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Patterson airs professor's charges of lax theological scrutiny at IMB

By Mark Wingfield and Greg Warner

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- The International Mission Board should rid itself of "unbiblical" practices and alliances with Christian mission groups that do not enforce strict theological parameters, a Southern Baptist missions professor urges.

Keith Eitel, professor of Christian missions at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., outlines his concerns about the theological framework employed by the mission board in an eight-page paper circulated by former Southern Baptist Convention president Paige Patterson.

For instance, Eitel alleges, because of inadequate theological training of some missionaries, "evangelism, church planting and discipleship are in the hands of theological novices." And women are inappropriately placed in positions of authority over men, he says.

An IMB spokesperson called Eitel's criticisms "groundless accusations," but nonetheless said the matter will be addressed by trustees next week.

The document, titled "Vision Assessment," was sent to all IMB trustees by Patterson, Eitel's former boss at Southeastern and now president at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. In a cover letter, Patterson called Eitel "one of the cutting-edge missiologists of our day."

"Without a doubt, the keenest thinking in missiology occurs on the staff of the International Mission Board. ... However, some profitable thinking and planning is also done elsewhere," Patterson wrote. "... The critical importance of this paper, especially in light of the conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention, will be apparent to

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you as you read it."

Eitel told a reporter he wrote the paper over the summer to summarize his perspective on the IMB's operation after being contacted by an IMB trustee who wanted to nominate him for a high-level position there. Avery Willis, senior vice president and second in command at the IMB, is scheduled to retire at the end of the year.

In the paper, Eitel appeals for IMB trustees to "synchronize" the mission board "with the theological convictions of the SBC" and to "set the board's course directly back into the evangelical roots that were the convictions of the founders of the convention."

For this to happen, he wrote, biblical and theological inquiry must not be minimized in importance.

While criticizing previous administrations of the SBC mission board prior to the fundamentalist campaign that began in 1979, Eitel also raises concerns about the current administration of IMB President Jerry Rankin.

He especially targets the IMB's participation in mission efforts with what the board calls "Great Commission Christians" -- other Baptist and Christian groups working toward the same missionary goals.

Eitel charges that these partnerships have "no mechanisms in place to filter or check the entry of unbiblical practices other than the specific theological preparation of the individual missionary."

And that link has been weakened, he said, because under Rankin's leadership "there has been an obvious and apparently intentional move away from requiring seminary training for the key roles related to church planting and church development."

Before the Rankin administration, such missionary candidates were required to have at least a master of divinity degree and two years of experience, he says. "Today, one may assume such roles with as little as 20-30 semester hours, and there is a spirit or culture within the board that downplays or undermines the need to even go to seminary at all."

Eitel adds: "If it weren't for the trustees holding the line on this requirement, I am afraid that seminary requirements would be dropped completely."

As a result of the change, he says, "I am concerned that evangelism, church planting and discipleship are in the hands of theological novices."

The theology of IMB missionaries has been under much scrutiny recently. Earlier this year, all missionaries were required to sign an affirmation of the Baptist Faith and Message, which was revised in 2000 by the SBC's conservative leaders. As a result, at least 77 missionaries left the IMB, including 13 who were fired for refusing to sign. New questions about missionaries' qualifications to serve could spark more uncertainty among the IMB's 5,500-member mission force.

Eitel also criticizes the IMB for allowing women in leadership roles, specifically in the role of regional strategy coordinators.

"Women, while certainly capable in numerous ways to do ministry, should not be placed in doctrinal or ethical authority over men, and the strategy coordinator role often causes this to happen," he writes.

These same strategy coordinators -- although he does not single out women alone as the culprits -- because they are "theological novices," Eitel says, "frequently lead their teams to partner with theologically suspect organizations."

The IMB's lack of stringency on theological and doctrinal training is a holdover from the previous administration of

Keith Parks, Eitel charges. That's bad, he writes, because Parks made clear his belief that Southern Baptists should be united around mission more than theological conformity.

Parks, he says, inherited and built upon a slippery slope toward liberalism that began in the SBC after World War I. This trend, he charged, placed increasingly more emphasis on personal experience than on a strict understanding of the Bible's edicts.

"Parks was saying that doctrine or theology divides us but missions unites us," Eitel noted. In contrast, leaders of the fundamentalist movement within the SBC like Adrian Rogers "indicated that unless our theological convictions are solidly established squarely on an inerrant Bible, we will have no legitimate or reasonable basis for doing missions."

Eitel concludes his paper with nine recommended actions for IMB trustees, beginning with an appeal to "recruit administrators committed to theological renewal of the board."

He also asks trustees to "change the appointment criteria and procedures to encourage theological preparation" and to "change the entire curriculum and teaching staff" at the Missionary Learning Center, where missionaries go for specific training after appointment.

Larry Cox, IMB vice president for mobilization, told Associated Baptist Press the agency is "very disappointed that Dr. Eitel chose to vent his groundless accusations against the International Mission Board in a public forum instead of communicating with our leadership."

"Since the distribution of Dr. Eitel's paper to our trustees in September, Dr. Rankin has sent Dr. Eitel a written response, and he has been in communication with Dr. Eitel to arrange for a meeting to try to resolve the misunderstandings in the paper," Cox said in the written statement. "This matter will be discussed with IMB trustees during their meeting in Lexington, Ky., next week."

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Virginia Baptists may cut Averett funds in dispute over homosexuality, Scripture

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Virginia Baptists will be asked to withhold about \$350,000 they planned to contribute to Averett University next year until a dispute over homosexuality and biblical interpretation can be resolved.

The Baptist General Association of Virginia's budget committee has amended its 2004 budget recommendation, asking messengers at the BGAV's annual meeting in November to escrow Averett's allocation "until such time as the [BGAV] covenant committee ... can reach an agreement with the university as to its future relationship" with the BGAV.

The budget committee is recommending the money be released to Averett in April 2004 if a "resolution of our differences can be achieved by that time." Otherwise, the budget committee will propose at the BGAV annual meeting in November 2004 a reallocation of the money.

The 144-year-old Averett has longstanding ties with the BGAV. Last year the BGAV contributed about \$450,000 to the university, most of it for scholarships for students from churches affiliated with the BGAV. The state association nominates about one fourth of Averett's trustees.

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But the Danville, Va., university drew the ire of some Virginia Baptists in August when John Laughlin, chair of its religion department, wrote an article in a local newspaper endorsing the recent action of the Episcopal Church to ordain an openly homosexual bishop and criticizing a literal method of interpreting the Bible. In September, John Shelby Spong, a controversial retired Episcopal bishop, lectured on Averett's campus, reportedly saying that the God who is revealed in a literal reading of Scripture is "immoral" and "unbelievable."

The comments are "contrary to stated core values of Virginia Baptists," said John Upton, BGAV executive director.

The Virginia Baptist Mission Board's executive committee sharply rebuked Averett Sept. 9, declaring, "We ... express our strong dismay and disagreement at the tone and content of public comments by Dr. Laughlin on homosexuality and the nature of Scripture, which were published in the Danville Register and Bee Furthermore, we are disappointed in Averett University's decision to host an appearance by Bishop John Shelby Spong to speak to the community and students."

In a resolution adopted Oct. 24, Averett's board of trustees expressed regret at "any perception that Averett University has diverged from its commitment to being Virginia's flagship Christian university."

But it added, "The board continues to feel strongly that the individual views of any single member of the academic community are the views of that individual alone and neither speak for nor reflect the views and values of the faculty, administration, board of trustees or Averett University."

The trustees also reaffirmed the school's mission statement, which describes Averett as an institution affiliated with the BGAV that "takes seriously its Christian heritage and values and its commitment to intellectual inquiry and excellence in all aspects of college life. ... In all its programs Averett stresses ... an atmosphere where both academic and religious freedom are valued. ... Averett is a community which values cultural, individual and racial diversity."

Members of the BGAV budget committee said they are recommending the university's money be escrowed to allow for "a reasoned response to [Averett's] resolution."

In the proposed 2004 budget unveiled Oct. 7, Averett would receive between \$321,513 and \$350,741, depending on the giving track through which a church contributes. If the escrow recommendation is adopted, the Averett line item would not be deleted. The money would be held until an agreement between the university and the BGAV is approved, or reallocated if no agreement is reached.

The BGAV is seeking "covenant agreements" with each of its ministry partners, including the three colleges with which it historically has related. The covenant committee working with Averett had not completed its task when this dispute arose.

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Four professors leave Southwestern to start alternative Carroll Institute

By Greg Warner and Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Four prominent professors abruptly resigned from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in early November, only to be named faculty members of the new B.H. Carroll Theological Institute started by former Southwestern leaders.

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The faculty members who resigned are Bruce Corley, professor of New Testament; Stan Moore, professor of church music and acting dean of the school of church music; Budd Smith, professor of foundations of education; and James Spivey Jr., associate professor of church history and associate dean of the seminary's Houston extension campus.

None of the professors provided information about the nature of their new assignments, according to a statement released by Southwestern Nov. 4.

Later that day, however, Corley was named president of the B.H. Carroll Institute, an alternative center for theological training to be based in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The other three were named the initial faculty. The appointments are effective Jan. 1.

The announcement was made by Scotty Gray, a retired Southwestern dean who serves as a director of the institute, and Russell Dilday, who was fired as president of Southwestern in 1994 by fundamentalist trustees.

The new institute, named for the founder of Southwestern, will use a church-based teaching model, the organizers said. Instead of a residential campus, the institute will utilize the resources of up to 100 "teaching churches." Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, site of the Nov. 4 press conference, was named the first teaching church.

The institute will have a board of directors, seek accreditation, and use the Internet for some instruction, organizers said. No site for the administrative center has been selected, they said. A first-year budget of \$400,000 is anticipated.

When plans for the institute were announced in July, Gray said it "definitely will be Baptist in orientation, but it will not be affiliated with any organization. It will be self-sustaining, both in its governance and its finances." A statement issued at the time said the institute would function in "a non-traditional, non-duplicating, non-political, non-competitive way."

In a statement, Southwestern president Paige Patterson said the four departing faculty members had "given a number of years of service to Southwestern Seminary," for which "the trustees, administration, faculty and large numbers of students offer profound appreciation." He also said he wishes the faculty members well "in every noble enterprise they attempt for Christ."

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Third World Anglican bishops denounce installation of gay man

By Robert Marus

DURHAM, N.H. (ABP) -- Shortly after an openly gay man was installed as the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire, his brethren in the Third World reacted with anger -- some of them cutting off their relations with the Episcopal Church in the United States.

Gene Robinson was installed Nov. 2 in an elaborate ceremony held in a sports arena at the University of New Hampshire in Durham. Nearly 3,000 Episcopalians attended the ceremony, called a consecration.

With the act, Robinson becomes the first openly gay man to be installed as a bishop in the church. Robinson is in a committed, long-term sexual relationship with another man.

In an address after his installation, Robinson attempted to strike a note of reconciliation to the thousands of U.S.

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Episcopalians and the millions of other members of the Anglican Communion around the world who opposed his election and consecration. "There are people -- faithful, wonderful, Christian people -- for whom this is a moment of great pain, confusion and anger," Robinson reminded his audience, according to the Washington Post.

He added that the majority who supported his election must remain "hospitable, loving and caring to them in every way we can possibly muster."

But many of his opponents among conservative Anglican clerics in the Third World weren't as conciliatory. "We are appalled that the authorities of the Episcopal Church of the U.S.A. have ignored the heartfelt plea of the [Anglican] Communion not to proceed with the scheduled consecration of Canon Gene Robinson," said Archbishop of Nigeria Peter Akinola in a statement released Nov. 3.

The statement was written under the auspices of a group calling itself the Primates of the Global South. It was signed by 20 primates -- or governing leaders of national Anglican denominations -- who hail mostly from African, Latin American and Asian countries.

"The overwhelming majority of the Primates of the Global South cannot and will not recognize the office or ministry of Canon Gene Robinson as bishop," the document went on to say.

It also noted that, because of Robinson's elevation to bishop, a "state of impaired communion" now exists between their churches and the American denomination.

One Kenyan Anglican leader went further, according to the South African television station News 24. Bishop Thomas Kogo of the Diocese of Eldoret in Kenya, saying he was speaking for his fellow Kenyan bishops, announced that 50 million Anglicans in Kenya were officially breaking communion with the U.S. Episcopal Church.

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Proposed Afghanistan constitution may not protect religious freedom

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Some observers are worried that a new constitution for Afghanistan may do little more to protect religious freedom than did the oppressive Taliban government.

After months of negotiations among members of a constitutional commission, a draft of the proposed document was released Nov. 3. While setting up a government that mirrors the United States' system in structure -- with three branches, an elected president and a bicameral legislature -- it also declares Afghanistan an "Islamic Republic."

The constitution names "the sacred religion of Islam" as the official religion of the country, according to a translation of the original Pashtu text.

While it follows that clause by saying, "Followers of other religions are free to perform their religious ceremonies within the limits of the provisions of law," the proposal doesn't contain any provision separating mosque from state or explicitly ensuring neutrality between religious groups, as does the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The proposal also insists that no law in Afghanistan "can be contrary to the sacred religion of Islam and the values of this constitution."

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It allows political parties to form and operate only if the "program and charter of the party are not contrary to the principles of [the] sacred religion of Islam." However, it also bans parties based on religion.

The document refrains from explicitly enforcing any particular school of sharia, or Islamic law, either, except when both parties involved in a court dispute are members of the same Muslim sect.

However, it does require that members of the country's highest court uphold an oath "in the name of God Almighty to support justice and righteousness in accord with the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam and the provisions of this constitution and other laws of Afghanistan."

It also requires that appointees to the court be educated either in principles of secular law or "Islamic jurisprudence."

Religious freedom was virtually nonexistent under the rule of the Taliban, a group of Islamic fundamentalists who held control over most of the country prior to the U.S. war against them in 2001. Although there are many in the ethnically diverse nation who subscribe to more tolerant strains of Islam, much of the country remains partial to the Taliban's conservative views.

And reports from the nation emphasize that many elements of the Taliban may be attempting to return to power.

A member of a U.S. panel charged with monitoring global religious liberty said the document does not ease her concerns.

"There's the potential risk of a judicial theocracy" developing under the current proposal's wording, said Preeta Bansal, a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

In a telephone interview, Bansal also noted that the constitution does not protect basic human rights as sacrosanct in the same way as the U.S. Constitution or international human-rights declarations. "You have a situation where individual human-rights guarantees can be trumped by ordinary legislation, and that legislation is invalid unless it accords with specific teachings of Islam."

Bansal is a visiting scholar at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. She recently returned from a commission trip to Afghanistan where, among other things, she and other commission representatives met with the nation's chief judge.

The justice told the commissioners that Islam is compatible with most human rights -- except for three critical ones. "All except freedom of expression, freedom of religion and equal rights for women," Bansal reported the judge as saying.

"At one point when we asked him specifically about the constitution, he kind of made a general comment about how great the constitution was, but then he pointed to the Koran that was in the corner and said, 'This is our law,'" she added.

"That would be one thing coming from a lower judge, but this was the chief justice," Bansal said.

Afghans from tribal and regional groups across the country will assemble in December in a traditional Afghan tribal council -- called a loya jirga -- to consider the constitution. Media reports said the proposal is unlikely to undergo significant alterations from the floor of the convention.

Kentucky Baptists unveil proposed staff reorganization

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The Kentucky Baptist Convention plans to reorganize its staff, taking the first major step toward implementing a new mission plan.

The proposed reorganization will eliminate two filled positions, reassign two employees and take advantage of five staff retirements. The first of four new regional strategists was added. Those adjustments will allow the convention to implement the reorganization while absorbing budget cuts of \$365,000 made earlier this year.

The reorganization will combine the work of the convention's church development and evangelism teams. The work of longtime departments such as discipleship, stewardship and family ministry will be assigned to various teams rather than maintained on a department level.

Doug Strader, director of the stewardship department; Vernon Cole, leader of the church growth team; Jim Clontz, director of the discipleship training department; and Guy Futral, leader of the leadership development team, all will retire between October 2003 and April 2004. Alan Witham, an associate in the missions growth team's extension-ministries department, was named the KBC's first regional church development strategist and Karl Babb, director of the family ministry team, will succeed Futral as head of the leadership development team.

"It's difficult when you have to make organizational decisions that impact lives and ministries," said KBC Executive Director Bill Mackey. "There's always a delicate balance between valuing every person and the mission of the organization. I've tried to consider the gifts, strengths and passions of each person and to find ways to maximize those in positions of ministry within given parameters."

The overall mission plan, adopted in May by the KBC Mission Board, is designed to guide state convention ministry priorities through 2009. The proposal awaits final approval from Mission Board members Nov. 10 and would take effect Jan. 1.

Mackey said the primary goal of staff reorganization is to help Kentucky Baptist churches be more effective. Among the concerns that promoted the reorganization is an unchurched population of 40 percent in Kentucky and an absence of any baptisms in 450 KBC churches last year. Goals call for starting 75 churches, including 25 high-impact churches, as well as 50 language church-type ministries by 2010.

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Festival celebrates 10 years of connecting faith, film

By Ted Parks

LOS ANGELES (ABP) -- In a place known for its glitz and greed, the City of the Angels Film Festival is all about inspiration and redemption.

An annual event that brings filmmakers, theologians and film fans together to explore what mainstream movies say about faith and life, City of the Angels recently celebrated its 10th anniversary by screening 13 key films from the last

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100 years.

The festival also hosted the American premiere of "Resistance," a new movie by Todd Komarnicki, producer of the new comedy "Elf."

With the 10th anniversary event titled "Revelations/Revolutions," organizers chose films that had a "spiritual dimension" and "changed the way that filmmaking got done," said Scott Young, festival chair and the director of faculty relations for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in the Southern California region.

The screenings ranged from D.W. Griffith's 1916 "Intolerance" to the hit musical "Moulin Rouge" from 2001, as well as "Resistance," Komarnicki's 2003 film about a downed American airman and his rescuers in Nazi-occupied Belgium.

The festival followed each movie with a panel discussion or an audience discussion led by a facilitator. The idea was to celebrate film's power to generate understanding by stimulating conversation among viewers.

An example is Spike Lee's 1989 "Do the Right Thing," the story of one steamy day in a Brooklyn neighborhood that explodes at nightfall into racial tension.

In the movie, conflict between the white Italian-American owners of a local pizzeria and their clientele mounts as the temperature in the city climbs. The conflict in the pizzeria mirrors the rumblings among and between the African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics who live nearby.

After the movie, panelist David Holmes, a humanities professor at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif., called attention to "economic disempowerment" in the onscreen neighborhood, where people talk about their dreams but seem unable to act on them. The film offered "an ongoing critique of the American dream," Holmes said.

Other festival picks shifted the focus from American urban life to Europe. "The Bicycle Thief," a 1949 neo-realist classic by director Vittorio de Sica, showed the economic devastation in post-war Italy. The 1929 documentary "The Man With the Movie Camera" portrayed Moscow in a time when many viewed the social experiment of the still-young Soviet Union with optimism.

The hit musical "Moulin Rouge" capped the three-day festival on its closing night. A frenetic pageant of color and sound, the lavish musical tells the story of a young writer named Christian (Ewan McGregor) who falls in love with singer Satine (Nicole Kidman) in the infamous nightclub that gives the movie its name.

Set in decadent turn-of-the-century Paris -- where the Bohemian Revolution champions "Freedom! Beauty! Truth! And above all things, love!" - the story follows Satine, who is torn between her idealistic lover and a wealthy duke who promises to bankroll the nightclub if she sleeps with him.

Leading the discussion following the screening, festival director Craig Detweiler found symbolism in "Christian," the name of the writer in the movie who sings about love by anachronistically borrowing lyrics from 20th century pop songs. A screenwriter, Detweiler is also chair of mass communications at Biola University near Los Angeles.

"Christian is going to sing a silly love song to a cynical person," said Detweiler, who spun the character's musical declaration of romantic love into a metaphor for the Christian proclamation of redeeming love. "Tell our story, Christian," Detweiler said.

The City of the Angels Film Festival began partially as a response to the social upheaval in Los Angeles after the Rodney King incident in 1991. The festival's sponsors include evangelical Christian and Roman Catholic organizations. Throughout its 10 years, the festival has offered a faith-informed perspective on film, in contrast to Christians who dismiss Hollywood as an unlikely source of spiritual insight.

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Matt Zerrip, a festival volunteer, appreciated the chance City of the Angels provided to talk about film and faith in the entertainment capital of the world. A student at Lee University in Cleveland, Tenn., and currently studying in a special film program in Los Angeles, Zerrip said, "Everything that comes out of Hollywood is not evil and debased."

- Photos available from Associated Baptist Press

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Study finds grandparents play prominent role in care-giving

By Mark Wingfield

ALEXANDRIA, Va. (ABP) -- Nearly 6 million grandparents live in the same household with their grandchildren in the United States, and 40 percent of those grandparents are the primary care-givers for their grandchildren.

One third of grandparent care-givers live in "skipped generation" households, where neither parent of the grandchildren is present.

The data, based on the 2000 Census, was released by the U.S. Census Bureau at a conference in Alexandria, Va. The report, "Grandparents Living With Grandchildren: 2000," shows the geographic distribution of grandparents living with grandchildren and serving as care-givers, as well as the length of time the grandparents cared for the grandchildren.

Among the report's highlights:

- Nineteen percent of grandparent care-givers were living in poverty in 1999. The highest proportion of grandparent care-givers in poverty was in the South (21 percent), and the lowest proportions were in the West (16 percent) and the Midwest (15 percent).
- Almost all grandparents responsible for grandchildren were either the householder or the householder's spouse (94 percent).
- Those grandparents younger than 60 were more likely to be grandparent care-givers than were grandparents age 60 and over.
- Racial and ethnic differences were prominent among care-giving grandparents. Non-white grandparents were at least three times more likely to be live-in care-givers than (non-Hispanic) white grandparents. Although the majority of grandparents living with grandchildren were (non-Hispanic) white (2.7 million), they comprised only 2 percent of the non-Hispanic white population age 30 and over. By comparison, 6 percent to 10 percent of other racial and ethnic groups lived with their grandchildren.

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Darrel Baergen, Baptist professor, playwright, dies of cancer

By Marv Knox

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ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- Baptist professor, playwright, director and producer Darrel Baergen died Oct. 23 in Abilene after a long battle with cancer. He was 68.

Baergen committed most of his career to teaching speech and drama in three Baptist schools. He began at Oklahoma Baptist University and later taught twice at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, where he retired as chair of the department of communication in 2000.

He also was chairman of communication arts at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth and director of the Center for Christian Communications Studies, operated jointly by the seminary and the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission. He produced "Sunshine Factory" and "The Good News" for the RTVC. Both aired on the ACTS Network.

Baergen earned degrees from Oklahoma Baptist University, Baylor University and the University of Denver. Survivors include his wife, Judy, of Abilene; two sons; a daughter; and five grandchildren.

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Supreme Court declines to hear Roy Moore's appeal on monument

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has dealt what would appear to be the death blow to Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore's legal crusade to display a Ten Commandments monument in a state building.

On Nov. 3 the justices declined, without comment, to hear Moore's appeal of a lower federal court's ruling against the monument.

By choosing not to hear the case, the justices will not be clarifying the rules for such monuments on government property.

The 5,280-lb. granite monument -- engraved with the Protestant King James translation of the biblical commandments -- was removed from its spot at the center of the Alabama state judicial building's rotunda in August, over Moore's objections. Moore had attempted to defy earlier federal court orders to remove the monument, but was overruled by his fellow justices on the Alabama Supreme Court.

In November, U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson declared the monument a violation of the Constitution's ban on government endorsement of religion.

Moore had the monument placed in the building's rotunda in July 2001, shortly after he was elected to the state's highest judicial post. Moore had campaigned as the "Ten Commandments Judge" after gaining notoriety through earlier court battles over display of the Commandments in his courtroom while he was an Etowah County magistrate.

In July, a panel of the Atlanta-based 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals unanimously upheld Thompson's ruling. Thompson then issued the order to remove the monument.

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision to let the lower court's ruling stand means that federal rules on government display of Ten Commandments monuments will remain unclear. Lower federal courts have allowed some Ten Commandments displays but refused others.

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The Supreme Court building itself has a depiction of Moses holding two tablets representing the Commandments in a frieze on the south wall of its courtroom. However, that display and others that lower courts have held constitutional depict other historic sources of law alongside the Ten Commandments.

Moore had insisted on placing the Commandments by themselves. He repeatedly and publicly asserted that God's law was supreme and should not be displayed on equal footing with "man-made" documents.

Moore had also argued that the federal courts had no authority to remove the monument, which he viewed as fulfilling his duty -- as a state officer under the Alabama Constitution -- to "acknowledge God."

"I think that ultimately this is the kind of decision that enhances religious liberty for everyone," said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Lynn's organization and two other civil-rights groups sued Moore to get the monument removed.

Lynn said the decision protects religious freedom "because today's religious majority could be a minority tomorrow, and they need protecting against government promotion of any favored religion."

But a Moore supporter said the decision was symptomatic of what he views as a renegade federal judiciary.

"We just think it's outrageous that they don't even want to hear the arguments from Justice Moore and his attorneys," said Jim Backlin, director of legislative affairs for the Christian Coalition.

Backlin added he thinks the justices' refusal to hear the case "is indicative of what the federal judges are doing in general in this country -- going against the wishes of the American people on such issues as the Pledge of Allegiance, the Ten Commandments."

Religious Right supporters in Congress have introduced a bill, sponsored by Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.), to require the posting of the Commandments in the House and Senate chambers. Backlin encouraged support of that, as well as "any constitutional amendment that supports any display of the Ten Commandments in the public square."

But Lynn said his organization would challenge any such law if it is enacted. "What's a more quintessential law respecting an establishment of religion than Congress putting up a religious monument in a public space they control?" he asked.

Leaders of a Baptist group who filed a friend-of-the-court brief opposing Moore said the court's decision not to hear the case isn't surprising. "As both lower-court decisions clearly and forcefully held, the facts presented an unmistakable constitutional violation," said Holly Hollman, general counsel for the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Hollman's organization filed the brief in the original case in Thompson's court. More than 40 Alabama clergy members who opposed Moore's action as a violation of church-state separation signed onto it.

The decision means that Moore's case has reached a dead end. However, his woes may not be over yet. His defiance of the orders of higher courts earned Moore a suspension from his duties by the state's Judicial Ethics Commission.

He faces a trial, set to begin Nov. 12, by the state's Court of the Judiciary. If they rule against him, Moore could be removed from the bench permanently, or suspended from his job until the court chooses to reinstate him.