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**Former SBC exec Harold Bennett
dies after brief bout with cancer**

- By Greg Warner

NASHVILLE (ABP) -- Harold Bennett, who led Southern Baptists during their most difficult era, died July 27 after a brief bout with pancreatic cancer.

Bennett, 78, was president and treasurer of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, the powerful agency that drafts the budget for the SBC and conducts the business of the convention between annual meetings.

Bennett, who retired in 1992, became Southern Baptists' chief executive in 1979, the year SBC conservatives elected their first in a string of presidents and ushered in the most dramatic change in the denomination's history.

During the next 13 years, he was considered by many to be a conciliatory force among factions in the SBC. He drew praise for his even-handed leadership of the Nashville-based Executive Committee, where many of the struggles for control of the denominational played out.

"We are shocked and saddened by the passing of Dr. Bennett," said Morris Chapman, Bennett's successor at the Executive Committee, in a statement. Chapman said Bennett was "an invaluable mentor" during Chapman's transition into the post. "He knew Southern Baptist Convention and Executive Committee work as well as anyone in the land and was willing to share his knowledge with me."

A native of Asheville, N.C., Bennett was a denominational leader for most of his professional life. Prior to becoming the SBC's chief executive, he was executive secretary-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention (1967-1979). He also worked for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Home (now North American) Mission Board and the Sunday School Board (now LifeWay Christian Resources).

Bennett was a Navy pilot during World War II and later an FBI clerk. Before beginning his denominational service, he was a pastor, assistant pastor and chaplain.

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He is survived by his wife, Phyllis, three grown children -- Jeffrey Bennett of Palm Harbor, Fla.; Scott Bennett of Charleston, S.C.; and Cynthia Howard of St. Petersburg, Fla. -- and five grandchildren.

The funeral service is scheduled for 2 p.m. on July 30 -- which would have been Bennett's 79th birthday -- at First Baptist Church in Nashville. The family has requested that memorial gifts be made to the American Bible Society or the Baptist World Alliance.

Bennett served as vice president of the Baptist World Alliance and was "responsible for bringing on most of the leadership" currently working for the international group, said BWA spokeswoman Wendy Ryan.

Reggie McDonough, who served under Bennett as executive vice president of the Executive Committee (1981-87), remembered Bennett's "all-out dedication" to the SBC. "He was willing to put his own personal needs and ideas aside because he felt very strongly that he was elected to serve all Southern Baptists," said McDonough, executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia until his retirement in 2001.

John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention, was a member of the Executive Committee during Bennett's tenure. "He was a man of faith and conviction," Sullivan said. "His ability to treat a person fairly during a difficult situation was a centerpiece of his ministry during those days."

Bennett was "one of the most capable administrators in the Southern Baptist Convention," Sullivan added. "He exhibited administrative awareness and strong convictions about doing things 'decently and in order.' His work in Florida is still foundational to all we do."

Lloyd Elder, retired president of the Baptist Sunday School Board, said: "I counted Harold Bennett as a very close personal friend for years now -- earlier as a working associate and more recently as a Christian and social friend. In Baptist life, he tried desperately and effectively to be fair to the whole family and to keep us moving together in missions, and for that I deeply appreciate Harold and the ministry he had. We will miss him as one of our very able leaders over a difficult period of time in Baptist life."

Mark Edwards, minister of music at First Baptist Church, called Bennett "one of the Baptist statesmen," who also served "in significant ways" in his home church. "He was particularly interested [in] and supportive of our church's mission endeavors and her ministry of music. We shall miss him. Persons of such stature are not easily replaced."

Under Bennett's leadership, the Southern Baptist Convention grew from 13 million members to 15 million. The convention's Cooperative Program budget almost doubled, from \$75 million to \$140 million.

Bennett was a graduate of Wake Forest University, now in Winston-Salem, N.C., and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

He served as pastor of Glen Royal Baptist Church in Wake Forest, N.C. (1948-51) and West Point (Ky.) Baptist Church (1952). He was chaplain to Kentucky State Reformatory and Kentucky Women's Prison (1951-53). He was assistant pastor of First Baptist Church in Shreveport, La. (1953-55), and then pastor of Beech Street Baptist Church in Texarkana, Ark. (1955-60).

His denominational service began in 1960, when he became superintendent of new work for the Sunday School Board in Nashville. In 1962 he became secretary of the department of metropolitan missions for the Home Mission Board in Atlanta.

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Bennett was director of the missions division of the Baptist General Convention of Texas in Dallas (1965-67) when he was hired to lead the Florida Baptist Convention.

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Retired missionaries ask SBC leaders to cease anti-Muslim statements

By Hannah Lodwick

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) --- Ninety-five retired Southern Baptist missionaries who served in the Middle East and North Africa recently signed a resolution calling for Christian leaders in America to refrain from making inflammatory statements about the faith of the people in the mostly Muslim area.

The admonition was sent in a letter addressed to former Southern Baptist Convention president Jerry Vines and Richard Land, executive director of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. The letter noted Vines used "very strong language to deprecate the founder of Islam" and cited Land's endorsement of President Bush's pro-Israel policies. Both actions were particularly distressing to missionaries, the letter said.

"Because of the deep and continued concern for all the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa," the resolution said, "we, the retired missionaries of this area, urge Christian leaders in America to respect the faith, values and aspirations of all the peoples of the entire area, and to reflect this respect in their public and private statements."

The retirees, representing more than 1,625 years of combined experience with the SBC International Mission Board, sent the letter after Vines, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., told a group of pastors last month that he stands by his June 2002 comment that Mohammed was a "demon-possessed pedophile."

A similar call for restraint was issued last January by a group of current IMB mission workers in Muslim countries.

The retirees drafted the latest statement during a reunion of IMB missionaries in Atlanta over the July 4 weekend. David King, the retiree who sent the message to Vines and Land, called the resolution "brief, but strong."

King served as a missionary in Lebanon and Northern Africa from 1960 to 1989. In his letter accompanying the statement, he told the two leaders, "The lack of such respect in your statements has done more harm to missions and the cause of Christ among the peoples of our area than you will ever know."

Vines and Land failed to return requests for comment. Likewise, the International Mission Board declined to comment, according to a spokesman.

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Police identify body of Dennehy;

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Baylor teammate Dotson held

By Hannah Lodwick

WACO, Texas (ABP) --- Authorities have positively identified the body of missing Baylor University basketball player Patrick Dennehy.

Searchers found the body in a Waco-area field July 25. A medical examiner in Dallas confirmed a positive identification for Dennehy two days later. Officials did not specify a cause of death.

After finding the decomposed body, investigators continued to search through high weeds in the rural area roughly five miles south of Waco. They found a head the morning of July 27.

- Carlton Dotson, Dennehy's former teammate, reportedly told FBI agents he shot Dennehy after the player tried to shoot him, according to the arrest warrant affidavit. The two had been shooting guns in a country field. On July 21, police in Maryland arrested Dotson for murder. Dotson denies he confessed to murdered.

Dotson's attorney Grady Irvin told CNN he feels concerned about the mental well-being of his client. Dotson reportedly called 911 before his arrest and complained about hearing voices.

"Any statements that were given by Mr. Dotson, if any, couldn't have been given freely, couldn't have been voluntary, and couldn't have been done when he was coherent in any way, shape or form," Irvin told CNN.

Dennehy's family reported him missing June 19, about a week after he was last seen on the Baylor campus in Waco. His mother and stepfather, Valorie and Brian Brabazon, had traveled to Waco to gather their son's belongings but left for their home in Nevada the morning of July 27.

Baylor President Robert Sloan expressed shock and asked for prayer in a July 28 e-mail addressed to the entire "Baylor family."

"Baylor has endured the heart-wrenching loss of students before, but never in such a startling and perplexing manner," Sloan wrote. "We grieve the loss of Patrick and the impact of that loss on the Baylor community."

In response to alleged impropriety on the men's basketball team, Sloan's letter also described an investigative committee he formed to "perform a full and credible review of our basketball program." Sloan said he has no reason to believe the accusations but takes NCAA rules seriously.

"Integrity is the cornerstone on which our entire athletics program is built," Sloan wrote. "We will spare no effort to determine if that commitment was compromised in any way."

The committee includes three Baylor law school professors and the former mayor of Austin -- a Baylor alum -- as outside counsel.

Both Dotson and Dennehy had transferred to Baylor on basketball scholarships, Dotson from Paris Junior College and Dennehy from the University of New Mexico. Dotson remains jailed without bond in Maryland while he fights extradition to Texas.

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