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Education head's BP interview sets off Washington firestorm

By Robert Marus

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WASHINGTON (ABP) — Comments by U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige in an April 7 Baptist news service article have stirred indignation among church-state watchdogs and public-school advocates in Washington. And some critics don't seem satisfied with Paige's subsequent attempts at clarification.

According to Baptist Press, a news agency run by the Southern Baptist Convention, Paige said that he "would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community, where a child is taught to have a strong faith." BP also reported Paige considering "the animosity to God in public school settings" as "puzzling," and characterized him as comparing the diversity of thought and belief found in public-school settings unfavorably with the strong values taught in religious schools.

The comments were reported in a profile of Paige by Todd Starnes, director of university communications at the Baptist-related Union University in Jackson, Tenn., and a former assistant editor at BP. The news agency released the story April 8. The Washington Post ran a story on the comments April 9.

Paige is a member of Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, where he serves as a deacon. The predominantly African-American congregation is affiliated with the SBC.

On April 8 and 9, several public-school advocacy and civil-rights groups attacked Paige's reported comments. "Secretary Paige's comments are outrageous and offensive," said Barry Lynn, director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "Our public schools serve children from varied religious backgrounds. As our nation's top educator, Dr. Paige should celebrate religious diversity, not denigrate it."

In a statement released shortly after the BP article was published April 8, American Federation of Teachers President Sandra Feldman said it was "insulting for the secretary, who should be the advocate for the 50 million-plus children in our public schools, to say their diversity somehow compromises those schools."

Some members of Congress also called on Paige to apologize for his remarks or resign. A group of 12 House members, led by Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), sent Paige a letter April 10. "No one is suggesting that parents should not have the right to send their children to a religious school of their own choosing," the letter said. "What is troubling is that the government's top education official would appear to prefer educational institutions that are reserved to one denomination, and who views the presence of children with different religious beliefs as detrimental to a sound education." It asked Paige to resign if he is still "unprepared to make clear that this sort of religious bigotry has no place in the Department of Education."

Paige had attempted, in a hurriedly arranged press conference the afternoon of April 9, to clarify his remarks. "I understand completely and respect the separation of church and state," Paige said, adding that his preference for schools with Christian values was only a personal choice and had nothing to do with his job as the nation's top public-education official. He also emphasized that he was talking about institutions of higher learning, not elementary or secondary schools.

Despite his spokesman having initially described Starnes' quotations as "accurate," according to the Post's April 9 story, on April 10 Paige aides issued reporters what they said was a more accurate quotation, based on a tape of the interview. In the partial transcript, Starnes posed a question about whether public or Christian universities had "the best deal."

According to the transcript, Paige responded: "Each of them have real strong points and some of them have some vulnerabilities, but you know, all things being equal, I'd prefer to have a child in a school where there's a strong appreciation for values, the kinds of values that I think are associated with the Christian communities, so that this child can be brought up in an environment that teaches them to have strong faith and to understand that there is a force greater than them personally."

The BP story had quoted Paige as responding: "All things equal, I would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community, where a child is taught to have a strong faith.... Where a child is taught that, there is a source of strength greater than themselves."

Paige, in the news conference, said his quotations had been taken out of context in a way that caused people to believe he was discussing a preference for Christian values in K-12 education rather than that on the college level. He also asserted he had said nothing for which he should apologize or resign.

But according to the Post's April 10 follow-up article, Starnes said the other quotations in the article that critics had found offensive were accurate, and he had characterized them in proper context.

Lynn said April 10 that Paige's attempt at clarification didn't ease his concerns about the interview as a whole. "This, to me, just adds new confusion; it doesn't add any clarification," Lynn said. "He doesn't seem to understand what the problem was initially – and that is that he seemed to be disparaging public schools at every level, and the integrity of values that come from non-Christian traditions."

Lynn said he was disappointed that Paige hadn't repudiated the statements without qualification. "As a result, I don't think he should continue to serve as the secretary Of education," Lynn concluded.

Brent Walker, head of the church-state separationist Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, offered more muted criticism. "I appreciate Secretary Paige's clarification," Walker said. "Baptist Press may have twisted his words.

"Nevertheless, it's not enough for the chief public-education official in the federal government simply to say he favors the separation of church and state," Walker added. "I'd like him also to affirm that the public schools belong to all citizens – regardless of their religion or even lack of faith."

AFT spokesman Alex Wohl said the teachers' union will take a wait-and-see attitude regarding Paige's fitness for the office. "We'll keep a watch as to whether he's as strong an advocate of public education as he says he is," Wohl said.

Paige also reportedly said his other comments were not meant to denigrate the religious and ethnic diversity present in America's public schools, but rather intended to say that schools with students and teachers from diverse belief systems face greater challenges than those with an agreed-upon set of moral and theological commitments.

The BP article had quoted Paige as saying, "The reason that Christian schools and Christian universities are growing is a result of a strong value system.... In a religious environment the value system is set. That's not the case in a public school where there are so many different kids with different kinds of values."

By press time April 11, officials in Paige's office had not returned phone messages from Associated Baptist Press requesting comment.

Some prominent Religious Right supporters ran to Paige's defense on April 10, including former Education Secretary Bill Bennett and Family Research Council head Ken Connor. "These are the sentiments of a Baptist deacon, which Secretary Paige is, and not an intolerant bigot," Connor wrote in the April 10 edition of his "Washington Update" e-mail newsletter. "The left's attack on Secretary Paige is an example of the intolerant anti-Christian bigotry among radical secularists who would drive any recognition of faith from the public square."

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Fate of Southwestern profs unclear after trustee meeting

By Mark Wingfield

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FORT WORTH (ABP) -- The fate of two church history professors believed to be under fire from trustees at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary remained unclear at the conclusion of the trustees' spring meeting April 8.

For weeks leading up to the trustee meeting, rumors swirled around the Fort Worth campus and beyond that Karen Bullock and Stephen Stookey, both associate professors of church history, were being forced off the faculty.

Both were due for tenure review, meaning the administration could recommend them to the trustee board for tenure approval. Both reportedly had been told prior to the board meeting that they would not be recommended to receive tenure and should seek other employment.

In many academic institutions, failure to receive tenure equates to an invitation to leave.

Word of the professors' plight has sparked intense concern among some students. To demonstrate their concern, a small group of students walked out of the April 8 chapel service while trustee Chairman Mike Dean spoke to students about the resignation of President Ken Hemphill.

"We love you, Dr. Bullock! We love you, Dr. Stookey!" the students shouted as they exited.

One of those protesters was Wendy Owens, a second-year master of arts in theology student who has studied with both Stookey and Bullock.

Owens said she and other students "find it hard to believe" that these two professors have been found unacceptable by seminary trustees or administrators.

"They are two teachers students really like and students can relate to really well," she said.

Owens, who earned an undergraduate degree in history at Wheaton College, said Bullock is "the best classroom teacher" she's ever experienced.

Both Bullock and Stookey, she said, presented scholarly and challenging material without appearing to deviate in any way from the theological parameters set by the seminary and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Both professors reportedly have signed the required affirmation of the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, unlike other professors who refused and were forced to leave.

"Dr. Bullock, when women students go in to talk to her, they get from her that women need to be submissive, need to be gentle," Owens said. "If (seminary officials) don't want her to be a role model, who do they want to be our role models? The only thing I can conclude is that they don't want (women) to have any role models because they don't want us in the School of Theology."

For now, whatever concerns seminary administrators or trustees have with the two professors remain publicly unidentified. Neither trustee chairman Dean nor Provost Craig Blaising would answer questions about the matter during interviews with the Texas Baptist Standard and other media outlets April 8.

The Fort Worth Star-Telegram, in its April 9 issue, reported on the alleged ouster of the two professors.

Contrary to what many on campus anticipated, Blaising indicated trustees had taken no action on the matter during their April 7-8 meeting in Fort Worth. Asked specifically about the two professors' status, he responded that was a matter of tenure review, a confidential matter that remained "in process."

Dean likewise declined to address a specific question about the professors.

The only reference to tenure review in the sessions of the trustee meeting open to the press was to an overall review of the tenure-granting process. The matter apparently had been discussed in closed-door committee sessions and was pushed through the plenary session on a "consent agenda" with an unidentified number of other "routine" items.

According to one business summary sheet provided to reporters, the trustees will finalize an overhaul of the tenure process at their fall meeting.

Whether this overhaul relates in any way to the status of Stookey and Bullock was not stated.

Dean did say, however, when pressed by a reporter, that if the seminary administration chooses not to recommend a professor for tenure, that decision would not have to come before trustees. Trustees would review a tenure case, he said, only if the administration recommends a professor be granted tenure.

Asked if it were his understanding that a faculty member bypassed for tenure would be expected to leave, he responded that was the commonly accepted practice at many educational institutions, including Southwestern.

Both Stookey and Bullock declined to comment on their employment status because, each said, they had not been told the final disposition of their cases.

However, multiple seminary sources confirmed that it is widely understood by faculty and staff that both Stookey and Bullock have been encouraged to resign and have been told they may teach at Southwestern only one more year if they don't resign.

"No one around here is happy about this," explained one seminary source, who asked not to be named, echoing off-the-record statements made by others as well.

By some accounts, Bullock incurred the wrath of some trustees with a chapel address she gave at Southwestern March 20, 2002. In that address, she drew from Romans 12 to discuss the Apostle Paul confronting "viruses in the church."

Those viruses that have attacked the church from the beginning, she said, are trying to be God rather than obeying God and trying to control people rather than loving people.

Although not specifically drawing a parallel between troubles in the ancient church at Rome with controversies in the Southern Baptist Convention, some in the audience made such connections.

She mentioned viruses in the church that cause people to desire to control others rather than serve them, "persons who became victims of a mindset that enforced compliance, used coercion and treated people as objects to support the agendas of a few in the name of God."

She called on Christians to "celebrate our diversity" rather than emphasizing differences.

Bullock concluded her address with a prayer that God would help Christians build bridges and embrace each other and that God would "heal us as individuals and as a denomination."

Stookey reportedly has come under scrutiny for two articles published in the Southwestern Journal of Theology in 1999. Both address historical problems with claims made by advocates of a "Christian America" ideology.

In the lengthy articles, Stookey used an analysis of historical records to demonstrate that some advocates of America being founded as an explicitly "Christian" nation misrepresent the positions, writings or statements of some of the founding fathers. For example, while one prominent speaker on the "Christian America" circuit proclaims that 52 of the 55 framers of the United States Constitution were orthodox Christians, the historical evidence suggests otherwise, Stookey wrote.

"In reality, the founders were a varied collection of orthodox Christians, nominal church attenders, Christian moralists, Deists and nonbelievers," Stookey reported.

Stookey's articles specifically challenge the historical accuracy of statements made by David Barton, one of the foremost advocates of a "Christian America" perspective.

Barton is a popular writer and speaker among many Southern Baptists who support Religious Right causes.

All this leaves students baffled, however, according to Owens.

"Most people cannot even comprehend what the issues might be," she said. "So there's lots of speculation. The truth is that both these professors are the kind that cannot be bought, bribed or threatened. Because they can't be controlled, they are threatening to some people."

If both Stookey and Bullock were to leave the seminary faculty, the church history department would be severely strained for faculty. Currently, the department has five full-time faculty – Stookey, Bullock, Leon McBeth, Paul Gritz and Jim Spivey. McBeth, a veteran teacher who has achieved the rank of distinguished professor, is retiring. That means Gritz and Spivey would be the two remaining professors in church history.



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