



Nashville, Tennessee
**Associated
Baptist Press**

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January 18, 2001

(01-06)

- Truett Seminary taps Paul Powell as dean**
- Jesse Jackson admits to extramarital affair**
- Texas Baptist leader criticizes endorsement**
- Bush nominations will include religion posts**
- Clinton submits race relations assessment to Congress**
- Helms says religious groups should replace U.S. aid agency**
- Clinton issues proclamation on Religious Freedom Day**

Truett Seminary taps Paul Powell as dean

By Mark Wingfield

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Baylor University President Robert Sloan has named Paul Powell dean of Truett Theological Seminary.

The appointment came one month after the top candidate produced by a university search committee declined to accept the post.

Powell, 67, is a veteran Texas Baptist pastor who retired in 1998 as president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Annuity Board. He subsequently has been president of the Robert Rogers Foundation in Tyler, Texas.

He becomes third dean of the seminary in Waco, Texas, which is now in its sixth year and enrolls just under 250 students.

Deans at the Baptist-affiliated Baylor serve at the pleasure of the president. Search committees usually offer the president a set of finalists for such positions, and the president has full discretion in making the final selection.

After six months of work, the search committee for a new seminary dean in December brought three finalists to campus. After interviews with faculty, students and administrators, the deanship was offered to Howard Batson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo.

Although Batson had been rumored for months to be the likely dean candidate, he declined the post. He explained that he could not feel a sense of peace about taking the job.

The dean's post became open last spring after Sloan announced that Brad Creed would be reassigned to classroom responsibilities. Sloan commended Creed for his three years as dean, but he said the time has come for a different dean to lead the young school to its next level.

One major challenge facing the new dean is stepping up the pace of growth at the seminary, which already is one of the fastest-growing seminaries in the United States. A corollary challenge is securing funding so that all those students can attend Truett at a price comparable to or cheaper than the six SBC seminaries, whose tuition is heavily subsidized by the SBC budget.

Baylor officials recently have said they hope Truett will double its enrollment in a few years to about 500. By some accounts, the long-range plan calls for doubling enrollment yet again a few years after that.

Enrollment already has grown from 51 in 1994 to 247 last fall.

Truett could receive significantly greater funding from the Baptist General Convention of Texas this year, if churches follow the recommended Cooperative Program adopted by messengers in October. That budget takes money away from the six SBC seminaries and redirects it to Truett, Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University and Hispanic Baptist Theological School in San Antonio.

Baylor officials said Powell, who is a Baylor regent and a former state convention president, is the ideal person to lead the seminary to the next level.

"There is probably no one in the state of Texas who is more revered and respected as a Texas Baptist than Paul Powell. His credibility with Baptists will be of enormous benefit to Truett Seminary," said Donald Schmeltekopf, Baylor provost and vice president for academic affairs.

Sloan, who was founding dean of Truett, said he is "thrilled" to have Powell come on board as the seminary's third dean.

"He is a man of leadership and vision, a man of stature among Texas Baptists and an outstanding preacher," Sloan said. "He has spent a lifetime doing the very things that Truett Seminary wants to prepare ministers to do -- to preach the word of God, to evangelize and to lead Baptists forward into the 21st century."

Powell has been a strong supporter of Truett, as evidenced by a \$2.5 million gift from the Rogers Foundation to build a 550-seat chapel in the Truett facility currently under construction on the Waco campus.

That chapel will be named for Powell. The overall facility is a \$17 million project for which John and Eula Mae Baugh of Houston have been lead donors.

"I really believe the future of our historic Baptist witness is tied closely to Baylor University and to Truett Seminary," Powell said. "I'm very grateful for the foundation laid by Robert Sloan and Brad Creed, and I look forward to getting to know the faculty members individually and meeting with students."

"My door will always be open," he added. "As I heard [former Baylor president] Abner McCall say on one occasion, 'It will not be an open door to a closed mind.' I want to listen, I want to learn and I want to help set a vision and represent Truett Seminary with our denomination, with our churches and with our pastors."

Powell will join the Truett staff Feb. 26. He and his wife, Cathy, will maintain their residence in Tyler but also will maintain an apartment near the Baylor campus.

Powell's longest tenure as a pastor came at Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler, where he served 17 years. He also served Bell Falls Baptist Church and the First Baptist churches of Troy, Taylor and San Marcos.

A Texas native who grew up in Brookeland and Port Arthur, Powell earned the bachelor of arts degree from Baylor in 1956, then the master of divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1960. He holds honorary doctorates from East Texas Baptist University, Baylor, the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, Campbell University and Dallas Baptist University.

Jesse Jackson admits to extramarital affair

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Jesse Jackson, a civil-rights leader and Baptist minister who counseled President Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, has admitted to fathering a child out of wedlock.

"I am father to a daughter who was born outside of my marriage," Jackson said in a statement issued Jan. 18. "I love this child very much and have assumed responsibility for her emotional and financial support since she was born."

News reports indicated that the child, who is now 20 months old, is the result of an extramarital affair with a woman who worked for Jackson's Rainbow-PUSH advocacy organization. Jackson said he has told his wife and family about the child and they are working to reconcile.

"This is no time for evasions, denials or alibis," Jackson said. "I fully accept responsibility and I am truly sorry for my actions."

Jackson said he would take some time off from his ministry to "revive my spirit and reconnect with my family."

"No doubt, many close friends and supporters will be disappointed in me," Jackson said. "I ask for their forgiveness, understanding and prayers."

Jackson was one of the first ministers to come to Clinton's side during public revelation of his affair with a White House intern and subsequent impeachment. He met with Clinton -- and with the president's wife and daughter -- on Aug. 17, 1998, the day Clinton faced a grand jury and later admitted to a national television audience that, despite previous denials, he had an "inappropriate relationship" with the 25-year-old Lewinsky.

According to a report in the Washington Post, Jackson joined the Clintons in an evening of conversation and prayer, during which the president found solace in Psalm 51, a chapter on contrition for sin.

"He has a great sense of shame and regret," Jackson said of Clinton at the time. "But having said that, the question is how you handle faith in a storm."

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-- By ABP staff

Texas Baptist leader criticizes endorsement

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- The head of Texas Baptists' Christian Life Commission described as "out of bounds" a Southern Baptist Convention leader's unprecedented endorsement of U.S. Attorney General-designate John Ashcroft.

Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, wrote senators urging confirmation of the former Missouri senator nominated for the cabinet post by President-elect George W. Bush. "On behalf of the vast majority of over 16 million Southern Baptists nationwide, I urge you to support the confirmation of Sen. John Ashcroft," Land wrote.

Phil Strickland, however, who heads up the social-concerns agency for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, said the CLC speaks to Baptists on issues but does not presume to speak for them.

"It seems incredible to me that anyone would claim to represent a majority of 16 million Baptists on any issue, much less the appointment of John Ashcroft as U.S. attorney general," Strickland said. "I am saddened that the head of the Southern Baptist ethics agency has claimed to speak with an authority that no Baptist should claim."

"Count me out of those whom he claims to represent," Strickland said. "My enthusiasm for Sen. Ashcroft as attorney general is greatly diminished by his support for radical cuts in welfare assistance to needy people, his consistent opposition to church/state separation, and his obvious embrace of the political Religious Right."

"Those are my concerns, but they are only my concerns. For anyone to claim to speak for all Baptists - or even for the vast majority of Baptists when it comes to endorsements of individuals -- is out of bounds."

The BGCT, the largest of the autonomous state conventions affiliated with the SBC, last fall defunded the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission -- along with reducing funds for SBC seminaries and Executive Committee -- over policy differences.

Land said that while the ERLC does not endorse candidates for elected office, it has in the past taken sides in confirmation hearings because individual Baptists don't have an opportunity to vote directly and therefore need someone to advocate their views before lawmakers.

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Bush nominations will include religion posts

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Among the several appointments that will be made in the coming months by President-elect George W. Bush are two major posts dealing with religion.

The ambassador-at-large of the State Department Office of International Religious Freedom was created under a 1998 law designed to curb religious persecution abroad. The person in the post also serves as the ex-officio, non-voting 10th member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which was established to monitor violations of religious freedom abroad and to give policy recommendations to the administration and Congress.

The other major appointment will head a new White House office recently announced by Bush to address faith-based social programs. Observers say it would be a launch pad to implement "charitable choice" measures and other partnerships between religious social-service providers and government.

In an interview with Associated Baptist Press, a Bush spokesman would not comment on names being discussed for the posts. He said the faith-based office in the White House would work on ways to help those in need "reach out to faith-based groups that have proven successful in changing lives."

Observers -- some who have advised Bush on the matter -- say the leading candidate for the faith-based office is Stephen Goldsmith, former mayor of Indianapolis. But others close to the charitable-choice issue say Carl Esbeck, executive director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, has been interviewed for the post.

CLS is a non-denominational national network of attorneys, judges, law students, professors and lay people helping lawyers integrate their Christian faith and professional responsibilities. On the CLS website, Esbeck is called a "progenitor of 'charitable choice,' a provision in the 1996 federal welfare-reform act designed to enable faith-based social-service charities to cooperate with state and local agencies in assisting the poor and needy."

Neither Goldsmith nor Esbeck responded to requests for comment made several days before publishing this story.

After leaving the mayor's office in 1999, Goldsmith became a domestic-policy adviser to then-candidate Bush. In 1997, Goldsmith formed the "Front Porch Alliance" to help match churches and community groups with government resources.

Jim Wallis, head of Call to Renewal -- a national movement to end poverty -- said Goldsmith is the "leading candidate." Wallis said at Bush's recent meeting with religious leaders in Texas, several people urged that Goldsmith head the post. With some fearing a sort of "Christian triumphalism" from such an office, Wallis added, Goldsmith, who is Jewish, may be able to allay those fears.

Wallis said if the Bush administration "sees faith-based organizations as a place and a way to solve social problems that they're not going to deal with in public-policy terms, then that will be revealed quickly, and many of us will oppose it.

"If they listen to faith communities in helping to set the agenda of the administration in helping the poor, then I think there is a real opportunity for partnership."

The nominee to head the State Department office monitoring religious persecution abroad is less clear.

Sources close to the issue say names being considered include former Sen. Dan Coats, R-Ind., who helped steer the 1998 religious freedom bill into law. The sources also said former U.S. Rep. Jon Christensen, R-Neb., has shown interest in the post. Also being considered is former Time Magazine International Correspondent David Aikman. Aikman currently works at Ethics and Public Policy Center, an organization established in 1976 to "clarify and reinforce the bond between the Judeo-Christian moral tradition and the public debate over domestic and foreign-policy issues."

Clinton appointed the first person to hold the post when he named Robert Seiple to head the State Department religion offices in 1998. Seiple left the office in September 2000 to begin a think tank at Eastern College in Philadelphia.

Steven McFarland, executive director of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said commission members have asked that the position be "filled as soon as possible." He also said the commission has sent letters requesting a meeting with Secretary of State nominee Colin Powell.

McFarland told ABP that the terms of all nine members of the commission expire May 14 and Bush will have three appointments to make, Democratic congressional leaders will have four and Republican congressional leaders will have two.

McFarland did not comment on potential nominees to head the State Department office. "We'd like to see someone with the same level of energy that Seiple brought to us," he said, however. "It sends a message that religious freedom is a prominent spot in our foreign policy."

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Clinton submits race relations assessment to Congress

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Citing "unfinished business" in matters of racial justice, President Bill Clinton has urged Congress to end racial profiling, declare Election Day a national holiday, create uniform voting standards and to more closely examine the criminal-justice system.

The letter outlined Clinton's "personal assessment of the current national mood concerning race relations and issue a set of concrete challenges that form what I call the unfinished business of building One America."

He said the letter "stems from my own personal commitment to racial harmony that has its roots in the lessons and experiences of my childhood in the racially segregated South."

Among the many issues addressed in the letter of several pages, Clinton urged Congress to end racial profiling. "Simply stated, no person should be targeted by law enforcement because of the color of his or her skin," he said.

He also asked that the country re-examine its criminal-sentencing policies. "Over the long term, we should not be satisfied when so many Americans, especially so many people of color, are behind bars for so long for nonviolent crimes, with so little hope of putting their lives back together when they get out."

On the death penalty, Clinton urged legislation to provide greater access to post-conviction DNA testing and increased access to competent counsel for defendants.

Again raising issues surrounding irregularities in the Florida election process, Clinton said: "Too many people felt that the votes they cast were not counted and some felt that there were organized efforts to keep them from the polls. Both of these allegations must be fully investigated. But, whatever the outcome, we can and must take aggressive steps to improve voter turnout, and modernize and restore confidence in our voting system."

Clinton asked that a non-partisan presidential commission on election reform be established to ensure a fair and uniform system of voting standards. He also said Election Day should be declared a national holiday to increase voter participation. And Clinton said ex-criminal-offenders "who have repaid their debt to society" should have a chance to earn back the right to vote.

The president also addressed health care and education reforms to help minority communities.

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Helms says religious groups should replace U.S. aid agency

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious and other private groups, rather than government, should take the lead in providing aid and humanitarian assistance to impoverished nations, says a United States senator.

In a recent speech to the American Enterprise Institute, Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., criticized the U.S. Agency for International Development, established in 1979. The conservative senator said the time has come to reject "the failed compassion of towering, distant bureaucracies and instead empower private and faith-based groups who care most about those in need," according to news reports.

Helms said religious groups worth supporting include Catholic Relief Services and World Vision.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Clinton issues proclamation on Religious Freedom Day

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Marking the anniversary of the 1786 Virginia religious-freedom statutes that became the model for the First Amendment, President Bill Clinton issued the annual Religious Freedom Proclamation Jan. 15.

He used the proclamation to highlight the new U.S. focus on religious freedom abroad during his term in office, including new mandated reports on the status of religious freedom around the world and a new State Department office created by a 1998 law.

Clinton stated in the proclamation that religious freedom "is not a right we enjoy solely by virtue of being Americans; it is a fundamental human right that should be honored in every nation around the globe."

"That is why I have sought to make it an integral part of U.S. foreign policy and to raise the international awareness that many countries continue to engage in or tolerate egregious violations of their citizens' right to worship," he said.

Clinton said that because of religious freedom, "Americans have been spared much of the violence, bitterness, and conflict that have scarred so many other societies" and have "benefited immeasurably from the many contributions of generations of men and women who emigrated to America" for religious reasons.

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