



Associated Baptist Press

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April 24, 2002

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee

APR 30 2002

(02-33)

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Jerry Johnson appointed dean of Southern Seminary's Boyce College

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Jerry Johnson, a former chairman of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's board of trustees, has been named dean of Southern's Boyce College.

Seminary President Albert Mohler, who appointed Johnson to the post, noted that Johnson resigned as a trustee in 1998 to enroll at Southern as a doctoral student. He has since served as Southern's assistant director of development and as an instructor in Christian ethics. He also has been chairman of the Southern Baptist Convention Committee on Order of Business.

"This is an historic event and development," Mohler told trustees. "I believe he is God's man for the hour for Boyce College."

Expressing appreciation to Mohler, Johnson responded, "I'm looking forward to working with you and the students."

Boyce Bible School was founded in 1974 on Southern's campus in Louisville, Ky., offering an associate of arts degree. It added six bachelor's degrees in 1998 and was renamed Boyce College. The school's enrollment has grown in the past five years from 75 students to 400.

Johnson first gained national attention in Southern Baptist life in 1990 during his first year as a trustee. He charged former Southern Seminary President Roy Honeycutt and several professors with "doctrinal infidelity," claiming that "one would have to be as blind as a mole to not see that Dr. Honeycutt just does not believe the Bible."

The ensuing uproar over Johnson's claims against Honeycutt, a renowned Old Testament scholar, included a call by the seminary's Faculty Club for Johnson's resignation and a motion at the 1990 SBC annual meeting seeking Johnson's dismissal as a trustee.

The motion was ruled out of order, but the issue was referred to Southern Seminary's board of trustees. Board members held a special called meeting in which they accepted an apology from Johnson for the wording of his written claims.

Johnson's letter of apology noted that some of the language in his 16-page document "was ill-chosen and too harsh."

His letter added, however, that "under no circumstances should this statement be construed to mean that the issues I addressed have ceased to be concerns in my heart and mind."

Since joining the seminary staff, Johnson also has served as an adviser to the Kentucky Baptist Laymen's Network, a group seeking to elect state convention officers committed to the SBC's conservative shift.

In 1999, Johnson again made news when he used seminary resources to recruit students to enlist conservative voters for the Kentucky Baptist Convention annual meeting.

Mohler said at the time that the use of seminary letterhead to enlist students in the effort apparently was "inadvertent" and "will not happen again."

While acknowledging the memo was "a mistake," Johnson added that "every Southern Baptist, every Kentucky Baptist has a right to use their influence. That was the only way in which I was doing this."

Johnson is scheduled to complete his doctorate this spring. He holds a bachelor's degree from Criswell College in Dallas and earned a master's degree in 1997 from Denver Conservative Baptist Seminary.

Johnson, a member of Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, is interim pastor of Elk Creek Baptist Church in Taylorsville. He previously was pastor of two churches in Colorado.

In other action, trustees voted to reduce the number of board members from 65 to 45, contingent on approval by the SBC Executive Committee and SBC messengers.

Mohler said the proposal, which has been under consideration for several years, "will best serve the seminary and the cause of our churches in years to come."

Decreasing the number of trustees will help "maximize trustee effectiveness and involvement" while bringing the size of the board more in line with other SBC entities, he added.

Trustees also elected four faculty members to tenured positions:

-- Peter Gentry, associate professor of Old Testament interpretation. A graduate of the University of Toronto, he previously was a professor of Old Testament and biblical languages at Toronto Baptist Seminary.

-- Kenneth Magnuson, assistant professor of Christian ethics. A graduate of Bethel Theological Seminary and the University of Cambridge, he previously was an assistant professor of Christian ethics at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

-- David Puckett, professor of church history. A graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago, he is headmaster at Trinity Academy in Raleigh, N.C.

-- Stephen Wellum, associate professor of Christian theology. A graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, he previously was an assistant professor of theology at Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary.

Gentry, Magnuson and Wellum have been teaching at Southern under presidential appointment since 1999. Puckett has been teaching church history at Southern since 2000.

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Americans held in Afghanistan say their faith sustained them

By Mary Wimberley

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Dayna Curry and Heather Mercer, the American missionaries who spent 105 days imprisoned in Afghanistan for teaching Christianity, said it was their faith that saw them through the ordeal.

Describing the first night that they were captured, Curry said: "We prayed and sang. It was like rivers of peace."

Curry and Mercer spoke to Samford University students April 18 in a morning convocation at the school in Birmingham, Ala. They also addressed a luncheon meeting of the Samford Auxiliary.

Although conditions in the rat-infested prison were primitive, being incarcerated with 30 Afghan women who had been imprisoned by the Taliban regime "was a missionary's dream come true," said Curry. She said some of the women were in prison for such crimes as wearing their burka away from their face or refusing to marry a Taliban soldier.

"Afghanistan is a different planet," Curry said. She said children beg on the street from morning to night, and one out of four children doesn't live to age five. Many people have never seen a movie.

Such circumstances made it easy for the two women to share their faith with the people and show them movies about Christianity, activities that the then-ruling Taliban considered a crime.

Mercer described Simon, a teenaged orphan who was receptive to a book of Psalms she gave him and wanted to accept her religion.

"Relationships like the one with Simon are how we ended up in prison for 105 days," said Mercer.

On Aug. 3, following the showing of a movie about Jesus to a family, Taliban soldiers captured first Curry and then Mercer. Curry said they put her in a car that was surrounded by "men with whips."

"I prayed that Heather would get away," Curry said. "But when she drove up later, I was relieved that I wouldn't be alone."

Being arrested didn't surprise Mercer. "I knew, going to Afghanistan, that I could be thrown in prison," she said.

During their imprisonment, the Sept. 11 attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center took place. When the retaliatory bombing started in Afghanistan, Curry said, "We realized that they could take revenge on us."

On Nov. 12, while in their fourth prison, they learned that the Northern Alliance would soon take over Kabul. "We had just finished our prayer and worship time, and we knew we would either be freed or we would be taken out of the city with the Taliban," Mercer said.

Later that evening, Taliban soldiers loaded the two women in a van and drove them toward Kandahar, putting them in the most danger they had been in. They were then put in another prison between Kabul and Kandahar, from where they were eventually freed.

Mercer recounted the final episode of their imprisonment, in which they first heard gunfire and saw Taliban soldiers running: "Soon all was quiet. Then we heard more angry men. I was under the desk, praying. Then, in comes this wild looking man with ammunition, a machine gun and a rocket launcher, shouting, 'You're free! You're free!' It was total chaos."

As they walked through the streets of the town, they saw women with their burkas pulled back and children playing music. "I thought, 'We are in the middle of history,'" Mercer said.

After two hours, a helicopter crew spotted the fire the women had made from headscarves and other clothing items. A U.S. Special Forces soldier told Curry that his family had been praying for them, and so had other members of the rescue mission. "He said it was an honor to be part of the rescue mission," she said.

The two have since learned how widespread prayer was for them during their imprisonment.

"As we came into the room today, women stopped and told us that their prayer groups had been praying for us," Curry told members of the Samford Auxiliary, an organization of women who undertake projects to support the university. About 800 members and guests attended the luncheon.

During the morning convocation, Mercer told students that her decision to go to Afghanistan had not been met with wide favor. "Some of the greatest opposition I received was from people who follow Jesus," she said, adding that her mother had opposed her decision.

"I had a choice. I could have served God in the states, and I could have made some difference," Mercer said. "The greatest challenge is choosing God's best over what's good. Choosing the narrow way is not very

popular. God was saying, 'My best for you is Afghanistan.' Those who opposed my going are now my best supporters."

"If you get persecuted in the name of Jesus, or people make fun of you, you are blessed," she told the crowd of about 1,200 students and faculty.

"The decisions you make in the next few years will affect what you do the rest of your life," she said. "Each of us in this room, by the power of God, has the ability to change the world one person at a time."

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-- Mary Wimberley is a writer for Samford University.

Mohler: 2000 faith statement is 'a blessing and a gift'

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Opponents of confessionalism in Southern Baptist life reflect "either an abysmal ignorance or a willful misrepresentation of the Baptist heritage," Albert Mohler told trustees of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Weighing in on the debate over international missionaries being directed to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," Mohler described the document as a doctrinal confession rather than a creed.

Mohler, president of Southern Seminary since 1993 and one of the principal authors of the Southern Baptist Convention's revised faith statement, cited confessionalism as one of the seminary's core realities.

"The 'Baptist Faith and Message' as revised by this convention in the year 2000 is not an imposition upon this institution or its faculty," Mohler told trustees during their April 16 board meeting. "It is a blessing and a gift for the health of the institution, its faithfulness and integrity."

Challenging those who say the Bible is the only confession Baptists need, Mohler said: "Virtually anyone who claims to be a Christian will sign the Bible. If signing the Bible is the only issue and there is no common understanding of what the Bible teaches, then one might as well be a member of any denomination or of any church or teach in any institution.

"How can one remain Baptist without a confession of faith?" Mohler asked. "How can one as an institution remain Christian in any distinctive sense without the confession of faith?"

"What kind of authority is there where there are no boundaries and there is no definition?" he added. "Confessionalism is necessary if there is to be any true accountability."

In addition to confessionalism, Mohler said core realities that shape Southern Seminary are conviction, commission, confrontation and the church.

"The convictions that drive Southern Seminary are deeply rooted in the Scripture as the inerrant, infallible, eternal Word of God," he said. "The seminary becomes important not as the end but as a means. We begin with the church."

Southern's commission "is framed by the Great Commission," Mohler noted. "We want to make certain that every single program of the seminary has not only a confessional integrity, but a Great Commission focus."

That focus is essential, he added, because "there will be no missionaries sent from churches that do not believe the gospel; there will be no missionaries supported by denominations that forfeit biblical authority."

Mohler said confrontation is important because "these are not easy days."

"The church of the Lord Jesus Christ has never been called to a false peace," he emphasized. "The church has always been watered by the blood of the martyrs."

Confrontational issues that ministers must face in today's society include homosexuality, the breakdown of the family and end-of-life ethical questions, he pointed out.

"The issue of homosexuality looms large as perhaps the most divisive confrontation in our modern moral context," he said.

Acknowledging that "the Christian church sometimes comes across as something less than compassionate on this issue," Mohler added: "Even though truth-telling is the first act of compassion, it is not the last. Premised upon that truth, we then can reach out to persons who are ensnared in a pattern of sin and say, 'We know the way out.'"

Citing the need for the seminary to be continually accountable to Southern Baptist churches, Mohler told trustees, "If those congregations aren't healthier because this seminary is here, then shut it down and start all over."

The board meeting concluded with Mohler recognizing several trustees who are rotating off the board and who began serving prior to Mohler's election as president.

Candidly reflecting on the political volatility of that transition, outgoing trustee Jim Wilson of Orlando, Fla., told fellow board members, "Some of us were there when we had sit-ins and stand-ins and protests and some predicted -- when we elected a young 33-year-old president who believed the Word of God -- predicted the death of this institution."

Citing growing enrollment in several seminary programs, Wilson added: "The death of this institution has been greatly exaggerated. It's exciting what God has done.

"We had crucial votes in those days," he recalled. "We would stay up and caucus late at night and we'd wonder, 'Can we count on this one? Can we count on that one?'"

Alluding to the seminary's conservative shift under Mohler's leadership, Wilson said, "I can't help but reminisce a little bit and just thank God for what has happened."

Outgoing trustee chairman David Wilson of Lubbock, Texas, who also is rotating off the board, told trustees: "Don't live in the past. Just don't forget where you are and don't lose what you have. Press on. The great days are ahead."

Sounding a similar theme in his report, Mohler encouraged board members to remind future trustees of the school's covenants and commitments "lest that which has been so hard-won be slowly but surely lost."

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