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**Florida pastor stepping down
after falsifying gift records**

By Bob Allen and Greg Warner

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- A former president of a seminary in Europe will resign his Florida church amid allegations that he misappropriated approximately \$184,000 in church contributions to the seminary and falsified receipts to cover up his actions.

A church administrator announced in the morning worship service April 30 that Altus Newell has offered his resignation after nearly 10 years as pastor of Deermeadows Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., and that deacons were "working with him on closure."

The announcement by interim church administrator Doran McCarty did not state a reason for Newell's resignation. He and other speakers from the platform alluded only indirectly to strife and conflict in the 2,100-member church during the last two years.

But church leaders say Newell was told to resign after admitting he misled the church about the use of funds intended for the seminary and falsified receipts for the contributions.

Newell told Associated Baptist Press his resignation is primarily for health reasons and that questions about the contributions are "in the process of being resolved."

According to church leaders, the \$184,000 was contributed to the church for use by the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, the Czech Republic, between 1992 and 1999.

Documents provided to deacons and available to church members account for about half the money. The documents allege that Newell authorized payments totaling \$90,520 from the church to a Swiss bank account in 1993, 1995, 1997, 1998 and 1999. The funds were contributed by an unnamed donor and Newell himself to a designated church account for East Europe Evangelism.

Church officials said Newell claimed the money was being used by the International Baptist Theological Seminary for evangelism in Eastern Europe. Newell produced a letter and receipts, purportedly signed by seminary officials, to acknowledge the gifts. A 1994 letter to Newell, supposedly from the seminary's then-president John David Hopper, confirmed gifts from the church "to our East Europe Evangelism Program."

But IBTS rector Keith Jones told Associated Baptist Press that no one currently at the school has ever heard of an "East Europe Evangelism Program," that the account number cited on the receipts does not belong to the seminary and that the receipts are inauthentic.

Seminary records reveal only one donation from Deermeadows Baptist Church -- \$150 in 1992 -- Jones said in an e-mail response to a reporter's questions. He said the seminary does keep its endowment fund at Union Bank of Switzerland -- the school was formerly located in Ruschlikon, Switzerland -- but the account number cited on Newell's receipts is not on a list of seminary accounts.

Jones said Newell, who was the seminary's president during the mid-1980s, apparently has had no contact with officers at the school in at least five years. The documents purporting to acknowledge receipt of the funds did not come from the seminary, Jones said.

He said the documents' letterhead uses unfamiliar formatting and wrong titles. Receipts purported to be signed by a seminary official were dated after he completed his term of service, Jones said, and the official who is identified as "the Reverend" David Nixon is in fact a layman.

Jones said he is "profoundly disturbed and disappointed" by what "seems to be a case of fraud within a local church." He said the nearly \$100,000 in documented gifts would be enough to train 100 seminary students and "thus equip a whole generation of unions in Eastern Europe with scholars and leaders and pastors."

"The Baptists of Central and East Europe appear, once again, to be the real losers in this tragedy," he said.

The questionable contributions were brought to the attention of church officials by the financial secretary, Darlene Papa. She then asked Todd Watson, a deacon and Jacksonville tax attorney, to help her investigate. Papa declined to be interviewed.

Newell met with Watson, Papa, administrator McCarty and other church officials April 26 and was confronted with the allegations. According to participants, he admitted to mishandling the contributions and providing false documentation. But Newell reportedly insisted such measures were necessary to protect the missionaries who received the money from being persecuted.

Church officials do not know who controls the Swiss account or how the money was spent, Watson said.

"He admitted to making misrepresentations to the church and ... to the preparation of false documents," Watson said. But when Newell was asked for documentation about how the money was used, "he said he was not a signer on the account and if he revealed how the funds were used there would be people at the seminary and missionaries whose lives or livelihood would be in danger."

McCarty declined to elaborate on the meeting with Newell and the documentation presented. "I can't add anything to what you have already been told," he said.

Church officials would not name the other donor or disclose how much of the \$180,000 he or she contributed.

Newell said in an interview that questions about the handling of funds are "in the process of being resolved."

"I've been aware that questions have come up about some personal contributions that I have made, not church funds," he said. "That is in the process of being resolved. The real problem is in my health."

Newell said he is undergoing treatment for a "depressive illness." He said his resignation "isn't completed" but "we're exploring it."

"The issue is my health," he said. "I've been sick the last several months. The real question is if I can be well enough to continue."

Newell said a series of gifts by him and another donor date back to his time at Ruschlikon. They were given as direct grants for churches "in difficult areas" where "Baptists are being persecuted."

But IBTS rector Jones said he doubts it is any longer necessary to channel funds through secret accounts. "Most of Eastern Europe is open for missionaries," he said. "Money passes freely through legitimate bank accounts."

James Smith, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary and seminary trustee, confirmed that he was not aware of any East Europe fund, "and I would be aware of any such fund or program."

"The idea that money need[s] to be transferred to such a Swiss account sounds very suspicious," said Smith, who lives in Germany. "East Europe is not deep in the Muslim world, which doesn't allow overt evangelism. I can't imagine that such a procedure would be needed or recommended by any reputable organization."

"People normally transfer money to Swiss bank accounts to keep them secret," Smith said.

Newell's resignation was first announced to a church business meeting April 26. However, McCarty explained, "He's still pastor of the church" until a severance agreement is approved and he signs the letter. The agreement, which is expected to be presented to the church for a vote May 10, would pay Newell his salary, retirement and other benefits for one year and allow him to keep his leased car until March 2001.

Newell's decision to step down follows a prolonged period of church conflict. He returned April 2 from a 12-week leave of absence requested by church leaders to help him get a handle on what he described to the church as "frustrations" related to his ministry.

In 1990 Newell resigned as pastor of Dawson Memorial Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., amid charges that he plagiarized other people's material in his sermons. Newell said in a news report at the time that he did not believe the plagiarism charge was a major factor in his resignation, but he admitted that fatigue from a long-running church conflict had taken a toll on his sermon preparation.

A former staff member at Deermeadows Church, who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisal, said Newell initially struck him as "a loving pastor." Over time, however, he said the pastor began to display "flashes of anger" at staff members, both individually and collectively. Those episodes escalated over the years, and came to include church members as well as staff, he said. Over time Newell's "leadership started eroding," he said.

Newell told ABP that members of Deermeadows Baptist Church have been good to him and supportive during "a very difficult time."

He said he imagines that church members "probably don't understand a lot" about the situation, but he is unable at present to answer all their questions.

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Texas Baptists unlikely to leave SBC, new executive tells regional leaders

By Dan Martin and Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptists' top executive says he doesn't foresee the moderate-leaning state organization cutting ties with the conservative-led Southern Baptist Convention.

"I am a Southern Baptist," said Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. "I intend to be a Southern Baptist. The BGCT intends to cooperate with the SBC. We will continue to work with them any way we can."

Wade met for more than three hours April 19 with 69 of the state's 72 directors of associational missions, who had requested the meeting with the new executive.

Wade, explaining the DOMs were asked to e-mail questions for discussion prior to the meeting, said: "The biggest question has to do with where we are headed with the SBC. From your e-mails, that is the biggest issue on your minds."

The state convention has taken steps in recent years to distance itself from the denomination, most significantly by offering alternative funding channels that do not funnel church gifts into the SBC's unified budget. A breakaway state convention has been organized in response by conservatives pledging loyalty to the SBC and support for its current direction.

Despite tensions between the BGCT and SBC, Wade said: "I am going to work to try to help Texas Baptists work with anyone who wants to work with us and to do God's work. I never see a time when we will say we are no longer Southern Baptist. I do not foresee us doing that."

Wade disputed charges that the BGCT is not cooperating with the SBC. "We send more than 20 percent of the dollars received by the SBC and then get accused of not trying to be partners," he said. "That is ludicrous. That is a red herring to threaten and frighten the churches."

He also replied to questions about whether he is leading Texas to affiliate with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which he and other moderates helped create in 1991, and if Texas is moving to form its own national convention.

"You asked me, 'Are you going to lead us into the CBF?'" Wade said. "My answer is 'No.' I am not hired to be a promoter of the CBF.

"I helped get it started. I support it. I give some of my offerings to the CBF, but the CBF does not want state conventions."

Wade said the church where he was pastor for 23 years before assuming his new post early this year sends some mission dollars to the Fellowship, but most go to the SBC. "And, we gave a lot more to SBC missions than some of those large churches who are so critical of us," he said.

Wade said he is also not pushing for establishment of the Baptist Convention of the Americas, an idea first surfaced in 1998 by Baylor University Chancellor Herb Reynolds.

"I have been saying all along that the last thing we need is a new convention," Wade said. "I haven't seen any great groundswell of churches to sign up for it."

While Wade said he intends to help Texas Baptists work with the SBC, he admitted the ultimate decision is not his.

"It is not in my hands," he said. "The BGCT will vote whatever it chooses to vote. I have a vote but I do not have the final word."

He added that he also "cannot control what the SBC leaders will do."

"I have met with them ... and am open to meeting with them again," Wade said. "I am going to do whatever I can to help us work together better."

Wade said he has asked the chairman of an SBC committee studying the denomination's "Baptist Faith and Message" statement not to change language in its preamble stating that the document is not a creed.

He said he also urged him not to use the word "inerrancy" in the document's article on the Bible. "Many of us do not use it. I think it is a political word. I love the Bible and the God of the Bible too much to use the word. Many of you might love the God of the Bible so much you do use it."

But by including it in the confessional statement, "they would be writing off a whole host of loyal Baptists," he said.

Wade said he is personally troubled by those who accuse him of not believing the Bible.

He referred to a controversy shortly before he took office when he defended the BGCT action in reaffirming the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement rather than the version amended by the SBC in 1998 which now includes an article on the family.

Wade said Texas Baptists opposed the SBC family article because it was not biblical enough but were accused of not believing the Bible for their action.

Wade said he "believes the Bible is the inspired Word of God from the first word to the last."

"I believe in the virgin birth, that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, that he was killed by hanging on a cross. He did it for our sin by his own free will and because it was the will of the Father. He was buried, he arose, he ascended, and he is coming again some day. I don't know when and I am suspicious of those who say they do.

"I look forward to that day, but I want to be out doing what he told us to do, not sitting on some mountain top somewhere."

Wade said he is hurt by accusations he does not believe the Bible. "Someone couldn't say anything about me that would be more hurtful than questioning my faith in the Word of God."

Also participating in the meeting were members of the administrative staff of the BGCT as well as the offers of the convention.

President Clyde Glazener, pastor of Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth, was asked to comment on his remark, quoted in a newspaper article, describing the new family article in the "Baptist Faith and Message" as "Neanderthal."

Glazener said he is concerned about the attitude of SBC toward women, but admitted, "If I had it to do again, I would not have used that word."

Wade said charges that the BGCT accepts abortion and homosexuality seem to have diminished but several persons had asked him to state his own views on those issues.

"I have always been against abortion," he said, adding that "years ago" he made a speech at a BGCT annual meeting opposing abortion but allowing exceptions in the case of rape, incest, or to save the life of the mother. "I accept those exceptions."

Regarding homosexuality, Wade said, "I have always been against homosexuality. I believe gay marriage is wrong and that homosexual behavior is sinful." He also said that if churches condemn the practice of homosexuality, they need to offer ministries to help homosexuals leave that lifestyle.

As for the BGCT, Wade said, "We have never been in favor of abortion, and we have taken stand after stand against abortion," he said.

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Pastors urge Baptists to retain heritage

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Baptists must hold tight to their principles and heritage if they wish to preserve their identity and integrity, a trio of pastors told the Network of Mainstream Baptists April 25.

"Being a Baptist is still important. What Baptists contributed to the faith of the church is still important," declared Brian Harbour, pastor of First Baptist Church in Richardson, Texas.

Several principles and doctrines characterize Baptists, Harbour said, noting Fischer Humphreys, theology professor at Samford University's Beeson School of Divinity, delineates eight Baptist distinctives.

"The Baptist 'distinctive' is how we bring these elements together," Harbour said.

He echoed Humphreys in proclaiming, "The loss of the principle of the separation of church and state is the greatest tragedy in the Southern Baptist Convention."

"Many people say this idea of separation is not only irrelevant but also irreverent," he lamented, quoting a former SBC leader who once called the separation of church and state "a figment of some infidel's imagination."

But faithful Baptists must resist the impulse to turn away from the historic notion of the separation of church and state, Harbour said, listing three reasons.

"First is the nature of faith," he explained. "In order for faith to be genuine, it must be freely chosen." He cited colonial Baptist leader Roger Williams, who labeled the coercion of conscience "soul rape."

The second reason to resist erosion of the principle of separation is "the nature of government under the control of religion," he said. Such a scenario is "not a pretty sight" and leads to religious persecution.

"The nature of the world we live in today" is the third reason to preserve a healthy relationship between church and state, he added.

Theocracy -- a religious government -- worked in ancient Israel because of its small size and its religious and ethnic unity, Harbour observed. But the diversity of the United States demands a more pluralistic government, he said, noting the United States is home to more Jews than Israel, more Irish than Ireland and more blacks than all other countries except Nigeria.

"The question is: If religion is to be in charge of government, whose religion? Methodist or Muslim, Baptist or Buddhist, Jerry Falwell or Keith Parks?" he asked. "When government gets involved in religion, it will deny rights."

Despite current trends, Baptists and others of goodwill must not give up, Harbour said, urging four actions.

"Recall the example and teachings of Jesus," he began. "Jesus won, not by gaining control but by giving of himself. Jesus was the one who said, 'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'"

Next, Baptists must remember their history, which was created by people such as Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island so that people might have religious liberty, he added. "One would have to totally rewrite Baptist history to deny this part of our heritage," he said.

Third, "grasp the big picture," Harbour suggested. "The use of power for our cause now can legitimate the use of power against our cause at a later time."

Religious principles must be sufficient to be applied equally across time, he noted, pointing to the issue of school prayer. Baptists or Protestants who favor school prayer now that they are in the majority must ask themselves how they will feel about the issue when they are not in control and unable to dictate the type of prayer that is prayed.

Finally, Baptists "need to think," he stressed. "We must not allow slogans and catch-phrases, like 'family values' and 'put God back in school' to shut down our thinking. We must continue as Baptists to use our heads."

Baptists also must not allow their familiarity with Christianity and Scripture to blunt their perceptions of Christ's mandate, added Bob Baker, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Lexington, Ky.

As a way of helping Christians keep their perceptions sharp, he echoed devotional writer Fred Bauer's list of things Jesus did not say.

"Jesus never said, 'The wages of sin are fame and fortune,'" Baker pointed out. "Bending or breaking the rules can offer handsome dividends, but we are cautioned not to be deceived by outward appearances.

"Many Christians have difficulty understanding God's sense of justice, but we can be assured accounts will be balanced someday."

Second, Jesus did not say, "The first shall always be first and the last shall be last, so look out for No. 1," Baker admonished.

In fact, Jesus modeled and taught just the opposite, that anyone who wishes to be a leader should serve others, he reminded.

"Periodically, we need to take a fresh look at the 'be a servant' directive of Jesus," he said. "God's favor is not won by being strongest or best, but by being the hands, arms, voices, feet ... and servant of all."

Third, "an eye for an eye and a punch for a punch" was not one of Jesus' teachings, Baker said, conceding, "Sometimes I wish he said that; the law of retaliation and revenge is attractive."

Instead, Jesus said, "Turn the other cheek. ... Love your enemies. ... Pray for those who persecute you," Baker noted. When Christians turn away from Jesus' teachings, they "find revenge is not as sweet and in fact more painful than you imagined."

"Jesus didn't advocate society without laws, but he said to be careful, to control your emotions, to keep your head," he said.

And above all, Jesus showed Christians how to respond to others by mounting the cross, where he sacrificed his life to give all humanity the opportunity for eternal life, Baker observed. "Look to the cross."

A model church must be a WISE church, advised Duane Brooks, pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston, offering those letters as hints for the type of church it needs to be. A WISE church, Brooks said, excels in:

-- Worship that is pleasing to God. Such worship creates a sense of anticipation and a feeling of adoration for God, he noted. "The best thing is to be caught in adoration."

In meaningful worship, the church members are not the spectators, but rather are the participants who perform for God, the audience of the worship, he said.

-- Instruction helps Jesus' followers to become more like Christ, he added, lamenting the decreased emphasis on discipleship -- training people to be obedient followers of Christ -- in many churches.

"We've got undisciplined disciples," he acknowledged, observing American churches today. "No wonder every ill wind blows members away."

-- Sharing is a key trait of faithful churches, Brooks said, noting sharing is based on the early church's sense of "koinonia," a selfless fellowship among believers.

Sharing churches "have things in common," he said. "They share their lives, their time, their treasures."

-- Evangelism also is present in model churches, Brooks added, stressing the absolute importance of presenting a Christian witness and leading others to faith in Jesus Christ.

"When worship, instruction and sharing are present, evangelism is inevitable," he declared, noting the "attraction is irresistible" when unbelievers see the life of Christ at work in a caring, Christ-centered church.

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Albanian Muslims mystified by CBF missions volunteers

By Jim Newton

STARKVILLE, Miss. (ABP) -- "Why did Christians kill my sons?"

When an Albanian Muslim woman in Kosovo asked this question last fall, John Breazeale of Starkville, Miss., didn't know what to say.

So he and other Cooperative Baptist Fellowship mission volunteers in Kosovo answered not with English words the woman couldn't understand but with actions she could. They rebuilt her house so she would have a roof over her head during the upcoming winter.

The Albanian woman showed the volunteers the bullet holes and bloodstains in her house where her sons had been killed. Then she said she couldn't understand why Orthodox Serbian Christians would destroy

her home and kill her sons, or why American Christians would travel so far to help rebuild her home.

"We didn't have a simple, easy answer," said Breazeale, who was part of a CBF volunteer missions team working in partnership with Samaritan's Purse, Franklin Graham's organization.

"But through working on rebuilding her home, the team members saw this woman soften her perception of Christianity and show gratitude for our service," said Breazeale, a construction contractor and member of First Baptist Church in Starkville.

Breazeale said he would like to go back to Kosovo again as a construction volunteer, but the situation there has become much more tense and CBF missionaries are not able to host construction teams because of security issues. Breazeale said serving as a mission volunteer in Kosovo taught him a lot about attitudes of Muslims toward Christians.

"Most Albanians are as mystified by the Christians who come to help them rebuild as they were by those who came to destroy," said Breazeale.

He observed that Christian aid workers and Baptist missionaries have their job cut out for them as they try to communicate the gospel to mostly Muslim Albanians whose society was torn apart by mostly Eastern Orthodox Serbs in what Breazeale called an "uncivil war."

Although Albanians are predominantly Muslim, they are not traditionally as devout as those who are extremely hard-to-reach in the Middle East. "Most Albanians are probably Muslims to the same extent Serbians are Christians," Breazeale explained.

Since they could not speak the language, Breazeale and other teams of construction volunteers working to rebuild homes destroyed by the war tried to communicate the love of Christ through their actions.

Similar construction teams went to Kosovo last summer and fall for two-week assignments to rebuild roofs and houses before winter for thousands of refugees who returned to burned-out and destroyed homes. With the government's support, the Serbian army and citizens began destroying the Kosovar Albanian society by hitting at its core -- the family, said Breazeale.

"We were told that, initially, Serbs killed Albanian professors, professionals, and social and political leaders. Then they began killing the men and breaking up families," Breazeale said. "The army would go through a city or village and randomly burn Albanian houses and businesses."

"Albanians were very resilient," said Breazeale. "They were working and living in burned-out buildings, and they had memories of personal horrors, but they didn't have teams of therapists helping them cope. Even through the profound personal tragedies and losses of family members, survivors are attempting to restore their communities to some sense of normalcy."

CBF and other missionaries are addressing the immediate life-and-death issues and ministering to the physical needs of the people.

"Evangelism moves slower in a Muslim world," Breazeale said. "One CBF volunteer described their work as 'incarnation evangelism,' as if Christ was in the flesh reaching out to help," Breazeale said.

With money donated by Christians in Mississippi, Breazeale was able to help purchase one year's worth of school supplies for a first-grade class and contribute to the purchase of a tractor for one of the last surviving males in a village.

"He will be able to use that tractor to help plant everyone's crops. The main problem for him will be knowing where land mines are located. People are still having the misfortune of finding mines left behind by the Serbs," he said.

Breazeale said he felt privileged to be part of an effort by CBF to help Muslim Albanians better understand God's love. "It might not be much, but it was a small step in a long journey toward peace and understanding," he said.

Texas Baptists explore partnership with Cuba

By Ken Camp

FARMERSVILLE, Texas (ABP) -- Pastor Bart Barber went to Cuba expecting to find struggling churches desperately in need of help. Instead, he discovered vibrant, growing, evangelistic congregations in need of partners.

"There are 10 churches to every pastor there," said Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville. "They are working to build leadership. We hope to put together some ways to help train leaders."

The Farmersville church may develop member-to-member partnerships with a Cuban congregation, linking Texas Baptists by correspondence and prayer with a Cuban Baptist family. The church also may send a construction team for a building project at a Cuban Baptist conference center.

Barber recently was part of a four-day exploratory trip to Cuba, sponsored by Texas Partnerships. Joe Bruce, project director of Texas Partnerships, led a team that included representatives from several Texas Baptist churches and the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas is involved in a limited partnership with the Eastern Cuba Baptist Convention.

Rick Williams from Carpenter's Way Baptist Church of Lufkin, Doug Tipps and Stan Livingston from First Baptist Church in San Marcos and Curt Grice from First Baptist Church of Arlington -- along with Bruce, Barber and the IMB representatives -- met with the leaders of Cuban Baptist churches.

Barber said he visited a variety of churches in the Guantanamo Province. He saw an established pre-revolutionary church in a traditional building and a house that had been converted to a church. He also saw a mission where 110 people meet each week in a crude structure built between two bamboo trees on a yucca plantation, and a "house of prayer" that attracts 80 worshipers each week.

"There was nothing contemporary about the worship, and they didn't sing indigenous songs. They sang 1950s Baptist hymns that were translated into Spanish. It was extremely traditional in one sense, but at the same time it was an extremely passionate, energetic worship service," Barber said.

Cuba has been closed to foreign missionaries for 40 years, but that does not mean the island nation has been without an evangelical witness, according to Don Sewell, director of Texas Partnerships.

"There is a very dynamic, evangelical Christian church in Cuba," Sewell said. "The churches have well-developed work in some areas such as music ministry and new-church starting."

Texas Baptists are being enlisted to help meet key needs of the churches in Cuba such as discipleship training, leadership development, construction and renovation of facilities, and financial support for retired ministers and widows.

Texas Partnerships already has made arrangements to help 100 Cuban pastors secure a basic 40-volume Christian reference library, and the office already has contributed books to the seminary library in Cuba.

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