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University president draws fire after grade-tampering incident

By Biblical Recorder staff

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. (ABP) -- The president of Baptist-affiliated Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, N.C., is under fire for tampering with grades of a star athlete, making him eligible to play.

The school's faculty gave President Chris White a vote of "no confidence" in light of a newspaper story reporting the incident Sept. 10. The secret ballot vote was 63-39 against White with seven abstentions, according to the Shelby (N.C.) Star, which attended the meeting until the faculty voted to close it.

An investigation by the NCAA into the school's athletics program was expected to follow.

The Shelby newspaper reported that student Carlos Webb lacked the academic standing to play basketball shortly before the start of the 2000-2001 season. One factor was that he was caught cheating in an introduction to religion class he took in the fall semester of 1999 and given an "F." Webb retook the class that summer and made a "D."

Under school policies, when a student fails a class and then retakes it and passes, the failing grade is dropped, meaning Webb would have passed the course. There is an exception, however, in cases of academic dishonesty, which means Webb's "D" and "F" grades should have been averaged together.

Just before the start of the basketball season, White wrote a memo to Gardner-Webb registrar Stephen Sain, ordering him to treat the summer course as a normal repeat. White said he based his decision after investigating "circumstances regarding" the grades.

White said Webb got bad advice from a "senior level" official, whom he refused to identify. "When a senior-level official does a dumb thing like that, it puts me in a bad position," White wrote in the memo. "But we put the student's welfare first."

Webb went on to average more than 16 points a game that year, leading Gardner-Webb to a 22-10 record and a championship in the National Christian Collegiate Athletic Association tournament.

A school official said GWU "self-reported" the violations, but did not give specifics to the North Carolina Baptist newspaper Biblical Recorder. The school released little information about the issue. A two-paragraph statement focused on the trustees' lack of notice about faculty concerns.

But Gil Blackburn, Gardner-Webb's academic dean, said he doubted White's story about the adviser error.

"The honor code should not be set aside on flimsy excuses such as 'bad advice,'" he said. "Cheating has consequences and the penalties should stand, whether the student is a star athlete or undistinguished."

In a telephone interview with the Biblical Recorder, Blackburn said athletic officials asked him three times to allow Webb's passing grade to override the failure for cheating. He refused each time.

Blackburn said faculty leaders asked White to take the lead in cleaning up the controversy. Some wanted White to offer to resign, and then let the faculty "judge whether he's the person who can lead us back from the humiliation," Blackburn said.

The no-confidence vote "would suggest that the faculty wasn't satisfied with his response," Blackburn said.

The Star said White admitted making a mistake in the faculty meeting and asked for forgiveness. He pleaded for "no mad rush to judgment" at the emergency meeting Sept. 10. Classes were canceled so faculty could attend.

Before the no confidence vote, the faculty gave Blackburn an overwhelming show of support with a 112-5 vote.

Blackburn said he knew about the situation two years ago, but did not report it to the NCAA or faculty. "I wish to God I had screamed bloody murder two years ago," he told the Star.

In the interview with the Recorder, Blackburn said he rationalized that he had done his duty by rejecting calls to change Webb's grades. He said he was in a "moral quandary" over whether he should report the matter.

"I feel I can be legitimately criticized for not making it known," he said. "I can't give you a good reason why I didn't."

Other faculty members criticized White during the meeting, according to the Star.

"There are two honor codes, one for students that have a good jump shot and another for others," said Phil Williams, associate vice president of academic affairs.

White presented his case, then left before other speakers took their turn and long before the vote.

"I conducted an investigation that was far too cursory, and I made a decision that was very, very bad," he said. "At the time, I felt that I had the authority to do that, and that I was siding with the student.

"Despite those who disagree with me, the fact that he was an athlete did not matter."

Blackburn said White told him he had investigated the Webb case, but the two did not consult about it. He told the Recorder that he was "informed after the fact."

White could not be reached for comment after the vote.

Darlene Gravett, dean of the graduate school, told the Star that a no-confidence vote indicates that faculty members no longer have confidence in White as a leader.

Blackburn said faculty members were told that a confidence vote would indicate that they thought White should continue to lead the school. A no-confidence vote would indicate a request that trustees change the leadership of the school.

But some faculty members expressed confidence in White.

Wayne Stacy, dean of the divinity school, issued a statement that he said spoke only for him as a member of the faculty.

"In my view, the special called university faculty meeting of this past Tuesday was precipitous, reactionary, unnecessary and counterproductive. If the faculty felt compelled to make a statement about this issue, it could have done so at its regular faculty meeting later in the month, most likely with more information and greater clarity," Stacy said.

"The president made a mistake. He's both owned it and asked forgiveness for it. In my judgment, one mistake does not negate 16 years of outstanding service as president of this university. He has my complete confidence and full support."

The school's trustees have not decided what, if any, actions they will take in response to the faculty vote, according to a statement released by the university's office of public relations and communications.

"The Gardner-Webb University board of trustees were not made aware of any faculty concerns prior to the faculty meeting of Sept. 10," the statement said. "Members of the board of trustees were only made aware of the faculty's actions on the day the faculty meeting was held."

The trustees' next meeting is scheduled for late October.

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Assistant campus minister reinstated at Mars Hill College

By Tony Cartledge

MARS HILL, N.C. (ABP) -- A week after announcing budget cuts resulting in layoffs of a campus minister and her assistant, Mars Hill College's interim president said an anonymous gift has come in that will allow him to reinstate the assistant campus minister on a three-quarter-time basis.

That still leaves Paula Clayton Dempsey, the Baptist-affiliated school's campus minister the past 11 years, out of a job as of Sept. 20. Some have suggested that aiming budget cuts at her office provided a convenient way to get rid of a high-profile woman minister that some view as too liberal for a Baptist school.

Interim President Dan Lunsford, in a telephone interview with the Biblical Recorder, repeated an earlier statement that the layoffs of Dempsey and her assistant, Debra Huff, were a last resort in implementing trustee-mandated budget cuts.

Since he announced the cuts Sept. 4, he said, a donor designated a gift for campus ministry that will keep Huff on three-quarter time. It also will expand associate campus minister Beth Honeycutt from half to three-quarter time. Her job is funded by donations.

Lunsford said other gifts have come in that will make possible a small severance package for employees released this fall who had more than three years of service at Mars Hill.

Lunsford denied charges that he was closing down the campus-ministry office. "Before making the move, I had resources lined up to assist with religious-life services on campus," he said. Lunsford said Wesley Pike, a Mars Hill alumnus who is director of missions for the French Broad Baptist Association, and Tommy Justus, pastor of Mars Hill Baptist Church, had agreed to assist the college's religious-life committee as needed. The committee also includes faculty members who are ordained ministers, he said.

He said a number of other lower-profile budget cuts this year preceded the recent layoffs. They included a reduction in library and student-health services and less dependence on outside consultants. Vacant faculty positions in education, music and science are not being filled, and deep cuts are being made in printing and marketing costs, Lunsford said.

In addition, the college will save \$240,000 by canceling all regular salary increases for the year, and another \$80,000 by reductions in the use of adjunct and part-time professors.

With all the reductions in place, the school's budget will drop \$617,000 from \$23.3 million to \$22.7 million. Since the new budget also accounts for \$1,155,000 in depreciation and bad debts, Lunsford said the effective cuts were about \$1.6 million.

Lunsford said he regretted that the budget axe reached the campus minister's office. "Rev. Dempsey is a very caring individual who has worked hard to help young people establish a vision of mission and outreach on a local and global basis," he said. "She has made a real contribution and has shown that giving Christian spirit."

He said the decisions culminating in Dempsey's dismissal were "the most difficult decisions of my career, but the bottom line is that we had to look at long range needs for the financial stability of the school."

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Washington Baptists recall Sept. 11 tragedies

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Tom Fournier narrowly escaped death at the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, and lost 42 colleagues with whom he worked regularly, but he has a message for his fellow believers: "If you are a Christian, you cannot fear. You can be discouraged, you can question, but you can't fear."

Fournier -- an Army computer specialist and a member of Washington's Georgetown Baptist Church -- spoke those words of encouragement in a testimony as part of a commemorative service on the one-year anniversary of the attacks. The service was sponsored by the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and hosted by Washington's National Baptist Memorial Church.

Fournier, like many others, was moved to spiritual reflection by the attacks. But he was also inspired to thankfulness that the suffering was not even greater. While his office sustained a direct hit from the airplane that crashed into the building, Fournier had stepped down the hall only a few minutes before the impact.

Despite mourning the loss of his co-workers, Fournier said he was encouraged by the fact that more than 70 percent of them were believers in Christ. "I'll see them again someday," he said.

Fournier also praised his believing colleagues for living out their faith in the workplace, noting that they were not abrasive or obtrusive about sharing their faith. "If you know that Jesus Christ is your savior, don't just say it with your words," he said, asserting that his co-workers lived out the words of a quotation often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words."

Reflecting the wide diversity of the D.C. convention, about 400 Baptists of several ethnic backgrounds gathered to pray; hear testimonies; sing hymns in Spanish, English and French; and enjoy performances by deaf sign-language choirs, African-American gospel choirs, and classically-trained white soloists.

Noting that America's multiculturalism was one of the ideals that the terrorists attacked on Sept. 11, the host pastor welcomed guests to the service. "In this place and at this time, you are a member of the glorious family of God," Paul Clark said. "You are in a community of peace."

Even as they gathered, though, a cloud of uncertainty about future terrorist attacks hung over Baptists in the District. Just a day before, the federal Office of Homeland Security had elevated the country's terrorism alert status to its second-highest level, the Air Force had resumed regular combat air patrols over the city, and military agencies had loaded live anti-aircraft munitions into missile launchers located around the metropolitan area.

At Washington's First Baptist Church -- less than a mile from the White House -- church members and others from the community were invited to use the sanctuary during much of the day for a "come and go" prayer service. Pastor Jim Somerville prayed that the safety of both his parishioners and the world wouldn't be further threatened by what may come next in American foreign policy. "Keep us, O Lord, from taking up the weapons of war in our quest for peace," he prayed. "Help us to know that real peace, lasting peace, comes from you."

Matt Anderson, while worried about future tragedies and wars, is also thankful for one positive benefit in his family's life as an indirect result of the attacks.

Anderson, who works at the Baptist Joint Committee near the Capitol, had a harrowing day. Because of snarled traffic and uncertainty about what might happen next, he walked the two miles to his wife's office. From there the couple had to walk most of the 10 miles to their home in Alexandria, Va., a path that led them right by the Pentagon.

Anderson said going through the experience together strengthened the couple's marriage. "I think it helped bring us closer," he said. "It helped put things in perspective, and it played a part in our decision to go ahead and have a child."

The young couple's baby -- their first -- is due in October. "We thought, even in America's tragedy, that the thing to do was to choose life in the midst of death."

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Americans gather in worship on anniversary of Sept. 11

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Americans turned to their faith on the anniversary of Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, gathering in houses of worship and community services across the nation.

About 200 people prayed around the flagpole at Rio Grande River Ministry in San Antonio, Texas, in sight of morning traffic on highway Loop 410.

First Baptist Church in Robbins, N.C., invited members from the community to a dinner and worship service featuring an "All-American" menu of hot dogs, baked beans, coleslaw and French fries. The service included patriotic music and a proclamation by the town's mayor.

"It was an encouraging time," said Mayor Mickey Brown, who is also the church's associate pastor. "The whole community came together."

The Kentucky Baptist Convention and Long Run Baptist Association co-sponsored a "Service of Remembrance." Leslie Hollon, pastor of St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., called on worshippers to move "from anguish to hope."

"If religion, which was intended by God to deliver God's hope to this world, is being hijacked by people who seek to bring destruction to this world, then people of religion must step forward to bring God's hope and stop the destruction that is under way," Hollon said.

Deena Burnett, whose husband was one of the heroes aboard Flight 93 that crashed in Pennsylvania on Sept. 11, remembered the day in a message at Otter Creek First Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark.

"As Tom talked to me four different times during his final hour, he assured me that he was putting a plan together and everything would be fine," she said. "His last words were, 'We're going to do something.'"

Despite her loss, Burnett said her faith has grown. "I have received hundreds of letters from people who say they are going back to church because of my story," she said. "I am thankful they are, even though I'm not sure what part of it inspired their reaction."

"Listen to what God's plans are for you with an open heart and mind," she exhorted worshippers, "knowing that you, too, can have a positive impact on the lives of others in your schools, communities and churches."

Some responded to the anniversary by reaching out to members of other faiths. Services at First Baptist Church, Haddonfield, N.J., included Jewish and Muslim readings. "This is an important time to reach out beyond our ecumenical family to the interfaith community -- a time for unity and cooperation among people of all faiths," said Michael Feicht, pastor of the American Baptist congregation.

Others focused on the differences between Christians and Muslims. "We need to witness to Muslims, not just because they're Muslim, but because they're human beings," said Grant Barber, pastor of Eastern Shore Baptist Church in Daphne, Ala.

Some lamented that despite a surge in church attendance following last year's attack, the numbers of worshippers soon fell back to normal. Roger Willmore, pastor of First Baptist Church in Boaz, Ala., laid much of the blame on preachers. "After Sept. 11, people returned to church needing to hear a relevant word from God," he said. "They did not hear an authoritative word from pulpits across the land."

Brad Creed, provost of Samford University in Birmingham, Ala., said the tragedies of Sept. 11 changed the mindset of the nation's young people. "Working with college students, I can see how the 9/11 events forced them to see life is not as predictable and secure as they once thought," he said. "These events have made students think more about the world in which they live."

Baptists didn't just sit and pray in the year since the attacks. During a 319-day response, Southern Baptists from across the nation cleaned 643 apartments in New York, served 1.3 million meals to rescue workers and victims' families, gave 21,000 teddy bears to children and donated \$4.1 million to disaster relief.

"The amazing part of this whole thing was to see Baptists come together as ambassadors for God," said Claude Rhea, chief development officer for the North American Mission Board.

Col. John Brinsfield, chief of chaplain operations for the United States Army Forces Command in Ft. McPherson, Ga., told Campbellsville College students about Pentagon workers who put helping others ahead of their own safety. "We are living a love story, although we may not have thought about our lives and priorities in exactly those terms," he said. "We love God, our country, and those around us."

In an address to the nation from New York's Ellis Island, President Bush talked about the nation's duty to defend ideals the terrorists attacked. "Ours is the cause of human dignity; freedom guided by conscience and guarded by peace," he said. "This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope drew millions to this harbor. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it."

"America was knocked to her knees" by the tragedy, said Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, but the nation "is strongest on its knees as it realized it is one nation under God."

"This country unapologetically was founded as one nation under God," said Huckabee, a former Baptist pastor and past president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. "Our military does not give us strength. Our strength comes from our Almighty God."

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-- Compiled from reports.

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