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August 15, 1988

88-130

CLC search narrows  
exec field to 3

By Dan Martin

N-CO

DALLAS (BP)--The search for a new executive director for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission was narrowed to three candidates during a two-day meeting of the eight-member search committee Aug. 12-13 in Dallas.

"We met and carefully considered 11 nominees," said Joe Atchison, director of missions from Rogers, Ark., and chairman of the search committee. "After considering those 11, we came down to three and did some interviewing."

Atchison declined to name the three candidates, noting he "wished to protect their identity," but said: "All three are really good men. Any of the three would be a credit to the commission. Some have strengths the others don't have. Only one of them is God's man, and we have got to find out who that is."

He said he is optimistic the search committee can agree on a single candidate who can be presented to the annual meeting of the CLC Sept. 13-14 in Nashville. "I can't say for sure, but I am optimistic at this point," he said.

The search committee is made up of the CLC executive committee, plus two additional members. Executive committee members are Chairman Fred Lackey, pastor of First Baptist Church, Athens, Ala.; Vice Chairman Atchison; Secretary Rudolph Yakym, a stockbroker from South Bend, Ind.; and committee chairmen C. Nolan Phillips, pastor of University Baptist Church, Middletown, Ohio; Richard G. Elkins, a land developer from Albuquerque, N.M.; and Larrey Nofa, a private school administrator from Fountain Valley, Calif.

Also on the committee are Alma Ruth Morgan, a homemaker from Bartlesville, Okla., and Hal Lane, pastor of Eutawville (S.C.) Baptist Church.

The committee announced its candidate qualifications during a news conference at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in June, noting the candidate -- who must be male -- should oppose abortion and favor capital punishment. The candidate should have a "clear personal testimony," a call to ministry and an active devotional life.

The news conference also noted the candidate's family life, churchmanship, educational background, communications and administrative skills, political acumen and doctrinal soundness also were to be examined.

By doctrinal soundness, Atchison told the news media in June, the committee means the candidate must be "an avowed inerrantist."

Atchison told Baptist Press following the August meeting of the search committee that the nomination process was left open for two months, during which time the 11 nominations were received. "We got some correspondence nominating a person and including a resume and other correspondence favoring this one or that one," he said.

"We realized when we stated what our requirements were that it was going to have an influence with the nominations because we made some things very clear from the beginning: that we wanted a scripturally based man on ethical positions. That eliminated a lot of people who might have been nominated."

Some of the letters of recommendation included "some surprises ... things that made us take note," he said, but he declined to be more specific.

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Search committee members were sent all of the resumes and letters of recommendation two weeks before their August meeting and were asked to pick their top three choices, Atchison said. When they met, they surveyed all of the resumes again and listed their top three choices. Then, the next day, six of the eight members spent about two hours with each of the top three nominees.

Both Lackey and Elkins had to leave the meeting early, Atchison said.

He noted: "All of the men we looked at satisfied us theologically. What we were most concerned about is their ability to lead and their future vision for our agency, since it is so unknown by many, and by others it is so controversial. We were looking for men who had ideas who would project this agency into the place where it needed to be and on the cutting edge of the moral issues of our day.

"Most of our search committee was concerned that men like (James) Dobson of Focus on the Family are being looked to by many Southern Baptists for their moral information. We want Southern Baptists to have an agency where they will have confidence in looking to it as their voice, their conscience and their educator.

"We are looking for a man who will bring our agency into focus."

He explained all of the 11 nominees are "inerrantists and have good strong positions on the issues that seem to be in controversy, such as abortion, women in ministry and capital punishment. All of these men are scripturally oriented in their ethics rather than what we have had in the past, what I would call situational ethics."

Former executive N. Larry Baker resigned under fire June 3 after 15 controversial months at the SBC moral and social concerns agency. Conservatives were unhappy with Baker's selection process and said they were "run over" in Baker's election, when moderates represented a majority. Baker was called to lead the agency on a 16-13 vote.

An effort was made to terminate his services in September 1987, with conservatives noting the "flawed" selection process and Baker's position on three key ethical issues: abortion, women in ministry and capital punishment. The effort failed on a 15-15 vote.

The "difference between all of the men (nominees) and Larry Baker is like daylight and darkness, there is so much difference," Atchison said.

The search committee chairman, who has been designated as the spokesman for the group, said he believes the vote on a final candidate at the September CLC meeting will be accepted in "a better spirit" than was Baker's.

While conservatives appear to have a 20-11 majority over moderates on the 31-member board, Atchison said he believes the vote will not be as divided as was Baker's election.

"For one thing, we put two moderates on the search committee, something that did not happen before. We are also going to change the way the nominee is presented to the full board. The board members will receive far in advance the resume and position papers about the nominee and will have a chance to study it, also something that didn't happen before," he said.

Conservatives felt "run over" by the moderate-dominated search committee which recommended Baker, sending out information a few days before the board meeting and then "pushing the nomination through," Atchison said.

"We are going to handle it in a way where there will be better acceptance and a better spirit," he added. "We feel like it is going to be completely open and fair.

"We are fully aware a lot of eyes are watching. What we are going to try to do is find the best man who is qualified, who is the Lord's man and not let all of this political fallout shape our decision."

Nazareth-based Baptist stirs  
Muslim interest in Christ

By Art Toalston

F - FMB

NAZARETH, Israel (BP)--The Arab businessman proudly shows visitors his well-lit, orderly shop. Ceiling fans prevent the Middle Eastern heat from making several women workers swelter in their traditional Muslim garb. A sort of Arabic Muzak almost makes the workday festive.

Although he is intent on a first-class operation, his entrepreneurial spirit is shaped by an otherworldly quest: to know God in his fullness.

"First of all, I am a Moslem," he says. For several months, however, he has been reading through the Koran; the Jewish Torah, the first five books of the Bible; and the New Testament, "to see the difference between the three religions."

The New Testament -- his first ever -- was given to him by Ray Register, a Southern Baptist representative in Israel since 1966.

The Arab, in his late 30s, has been keeping a notebook of his findings. All three religions strive "to respect God," he says.

"Judaism came to the Jews only." In Christianity, "Jesus has come to clean the hearts of human beings." When a person studies Christ's teachings, he concludes, "He (Christ) has spoken to your heart."

For example, "Islam teaches to give a part of your wealth to man, to the poor, but Christ said, 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.' He never limited the amount. The relationship with God in Christianity is unlimited," the Arab explains.

The Arab plans to continue his quest. He reports: "I say to my friends, 'You eat three times in a day to fill your stomach. And you go to school 12 years or more to fill your mind. But you must fill your heart.'"

Register has no idea how many towns and villages in Galilee, the heavily Arab section of northern Israel, have similarly inquisitive Arabs. Driving from Israel's northern border with Lebanon back to his Nazareth home one day, he began counting. "I got to about 80 villages," he recalls. "I lost count. Arab villages alone.

"Just so many people who need to be reached for the gospel."

Not all of Israel's Arabs are Muslim. One out of five is Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic or Roman Catholic. Some are Anglican. A tiny minority are Baptist, and Register spends roughly half his workweek nurturing their churches with evangelistic and discipleship training and times of shared prayer and counsel.

The rest of his workweek is spent among Muslims. Register says it's not dangerous. These are people who invite him into their homes, people quite open to telling a visitor about their faith and giving him equal time, to accepting him as a friend, not haranguing him with their suspicions of America.

Granted, Islam seems to be on the march, and even in Israel the effects of the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic revolution have been felt.

Khomeini, a leader of the heavily Iranian Shiite sect, is not popular among the majority of Mohammed's followers in Israel and elsewhere who are Sunni Muslims. But Muslims in the region have been buoyed by his rise to prominence.

They no longer see themselves as just "a conquered people, conquered by Israel," Register says. "They now have a status, an identity as a people and a unity they did not have before."

Mosques, or Muslim houses of worship, and minarets, the adjacent prayer towers, are "popping up all over the landscape," he reports.

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Many women now are wearing traditional garb that leaves only their faces and hands uncovered. Many men are growing beards as a sign of their religious commitment.

Under such circumstances, what hope is there for reaching Muslims with the gospel? Plenty, says Register, whose book, "Dialogue and Interfaith Witness with Muslims," was published in 1979.

The time is ripe for Christians to expand their witness to Muslims, because Muslims are "thinking more about God than they were before," he says. And Christians have plenty to share.

Register says verses from the Koran itself counter such Muslim arguments that the Koran has superseded the Bible, that the Bible has been corrupted, that Jesus was not the Son of God, that he didn't really die on the cross.

On the latter assertion, for example, Register notes that four verses in the Koran acknowledge Jesus' death on the cross, while only one verse can be interpreted for the opposite meaning.

One Muslim leader says the Koran teaches: "Do not refuse what comes down to Abraham and the gospels. ... Be wise." He points to his Koran and Register's Bible and says, "Here and here, it's all great."

He, like other Muslims, voices reverence for Christ. He quotes a verse from the Koran that says, "O Jesus, I will put you to death and raise you up to myself, and ... I will make those who follow you above those who refuse to believe."

"Jesus has certain qualities that nobody else has," the Muslim leader says. "He raised the dead; he healed the lepers and the blind. God gave him certain works that he never gave to Mohammed."

But his regard for Christ does not compromise his esteem for Mohammed. "The seal of all the prophets was Mohammed, may peace be upon him," he says.

Much of Register's contact with Muslims in Israel has come via the extended family system of the Middle East. With the help of introductions supplied by longtime friend Abu Mustafa, who lives in a village near Nazareth, he has visited many members of one extended Muslim family.

Register had known Mustafa's father and visited him in a hospital before he died several years ago. Mustafa later had a dream in which his father told him: "I'm thankful to the pastor for what he has told me. Be a true friend to him because he has a true belief. He's a true friend ... in a time of need, a time of testing, not just with words."

Register's first contact with Muslims was at the University of Virginia years ago. One Muslim from Syria "told me he prays five times a day. That convicted me as a Christian, because I didn't have a regular prayer life of my own. So I started reading the Bible and praying every day as a result," he says.

All Muslims who venture to the United States "are coming back sooner or later" to their Middle Eastern homelands, either to live permanently or to visit family and friends, Register says.

He hopes "more Christians are opening up to the need to minister to Muslims." Pointing to ever-heightening tensions in the Middle East, he reminds, "God uses all sorts of motivations to get us awake and aware of what should be done in the world."

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BP photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press.

Ministries to AIDS victims  
explored at conference

By Leisa Hammett-Goad

*FJ - HMB*  
Baptist Press  
8/15/88

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--Southern Baptists need to put aside judgments of AIDS victims and increase their ministry to individuals diagnosed with the disease, a medical missionary said during Home Missions Week at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center.

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Fred Loper, a physician and Southern Baptist home missionary, noted the majority of AIDS victims are hemophiliacs and not homosexuals, as commonly believed. Baptists should be involved in a ministry to AIDS victims, regardless of how they became infected, Loper said.

Loper, who practices medicine five days each month and consults with Baptists on medical issues the remainder of his time, reassured conference participants that AIDS is not transmitted through casual contact.

Although he acknowledged he is more apt to be exposed to the disease than someone not involved in medicine, the Oklahoma City physician decided long ago the minimal risk is worth the chances he takes. "It comes down to are we going to minister to patients with AIDS or not?" he said.

Loper encouraged conference participants to contact hospitals and local AIDS organizations and ask what they can do.

"There are huge needs. Nobody can locate housing, provide transportation, clothing, love and community better than us. These are things we have been doing forever. Taking care of AIDS patients is not all that complex. It's just a matter of whether we want to do it," he added.

"If our Lord is truly the Almighty, he will guide us in this issue. ... AIDS patients are our modern-day lepers ... Jesus ministered to lepers and he's our model.

While encouraging churches to minister to AIDS victims, Loper and other conference leaders urged Baptists to avoid feelings that they might be perceived as condoning homosexuality if they help the patients.

Carole Reese, Southern Baptist home missionary and chaplain at Chicago's Cook County Hospital -- one of the nation's largest public hospitals -- ministers to AIDS patients daily with help from Baptist volunteers.

"There are a lot of stigmas attached to diseased people," said Reese. "In addition many AIDS patients are homosexuals and drug users, people we don't normally want to associate with in the first place."

Biblical judgment and rejection are not the same, she said, noting, "Christians have to be able to stand for something, but they must balance judgment with the good news of the incarnation, of love and forgiveness."

Reese agreed with Bill Thornton, executive director of Exile Ministries of First Southern Baptist Church in Fresno, Calif., insisting AIDS patients are different from others who are terminally ill.

Parents and friends don't visit them, and medical professionals often refuse to provide basic care, Thornton said. He and Exile volunteers often deliver food, feed and bathe patients because nurses often refuse to help, he added.

Thornton resigned from a pastorate three months ago to head the ministry, which serves as a support group for families of homosexuals and for homosexuals who desire to change. The organization also works with AIDS patients and their families and trains others to work with these groups.

"Our dream is to be a catalyst for Southern Baptists, to demonstrate that this kind of ministry can be done by a church," he said.

Thornton told conference participants they can lay foundations in their churches with their positive attitudes towards AIDS patients: "How many times each year do you hear preachers joke about homosexuality? "There's a mother who's hearing that joke about her son. She couldn't tell you her son was homosexual; now what is she going to do when he has AIDS?"

Thornton challenged Christians to pray that God would change their attitudes, not only about homosexuals and AIDS patients but also about people who are different. He then urged Baptists to learn everything possible about AIDS and to listen to people who have AIDS.

"Search the Bible and learn what it says about understanding and compassion. Accept a person as he or she is with the power of God working through you," he added.

When participants in Exile Ministries visit AIDS patients, Thornton said, "they don't tell AIDS victims they've sinned and are going to hell if they don't listen. The patient and the hospital would throw them out."

Instead, volunteers listen to the patient's problems. "Often a patient will ask me why I am there, and I tell them I have come to share Christ's love," he added. As a result, a number of AIDS patients have become Christians, he said.

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CORRECTION: Please note the following correction in the 8/11/88 BP story titled "House committee approves bill, despite church-state questions":

In the first paragraph, the verb should be have brought instead of has brought.

Thanks,  
Baptist Press