killing that was just."

The Christian Life Commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas also is evaluating alternatives to capital punishment.

With the support of "a number of strong Texas pastors," the moral-concerns agency has begun to form a committee to study alternatives to capital punishment -- particularly life without parole, said Director Phil Strickland.

"It is a terrible tragedy when the state kills innocent people, particularly if there are alternatives that still protect society," Strickland said.

Strickland questioned whether the death penalty serves as a deterrent to violent crimes like murder. "You're not going to eliminate crimes of passion, which most of these are," said Strickland.

Another thing about capital punishment that ought to be considered, Strickland said, "is whether or not we genuinely believe in the possibility of [Christian] conversion."

Though generally in favor of the death penalty, Pat Robertson in 1998 opposed the execution of Karla Faye Tucker of Texas, who was eventually put to death for murdering two people with an ax. Tucker underwent a Christian conversion while in prison, for which Robertson and others said she deserved life imprisonment rather than death.

"She is not the same person who committed those heinous ax murders," said Robertson in 1998. "She is totally transformed, and I think to execute her is more an act of vengeance than it is appropriate justice."

Stassen said an inmate's religion should not be a factor in deciding whether capital punishment is right or wrong.

"What the Bible teaches," he said, "is that every human life is a child of God, not just Christians. We are all made in the image of God. This is about the sacredness of life."

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Author views sweeping change as opportunity for churches

By Todd Svano

LOS GATOS, Calif. (ABP) -- Imagine entering your home. The doors open automatically and the heat adjusts as you enter a room. Lights come on at dusk. A dot-sized computer implant regulates your blood pressure and monitors and dispenses insulin. That same device, receiving signals from a satellite, locates your missing pet or child and voice-directs your car to addresses you enter on its dash.

That's a glimpse into the not-too-distant future, says Walt Wilson, author of "The Internet Church," a book released this month by Word Publishing, intended to make Christians privy to sweeping changes that are about to affect every area of their lives.

As a Silicon Valley executive for 35 years, Wilson warns of a "radical discontinuity" in American life, "change so fast and disorienting that we have no explanation for it." The technology genie is out of the bottle, he said in an interview. "From now on, nothing will be the same."

As a Baptist deacon, however, he says, "If you think that all of this comes out of Silicon Valley, you're on the wrong track." In fact, "These developments are not about technology at all," he writes. "They are about the Great Commission. Change this big is being orchestrated by God, not by us."

With a new Web page coming on-line every four seconds and Internet traffic doubling every 90 days, this transformation may occur faster than anyone anticipated. Instead of recoiling in fear of technology, however, Wilson says Christians ought to be setting trends. Most importantly, they can use this new technology to spread the gospel of Christ to people who would never set foot in a church.

Wilson gives an informed, behind-the-scenes view of the implications of the high-tech revolution in business, biotechnology, neighborhoods and personal lifestyle. Half of his book, however, is devoted to educating Christians and positioning churches to reclaim their witness to the world.

The Romans built a network of roads to more easily dispatch the military. But Christian missionaries used those same roads to carry the gospel to the known world. The Internet is the new system of Roman roads, built, incidentally, by the military, explains Wilson. "Is it a coincidence that this first-century theme repeats itself?"

"God is doing something big, and we had best be clearheaded about what is going on around us," he writes. "The church is in the information business, and we should not be surprised that God has raised up information technology to communicate his word to the entire world."

The timing couldn't be better, said Wilson -- both for today's seeker, who wants to self-navigate in matters of faith, and for Christians, many of whom are stuck in church "fortresses" that are either tribalized or "distracted by politics." The Internet has the power to reconnect these groups, he maintains, and the Holy Spirit is using this platform.

One thousand people visit Wilson's California church every day via the Internet, he says. "They arrive around the clock on a 24-hour basis. ... People who will not go through the door of a church [come] in the quiet of the night."

In the course of a month, Calvary Baptist in Los Gatos receives 2,000 hits from people who work at Apple Computer, and roughly 2,000 hits from Hewlett-Packard and others. "People are looking for answers, sometimes in the midst of a chaotic business day," he says. "We are literally reaching out to 30,000 people a month from 30 countries around the world. My pastor loves the thought that he can preach to an audience of thousands every day in this virtual sanctuary."

Barriers of race, gender and nationality are gone, said Wilson, whose site, calvarylosgatos.org, even translates its message into six languages.

Others also are seeing the moment of opportunity. Russell Dietz, one of several pioneers cited in the book, stumbled upon a now-thriving evangelistic ministry when 15 people inquired about his Christian faith within 24 hours after he posted a personal Web page. Today, he goes into adult chat rooms, pulls people out, shows his concern and begins to share his faith.

Dietz has discovered that there are scores of lonely, shy, single and, often, divorced professionals who are looking for a "little bit of comfort on-line." Russell simply listens, telling them God loves them and can bring them joy and meaning. Today, he has a daily ministry to 50 people and comes home to 30 personal e-mail messages each night. "Many of them are now reading Scripture, praying on a daily basis, and connecting actively with their local church," he reports.

Churches have an incredible opportunity to overcome traditional stereotypes, to move away from the margins and into mainstream society, says Wilson. "People see that this is not about joining a church or collecting money or any of the things the world thinks the church is about."

"Many people don't like the experience [of a worship service]; they're afraid to be with us; they think we're a bunch of hypocrites, etc. We see those attitudes in spades here in Silicon Valley. All those filters that get in the way of human communication simply disappear with the Internet."

Some observers, however, fear that this approach will lead to a depersonalized or disembodied gospel. In fact, pollster George Barna predicts that by 2010, 20 percent of the U.S. population will rely primarily or exclusively on the Internet for religious input. Will this be the successor to the church drive-in theater, where people, content with electronic relationships, stop going to church?

"I don't believe they will," says Wilson. "Overhype says retail will go away, churches will go away. I don't believe that that's true. We're social people and we will always need contact with other people." In fact, Wilson said, this technology has greatly enhanced community among his church members by eliminating the problem of superficial Sunday-only relationships.

"We found that prayer requests were being placed on the Internet, people were exchanging e-mail messages on a daily basis and connecting socially. Our guys would travel to Tokyo for a week, take a laptop with them and be right in the flow of communications. We didn't have to wait until next Sunday to find out the results of our prayer requests. You talk about deepening community!"

Wilson sees the potential of sites like athletesinaction.org for presenting a compelling witness through the testimonies of NFL players and pastors.net for providing resources to leaders ministering in Third World countries who have never attended seminary. "I think it's going to reduce heresy in the church rather dramatically."

This gives new meaning to Jesus' statement in Matthew 24:14 that "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations," says Wilson.

"This is a tool for us, in obedience to the Great Commission, to touch every man, woman and child on the face of the earth in the next decade. When that picture becomes clear to us, it's compelling and it's driving and that's what caused me to write this book."

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-- Todd Svanoë is a free-lance writer in Middleton, Wis.

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