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Oklahoma pastor to be recommended as Illinois executive director
By Michael Leathers
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SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (ABP) – A former president of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma will be recommended as the next executive director of the Illinois Baptist State Association.

The IBSA's executive director search committee has picked Wendell Lang, pastor of First Baptist of Pryor, Okla., to succeed Bob Wiley, who stepped down in October 2001 after a tumultuous relationship with some IBSA elected leaders during the last two years of his five-year tenure. Lang will be presented to the IBSA's board of directors on Jan. 28 during a special meeting in Carlinville, Ill. If elected he is expected to begin his duties by the third week of February.

"Wendell is a consensus builder and has a real ability to bring people together and focus them on the mission at hand," said Anthony Jordan, the BGCO's executive director-treasurer.

Those traits may be put to the test when, if approved, Lang will take the reins of a state convention grappling with a growing unrest among churches over the IBSA's direction during its leadership transition and plummeting staff morale.

One of Lang's duties, according to a staff memo from the search committee's chairman, will be to "graciously" review employees to see how they fit into the organization. Staff received the memo from chairman Kevin Kerr in mid-December. He dispelled a rumor that his committee favored a proposal that called for the new executive director to "demand the resignation" of all staff.

Such a proposal, Kerr admitted, had been recommended to committee members. While they were "able to understand the reasoning behind such a suggestion," Kerr wrote, they "quickly sought to address the weaknesses this plan seemed to pose."

Kerr, who is a pastor in Waterloo, Ill., wrote that the new executive director does not intend to demand a blanket resignation.

"On the other hand, you should know that each staff person will be graciously reviewed over the course of some time to see how well they fit into the new team and how effective they want to be toward helping IBSA accomplish its mission. ... If you want to be on the team and will be committed to service which helps IBSA churches accomplish kingdom growth, you should be given that opportunity." Lang intends to be "supportive and redemptive" toward staff, Kerr wrote.

News of that memo drew a cautious reaction from the director of missions of Capital City Baptist Association in Springfield. "It would put me on guard with all the things that have taken place," Milton Bost said. Most IBSA employees are members of churches in the regional association.

Lang served two, one-year terms as BGCO president, wrapping up his final year last November. He "has a passion for evangelism and missions," Jordan said. Kerr's memo described him as a "relational person" and a "well-respected leader with a genuine concern for the pastors of our state."

Lang declined to comment, saying he would have to confer with Kerr before talking to the press. Kerr also declined to discuss what strengths Lang would bring to the IBSA and said more details about him would be shared after the board's vote. "The ones that need to know have been informed," he said. He also declined to discuss his memo and its impact on staff.

The other two candidates rounding out the search committee's top three picks, according to Baptist insiders, were John Yeats, editor of the Baptist Messenger, newspaper of the Oklahoma state convention, and Pat Pajak, pastor of Tabernacle Baptist Church, Decatur, Ill., and a former IBSA vice president.

If approved, Lang will become the second person connected to the BGCO to be named executive director of a state Baptist convention in the past year. David Clippard, the BGCO's associate executive director, was named executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention in August 2002. Clippard replaced Jim Hill, who cited his diminished leadership role among elected and appointed state leaders as the reason he stepped down.

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King's legacy remembered in differing ways by Bush, other Christian leaders

By Robert Marus

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WASHINGTON (ABP) – As President Bush paid tribute to the legacy of slain civil-rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. on the holiday bearing King's name, some Christians gathered for commemorative services around the Washington area accused Bush of having an incomplete understanding of King's famous dream.

To mark the day, Bush spoke in a service memorializing King at a historically African-American church: "It is fitting that we honor this great American in a church because out of the church comes the notion of equality and justice," Bush told a crowd of about 1,500 at First Baptist Church of Glenarden in the Washington suburb of Landover, Md. "As we remember the dream of Martin Luther King, and remember his clear vision for a society that's equal and a society full of justice, this society must remember the power of faith."

But the speech came just days after Bush's administration filed a Supreme Court brief opposing an affirmative-action plan at the University of Michigan. Many African-American leaders – including a member of Bush's own cabinet, Secretary of State Colin Powell – still strongly support affirmative action. They and other affirmative-action supporters believe the practice of using racial diversity as a factor in hiring and admissions to schools helps counteract continuing institutional prejudices against blacks and other minorities, and that it has helped create workplace and school diversity that ultimately benefits all Americans.

Like most conservatives, however, Bush opposes any sort of "racial preferences" or "quotas" to achieve the goal of diverse workplaces or student bodies. They see affirmative action as denying the basic rights King fought to establish by discriminating on the basis of ethnic background.

One of the pastors of the Maryland church criticized Bush's stance. "I am just praying that God will touch his heart and that he would really reconsider and do what the Lord tells him to do," said Nikki Pearson, as reported in the Washington Post.

The same day, at the Washington National Cathedral, a group of Christian leaders organized by the evangelical group Call to Renewal said one of King's often-forgotten legacies was his opposition to war.

As part of the service, various Christian leaders read portions of King's last homily, delivered at the National Cathedral just days before his April 4, 1968, assassination. In that sermon, Call to Renewal leader Jim Wallis said King called strongly for "an alternative to war and bloodshed, for a re-focusing of our attention on the most dangerous enemies of our age – poverty, racism, and hopelessness – and for the development of a new perspective.

"Martin Luther King Jr. was a modern-day Micah," Wallis continued, "who knew that we will not beat our swords into plowshares until everyone has their own vine and fig tree."

Wallis told the congregation that Bush should come up with a "faith-based initiative" to end war. "Virtually every church body which has spoken on the subject, internationally and in the United States – with the one exception of the American Southern Baptists – has concluded that a war on Iraq would not be a just war," Wallis said. "Never before have the churches in America been so united on the issue of peace."

Earlier, in his speech about King's legacy in fighting against poverty, Bush had made a reference to his faith-based and community initiatives – a plan to expand the ability of government to give money to religious groups to conduct social services.

"This government of yours must welcome faith, not discriminate [against] faith, as we deal with the future of this great country," Bush told the group gathered in Maryland. "And even though progress has been made... though progress has been made, there is more to do. There are still people in our society who hurt. There is still prejudice holding people back. There is still a school system that doesn't elevate every child so they can learn."