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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Baylor faculty, administration clash over center for creation study**
- Jacksonville church clears air about controversy over pastor**
- Church-state separation helps religion, say activists**
- Baptist family pays price for opposing school prayer**

**Baylor faculty, administration
clash over center for creation study**

By Mark Wingfield

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Controversy has erupted between the faculty and administration of Baylor University over formation of a center charged, in part, with exploring whether science points to an "intelligent design" behind the universe.

President Robert Sloan and other university administrators created the Michael Polanyi Center at the Baptist-affiliated school in Waco, Texas, in October 1999. It is named for a world-renowned physical chemist and philosopher who died in 1976.

Faculty members, particularly from the sciences, have complained they were not consulted about formation of the center, even though it relates to their areas of study. Some science professors have expressed fear that negative perceptions about the center's work will hurt the reputation of Baylor's science departments.

The conflict escalated in mid-April when the Polanyi Center sponsored its first-ever conference on the role of naturalism in science. The meeting included presentations on an emerging view popular among conservative Christians known as intelligent design. That conference included a diverse array of speakers with established academic credentials and drew about 350 participants.

But some Baylor faculty members refused to attend the conference, accusing Sloan and the Polanyi Center of promoting "creation science," a view that attempts to harmonize scientific discoveries with the Bible.

Other faculty members outside the sciences have joined the protest in sympathy, contending its formation indicates a lack of collegiality between the administration and faculty.

The battle came to a head April 18, when Baylor's faculty senate voted 27-2 for dissolution of the Polanyi Center. Sloan responded in an address to the faculty the next day that he would not close the center simply because the faculty demanded it.

Sloan instead reiterated his commitment to a previously announced plan to establish a peer-review committee, composed primarily of outside scholars, to evaluate the work of the Polanyi Center.

Sloan said the Polanyi Center was created in the same way as other centers that have started at Baylor during both his and previous administrations.

Robert Baird, chairman of the faculty senate, meanwhile, told colleagues the Polanyi Center controversy is "one of the most divisive issues to have arisen on the Baylor campus during my 32 years on the faculty."

Before the faculty senate vote calling for the center's dissolution, Baird also called for closing the center and starting over in a process that would allow faculty more control. "If it is desirable for Baylor to have a center to explore the connections between science and other disciplines, a committee of Baylor faculty from across the disciplines could be formed," he suggested.

"The directors of the center claim to be doing science," Baird charged. "Yet the center was created without consultation with colleagues in the sciences. Another major purpose of the center is to examine the connections between science and religion, yet again it was created without consultation with colleagues in the department of religion."

The Baylor Lariat student newspaper quoted geology professor Joe Yelderman speaking against the center on similar grounds.

"I am concerned as a science professor, because something involving the sciences occurred without us (faculty) knowing about it," Yelderman said. "As a professor, I am concerned that people will make us guilty by association and assume that we are associated with or linked to this organization"

Yelderman described creation science "a pseudo-science rather than science."

In an interview with the Baptist Standard, Sloan said he does not believe the Polanyi Center advocates creationism nor does it contradict scientific study taught elsewhere in the university.

"I understand why many scientists feel nervous, but this really is not a question of trying to impose certain specific interpretations of Genesis on the scientific disciplines," Sloan said. "There are many scholars of a religious and non-religious bent who think some of the old paradigms -- Darwinism and neo-Darwinism - - can be challenged. A Christian university is a place where we ought to be able to ask questions about our belief in God the Creator and the nature of the world in which we live."

In a statement released on Baylor's Web site, Sloan said he does not affirm creation science. "I think it is not good theology, and I would be embarrassed for what I understand to be creation science to be taught at Baylor University."

Nevertheless, Sloan said in the statement and in an interview, he strongly affirms that God created the world. "What is a given is that we affirm a Christian worldview, that we affirm a Creator and that the Creator has revealed himself through Jesus Christ."

Bruce Gordon, associate director of the Polanyi Center, also said in an interview that the work of the center should not be confused with creation science.

"With anything new and novel, there's going to be a certain amount of suspicion," he admitted. "When you use the word 'design,' it raises questions about what is the intelligence behind this design. Worries arise as to whether this might be a species of creationism in a bad sense."

And the mere mention of the word "creationism" among the scientific community "conjures up all sorts of connotations," Gordon said. But that's not what the Polanyi Center is about, he added.

Simply setting out to discover whether scientific formulas indicate intelligence behind creation does not necessarily prove or disprove the existence of God, Gordon noted. "The uniqueness of that intelligence and the character of that intelligence are not transparent just because a mathematical inference can be made," he said. "You're a long way from being able to determine anything that resembles the Judeo-Christian belief."

Gordon said he believes the Polanyi Center ought to continue at Baylor because of its uniqueness. No other such enterprise exists at any other American university, he said.

The center consists of two people, Gordon and Bill Dembski, who serves as the center's director. Dembski is considered one of the nation's foremost authorities on intelligent-design studies. His 1999 book, "Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology," was named one of the year's 10 most-influential books by Christianity Today.

"Given Baylor's identity as a Baptist institution and its commitment to historic Christianity, it seems like this is a reasonable context to be asking these questions," Gordon said. "The sorts of concerns that are the focus of the Polanyi Center have a natural place in the dialogue at Baylor."

Debate over the Polanyi Center is only the latest in a string of disputes between Sloan and the Baylor faculty since he assumed the presidency in 1995. Sloan and the university have been the target of more than two dozen lawsuits brought by disgruntled faculty over claims such as wrongful termination and denial of due process.

Baylor spokesman Larry Brunley cited this underlying tension as the primary force behind the Polanyi Center controversy. Some of the faculty members making the most strident claims about the Polanyi Center are longtime critics of Sloan, he said, who are venting years of pent-up anger.

Brunley found it ironic that faculty members who normally advocate free inquiry are demanding the withdrawal of such freedom from one aspect of university life.

"To shut the center down right now, as the faculty senate has called for, would be a form of censorship," he said.

-30-

Jacksonville church clears air about controversy over pastor

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- A Florida pastor is seeking permanent disability because of a mental illness and maintaining innocence amid charges that he falsified documents to mislead church members about deposits to a Swiss bank account.

Deacons of Deermeadows Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., meanwhile, have hired a lawyer and independent auditor to investigate the matter and are moving forward with plans to replace their pastor.

About 400 of the church's 2,100 members met three-and-a-half hours May 10 to clear the air about controversy surrounding their pastor of 10 years, Altus Newell. The members-only meeting was closed to the media. A press release issued May 11 termed it "a productive meeting." Newell did not attend.

"The deacons stated they have sought professional assistance from a local law firm to handle all legal matters and an accounting firm to investigate the dispute regarding the distribution of funds sent to the East Europe Evangelism Program," the unsigned statement said. It was faxed to media outlets under a banner describing it as "an official statement" of the church.

A handout distributed at the meeting reported that staff relationships had deteriorated to "crisis proportions," with numerous ministerial and office staff having already resigned and large numbers of members leaving the church. "It has become obvious that the church must move forward by seeking new pastoral leadership regardless of the outcome of any investigation regarding the pastor's role in the handling of the contributions through the account in Switzerland," the statement, a report from the deacons, read in part.

The funds in question are about \$184,000 deposited in the church's name over several years in a bank account in Switzerland. Newell, who endorsed at least some the checks, said they were contributions he and another church member made to help Baptists in Eastern Europe who face persecution for their faith.

Newell produced documents purportedly acknowledging receipt of part of the funds by officials at International Baptist Theological Seminary in the Czech Republic. Newell, a former Southern Baptist missionary, was once the seminary's president before it relocated from Ruschlikon, Switzerland. The school's current European leaders, however, said the documents were fake, that the account number cited on them does not belong to the seminary and that there is no such thing as an "East Europe Evangelism" program at the seminary.

Newell reportedly admitted to a group of church leaders that he attempted to mislead the church in order to protect the identity of the people receiving the funds. He insisted, however, that the monies went for the intended purpose and that no church funds other than those designated by him and the other donor were involved.

A lawyer representing Newell wrote a deacon leader May 5 insisting the pastor has done nothing wrong. He said given proper time, Newell is anxious to produce evidence to "remove any stigma attached to his name by the allegations of some who do not have all of the facts."

Archibald Wallace III, an attorney in Richmond, Va., said Newell originally contributed funds through the seminary but started bypassing the school and sending them directly to churches after the seminary "changed its leadership, mission and structure."

Wallace said Newell could produce evidence from individual recipients of the gifts, provided there is some mechanism for keeping them anonymous. "Many will suffer if it becomes publicly known what the source of their funding was, in view of the competition for control of the designation of funding by at least four Baptist groups operating in the former Eastern bloc counties," Wallace's letter said.

Newell initially offered to resign pending approval of a "closure agreement" involving severance benefits. He since has been diagnosed by Jacksonville's Mayo Clinic, however, as suffering from "severe depression" and "is medically unfit to work," Wallace said.

"I am advised that his condition is probably not something from which he will recover to an extent that he will be able to return to his full-time duties as senior minister of the church," Wallace wrote.

As a result, Newell has withdrawn his offer to resign and instead is asking for medical disability. Once permanent disability is established, Wallace said, "Dr. Newell will withdraw formally from the church."

In their written report to church members May 10, Deermeadows deacons said in light of the attorney's letter they would consult with their own retained outside counsel before moving forward with any recommendations regarding the pastor's employment.

-30-

Church-state separation helps religion, say activists

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- "The day we lose separation of church and state, start saying your prayers," read a sign held aloft on the U.S. Capitol lawn.

That sign summed up sentiments of more than 100 participants and speakers at a May 9 rally organized to show support for church-state separation.

The rally was convened by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, a leading voice against anti-Semitism and hate. Speakers included a Jesuit priest, a Baptist minister and a 17-year-old student who won a lawsuit against a public school district that forced students to participate in unconstitutional Bible lessons.

The rally participants then visited members of Congress, urging them to uphold religious freedom.

Brent Walker, executive director of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee, invoked words of George W. Truett, who gave one of history's most famous speeches on the topic of religious liberty on the Capitol steps almost precisely 80 years earlier -- May 16, 1920.

Quoting Truett, a Southern Baptist statesman and pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Walker said: "Our contention is not for mere toleration, but for absolute liberty. ... It is not the prerogative of any power, whether civil or ecclesiastical, to compel conformity to any religious creed or form of worship, or payment of taxes for the support of a religious organization."

Walker then asked the crowd: "Can you believe a Baptist preacher said that 80 years ago? Some of them today could do well to go back and read that again." Walker said he wanted supporters of the rally "to see the face of a Baptist that may be different from the kind you are used to seeing."

"Despite what you may have heard from many pseudo-Baptists, belief in the separation of church and state has been a hallmark of Baptists for nearly four centuries," Walker added.

Robert Drinan, a Jesuit priest and former member of Congress, also spoke. He criticized efforts underway to fund religious social services and education through tax dollars.

Drinan said Catholic bishops meeting 35 years ago at the second Vatican Council "rejected the traditional teaching that government should aid religious bodies carrying out their faith-based mission." Vatican II also stated, "A wrong is done when government imposes upon its people, by force or fear or other means, the profession or repudiation of any religion," he said.

Drinan said leaders of the Religious Right, by urging followers to vote against any candidate that does not support the return of school-sponsored prayer, government aid to religious schools and a ban against abortion, are repeating pleas first uttered by the Federalists in the presidential election of 1800.

"[Thomas] Jefferson's victory in 1800 supported his firm belief that religion and government should be separate, because in his view, absent such a separation, the church would dominate the government," Drinan said. "Roger Williams, who founded Rhode Island after he had to flee Massachusetts, also advocated a separation of government and religion, because in his view the government would dominate and dictate to religious groups."

"Thomas Jefferson and Roger Williams were both right," he said.

Also addressing the rally was Karla DeAmicis, who was forced to study the Bible as an eighth grader in Lampasas, Texas. She won a lawsuit against her school district after a federal judge ruled in 1996 that the course violated the Constitution.

DeAmicis, who is a Christian, said students were given quizzes and worksheets on the Bible and were often told their interpretations of stories about Moses and Jesus were wrong. "Everything that I had treasured since I was a child -- the things that I had learned in my church -- she was telling me I was wrong," DeAmicis said.

The straight-A student said her grades began to drop for no reason, but no one in the school would listen to her concerns. DeAmicis contacted the Anti-Defamation League, who supported the family in the successful lawsuit.

Baptist family pays price for opposing school prayer

By Kenny Byrd

SANTA FE, Texas (ABP) -- Debbie Mason grew up in a Baptist church believing in the separation of church and state. Years later she has learned that standing up for that conviction can carry a price, even with fellow Baptists.

Mason and her four daughters found themselves on the minority side of an emotional dispute over prayers at high school football games in Texas.

That dispute is now before the U.S. Supreme Court. Justices will decide by the end of June about the constitutionality of the Santa Fe Independent School District's policy allowing varsity games to be kicked off with prayer.

Lower courts have struck down the policy, which allows a student elected by peers to give a "message" or "invocation" at varsity football games. While the Masons are not among the parties challenging the policy in court, they have vocally opposed it. As a result, they say they faced harassment and threats.

"If you want to make enemies, if you want people to hate you, stand up for separation of church and state," said Mason, a homemaker who grew up attending a Baptist church in Michigan.

"This isn't a bad community," Mason said of the 9,000-population Texas town where she moved several years ago. "A lot of people here are nice, but some people in the churches have made it hard for other people."

When Mason's daughter Jennifer was 17 years old, a local school board member -- speaking from the pulpit during the worship service of a Santa Fe church -- described parents who opposed the school's policy as "dim-witted" and "bored" housewives with a "void" in their lives.

"I was in shock. I started to cry," remembers Jennifer Mason, who, at 22, is now a reporter for a newspaper in Alvin, Texas.

Mike Lopez, the school board member who made the remark, recalls the incident. "I'll stand by that statement," he said. Opponents of the prayer policy enjoy "taking the opposite view on everything that the town decides to do," he said. Many people in the town refer to families who oppose the prayer as "CAVE people -- Citizens Against Virtually Everything."

Court documents cite several incidents where students from minority faith groups were treated harshly by the school district. One teacher told a Mormon student his religion was a "cult."

Lopez said the Masons and others have exaggerated stories about religious coercion in schools.

"I can't understand how a 30-second prayer offered up in the name of Jesus Christ can so traumatize a child beyond repair, yet that same child can go see graphic violence in R-rated movies and be OK," he said.

But Mason, who answered phone calls from Associated Baptist Press only after "caller ID" identified who was calling, said her family's unpopular stance has jeopardized their employment, health and friendships. "For the last four or five years, we've had it hard financially," she said.

"When you're in a school like this or a small town like this, word trickles down," she said. Mason said her daughters couldn't find jobs in Santa Fe.

"We've been called 'anti-prayer' and 'anti-God,'" Mason said. During the height of the harassment, Mason said, "I thought I was going to have a nervous breakdown."

On more than one occasion her daughters came home crying, she said.

One daughter was diagnosed with an illness that a doctor said was caused by stress and anxiety. Mason said the girl finally admitted "that some kids had been pushing her up against the wall, tripping her and saying, 'You don't believe in God.'"

"Kids can be mean," she said. "A lot of the children who were doing this were from their own church."

Mason said her daughters were called "devil worshippers" for refusing copies of the Bible being passed out in school.

"Why should a child even have to explain why they don't want a Bible from a Gideon standing in the hall," she said. "I decided that my children were not going to go through that anymore and nor were any other children in the school district."

Mason said people would confront her at school board meetings and say: "You're one of us. You're a Baptist. Why are you doing this to us?" Mason would answer: "Because I am Christian. Because I am Baptist."

Mason, who moved to Santa Fe from Flint, Mich., said Baptists "down here believe differently than what I learned as a Baptist in Michigan."

At the age of 6, Debbie said she watched her parents go through a messy divorce. "I had a lot of questions I wanted to ask God," she remembers feeling at age 8. "I was so young, I thought you had to join a church to talk to God." Mason said.

She began attending a Baptist church with her grandparents. "I found out Jesus loved everybody." Mason said that when her mom was working two and three jobs, "and I just felt no one cared or was there, I knew Jesus was there. He was sitting there beside me when I cried myself to sleep."

As she got older, she said her church taught her about the necessity of separating church and state.

"Church-state separation is good for religion," Mason said.

"[People] don't think about the fact that someday they may wake up and will not be allowed to be a Baptist by their government," she added. "Our forefathers had enough insight to know that we would get back to the same problems they faced, and they wrote a Constitution to help us do the right thing."

Mason said she was ecstatic after discovering the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty watchdog group in Washington, had filed a brief against the prayer policy. "I cried when I heard it, because not many people had been helping us," she said. "I was thrilled that a group had done it. I was even more thrilled to find out it was a Baptist group."

Baylor University's J. M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists joined the BJC effort.

Mason said it has been painful to see her children be hurt by their church and fellow Christians. Two of her daughters have turned away from organized religion altogether because of the experience.

"This school board will never know the pain they have caused my children," Mason said.

Mason said she and her husband let their children choose their own faith. "They went to every church in town and always came back to the Baptist church," she said. Mason said that choice "made them stronger when it came to their faith, and it made them stronger to be able to speak out when people of other faiths were being hurt."

"But now, they won't go near a Baptist church."

Jennifer Mason said that before the lawsuit, her church friends would sit with her in worship. "But then after, it was like two different churches. It caused me to question my faith."

The Mason family was one of many that left Flint several years ago when General Motors closed a car plant there and jobs left the city.

When asked if she will leave the small Texas town, Debbie Mason quickly replied, "I'm not moving. ... I think fate has put me here to fight this fight."

Mason said she is perplexed by those who ask, "What harm is a prayer?"

"I guess their religion doesn't matter much," she reasoned. "Has religion become so commercialized that it's become 'just a prayer'? I think prayer means more than that."

Mason said she thinks most of the Supreme Court justices asked good questions during the oral arguments March 29, and she hopes they will strike down the prayer policy. But after her family's experiences, she worried, "If the Supreme Court does rule in the Does' favor, there is no telling what could happen down here."

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