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Oklahoma City First Church
Okays Women Deacons Plan

OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)--Members of First Baptist Church, Oklahoma City, where Southern Baptist Convention Second Vice President Gene Garrison is pastor, voted 232-167 Jan. 16, to change church bylaws to allow women to serve as deacons.

According to Garrison the vote, which came following a two-hour discussion, makes the Oklahoma City church the first Southern Baptist congregation in the state to allow women to serve as deacons.

The discussion meeting, attended by 600 to 700 persons, culminated a study which began in March 1981. A nine-member committee to study the role of women in the church conducted an intensive study and correspondence with other churches who also have faced the issue before bringing the matter to the business meeting.

After its two-year study, the committee reported it found nothing in the New Testament to prevent women from becoming deacons. It cited New Testament scriptures, as well as the writings of the early church, to indicate there were women deacons in the First Century churches.

In an interview with Baptist Press, Garrison commented: "I was very proud of our people. There was not one bit of ugliness or anger. It was a very sweet spirited meeting. Both sides were ably represented, and all who spoke did so in a spirit of love and unity. Not one angry, emotional word was spoken."

Garrison, who has been pastor of the church for 10 years, succeeding former SBC president Herschel Hobbs, did not participate in the discussion but was moderator during the two hour discussion. In his column in the church newsletter prior to the vote, Garrison wrote: "I am praying for God to reveal his will in the matter of ordaining women as deacons in this church and for him to make it known thorough the vote...However it goes, I could accept that. Can you?"

He added: "I am committed to the principle of the autonomy of the local church. I believe God works through the congregation. I believe the congregation has the right to decide for itself what the policy of the church shall be."

After the vote, Garrison said, "I know from talking to the members that feelings ran very deep on both sides. I think this was done in a spirit of love. I was very proud."

Those who spoke during the discussion spoke nearly as much about Christian love for one another and remaining unified as they did about their opinion on the issue.

Comments by the women opposing the change included: "The Holy Spirit did not just give Paul inspiration to cover the first century."

"It may be old-fashioned, it may not be in keeping with today's world, but it is the law of God."

"The Bible said to pick you out a deacon and pick you out a man. If God is the same God today as he was yesterday, we don't need to ordain women.

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The pastor noted the church does not necessarily need to ordain women as deacons in order to conform to the pattern of the New Testament.

The action did not vote on "any particular woman" but merely set the procedure which will allow women to be elected and ordained. The motion authorizes the present 45 member deacon board to "appoint the necessary committee and recommend the procedure to the church" whereby the action can be implemented, Garrison said.

"The procedure should be set by late summer or early fall," Garrison said, noting the 5,000-member church elects deacons in early October. "The church has the opportunity every year either to elect new people or to reactivate those who have already been ordained. Each year 15 deacons go off the board and 15 go on. In the 10 years I have been here, usually 10 or 12 deacons are reactivated and three to five new persons are elected."

The action of the prestigious church is almost certain to bring negative reaction.

Former SBC President Bailey E. Smith, pastor of neighboring First Southern Baptist Church of Del City--an Oklahoma City suburb--said: "I stand opposed to the ordination of women as deacons. I believe when a church starts doing those things (ordaining women) it has quit majoring on the main thing...evangelism and soul winning.

Smith also said he would be opposed to "disfellowshipping" the church. "I do not think it should be a test of fellowship...although it saddens me. You rarely see a dynamic, soul-winning church doing something like this."

The question of withdrawing fellowship from First Baptist has been mentioned by members of the Capital Baptist Association, composed of 127 churches and 137,000 Southern Baptists in the Oklahoma City area. Ernie Perkins, director of missions for the association, said he "imagin s someone will try to do something about it," adding he does not expect such an effort to be made prior to the annual meeting of the association next October.

"It is one thing for them to vote they are open to it (ordination of women) and another thing entirely for them to do it," he said, noting the Oklahoma City church may or may not ordain women to the diaconate.

Perkins added: "I am a fundamentalist with a capital F when it comes to the autonomy of the local church. I believe First Baptist has every right to do what it feels God's will is for them. The only thing is, of course, that sister churches have a right to determine if they want to have fellowship with a church that has made such a decision."

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Pastor Builds Rapport
Into 'River Rats' Ministry

By Phyllis Thompson

Baptist Press
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COLOMBIA, Penn. (BP)--Jim Deatherage wanted a lot when he became the pastor of Cloumbia Baptist Chapel. Within a year he wanted the congregation to become self-supporting. He wanted to average 100 in Sunday School. He wanted to baptize 48 new converts.

But after meeting his 50-member congregation and assessing the inner-city community, he rearranged his priorities. In the town of 14,000 an estimated 9,000 were unchurched. His congregation, like the community, was racked by depression, poverty and unemployment. Members considered themselves "river rats," a derogatory name given town forebears by outsiders because of Colombia's location along the Susquehanna River.

But for Deatherage, the name became the basis for beginning his pastorate. "Basically, my people didn't like themselves very much," he explained. "After years of nothing to look forward to, of being described as lunatics and trash, they had come to believe it."

In sermons and Bible studies, Deatherage began to teach his members "we'r all made in God's image. And because of that, it doesn't matter what we have or what we look like. Through him we have beauty."

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Gradually he saw results. Among the first to respond were community youth, who sensed in Deatherage understanding and patience. Now, besides attending regular Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday services, youth know they can phone with problems, with good news or "just to talk." Deatherage occasionally grows frustrated. "It's hard," he said. "You receive many requests for food, money, clothes. And sometimes you have to say 'I'm sorry, I don't have it to give.'"

Nevertheless Deatherage's spiritual counseling has seen members through emotional crises. His availability and warmth have led to an easy rapport, not only with members of his church, but with the community that otherwise might have rejected the Texas native, a graduate of Stephen F. Austin College and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

To Deatherage rapport involves all phases of church and community life. Not only does he prepare long and hard for Sunday worship services, he strives to remain aware of personal problems; most days are spent visiting homes and counseling. He helped to build Sunday School rooms; he makes church repairs; he drives the church bus, often getting up before sunrise on Sundays to assure the building and bus will be warm for members. "A church is only as strong as its pastor," he said. "You work so hard to meet physical needs, yet you realize that means absolutely nothing if you don't change the spiritual."

To help members "grow spiritually," Deatherage began a discipling group. As yet, only a few attend. "We're suffering a lack of leaders," he admitted. "Which means I carry a heavier load. But you have to make that first year start. The rest will follow."

Thirty-year-old Deatherage was a minister of youth and music at Memorial Baptist Church in Gettysburg, Penn., when the Colombia church asked him to become its pastor. His work in Gettysburg had already convinced Deatherage "the Lord wanted me in Pennsylvania," he said. "Before that I thought Pennsylvania was full of smokestacks, coal mines and rough, rough individuals. I never thought I would pastor a church in the North."

As a seminary senior, Deatherage reluctantly joined a revival team to the pioneer state. "I got up that first morning and looked out my window expecting to see filth and debris," he remembered. "Instead I saw huge barns, open corn fields, grazing cattle. I fell in love with Pennsylvania right then."

For Deatherage, stereotypes of residents also evaporated quickly. "People are people," he said. "There were no adjustments. This was where I belonged."

But like his community, Deatherage weathered storms. Shortly after his arrival in September, church attendance reached an all-time high of 159. But in February, one of Pennsylvania's coldest months, attendance was down to 59. Offerings that had been \$1,000 dwindled to \$275.

Simultaneously, the heating bill reached an all-time high of \$942. "We really couldn't make it," Deatherage said, without the help of several churches and some individuals in other states. Deatherage hopes attendance will once again reach the 100-mark, "But if it does, I don't know where we'll put everyone," he said. Already, space is at a premium. Sometimes furniture is removed so more children can be packed into tiny classrooms.

Deatherage also would like to constitute within a year. "I guess that may be a little presumptuous," he said. "But if you don't set goals, if you don't know where you're going, that's where you will end up--nowhere."

And while some goals may remain unattained, Deatherage has determined others will be reached regardless of the costs. "You get hurt, you get frustrated," he said. "But you realize that people are important, more important than anything. Sure I'm not going to solve every problem in Colombia, but I am going to try."

High Court Will Not Hear
Challenge To Skull Cap Rule

By Stan Hasteley

WASHINGTON (BP)--The U.S. Supreme Court announced Jan. 17 it will not decide if Orthodox Jewish high school basketball players have a constitutional right to wear yarmulkes, or skull caps, in competition.

Over the objections of justices Thurgood Marshall and Harry A. Blackmun, the court majority turned aside a challenge by two Orthodox Jewish schools and five parents of student athletes to rules by national and state high school athletic associations forbidding any headwear except sweat bands.

The schools and parents, from the Chicago area, argued in papers filed with the high court that the rules violated the students' free exercise of religion. All Orthodox Jewish males are required, out of respect to God, to wear their yarmulkes nearly all the time.

Both the Illinois High School Association and the National Federation of State High School Associations, on the other hand, defended the rules against headwear, saying that the bobby pins and clips used to secure the skull caps pose a danger to the athletes.

In lower court proceedings, a federal district court held in late 1981 that because the associations failed to present a single instance of injury caused by a yarmulke's slippage, the free exercise of religion claims prevailed.

But the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals reversed that ruling, holding that the students had "no constitutional right" to wear yarmulkes "insecurely fastened by bobby pins." It ordered the case sent back to the district court and asked the parties to work out an alternative means of securing the skull caps.

The Supreme Court's refusal to hear the case leaves that order in place.

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Houston Church Sets
\$34 Million Campaign

By Louis Moore

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HOUSTON, Texas (BP)--Houston's Second Baptist Church has announced a \$34 million expansion which will include the largest church sanctuary in Houston and apparently the largest Southern Baptist worship facility in the world.

The church hopes to use pay-as-it-goes plan, raising the \$34 million during the period of construction, with completion anticipated in 1986. The church currently has only \$1 million marked for the expansion.

Until the Second Baptist project was announced Jan. 17, Houston's largest church construction project was the \$9 million expansion First Baptist began nearly two years ago. That project is still underway.

Edwin Young, pastor of Second Baptist, said the church is rapidly running out of space and faces a "stop growing or start building" situation. The church's current sanctuary seats 1,350 and is filled to capacity in both Sunday morning worship services.

The new auditorium initially will seat 3,600, roughly 1,000 more than the city's largest, First Baptist. The building, to be modified colonial style, can be expanded to seat up to 8,000 persons.

Two separate building projects are contained in the \$34 million expansion: \$25 million for a worship center/education facility of 175,403 square feet, and \$9 million for a school/family life building of 104,841 square feet. The school facility will be used primarily by Second Baptist school, which offers private education from kindergarten through the twelfth grade and currently has about 800 students.

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Funds will be raised in two phases. The church will soon ask its 5,000 resident members to sign pledge cards to pay the \$25 million for the worship center over a three-year period. Divided evenly, that means it would take an average contribution of \$5,000 per member to pay for the new structure.

Young, said, however, the church will not solicit "equal gifts, but equal sacrifice. We can't do this without God's help. It will take an act of faith--a strong belief that this is the direction God wants us to go." Young said he is personally convinced "this is what God wants us to do."

The remaining \$9 million will be raised from parents of students, alumni, friends of Second Baptist's school and from foundations and charitable trusts.

The cost of the building will be in addition to the church's \$3.5 million annual budget. Last year the church raised more than \$6 million in total contributions to its budget in various causes, but not including its school. The church contributed about \$500,000 to various missions causes, including some \$162,500 to the SBC unified gifting plan, the Cooperative Program, representing about 4.5 percent of its budget.

The school currently has a budget of \$1,250,000, which is separate from the church budget. The school and church currently have a staff of 130 persons, which Young said will expand to 150 or 160 when the facility is completed.

Young said he intends to keep the church from focusing exclusively on its new building to the detriment of its social ministry. He said the church is in the process of expanding its annual contributions to various Southern Baptist mission causes and will continue to do so.

He said he is leading the church to be more involved in social ministries outside its own congregation too. He said next year the church will focus on special ministries to ghetto children, special education children, street people and the unemployed. "We're going to try to do our share to feed those who are hungry and clothe those who are naked," he said.

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(Moore is religion editor of the Houston Chronicle.)