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President of New Orleans Seminary balks at SBC 'control' strategy

By Mark Wingfield

This story updates an earlier version.

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- Trustees of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary will decide this fall whether to continue as the lone holdout among Southern Baptist Convention entities by refusing to make the SBC the "sole member" of their corporation.

The Executive Committee asked all the SBC's schools and mission boards to make the legal change to prevent its trustee boards from exercising the kind of break several colleges have made with state Baptist conventions.

More than 10 years ago, for example, trustees of Baylor University, fearing a fundamentalist takeover of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, amended the university's charter to remove the BGCT's authority to name the majority of Baylor's board. Similar action by five agencies of the Missouri Baptist Convention, which recently came under fundamentalist control, is being challenged in court.

New Orleans Seminary President Chuck Kelley says he opposes naming the SBC as the seminary's "sole member" out of principle. He conceives no situation under which the seminary would or could depart from the SBC.

The legal change requested by the Executive Committee would not alter the way seminary trustees are elected, nor would it change the current governance of the seminary. However, it would give the

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Executive Committee legal authority to overrule or remove the elected trustees if those trustees acted against the wishes of the convention.

Kelley opened the academic year at New Orleans Sept. 4 with a convocation address explaining the situation to faculty, staff and students. His topic was the autonomous organizational structure of Baptists.

To accede to the Executive Committee's request "could start a fundamental change in historic Baptist polity and compromise our practice of organizational autonomy," he declared. It also would introduce a form of connectionalism into Baptist life, he said, and start "a movement away from the decisive influence of the SBC and toward a direct control by the SBC."

As evidence of where this connectionalism could lead, Kelley pointed to recent debates over the future of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. In a recent address to members of the Missouri Baptist Convention's Executive Board, Missouri pastor David Baker reported that an SBC Funding Study Committee was considering closing or changing the focus of Midwestern Seminary.

That prompted an editorial in the Missouri Baptist Convention's newspaper, the Pathway, where one of the Missouri participants in the Seminary Funding Committee discussion was quoted.

In that small-group meeting, David Tolliver asked what would happen if Midwestern's trustees didn't go along with the proposed change. He said he understood SBC officials to say they would ask the convention to remove the seminary's entire trustee board.

In an attempt to quell the concern Tolliver generated among Missouri Baptists with that report, the president of the SBC Executive Committee released a letter to state Baptist paper editors Sept. 18. In the letter, Morris Chapman says no such threat was made.

Chapman concurs that the question was asked about what would happen if Midwestern's trustees did not consent to a change in status proposed by the SBC. But he recalls a different nuance to the answer: "I answered the question by saying: 'The SBC has left itself no recourse to overturn governing actions of an entity's trustees. The only course of action available to the SBC is the possibility of removing the trustees by vote of the convention in session.'"

Chapman added in his letter that such a step never has been taken and he can't imagine it happening.

Nevertheless, Kelley saw danger in the mere suggestion.

"To my knowledge, this stunning suggestion is unprecedented in Southern Baptist history," he said. "Knowing that Midwestern Seminary had already made the SBC the sole member of its corporation, these members of the SBC Executive Committee were assuming the power of sole membership made it possible to change an entire board of trustees at one convention. Whether they were right or wrong in their interpretation, such a suggestion would not have been made prior to the sole membership strategy."

Kelley warned the New Orleans family: "The change to sole membership suggests a new power would be in play at the denominational level. ... I believe it is impossible to say sole membership would never be used for anything but its original stated purpose."

Kelley lamented that SBC conservatives, after gaining control of all SBC boards through presidential appointments in the 1980s and '90s, would resort to such tactics to ensure they wouldn't have to call on

God for a miracle again.

"It saddens me that the biblical conservatives would be the group of record taking the first step toward connectionalism at the national level of SBC life," he said.

The risks of allowing SBC entities to remain fully autonomous are more palatable than the risks of connectionalism, Kelley declared.

He posed several other alternatives as possible ways to accomplish the Executive Committee's desire:

-- Asking each person elected as a trustee of an SBC entity to "sign a covenant" with the SBC to uphold all SBC guidelines for the entity he or she will serve. -- Amend the charters of SBC entities to require financial penalties for unauthorized charter changes.

Trustees of New Orleans Seminary are scheduled to take up the matter when they meet Oct. 6-8.

Another official with the SBC Executive Committee agreed with Kelley that "connectionalism should always be avoided," but said he believes the Executive Committee's request is of a different order.

Kelley has "inappropriately applied connectionalism, called 'hierarchicalism' by some, to the corporate subsidiary realm, an area to which it has no relevance," said Augie Boto, vice president for convention policy with the Executive Committee.

"The Southern Baptist Convention's use of sole membership only affirms the legal relationship between the SBC and its entities and has no bearing on the authority or autonomy of the local church. Because that autonomy is unaffected, painting sole membership with the black brush of connectionalism is unjustifiable."

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NC convention removes church that baptizes gay members

By Steve DeVane

CONCORD, N.C. (ABP) -- A Concord church that was removed from its association in April has been quietly taken off the rolls of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina as well.

McGill Baptist Church was voted out of the Cabarrus Baptist Association for allegedly baptizing two gay men. Jim Royston, executive director-treasurer of the state convention, said he and convention officers decided after hearing about the association's move that McGill should be removed from the convention's membership as well. Convention policy makes the church ineligible, he said.

In 1992, the convention's General Board changed its financial policy to exclude "any church which knowingly takes, or has taken, any official action which manifests public approval, promotion or blessing of homosexuality." Such churches, the General Board said, are not "cooperating churches" -- the terminology for membership.

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"Technically, it wasn't because they were removed from the association," Royston said. "It was the issue that brought it about. The issue, as far as I could tell, that impacted us was the public action of a church being removed from an association related to the homosexual issue."

Steve Ayers, pastor of McGill Baptist, said the church has not made homosexuality an issue. "We're just talking about accepting members," he said. "I hope this doesn't mean that all gay members of churches would be purged from churches affiliated with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina."

Ayers said he thinks the convention is "treading on very shaky ground" if it's going to decide who can be members of cooperating churches. "If someone thinks there [are] not gay people in churches, somebody needs to look around," he said.

Ayers said the church has not asked the men if they are gay, but he doesn't doubt that they are. The men first came to the church because they were invited, he said. Ayers said he wonders if churches now must have a list of questions to ask people before the church agrees to baptize them.

"When someone says they've accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of their life, do you believe them or not?" he said. "That's what it comes down to."

Ayers said he believes that only God is capable to judge. "I could not stand before God and tell him that I kept anyone out of his church," he said. "That's what this comes down to."

Ayers questioned why the convention's decision would be related to the association's action. "That's not Baptist polity," he said. "We've become very hierarchical."

Ayers said he found out that the church was no longer in the convention when he discovered the church was not on the church locator program on the convention's Web site.

"It was just a shock that came out of the blue," he said. "No one from the state convention has ever asked us our interpretation on this."

Ayers wrote an e-mail to the convention's webmaster. He received a reply from Royston saying the convention would no longer receive contributions from the church, making it ineligible to be a cooperating member of the convention.

Royston said in an interview that the convention should have notified the church earlier. He said he planned to apologize to Ayers. "I just regret that happened," he said. "That's not fair."

Royston said he expected the issue to come up during the convention's Executive Committee and General Board meetings in May, but it didn't. He informed the convention's business office that the convention would not be accepting any more contributions from McGill and asked them to let him know if the church sent any money.

The church sent the convention a check for more than \$4,400, which Ayers said the convention cashed in early September. Royston said the convention had mistakenly cashed the check. The convention is sending a check for the same amount back to the church, he said.

The convention's anti-gay policy was first used in 1992 to remove Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh and Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill. Pullen voted to bless the union of two homosexual males. Binkley in Chapel Hill voted to license a gay man to the ministry.

In 1999, the policy was used to remove Wake Forest Baptist Church in Winston-Salem. The church held a same-sex union for two lesbian members in September 2000.

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Giving channel set up for missionaries who refused to sign doctrinal statement

By Robert O'Brien

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptists have taken another step to help Southern Baptist missionaries forced to leave the mission field because they would not affirm the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message doctrinal statement.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas is establishing a channel for donations designated for specific missionaries who choose to return to the mission field on their own.

The designated gift channel will be separate from a general \$1.3 million transition fund Texas Baptists set up last year. That transition fund gives stateside support for up to one year for missionaries terminated, resigned or retired from the SBC International Mission Board because of the Baptist Faith and Message controversy.

At least 77 missionaries have left the International Mission Board because of the controversy. Some missionaries object to the conservative changes in the revised doctrinal statement, while others say the IMB's requirement that missionaries sign an affirmation of the statement is creedalistic.

E. B. Brooks, coordinator of church missions and evangelism for the Texas convention, said the new channel will distribute only donations designated to specific missionaries, not establish a fund for distribution to missionaries in general.

"The gifts must meet criteria provided to donors by our Texas Partnerships Resource Center," Brooks said. "Missionaries funded by this process must also meet certain criteria established by our resource center."

The resource center is in the process of working out details of criteria and policies for channeling the funds, but in the meantime missionaries from any state who have returned to the field or plan to do so may contact the resource center. Potential donors from any state may ask for a list of those names as they become available.

Veteran missionaries Ted and Frances York, terminated from Benin, West Africa, said the Texas Baptist initiative offers "great encouragement" to missionaries who came home wondering about their next step.

"Though we do not know if or when we will go back overseas, we are glad to know that there is a channel in the making, and we truly are thankful for what Texas Baptists are doing," said Frances York, now in Boiling Springs, N.C., where she and her husband are missionaries in residence at Gardner-Webb University.

Veteran missionaries Houston and Charla Greenhaw, who retired early over the Baptist Faith and

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Message issue, have returned to serve in Brazil, using Texas Baptists as a channel for their support.

Houston Greenhaw said the support from churches, flowing through the Texas Baptist channel, "freed us from the necessity of either promising to conduct our ministries according to a document (BF&M 2000) foreign to, and often irrelevant to, the culture in which we work, or walking away from that culture and our ministries."

Veteran missionaries David and Susie Dixon, terminated from Madrid, Spain, have returned to Madrid, where he is pastor of International Baptist Church and a teacher at a Baptist seminary.

"Thank God they [Texas Baptists] are finding ways to move beyond convention politics, pettiness and controversy, and keep focused on God's good purposes.... We're ... [back] in Madrid, where our 15-year investment in the Lord's work here has given us a few 'handholds' on the culture and language. We thank the Lord for Texas Baptists, who set up the channel and infrastructure to make this possible."

Don Sewell, who directs the Texas Partnerships Resource Center, said the office is currently in contact with three returning missionary couples, including the Greenhaws and Dixons. "We don't expect large numbers to participate, but we will serve as a channel for those who qualify," he said.

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'Gospel of John' takes NT book word-for-word to the big screen

By Ted Parks

HOLLYWOOD, Calif. (ABP) -- Jesus in the movies is nothing new. But allowing an entire New Testament gospel to speak word-for-word in the glossy idiom of the big-screen is unique, say the producers of "The Gospel of John," now showing in select theaters.

A production of Toronto-based Visual Bible International, the new film "follows the gospel precisely, neither adding to the story from other gospels, nor omitting complex passages," explain the movie's makers. Unlike other movies about the life of Jesus, the filmmakers insist, "The Gospel of John" sticks to one New Testament account rather than borrowing episodes elsewhere in Scripture or from extra-biblical sources.

Producer of "The Gospel of John," Garth Drabinsky, believes the fourth gospel provides an ideal text for translation from page to screen. A film and theater veteran, Drabinsky called John "a magnificently ... structured story on a dramatic basis."

"The Gospel of John" is not Visual Bible's first attempt to translate the words of Scripture into images. Earlier projects by the company include video versions of the New Testament books of Matthew and Acts. But the earlier productions were made under previous owners, explained Visual Bible vice president of consumer marketing, Alex Panousis.

The latest film, produced under new ownership, is a step up from the made-for-video Matthew and Acts, said Panousis, who emphasized the extensive research behind every aspect of the latest production.

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"We went to incredible lengths to meticulously recreate that period," producer Drabinsky said of the filmmakers' attempts to accurately reproduce the look of the first century. With filming in Israel difficult because of Middle East unrest, the creators of "The Gospel of John" shot the movie in southern Spain, Drabinsky said. The producer added that "John" was filmed in the same area where famed British director David Lean's shot portions of his 1962 epic, "Lawrence of Arabia."

Drabinsky also said the filmmakers sought stage performers free of the "baggage" likely to be carried by big-name Hollywood personalities.

Though well-known Christopher Plummer narrates the movie, other cast members are less familiar to moviegoers, reflecting the producers' focus on talent from stage rather than screen. Henry Ian Cusick, who plays Jesus, performs with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Actors Stuart Bruce (John) and Daniel Kash (Peter) have also done Shakespeare.

"The Gospel of John" premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in mid-September to sell-out crowds, prompting Canadian columnist Jay Stone to dub the movie the event's "toughest ticket" because of the demand. Stone said the movie sold out both its opening 1,500-seat showing and a 650-seat screening the next day.

Reviewing the film on his Movieguide.com Web site, Christian film critic Ted Baehr said the movie "brings ... John's gospel alive in a powerful, profound way." Baehr felt scriptwriter John Goldsmith did "a superb job of staging and setting the story in such a way that it is constantly compelling."

The new movie opens the same day as another film likely to interest Christian moviegoers, the bio-pic "Luther" about the famous 16th-century church reformer.

"The Gospel of John" follows in the footsteps of other Jesus movies -- from Cecil B. DeMille's 1927 "The King of Kings" to, more recently, Martin Scorsese's controversial "The Last Temptation of Christ" in 1988. And "John" precedes Mel Gibson's much-anticipated "The Passion," scheduled for release sometime next spring.

For Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals and senior pastor of the 10,000-member New Life Church in Colorado Springs, "John" is not only entertaining but edifying. Haggard said the movie was the first ever to gain the NAE's Seal of Approval.

"I believe it's fundamental to Christian living that we do everything we can to expose ourselves to the word of God," Haggard said. He added, "Every Bible-believing Christian should pray ... that the Holy Spirit will draw people to see this movie."

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Federal panel warns religious freedom significantly imperiled in Afghanistan

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Members of a federal panel are warning that religious freedom and other human rights remain seriously imperiled in Afghanistan -- even under a United States-backed

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government.

Members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, reporting on an August visit to Kabul, said Sept. 24 that the U.S.-backed interim government is in danger of allowing the nation to return to the patterns of severe repression of religious freedom that characterized the Taliban's rule there. The Taliban were deposed by U.S.-led forces in 2001 for harboring Osama bin Laden and other members of the al-Qaeda terrorist organization.

Noting that the country was in the "crucial period" of preparing a proposal for a permanent constitution, the report said "there are indications... that the gains for human rights achieved by the U.S.-led coalition's victory over the Taliban are in peril."

The commission mentioned reports of abuse of religious freedom and other human rights taking place in areas of the country that have not yet been brought under the transitional government's authority. "The security situation both within and outside Kabul is precarious and perhaps even deteriorating," the report said. "Taliban and al-Qaida remnants remain active and have been joined by others hostile to the internationally recognized transitional administration led by President [Hamid] Karzai. Regional warlords and local military commanders operate independently of the central government and abuse human rights with impunity."

The report also noted that "there have been troubling signs that Afghanistan's reconstructed legal system and the new Afghan constitution might be used by extremists in the transitional administration to deny universal human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, to the Afghan population."

The commission has before noted that an Afghan judge -- whose salary is subsidized by the U.S. -- has handed down blasphemy rulings. The latest report also notes that, in Afghanistan, "journalists have recently faced prosecution by the U.S.-supported transitional administration for allegedly having 'offended Islam,' when the real offense is political."

The report went on to recommend that Afghan reformers and moderates "be protected from accusations of blasphemy or similar charges for daring to raise questions about the appropriate role of Islam in Afghanistan's political and legal systems or for criticizing specific political figures or political parties."

Afghans are currently drafting the proposed constitution. A spokesperson for the commission said that, according to their best knowledge, the proposal will be released sometime this fall.

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Student ministry goes to bar to plant 'gospel seeds'

By Ken Camp

STEPHENVILLE, Texas (ABP) -- A couple of days each fall, the Baptist Student Ministry at Tarleton State University encourages college kids to go to a bar -- not to drink but to enjoy a free meal and hear the gospel.

As part of its outreach to new students in early September, the BSM sponsors two Wednesday lunches at

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a tavern across the street from the Tarleton campus. The bar is closed at lunchtime, but the owner makes the building available to the campus ministry.

"We'll have students who go there who won't go to anything else that we do," said Darrell Samuelson, BSM director at Tarleton.

Churches in the Stephenville area provide the covered dish lunches at the popular student hangout. Samuelson acknowledged that a couple of congregations have objected to an event at a bar. But most view it as a chance to bring a Christian witness to students who would never set foot in a church or in the BSM building.

Students are drawn to the familiar bar by the free food. While they eat, they listen to a Christian testimony by a local celebrity such as the university's football or baseball coach.

"Some of the students feel less threatened in that setting," said Trey Felan, baseball coach at Tarleton State University, who spoke at a recent luncheon. "We've got their attention for a little while. Maybe we'll reach somebody, or maybe a seed will be planted for later."

In addition to the bar outreach, the BSM also sponsors about a half-dozen other activities -- most of them centered around free or low-cost food -- designed to reach new students. One of the most popular activities is the "big feed" on the third day of the new semester. Volunteers set up grills in an open area near the men's dormitories, and they offer steaks for 99 cents. "That event really reaches the guys. They smell the meat cooking all morning, and that brings them out," Samuelson said.

Event organizers acknowledged that only a fraction of the students they contacted will become active in Baptist Student Ministry, but that's not their ultimate goal. "It's not about numbers involved in the BSM," Felan said. "It's about getting the gospel to numbers of students who aren't in church anywhere."

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News Briefs from ABP's Washington Bureau

By Robert Marus

Appeals court rules against Muslim prisoners

TRENTON, N.J. -- A federal appeals court has ruled against a group of more than 200 Muslim prisoners seeking the right to eat meats prepared according to Islamic dietary laws. The 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled Sept. 10 that the New Jersey State Prison, a maximum-security facility in Trenton, does not have to serve halal meat.

Halal meats are prepared according to a strict set of religious guidelines, similar to Jewish kosher dietary laws. For instance, like Orthodox Jews, observant Muslims are barred from eating pork.

The ruling comes despite the fact that the prison serves kosher meats to Jewish prisoners. The judges said the costs associated with processing the meat properly and having it inspected and certified as halal would be prohibitive because of the high number of Muslim prisoners. There are far fewer Jewish

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inmates at the prison. (ABP)

Group asks IRS to investigate church

WASHINGTON -- A church-state watchdog group has asked the Internal Revenue Service to investigate a California church for possible violations of tax laws due to political activity.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State has asked the IRS to investigate the First African Methodist Episcopal Church of Los Angeles for endorsing embattled Gov. Gray Davis (D) during a Sept. 14 worship service.

Davis, who is fighting to avoid a recall effort funded by his Republican rivals, appeared at the church with former President Bill Clinton. In their comments, both opposed the recall effort. Davis reportedly said, "This recall threatens the very fabric of democracy. It is not good for you, it is not good for California. I ask that you defeat it."

Pastor Cecil Murray also reportedly said that Davis is "our vital warrior" and "we are his posse."

Federal law prohibits churches and other non-profit groups that are organized under section 501(c)(3) of the federal tax codes from endorsing political candidates or parties. (ABP)

German court says teacher can wear scarf

WASHINGTON -- Germany's highest court said Sept. 24 that a Muslim public school teacher can wear a religious symbol in the classroom. The nation's Federal Constitutional Court said the Afghan-born Fereshta Ludin, who teaches in Stuttgart, in southern Germany, has the right to wear her hijab -- a head scarf that traditional Muslim women wear -- while teaching.

The court ruled that other teachers should have that right unless they teach in a state that has laws specifically prohibiting religious symbols in the classroom. Germany's constitution requires the state to be strictly neutral towards religion.

Germany -- like many European nations -- is home to large numbers of Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants. Many of them are Muslims. Controversies over allowing women to wear head scarves have raged across Europe in recent years. They have gained particular attention since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, perpetrated by Islamic extremists. (ABP)

Muslim, Jewish groups support Amish in suit

WASHINGTON -- A diverse coalition of groups is supporting the right of Amish residents in a Michigan county to violate local health codes in the name of religion.

Five Amish farmers from Gladwin County, Mich., filed a lawsuit against county officials in federal court Sept. 15. The suit claims the officials violated the farmers' right to free exercise of religion and due process by insisting the families install septic systems large enough to comply with county health codes.

The Amish, who adopt simple lifestyles and do not use many modern conveniences, say they do not need the systems because they use much less water than the average household in the county. Installing the systems would be expensive and may require outside labor -- the use of which would be wasteful and sinful, the farmers say.

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The case has earned the support of leaders of Islamic and Orthodox Jewish groups as well as the liberal public-interest group People for the American Way. (ABP)

RNC chairman calls for gay marriage ban

WASHINGTON -- The chairman of the Republican National Committee has called for the party platform to include a plank in support of banning same-sex marriage constitutionally.

In Sept. 23 comments reported by the Washington Times, RNC Chairman Ed Gillespie called for a platform supporting a constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage. Currently, the Federal Marriage Amendment is making its way through the House. Sponsored by Rep. Marilyn Musgrave (R-Colo.), the amendment not only would define marriage only in heterosexual terms on the federal level, but also ban states from offering any of the benefits of marriage to same-sex couples.

Gay marriage has been a contentious issue since the Supreme Court, on privacy grounds, overturned state laws banning gay sex. Both opponents and supporters of gay marriage have said the ruling makes it easier for other courts to overturn laws banning same-sex marriage.

Several months ago, former RNC Chairman Marc Racicot earned the ire of social conservatives in the party by meeting with more than 300 gay Republicans to discuss widening the party's support among gay and lesbian voters. (ABP)

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HBU to enter fraternal relationship with new Texas convention

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Trustees of Houston Baptist University have affirmed a fraternal relationship with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention while reaffirming their desire to maintain its relationship with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The Sept. 23 vote to enter into a relationship with the SBTC was described by board Chairman Mark Denison as "overwhelming." But the vote prompted one Houston-area pastor to resign from the board because of the new direction.

Pete Freeman, pastor of First Baptist Church of The Woodlands, wrote to HBU President Doug Hodo the next day, explaining he believes the agreement with the SBTC "is a breach of both the intent and integrity of the previously adopted covenant/agreement" with the BGCT.

That agreement, adopted in 2001, was intended to patch up difficulties between the BGCT and HBU after HBU trustees unilaterally revoked the right of the BGCT to name the university's board. After months of negotiation, the BGCT conceded to allow the university to name 75 percent of its board, and HBU pledged to maintain a "unique affiliation" with the BGCT.

The 2001 document, which was approved by both the BGCT Executive Board and HBU trustees, states: "HBU agrees to maintain a unique affiliation with the BGCT by not affiliating or establishing a formal

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relationship with other denominations, conventions or religious entities."

When the new agreement was reached in 2001, the BGCT restored most of the funding withheld from HBU after the unilateral charter change.

This year, the BGCT budgeted \$125,000 for campus religious activities, \$120,000 for minority and ethnic scholarships and emphases, \$180,000 for ministerial student tuition support and \$492,000 as HBU's share of funding divided proportionately between the eight universities affiliated with the BGCT.

A basic block grant of about \$600,000 the BGCT previously provided to HBU has not been restored.

A Southern Baptists of Texas Convention news release said the SBTC will not budget any financial support for the university or seek any control of the university's governance. Currently, the only educational institution budgeted for direct financial support from the SBTC is Criswell College in Dallas, which is listed as an "affiliated" school rather than a fraternal partner.

The SBTC split from the BGCT in 1998. Its stated purpose is to work more closely with the Southern Baptist Convention, whose theology and politics have moved sharply to the right during the past 25 years. The SBTC gives 51 percent of its undesignated receipts to the SBC. Its stated intent has been not to create or support institutions.

However, the SBTC previously approached 23 BGCT institutions, asking about the possibility of creating formal relationships. The SBTC acknowledged it would require support for the SBC's doctrinal statement, the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, and the institutions declined or did not respond.

In February, Texas Baptist Men voted to reaffirm its unique relationship with the BGCT but agreed to "officially work" with the SBTC, its associations and churches. That agreement allows the men's organization to involve men from churches affiliated with both conventions, but it does not mention the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message.

The agreement between HBU and the SBTC appears similar to the situation with Texas Baptist Men, except that HBU trustees had adopted the 2001 agreement with the BGCT unlike anything adopted between the BGCT and Texas Baptist Men.

A statement adopted by the HBU board in open session Sept. 23 declares that the SBTC's requirements for fraternal relationship "are in agreement with the biblical concepts outlined in" the preamble to the university's constitution. It then affirms the "unique affiliation and relationship" with the BGCT while also affirming a "fraternal relationship with the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, with a desire to cooperate in appropriate ways in the work of the kingdom of God in Texas."

The board statement notes HBU "desires to have avenues open to it to reach out to all Texas Baptists and likewise for all Texas Baptists to reach out to Houston Baptist University."

Denison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Gainesville, reiterated that point: "It is a good decision. We're responding to the current landscape, which we didn't create but to which we must respond. ... We must respond to all Baptists in the state of Texas."

No official count was recorded on the show-of-hands vote, but Denison reported the resolution "was overwhelmingly approved."

Freeman said he and two others voted against it.

From Freeman's perspective, adopting the fraternal relationship with the SBTC violates the pledge made by HBU trustees to the BGCT in 2001. That pledge, he noted, says HBU will adopt no "formal relationship" with any other convention.

He said he told the board: "If this is not a formal relationship, why is this a multiple-page document and why are we spending so much time talking about it? It is a formal relationship."

Jim Richards, executive director of the SBTC, commended the new link with HBU as a natural occurrence.

The SBTC "is comprised of churches that had a part in building Houston Baptist University," he said. "Students who are members of SBTC churches attend HBU. It is only natural for an educational institution and a convention with compatible views on the nature of Scripture and Baptist distinctives to work together."

Charles Wade, executive director of the BGCT, neither commended nor criticized the decision.

"The BGCT has enjoyed and appreciates Houston Baptist University's unique relationship with us, by which Texas Baptists give financial support to the university and share in the election of its trustees," he said. "We recognize and affirm the university's desire to serve all the Baptists in Texas and beyond, while at the same time maintaining its historic partnership with the BGCT."

Freeman, however, cited lack of support for his concerns from the BGCT as a reason for his resignation from the HBU board. In his resignation letter, he explained: "My disappointment with the support I have received from the BGCT on this matter has rendered me less effective as a trustee of both the BGCT and HBU."

Freeman was among the one-fourth of HBU's board elected by the BGCT. In an interview, he said he did not wish to elaborate on his concerns with the BGCT.

Freeman also cited as a reason for his resignation another action taken by HBU trustees Sept. 23. "I cannot in good conscience abide by the confidentiality policy agreed upon at yesterday's board meeting," he wrote Hodo. "It conflicts with my personal understanding of Baptist policy concerning the regular meetings (non-executive sessions) of Baptist boards."

More information on that policy was not available, since it reportedly was adopted in a closed session. Freeman said he could not characterize the action further because of the restrictions imposed, other than to say that "too much Baptist business is done in secret."

-- With additional reporting by Editor Marv Knox

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CORRECTION:

In the Sept. 23 ABP article, "Bush expands 'faith-based initiative' again through regulatory changes,"

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there is an error in the 15th paragraph. That paragraph should be altered to read: "Congress passed that legislation and then-President Bill Clinton signed it into law. But at the time, he made it clear that he believed government funding for pervasively religious groups was unconstitutional, and he did not implement that aspect of the legislation."

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