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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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Thomas warns churches against  
bias in presidential campaign

WASHINGTON (BP)--A Baptist church-state attorney has issued a warning that a recent mailing sent to Southern Baptists could lead churches to jeopardize their tax-exempt status.

Oliver S. Thomas, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, warned that an insert in the mailing comparing the views of presidential candidates George Bush and Michael Dukakis amounted to political bias that could lead Internal Revenue Service investigators to consider revoking the tax exemption of churches that distribute it.

The person who oversaw assembly and mailing of the packet to an estimated "50,000 to 60,000 Southern Baptists," Fred Powell, senior associate pastor at Atlanta's First Baptist Church, disagreed with Thomas' assessment that the comparison amounts to bias.

"We were told that it was run by IRS and was a fair assessment," said Powell, who would not give more specific information on the preparation or checking of the document. "We have been told it does (meet the IRS guidelines). It is an opinion situation here."

Powell added: "The intent of this is to get Christians to vote. It is stated clearly that they are to vote as they feel led. No one is implying that you should vote for one candidate or the other. Strongly conservative people will vote for one; someone with more liberal leanings will vote for the other. We are not telling people to do anything but to vote."

Thomas said: "An IRS executive advised me there were 'serious problems' with the issues comparison. I believe we have an ethical duty to pass that information along to Southern Baptists."

Thomas said while most of the mailing is legal, it falls short of the law in its presentation of the views of one of the presidential candidates in "pejorative, inflammatory language" and in "caricaturing" the candidate's position in a "biased manner."

"I've discussed these materials with prominent church-state attorneys from other denominations who agree that any church that distributes them would be jeopardizing its tax-exempt status," Thomas said. "That's the real problem with this letter. Churches are being encouraged to use something that could easily lead to an IRS investigation and possible litigation."

"A church may decide to take such a risk, but it should do so with its eyes wide open, realizing the possible consequences."

The Internal Revenue Code's provision on political activity by tax-exempt organizations states in part that such groups must not "participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office."

Thomas encouraged churches that have questions about the mailing to check with their local or regional IRS offices.

The mailing -- which includes a cover letter addressed to "Dear Southern Baptist Friend" and signed "Southern Baptist Leaders" -- urges Christians to participate in the upcoming nationwide elections and includes a page with quotes on the importance of voting from 11 Christian leaders, including four Southern Baptists.

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The Southern Baptists are Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tenn.; Charles F. Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church, Atlanta; James T. Draper Jr., pastor of First Baptist Church, Euless, Texas; and Edwin Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church, Houston. All but Young have been SBC president.

Others quoted include Jerry Falwell, Bill Gothard, Josh McDowell and James Kennedy.

Two Southern Baptists whose names appear in the mailing -- Draper and Rogers -- said their intention was to get people to vote. Both confirmed the accuracy of their quotes on the importance of voting, but each said he had not been involved in preparing or mailing the letter.

The packet includes a printed cover letter promoting National Citizenship Day, Sunday, Sept. 25, 1988; the comparison of candidates; the quotes on the importance of voting; and a sheet with registration requirements in the state of the person receiving the letter.

The cover letter lists five activities it says churches may engage in without violating IRS regulations, including encouraging church members to vote, preaching on "the role of the Christian in the state," registering new voters, using church buses to transport voters to the polls and distributing candidates' views in a "non-partisan fashion."

The "1988 Presidential Issues Comparison" appears on the back of the cover letter. It gives a brief description of the views of Bush and Dukakis on abortion, budget/taxes, the death penalty, defense, federal courts, "freedom fighters," homosexuals as foster parents, the Middle East, the Pledge of Allegiance and school prayer.

At the bottom of the page the letter says, "Study the issues and decide for yourself, but be sure to vote on election day."

Powell said the mailing came about when "key Southern Baptist leaders felt it was important to get Christians to vote." He said the group was "informal" and sort of "mushroomed."

He also said the non-specific term "Southern Baptist Leaders" was used but declined to identify those included in such a group. "I don't feel I could (name them) without their concurrence, even if I knew them all," he said.

"The important thing is not who sent it, but getting people to vote," he explained.

Rogers told Baptist Press the letter is "something I had not seen nor did I write nor did I have any part in the production of. The quote on voting is indeed one I wrote and sent at the request of Fred Powell."

He added: "There was a consortium of people who met together out of a common concern to talk about the fact that we need to get our people -- Christian people -- aware of their God-given responsibility to vote. In the discussion, we felt it would be good to get out a letter to encourage our people to do just that. That was the genesis of it."

Rogers said readers would make "a mistake to assume" the "Southern Baptist Leaders" noted in the letter include the four whose quotes are cited.

"I do not know that I would agree with every syllable of it, but there is nothing (in the letter) I disagree with at first look," he said. "But it is not something I read, helped write or fixed my signature to."

Draper, who said he had been on a trip to Africa and did not participate in early discussions, said he did talk about the letter in a telephone conversation just before it was mailed: "Several of us were talking ... I don't remember who all; I do remember Adrian (Rogers) and Fred (Powell). After it was over, I wrote a letter to Fred and put my quote in it."

Powell said "Christian leaders around the country" created National Citizenship Day and set the date for Sept. 25, Powell said, adding the letters were mailed the week before Sept. 25.

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The letter includes a toll-free number for people wanting "preprinted bulletin inserts" or other information. A call from Baptist Press was answered by an answering service in Calimesa, Calif. An operator said she did not know if National Citizenship Day had an office and that messages were being mailed to the customer. She would not say where they were mailed.

Powell said the mail was not being sent to First Baptist Church of Atlanta but declined to divulge who had hired the answering service. "It is a private organization, I think," he said.

Powell said he was provided the information for both the letter and the comparison of candidates' views "from another source. I really don't know who put the comparison together. The information was given to me, and I helped put it together."

First Baptist Church of Atlanta "acted at the request of others," he said. "It wasn't our idea, although we were in agreement with it. It wasn't initiated here, but it was just more convenient for us to do it. ... We just became the vehicle of communication."

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(BP reporters contributing to this story were Stan Hastey and Kathy Palen of the Washington Bureau and Dan Martin, news editor.)

Ruschlikon funding effort  
proposed; academy created

By Mike Creswell

Baptist Press  
10/4/88

DORFWEIL, West Germany (BP)--European Baptists have approved a major new funding effort for financially troubled Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, expressing a desire to maintain the school in its present location near Zurich.

The seminary is operated in a partnership between the European Baptist Federation and the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. The Foreign Mission Board, which owns the seminary property, must consider the funding plan and related actions.

The funding effort was one of two major actions taken by the federation's General Council during its annual meeting Sept. 29 - Oct. 2 at the West German Baptist Family Center near Frankfurt. Twenty-one Baptist Unions in Eastern and Western Europe make up the EBF.

The general council also agreed to create a new International Baptist Lay Academy in Budapest, Hungary, designed to train Baptist leaders from Eastern Europe.

By approving a mortgage/investment fund-raising effort for the financially troubled seminary, the European council expressed its desire to maintain the school at its present location rather than selling the property and relocating elsewhere in Europe.

Relocation was one of the main options explored in recent months by representatives of the federation and the Foreign Mission Board. A group of board trustees headed by chairman Mark Corts visited Europe during late September to examine potential sites and talk directly with federation leaders about how to maintain the school's ministry while reducing annual financial losses.

In 1987 the school's expenditures totaled 1,512,131 Swiss francs (almost \$1 million U.S.) while the income was only 1,389,000 Swiss francs. The Foreign Mission Board is a major contributor to the seminary and several faculty and staff members are Southern Baptist missionaries. The drop of the U.S. dollar's value by 35 to 40 percent over the past three years has, in effect, reduced the level of support from the Foreign Mission Board and other Baptist entities in the United States.

The financial plan adopted would authorize the seminary to borrow 18 million Swiss francs against the property, then invest the money in European currency markets, securing an estimated annual income of about 540,000 Swiss francs. That amount would provide funds to make up losses in the last two years and also provide funds for needed renovations on the buildings, thus keeping the school on an even financial keel for several years.

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However, the financial plan hinges on the Foreign Mission Board's agreeing to turn over ownership of the seminary property and buildings to the federation. The method of funding will be one consideration in the board's decision.

The seminary is administered jointly by the Foreign Mission Board and the federation and FMB policy has been to establish seminaries and other institutions, then turn them over to national Baptists when the receiving body appeared capable of taking responsibility for the them. In 1978 the board offered to turn over the seminary to the federation, but at that time European Baptist leaders felt they were not ready to assume this responsibility.

Federation leaders stressed they want to maintain a working relationship with the FMB in operating Ruschlikon, which has become a strategic educational institution for Baptists of Europe and other areas.

"There has never been a greater gift to Europe than (the) Ruschlikon seminary," Knud Wumpelmann, the federation's general secretary, told the council during lengthy deliberations.

The Foreign Mission Board is expected to hear a report from the study committee at its October meeting. In addition to Corts, Winston-Salem, N.C., the committee includes Dale Cain, Lubbock, Texas; Dick Thomassian, Huntsville, Ala.; Hunter Riggins, Poquoson, Va.; and John Simms, Salem, Va. The committee was accompanied by John David Hopper, Ruschlikon president; Isam Ballenger, vice president for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa; and Keith Parker, director of Southern Baptist work in Europe.

In a major step for Baptist work in Eastern Europe, the council also approved establishing, in partnership with the Foreign Mission Board, an International Baptist Lay Academy in Budapest, Hungary, which would train Baptist leaders from several Eastern European countries.

President of the academy will be Laszlo Gerzenyl, professor of the Baptist seminary in Budapest, where classes will be held. The Foreign Mission Board will transfer Southern Baptist missionary Errol Simmons from Spain to be associate director. Both Gerzenyl and Simmons will teach at the academy, but most teachers would come from Baptist groups in the West, traveling at their own expenses, or on funds provided by their own schools or unions.

The academy will be administered jointly by the Foreign Mission Board and the European Baptist Federation, in conjunction with the executive board of the European Baptist Seminary at Ruschlikon. The FMB will fund the program from three to five years on an experimental basis.

The new academy has been approved by Hungarian government leaders, who said they would allow the distribution of Christian literature in connection with the academy.

As part of its curriculum, the academy will offer classes in English, which will help many Eastern European students to attend seminary classes taught in English at Ruschlikon through the seminary's Summer Institute of Theological Education.

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Tennessee Convention elects  
D.L. Lowrie executive director

By Wm. Fletcher Allen

Baptist Press  
10/4/88

BRENTWOOD, Tenn.-- D.L. Lowrie, director of the state missions commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, has been elected unanimously to become executive director-treasurer of the Tennessee Baptist Convention.

Lowrie, 53, a native of Tennessee, was elected during a called meeting of the TBC Executive Board Sept. 29. He will succeed Tom J Madden, who will retire April 30 at age 70. Madden has been the TBC's top executive since Jan. 1, 1979.

Lowrie will join the TBC Jan. 1, and will work with Madden for four months.

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Perry Michel, pastor of Belmont Heights Baptist Church in Nashville and chairman of the search committee, said Lowrie was chosen out of about 34 serious candidates.

"We believe D.L. Lowrie is the best of the best," Michel said. "All who were nominated were faithfully considered. We prepared ourselves for the work, and we spent countless hours on our knees in prayer," he added.

In accepting the new post, Lowrie said, "My ultimate responsibility is to God. I want to be one of you, work with you. I want us to write a page together that will honor the work of God in Tennessee."

Lowrie is a native of Bluff City, Tenn., where his parents still live. He is a graduate of East Tennessee State University in Johnson City and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He has held pastorates in Tennessee and Texas and was pastor of First Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas, before assuming the BGCT post in 1986.

He held several key positions in the Texas convention, including two years as president from 1981-83.

Lowrie and his wife, the former Alice Reynolds of Myrtle, Miss., have four sons.

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Lay people retire  
Walnut Street debt

By Jack Sanford

Baptist Press  
10/4/88

LOUISVILLE, KY. (BP)--Kenneth Chafin startled the congregation of Walnut Street Baptist Church, Louisville, Sunday, Oct. 2, by announcing that a small group of lay people had pledged \$1.2 million to pay off the church debt by the end of the year.

Chafin, pastor of the church for less than six months, said lay people led the effort and did most of the solicitation.

It originated with a layman who said he did not like to spend \$100,000 each year on principal and interest and offered to help pay the debt. He then went on to enlist others in the project. The group which finally came up with the funds was a diverse group of about 15 couples, Chafin said.

The group "represent great diversity in age, vocation, experience and length of time in the church. All were intensely interested in the project but not all were able to give at the present time because of various good reasons. Those who were able to give pledged cash, stocks, bonds and the gift of land. All these will be translated into cash with which to retire the debt," he added.

The lay people, whom Chafin said can "make a tremendous difference in the way the church moves forward," freed up contributions of about 1,100 families who had been giving above their tithes each week for the past six years to retire the debt.

Among the things Chafin said he hopes to accomplish with additional funds made available by the elimination of the debt service is increased program money. The Walnut Street congregation has extensive inner-city ministries to children, homeless people, street people, people with marriage problems. Additional funds will enrich and expand these ministries and open avenues for new work, particularly among ethnics who live in Louisville.

Cooperative Program giving is expected to increase as the church moves forward with a planned percentage increase each year. This increase will be larger because it will come from larger budget funds now that debt retirement is no longer necessary.

Chafin said evangelism is his major emphasis and noted additional funds would enable the church to move into creative programs of evangelism. He added, "I am thankful to God we will be able to enter 1989 with nothing on our minds but winning this city to Christ."