



# Associated Baptist Press

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### Seminary administrator put on permanent 'leave'

By Bob Allen

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Trustees of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary approved a severance package Oct. 8 for a vice president earlier placed on administrative leave over conflict with the seminary's new president.

Terms of severance for Michael Whitehead, vice president for business affairs since 1995, were not disclosed.

The action took place behind closed doors at a special meeting requested by 13 of the school's 34 trustees to investigate allegations of irregularities by Phil Roberts, president of the Southern Baptist Convention seminary in Kansas City, Mo., since February.

Those charges, circulated among board members this summer in an e-mail from Mississippi trustee Gary Peek, involved improper use of seminary funds for personal travel and a lack of communication between the president and trustees.

A trustee leader said that issues brought to the table in the called meeting were "resolved," according to Baptist Press. A statement released after the meeting said trustees "affirmed support" of Roberts and looked forward to his official inauguration in late October.

Roberts told Associated Baptist Press that Peek apologized in the meeting and withdrew his charges. Peek declined to comment to an ABP reporter after the meeting.

An informed source requesting anonymity, however, said Peek apologized only for the manner of airing his concerns but believed it was his responsibility as a trustee to ask for information.

The source said concerns remain about administration of the seminary, including turnover in the business office leaving no one in place with an accounting degree or experience.

Trustees reportedly arranged with two other seminary presidents -- Albert Molher of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Paige Patterson of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary -- and SBC president James Merritt, to "mentor" Roberts in assembling an administrative staff and other leadership decisions.

Roberts told ABP he pledged better communication with trustees. Some of the trustees critical of Roberts prior to the meeting said they were less concerned about the seriousness of charges leveled against him than with frustration from being unable to get their questions answered.

Roberts said he believed "problems" linger on the trustee board related to his predecessor, whom trustees fired two years ago, and they have "raised tensions" and "lowered trust" among members of the board. He said he hoped the board was now on its way to "dealing with issues in a redemptive way."

Trustees did not disclose the reasons behind Whitehead's administrative leave or severance but instead issued a statement expressing "gratitude and appreciation" for his "faithful service."

"Dr. Whitehead has served with integrity in each capacity in which the board has assigned him, as vice president of business affairs and as interim president for nearly two years," the trustee statement said.

Whitehead also issued a statement describing his five-plus years at Midwestern as a "blessing."

"But the Lord seems to be saying that it is time for something new," Whitehead said. "As I enter this period of board-approved leave, I am excited to see where God will lead and excited to do whatever God says to do. I wish the very best for MBTS and shall be in prayer for the seminary faculty, staff, students and trustees."

Whitehead did not return a reporter's phone call, but sources told ABP Whitehead and Roberts were unable to work together. Sources said the impetus for the called meeting was a confrontation between the two men over Whitehead's refusal to reimburse travel funds to Roberts that Whitehead said were unjustified. After Roberts met with Whitehead and talked with the board's chairman and vice chairman, Whitehead went on administrative leave.

Roberts told ABP after the meeting, "I am thankful for the ministry Mike Whitehead has had at Midwestern Seminary and think he is going to have a continuing contribution to Christian/Baptist life in the Kansas City area."

According to Baptist Press, Malcolm Yarnell, Midwestern's vice president for academic affairs, was prepared to deliver a statement to trustees about the faculty's commitment to the mission of the seminary. Yarnell, along with two other administrators, expressed confidence in Roberts' leadership.

However, ABP received a copy of a letter written on Midwestern Seminary letterhead to Peak from an individual claiming to be a faculty member, who remained anonymous for fear of being fired.

The writer said he or she spoke on behalf of several colleagues in viewing "an ever-growing contemptuous and distrustful environment, especially among the faculty and staff."

The departure of several long-time staff members and a perception that some replacements are less qualified, coupled with little communication and other concerns "have brought faculty and staff morale to an indescribable low," the letter said.

"Although I have served our convention, and Midwestern, for quite some time, I have never seen the level of instability I have seen throughout the past nine months," the letter continued. "The running joke is: 'Don't worry about meeting the new person today -- they won't be here tomorrow.'"

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## **Texas Baptist newspaper calls for 'slander' to stop**

By Mark Wingfield and Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Baptist General Convention of Texas' newspaper has called on leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention and a breakaway conservative state convention in Texas to "cease and desist" from producing and distributing materials that "slander" ministries of the BGCT.

An editorial in the Oct. 8 issue of the Baptist Standard ran alongside a lengthy report about the rival Southern Baptist Convention of Texas' newsletter publishing a story written by the SBC news service Baptist Press linking a BGCT agency with the pro-abortion group Planned Parenthood.

The president of Buckner Baptist Benevolences, Ken Hall, described the article's publication as "public relations terrorism" designed to undermine confidence in both the child-care ministry institution and the moderate-led state convention that supports its work.

"This was an attack on the Baptist General Convention of Texas by using Buckner," he declared. "The only conclusion I can draw is that they were using Buckner as a weapon to somehow injure the efforts of Baptists in Texas."

Hall said the article was one in a continuing pattern of efforts to "slander" the BGCT, the largest state affiliate of the SBC, which has resisted the conservative movement that controls the national denomination.

The story, published in the Southern Baptist Texan's October issue, is headlined "Abstinence program linking Buckner and Planned Parenthood stirs concern in Amarillo." It criticizes Buckner for co-sponsoring a sexual-abstinence program, along with 23 other organizations, including the American Red Cross and Girl Scouts.

The article focuses, however, on one of the co-sponsors, Planned Parenthood, quoting sources as saying Buckner has created the "appearance of evil" and a "perception of guilt by association" by being linked with the group that supports abortion.

Hall called the article "misleading and untruthful" and said it would hurt women and children the agency serves.

Marv Knox, editor of the Baptist Standard, editorialized Oct. 8 that "the slander has to stop."

"You may be weary of the Standard reporting stories like this," Knox wrote. "We're weary too. But this newspaper's board of directors and staff have considered our calling, and we resolutely agree you must know what is happening.

"The time has come for Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee and publisher of Baptist Press, and Jim Richards, executive director of Southern Baptists of Texas, to publicly disavow this practice and command their employees to cease and desist. The Standard stands ready to publish in full any pledge Chapman and Richards give to stop the slander of BGCT ministries. If they will not do so, they are as guilty of the malice as the staff members who produce the stories. If they will not, they are accountable for the damage they do to fine institutions like Buckner, the host of ministries sponsored by the BGCT and God's children -- like grandparents, pregnant teenagers and abused children."

Hall said the Baptist Press article "misrepresents the facts" and makes "immoral assertions," noting that Buckner never has and never will support abortion in any form.

"Buckner would not lend itself to anything that would teach anything other than total abstinence before marriage," he explained. "We strongly believe in the absolute sanctity of life -- from pre-birth to death."

Participating in educational events like the one in Amarillo is essential to reach young people with a message of abstinence and self-protection, he asserted.

"I have no apology for Buckner participating in this event," Hall said. "We've been called to serve as Jesus did . eating with sinners and tax collectors. We meet people where they are."

But Gary Ledbetter, editor of the Southern Baptist Texan, defended the Baptist Press article, written by his wife, Tammi, as fair and accurate.

Ledbetter said publishing the article had nothing to do with the BGCT but was about "an institution in Texas that many of our churches support."

"Buckner has partnered in this particular event with an organization that is a major and significant abortion provider," he explained. "That does not imply that Buckner supports abortion. But it implies that this was an unfortunate association on their part."

Churches that contribute to the SBTC currently have the option of designating that funds be passed through to Buckner, a well-known and respected BGCT agency. That arrangement ends after this year, however, because Buckner officials refused to sign a statement of affiliation with the breakaway group that included endorsement of a confession of faith.

A reporter asked Ledbetter to explain the difference between Buckner planning an abstinence program with different groups and SBC official Richard Land serving with people from non-Christian faiths on a government panel for international religious freedom.

"I don't know how to compare them, except that Planned Parenthood is an organization that is antithetical to what most Southern Baptist churches stand for," Ledbetter said. "There is not much way to partner with Planned Parenthood in a way that is consistent with Christian beliefs."

And even though the program dealt solely with abstinence, Ledbetter said, "Any sexually related material that's taught by Planned Parenthood is going to be tainted by their reputation of what they stand for."

Buckner received three referrals for its adoption program as a result of the Amarillo conference, said Scott Collins, vice president for communications at Buckner.

"I guess appearance is more important to (SBC and SBTC) than saving three babies' lives," he said. "We can look good, but if we're not out there doing the ministry, we don't get these referrals. Criticize us all you want, but we got three referrals from that."

In another article in the SBTC newsletter, the group denied charges the new convention is attempting to lure churches away from the BGCT.

"The officers and staff of the SBTC have not become involved in a plan to increase the ranks," president Rudy Hernandez wrote in the convention's magazine. "They have responded to requests from churches for information either by mail or in person and have been kept busy responding to the requests so that there has been no need for proselytizing."

"Individuals who may have sought out others to become a part of the SBTC have done so at their own discretion," he added.

In a publicity packet sent to churches across the state, meanwhile, SBTC executive Jim Richards touts the convention's conservative views and invites visitors to this year's annual meeting, which is scheduled the same time as the BGCT.

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