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March 17, 1989

89-43

Southeastern ratifies
accreditation responses

By Marv Knox

N-CO

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)--Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary trustees have ratified their responses to the two agencies currently investigating the school's accreditation.

They twice voted 19-7 to "approve and adopt" the documents at the conclusion of their semi-annual meeting March 13-15 on the seminary campus in Wake Forest, N.C.

They also approved procedures for developing an "institutional response" to one of those accrediting agencies. And they changed procedures for selecting faculty, a move recommended by both agencies.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada are evaluating Southeastern Seminary following 17 months of controversy.

Conservatives gained a majority on the seminary board in 1987, eight years into the Southern Baptist Convention's theological/political controversy. The new majority changed the school's faculty-selection policies in October of that year, vesting more responsibility with the president and trustees.

President W. Randall Lolley, seven other administrators and three professors subsequently resigned. Lolley cited the policy change -- which he said ensures that only biblical inerrantists can be added to the faculty and disallows faculty leadership in selecting teachers -- as the reason.

SACS and ATS then sent investigating teams to the school, just as new President Lewis A. Drummond was launching his administration.

Southeastern is "a very troubled campus and divided institution," the initial ATS report states. "The provisions and principles internal to an academic institution have been severely threatened and in some instances abrogated."

The SACS report says Southeastern does not conform to some accreditation standards in matters of faculty selection, academic freedom, and organization and administration. It also raises "serious questions" about the effectiveness of the school.

The seminary trustees' instruction committee wrote draft responses to the agencies during the winter. Baptist Press received a copy of the response to SACS, and trustee Chairman Robert D. Crowley said that document is "basically the same" as the one drafted for ATS.

The 60-page SACS response says Lolley's failed leadership and the faculty's "public opinion campaign" precipitated the accreditation crisis. Trustees, on the other hand, acted in accordance with SBC mandate and seminary bylaws when they made the policy changes that precipitated the turmoil, it adds.

The report also claims SACS treated the seminary unfairly -- first in assuming trustees made belief in biblical inerrancy "a requirement for faculty eligibility" and second in reviewing events "in a light most favorable" to faculty, former administrators and some students.

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James W. Bryant, a pastor from Fort Smith, Ark., and chairman of the trustee instruction committee, began the special session by noting: "We recognize this is a report that comes from a particular perspective. There will be those on the board who do not agree. ... There are not any known factual errors in this report. We did try to verify it."

Trustees rejected 7-19 a proposal to substitute the documents with letters to the agencies stating: the trustees received the "report of your investigation"; a majority of trustees "feels your report does not reflect sufficiently our need to comply with our controlling body," the SBC; the seminary "will meet your guidelines and ... comply with your criteria"; trustees have taken steps that a majority "feels responded to your concerns regarding faculty election"; and trustees ratified a plan to create a committee to respond to the agencies' concerns.

Instead, trustees decided to "approve and adopt" the documents "with the understanding that factual inaccuracies will be corrected." Most of those dealt either with Lolley or the investigation of Southeastern by a subcommittee of the SBC Peace Committee.

Among the references to Lolley, trustees dropped a sentence saying he resigned because of his "unwillingness to assume" the responsibility for implementing the school's new faculty-selection process. They also removed two sentences that said he threatened to complete his administration with the appointment of adjunctive faculty rather than submit candidates for permanent positions to votes by trustees. They deleted a charge that the conduct of the Peace Committee's subcommittee was "controlled by Dr. Lolley," and they cut a paragraph that expressed judgment about the propriety of that subcommittee's investigation.

They voted 9-15 not to remove "Exhibit P" -- minutes from a 1987 closed-door meeting with Lolley -- from the documents.

Reflecting on the content of the documents, Charles W. Midkiff, a pastor from Greenville, Ky., said, "I do feel a great deal of responsibility has been put on Dr. Lolley, administrators, faculty and students, but I do not see a great deal of trustee ownership in our problem."

Noted Robert Shirley, a retired pastor from Tupelo, Miss., "This has been more of a defense than a suggestion that we are willing to do something about what is wrong."

"These documents are what has kept us from being put on probation," Bryant countered.

Trustees voted 20-9 to approve the process for preparing an "institutional response" to SACS, due July 1. The action notes SACS' request "to respond to certain alleged violations of academic standards calls for an institutional response, and that must be met by entering in good faith into a process in which representatives of the various constituencies of (the seminary) are involved."

The plan gives President Drummond power to "designate representatives from the faculty, administration, student body, alumni and trustees." It also makes him responsible for developing the seminary's response to be presented to SACS.

The trustee's plan parallels a suggestion offered by the faculty. However, the faculty's plan said the negotiating group should work with a "designated third-party facilitator," probably a representative of ATS. It also gave each constituent group the right to choose its representatives, stated the negotiating group should provide prior agreement on "process and ground rules for implementation of the findings," and noted the group's final document should receive "approval of all components of the school."

Representatives from both trustees and faculty said Drummond is the key to the process.

Trustee Chairman Crowley, a pastor from Rockville, Md., said: "It's going to take cooperation on the part of everyone and a courageous act by Dr. Drummond to draw conclusions and draft an appropriate report. He is going to have to be his own man, independent from faculty, trustees and alumni. No side can feel they have won or been slighted."

C. Michael Hawn, president of the seminary's American Association of University Professors chapter, added: "They put the onus on him (Drummond). He can make some steps toward reconciliation. The possibility for negotiation and discussion is there; we would welcome it."

Drummond promised to live up to the task, saying, "I will make decisions as best I can, not because they will please the trustees or the faculty, but for the best interest of the school."

The change in the process for selecting permanent faculty altered the October 1987 change that triggered the spate of administrative and faculty resignations. Prior to that time, the academic dean and faculty members took the lead in selecting nominees for vacancies. The '87 change made the president directly responsible, working through the trustee instruction committee. The new change increases involvement of the academic vice president and area faculty and lowers trustee involvement to the seventh step of a nine-step process.

The change in the process for appointing temporary instructors reverses the October 1987 change. The '87 change involved trustee approval of temporaries. The original and new processes involve only administrative appointment.

"The generation of the change came from the president and the accrediting agencies," Bryant said. "They advised us that the trustees need to withdraw from the selection of faculty."

"We're getting it half right," Mark Caldwell, a pastor from University Park, Md., said of the procedure for selecting permanent faculty. "I would not have you believe we are in compliance with SACS and ATS with this. There still is not enough faculty involvement."

Hawn noted the process for permanent faculty does not call for full faculty participation until the candidate visits the campus, the sixth step in the process. "How can you respond to a person you see for the first time during a campus visit to interview for the job?" he asked. "I think the faculty probably would say it won't make much difference."

Drummond said the changes are "more in line with the best mechanism to involve faculty. The faculty has a voice, as does the administration."

Trustees approved the permanent faculty process 22-7 and passed the temporary faculty measure on a voice vote with two dissenters.

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Drummond shares dream
of seminary's future

By Marv Knox

N-10

Baptist Press
3/17/89

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (BP)--President Lewis A. Drummond shared his "plan of goals and dreams" for Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary during the Wake Forest, N.C., school's trustee meeting March 13-15.

But trustee discussion of a resolution to affirm those dreams caused some observers to believe faculty members were told to adopt the dreams or leave.

Drummond presented a 14-page paper that focused on academic, practical and spiritual development at Southeastern Seminary.

"My personal big dream is the development of a world mission and evangelism center," he said. "Southern Baptists are no doubt the largest group of evangelical Christians in the history of Christianity. ... Here we are as Southern Baptists without that which has made such a difference in other seminaries -- a real world mission/evangelism school.

"No academic corners will be cut. We will continue to maintain the highest scholarly standards. ... There's nothing like this in the eastern half of America. I'm convinced we could attract people from all over the country."

Drummond also proposed a \$12 million to \$14 million development campaign to fund capital needs, endowment of the mission/evangelism center and general endowment for personnel salary increases. Enrollment should grow from 780 students now to 1,500 in 1995 and 2,000 by 2000.

He proposed requiring all students to take witness training or discipleship courses, encouraging all students to be involved in prayer and Bible study groups on campus, making personal witnessing opportunities available to students and launching "a spirit of revival and spiritual awakening" on campus.

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Drummond's dream also included development of the faculty's classroom and writing skills; formation of new curriculum to help students minister in a "secular-humanistic society"; enlargement of continuing education programs; development of "research centers"; more faculty; encouragement of a "wholesome evangelical, church-oriented spirit"; creation of "delivery systems" to provide off-campus education; and formation of centers for teaching ethnic students.

Following his speech, James R. DeLoach, an associate pastor from Houston, offered a resolution commending Drummond and pledging that trustees "buy into" his dream.

During discussion, DeLoach said, "I hope that any faculty or administrator (who) cannot buy into this dream ... will be man- and woman-enough to absent themselves from the seminary."

Mark Caldwell, a pastor from University Park, Md., who cast the lone dissenting vote to the motion, said: "I do not agree that if a faculty member does not agree, he or she should leave the school, that a trustee who does not agree should resign. We're moving too fast without regard for people involved."

C. Michael Hawn, president of the seminary's American Association of University Professors chapter, asked: "How can you have a school of academic integrity when you don't allow opposing views?"

"Also, I would doubt that he has ever in his life encountered such integrity as exists on this campus, especially the faculty. They were dedicated to the vision of this school as its founders stated it, and there was every indication it had prospered.

Hawn cited the high percentage of faculty who are former missionaries and the students' participation in "praxis" church-starting programs as evidence that "charges against our commitment to missions and evangelism don't hold up."

In an interview, DeLoach said he did not mean to threaten faculty: "That statement in no way is intended to ask anybody to leave. ... I was simply asking students, faculty, administrators and alumni to take steps toward Dr. Drummond. I will take no part in a movement to move faculty out of this seminary."

Drummond said of the incident: "I was not in concurrence in that statement with Dr. DeLoach. He apologized for it. That would not be the position of me, the trustees, nor Dr. DeLoach."

In other business, the trustees:

-- Voted to "look upon with favor" Drummond's request "that the trustees help us to seek out the financial resources that will enable us to expand the size of this faculty as a means of building for the future."

-- Referred back to their instruction committee the question of whether to make the Southern Baptist Convention's doctrinal confession, the Baptist Faith and Message, its official faith statement.

Southeastern and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary are the only two SBC entities that have not adopted the Baptist Faith and Message as the official doctrinal statement. The two seminaries both have the same statement, written in 1859 when Southern Seminary was founded. Southern calls it the Abstract of Principles, and Southeastern calls it the Articles of Faith.

A messenger to the 1988 SBC annual meeting offered a motion that the two schools adopt the Baptist Faith and Message. The motion was referred to the schools' trustees.

-- Postponed until their October meeting a decision on formulating a response to the SBC Peace Committee, which reported to the convention at the 1987 SBC annual meeting.

Southeastern is the only SBC entity that has not adopted a formal response to the Peace Committee's final report. The committee was created in 1985 to suggest avenues for reconciliation within the convention.

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-- Voted 16-13 to defeat a motion that would have employed the Washington law firm of Arent, Fox, Kinter, Plotkin and Kahn, retroactive to Dec. 1, 1988.

The issue was raised by Caldwell, who noted he received a letter from the firm, stating that the firm represented the seminary on labor-relations cases. Caldwell questioned when the firm had been employed, and then William Delahoyde, an attorney from Raleigh, N.C., made the motion.

"It looks as if you are making it retroactive to cover somebody's trail," Caldwell said. Delahoyde replied, "Yes."

Chairman Robert D. Crowley, a pastor from Rockville, Md., in the metropolitan Washington area, said a long-time friend, a partner with the firm and who had provided legal help for his church, had offered to help the seminary for free and that he had accepted the offer.

"This is unethical, because no one on the board knows anything about this lawfirm," said Walter R. Lonis, a retired Denver police detective.

"It is something that needs to be done," said James W. Bryant, a pastor from Fort Smith, Ark. "We do need the advice of anyone that fine in labor relations."

A trustee asked about the nature of the legal advice offered by the firm. Crowley responded: "The AAUP (American Association of University Professors) has tried to interfere with the affairs of our seminary. It is a union. I wanted to know what my response should be."

Later, Crowley told Baptist Press, "It's unconscionable to slap someone who did you a favor."

-- Approved Drummond's academic title, professor of the history and philosophy of evangelism.

-- Referred to the administration a proposal that would prohibit the use of tobacco on seminary grounds and at seminary functions.

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Senate panel OKs ABC bill,
adds church-state amendment

By Kathy Palen

N-BIC

Baptist Press
3/17/89

WASHINGTON (BP)--Church-state concerns precipitated the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee's amending a major child-care proposal before voting to send it to the full Senate.

The panel March 15 approved the Act for Better Child Care Services -- known as the ABC bill -- by an 11-5 vote.

A similar bill was killed by a Senate filibuster during the 100th Congress.

The current legislation -- which was introduced by Sen. Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn. -- has undergone a number of changes and picked up a former key opponent -- Sen. Orrin G. Hatch, R-Utah -- as one of its 39 co-sponsors.

Dodd told the committee he hoped his proposed amendment would resolve a conflict over the use of federal funds to subsidize child care in religious institutions. Churches provide approximately one-third of the nation's child-care services.

An array of religious and educational organizations had charged the bill, as originally drafted, violated the separation of church and state. But a number of those organizations -- after working with Dodd and Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., on amendment language -- have agreed not to seek further church-state changes.

"I am not a constitutional scholar," said Dodd. "My goal is and has always been to ensure that church-based providers -- among the safest and most prevalent care givers in the nation -- are full members of the ABC partnership in a constitutionally permissible manner."

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The ABC bill would allow child-care centers sponsored by religious institutions to qualify for federal funds if they avoid religious instruction, worship or other sectarian activities.

Dodd's amendment -- which the panel adopted without objection -- would prohibit religious discrimination in admissions and employment by all ABC-funded providers. It would, however, permit a provider to exercise limited preference in hiring and admitting individuals who have a pre-existing relationship with the organization that owns or operates the child-care center.

But if 80 percent of a provider's operating budget comes from federal funds, not even limited preference would be permitted.

Although voting in favor of the amendment, Sen. James M. Jeffords, R-Vt., warned the panel that in his opinion the legislation -- even in its amended form -- most likely would violate the First Amendment's establishment clause.

The ABC bill would authorize \$2.5 billion in fiscal 1990 -- and additional funds in the following four fiscal years -- for child-care services.

Those federal funds would flow through the states to parents, who would use certificates to purchase child-care services from center-based providers, group home providers, family providers or other providers that are licensed or regulated under state law and that satisfy federal, state and local requirements. The bill also would allow payment to relatives caring for grandchildren, nephews and nieces.

The Senate proposal would target assistance to families with children under age 16 and whose incomes do not exceed 100 percent of the state median income. Priority would be given to children from low-income families.

The bill would require child-care providers -- excluding relatives -- to meet health and safety standards set by the state. Within four years, providers would be required to meet minimum federal standards to be established by a national advisory board.

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HMB elects evangelism vp;
announces gains, budget cuts

By Mark Wingfield

N - HMB

Baptist Press
3/17/89

ATLANTA (BP)--A new vice president for evangelism, a record year for conversions and church starts, and a plan to reduce 1989 budget expenditures by nearly 10 percent highlighted the spring meeting of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

Darrell Robinson, pastor of Dauphin Way Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala., unanimously was elected vice president for evangelism during the March 10 meeting. He succeeds Robert Hamblin, who left the board last December to become a full-time evangelist and direct a religious foundation.

"There is no position in Southern Baptist life any more important than this one because of the urgency of winning America for Christ," said HMB President Larry Lewis.

After his election, Robinson told the board: "Only God can do what must be done to reach America for Christ. God cannot do that through me alone, but he can do that through Southern Baptists working together."

During his annual report to the board, Lewis announced year-end gains in baptisms, missionary appointments, church starts and volunteerism. However, he warned that these records may not be repeated if funding for the board does not increase.

The board receives the majority of its funds from the unified giving plan of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Cooperative Program, and from the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for Home Missions, promoted by the SBC Woman's Missionary Union.

The Cooperative Program 1989-90 allocation budget features a 2.05 percent decrease to most agencies, as the SBC moves to a "performance-oriented" rather than "goal-oriented" budget. The Annie Armstrong offering has increased only slightly in recent years.

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Because of projected decreases in funding, Lewis announced that each HMB section had been asked to reduce 1989 budget expenditures by an average of 9.69 percent. Cuts will come from Atlanta-based operations and will not affect funding to missionaries, he said.

"We are not proposing across-the-board cuts," he told directors. "We will reduce expenditures based on staff evaluation of priorities. We want to assure our missionaries that field ministries will not be cut."

The board will operate on a contingency budget for the remainder of the 1988-89 fiscal year, Lewis said, because of reductions in Cooperative Program funding, less retained income available, and the small increase in receipts from the 1988 Annie Armstrong offering.

Lewis explained the action is typical of what most Southern Baptist agencies are facing in light of anticipated changes in the way the convention will structure its budget process.

"In spite of these actions, the cash flow and the financial position of the agency is healthy," he added. "We are seeking to act responsibly in budget management. We have good reserves. The financial position of the agency is solid."

Lewis also cited highlights of HMB accomplishments in 1988. They include:

-- A record 75,943 people led to faith in Christ by home missionaries, chaplains and national staff personnel. "This conversion ratio of one to 13 is far better than the national SBC average of one to 43," Lewis noted.

-- A new high in appointment of home missionaries and endorsement of chaplains. An increase of 81 missionaries, or 2.1 percent, pushed the total to a record 3,827 serving across the nation and assigned territories. A total of 2,014 chaplains now serve in the United States and 14 foreign countries.

-- A net gain of 285 churches and 953 church-type missions, the largest gain since 1965, pushed the denomination closer to its goal of 50,000 churches and missions by A.D. 2000. The convention now has 42,217 churches and missions.

-- A 17.9 percent increase in volunteers for mission service, with 8,597 new volunteers contributing to a record 49,781 individuals seeking short- and long-term assignments. This included nearly doubling the number of adults and adult mission groups in Christian Service Corps projects last year, Lewis said. A total of 873 groups -- up from 444 in 1987 -- involved 13,454 adults in ministry projects.

-- A record 775 churches participated in lay renewal weekends and lay ministry weekends, and more than 115,000 lay people were trained in personal evangelism.

-- More than 50,000 individuals have completed training in a Prayer for Spiritual Awakening seminar, committing themselves to pray daily for revival.

In other action, the board of directors elected two additional staff members, appointed missionaries, elected new board officers and pledged to pray for the Woman's Missionary Union search committee named to find a successor to Executive Director Carolyn Weatherford.

Floyd Tidsworth, church extension director for the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, was elected associate vice president of the extension section. Tidsworth will work with Vice President Charles Chaney in directing the new section, which was created during a previously approved staff reorganization.

HMB national consultant Willie McPherson was elected associate director of the black church extension division, which also was created in the recent reorganization. McPherson will assist Southern Baptists in the western states in starting and growing predominantly black churches.

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New officers elected by the board of directors are Ralph Smith, pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, chairman; Troy Morrison, director of church-minister relations for the Alabama Baptist State Convention, vice chairman; Lawson Schroeder, layperson from First Baptist Church of Atlanta, second vice chairman; Ann Frazier, layperson from Roanoke Baptist Church in Roanoke Rapids, N.C., secretary; and Llwyn Walker, layperson from First Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas, assistant secretary.

Outgoing board Chairman Clark Hutchinson, pastor of Eastside Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., delivered the keynote address at the board's banquet.

"God is changing me," he said. "I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Home Mission Board for these past two years.

"We should hold dearly to our beliefs, but that does not give us the right to club others with our beliefs," he said. "We Southern Baptists have tried to make every church alike, and that won't work.

"It takes all kinds of churches to reach different kinds of people. Don't criticize something God is blessing because it isn't just like you."

Hutchinson admonished board members to learn to say, "I don't agree with you, but I still love you."

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Note to editors: "Llwyn" is the correct spelling for Walker's name.

Lewis opposes new SBC
agency, SBA seminary

By Joe Westbury

N-HMB
Baptist Press
3/17/89

ATLANTA (BP)--Wrestling with shrinking funds for home missions, Southern Baptist Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis opposes creation of a new Southern Baptist Religious Liberty Commission and plans for a new Southern Baptist Alliance seminary.

Creation of the new agencies would drain resources away from home and foreign missions, Lewis told trustees during the board's spring meeting March 10 in Atlanta.

The Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention has recommended creation of the Religious Liberty Commission to represent the convention in Washington. The Alliance, an organization of convention moderates, has approved plans to begin a new seminary in Richmond, Va.

The denomination does not have adequate financial resources to fund another agency, Lewis charged, and said the new Washington-based Religious Liberty Commission would duplicate efforts being addressed by the SBC Christian Life Commission and Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

"Please do not misunderstand me. I do not oppose the decision to fund an office of the Christian Life Commission in Washington to represent Southern Baptists regarding critical moral and social concerns. I simply fail to see the wisdom of having three offices representing Southern Baptists in our nation's capital," said Lewis.

The new commission, in order to become a reality, must be approved by majority votes by messengers to two consecutive SBC annual meetings. The new commission would eliminate the current Public Affairs Committee, through which SBC representatives to the Baptist Joint Committee are named. Lewis is a voting ex-officio member of the PAC.

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Lewis noted that at the same meeting in which the creation of the new agency was approved, the SBC Executive Committee proposed a 2.05 percent decrease for the denomination's allocation budget, the Cooperative Program.

"During a year in which the Home Mission Board's Cooperative Program allocation is being cut by about \$1 million, it is not good stewardship to propose creation of a new agency," Lewis said.

He reminded the board members that the Executive Committee estimated funding of the new agency would require a minimum of \$500,000 to \$750,000 a year -- money that normally would be channeled to home and foreign missions endeavors.

SBC Foreign Mission Board President R. Keith Parks "rightly pointed out to the Executive Committee that 50 percent of the new agency's Cooperative Program allocation will come from the Foreign Mission Board, and that 20 percent will come from the Home Mission Board," Lewis said.

"If the proposal is approved, missions will be crippled and hobbled at a time when we need to move forward unhindered in our efforts to achieve the goals of Bold Mission Thrust," he said. Bold Mission Thrust is the denomination's plan to present the gospel to every person in the world by the year 2000.

Lewis then said he equally is opposed to plans announced by the Alliance to start its seminary.

Citing the lack of resources and the duplication of the denomination's six existing seminaries, Lewis said the move "is divisive and will weaken foreign and home missions by draining resources that might be used to support our cooperative mission efforts."

Lewis challenged board members "to oppose anything that might weaken Cooperative Program support of home missions."

"For the next 10 years, we do not anticipate receiving any additional funds for programs, projects or personnel. We most likely will be in a cut-back mode for the remainder of this century under the budget structure proposed by the Executive Committee."

The new Executive Committee guideline links Cooperative Program budget goals to the previous receipts. In addition, it directs any overage to be distributed equally between "program advance" and "capital needs."

Lewis said he would prefer to continue to determine the basic budget on the basis of a "fair and reasonable estimate of income rather than on the basis of receipts from the last year of record, and divide any overage between operating budgets and capital needs" until those capital needs commitments are met.

In light of the Executive Committee action and the prospect of lean years to come, Lewis announced board staff had been asked to trim an average of 9.69 percent from the current budget to bring expenditures in line with anticipated income.

The reductions will be made by the Atlanta-based staff in the national budget, he said, assuring missionaries that field ministries would not be cut.

"This is not a crisis situation. It is simply good budget management in light of the realities of reduction in income," he explained.

Directing board members' attention to the upcoming SBC annual meeting in Las Vegas, Nev., Lewis expressed concerns about how controversy at the convention might affect the planned evangelistic thrust.

"I believe Satan will do everything he can to destroy Bold Mission Thrust and embarrass Southern Baptists in Las Vegas," he predicted.

Lewis encouraged Baptists to arrive early to participate in a day of witnessing Saturday, June 10, to provide an evangelistic thrust and help start 25 churches in the state.

CORRECTION: Please make the following change in the next-to-last paragraph of the 3/16/89 Baptist Press article titled "Northeast school faces tight budget pinch":

Joseph M. Smith is pastor of Takoma Park Baptist Church in Washington, not director of ministries in higher education for the District of Columbia Baptist Convention.

Thanks,
Baptist Press

Stranded student leads
ex-convict to Christ

By Ken Camp

F - Texas

Baptist Press
3/17/89

HUNTSVILLE, Texas (BP)--A newly released ex-con came to Christ when an ice storm brought him together with a stranded group of students from Houston Baptist University at the Hospitality House in Huntsville, Texas.

It was Earl's mandatory discharge date after 13 years in the Texas Department of Corrections. But since all administrative TDC offices and parole offices in Huntsville were closed due to a paralyzing ice storm, he had to be released without being formally processed.

With just a few dollars in his jacket pocket, no parole papers, no family, no way of leaving town and no plans for the future, Earl wandered aimlessly before approaching the operator of a gas station to ask for help. The attendant directed him to the Hospitality House, a Texas Baptist ministry supported by the Mary Hill Davis Offering for State Missions.

"Earl walked in our front door and said, 'I need help,'" said Bob Norris, director of the Hospitality House. "He was literally freezing and had not eaten in about 21 hours."

Although the mission of the Hospitality House is to provide a temporary refuge for the visiting family members of TDC inmates, not primarily for prisoners themselves, Norris recognized the extenuating circumstances in Earl's case.

"We brought him in, gave him some food and hot coffee and got him warmed up," Norris said.

"Then Mary Battles, our Mission Service Corps volunteer, went to find some warm clothes that would fit him. She showed him three shirts and asked him to pick one. He said he didn't know how. He'd been in prison so long, he couldn't make choices anymore."

Slowly, as Earl visited with Norris and his co-workers, the ex-con began to relax somewhat. However, that relaxed feeling was short-lived.

Word arrived that a group of more than 30 students were returning to Houston from Baptist Student Union Leadership Training Conference in Waco, Texas, when icy road conditions left them marooned and in need of overnight shelter in Huntsville.

"When Earl heard that 30 some-odd college kids were going to be spending the night here, he couldn't handle it. He went to bed in his room and almost literally pulled the covers up over his head," Norris said.

One student, Dwight, was led into the room with Earl. Inspired by the conference theme, "Share Jesus Now," Dwight had been praying for opportunities to share his faith with someone.

"He began visiting with Earl, slowly drew him out of his shell and introduced him to the Lord," Norris said. "Then he gave him a pair of his own stone-washed jeans and a shirt which fit perfectly."

Dwight then called his parents in Houston who found a place for Earl to live and lined up a job opportunity for him.

"The next morning," Norris said, "before he left for Houston in the car with Dwight and the kids, Earl told me, 'You know, you were right. These are great kids! My whole life is changed.'"