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Southern Seminary trustees
called to special meeting

Baptist Press
12/11/92

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Southern Baptist Theological Seminary trustees will meet Dec. 15 in a special meeting, apparently to consider a termination contract for ethics professor Paul Simmons.

Trustee chairman Wayne Allen, a Cordova, Tenn., pastor, called the meeting but has refused to talk to the news media. The four-hour session, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Marriott Hotel near the Atlanta airport, will be closed and no information about the meeting is being released.

The trustees, sources have told Baptist Press, will consider a contract buyout presented by the trustees' academic personnel committee. But, apparently, there is division among the trustees between those who want to pay to have Simmons leave and those who want the ethics professor to face formal charges of heresy (teaching contrary to the seminary's abstract of principles, its doctrinal guide).

Simmons, 56, has been a Southern faculty member 23 years but has been criticized for his recent support of abortion rights and homosexuality views. He is a tenured professor which means he could be fired only for heresy or violating his contract.

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Opposition mounting against plan
to lift military ban on homosexuals

By Tom Strode

Baptist Press
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WASHINGTON (BP)--President-elect Bill Clinton's stated intention to lift the ban on homosexuals in the United States armed services faces mounting resistance from congressional members as well as military, Christian and conservative organizations.

Recent events signaling an organized effort to prevent a change in the Department of Defense policy are:

-- a hearing before a House of Representatives Republican leadership committee in which witnesses from the military, Congress and pro-family groups warned of the impact of inclusion of homosexuals in the armed forces.

-- the formation of a coalition of military, religious and pro-family organizations to oppose lifting the ban. The Coalition to Maintain Military Readiness is composed of more than 40 groups, including the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

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-- a nationwide "Just Say No to Homosexuals in the Military" campaign promoted by Operation Rescue founder Randall Terry and the Christian Defense Coalition. The sponsors are expecting public gatherings in about 100 cities Jan. 8 to protest Clinton's plan.

The ban exists, a Department of Defense spokesman testified at the hearing, for practical reasons, not because of security, social, moral or philosophical considerations.

Unlike civilians, members of the armed services "cannot separate their professional and personal lives," said Christopher Jehn, assistant secretary in the Department of Defense for force management and personnel. Members of the military have sacrificed their right to privacy, Jehn said, and therefore "endure long periods of forced intimacy with their colleagues."

Senior military leaders consistently have determined the inclusion of persons practicing homosexual behavior is "prejudicial to good order and discipline," Jehn said.

There is "no military benefit" in lifting the ban, said Ronald Ray, who served 32 years in the Marine Corps and recently was on President Bush's commission on women in combat.

The military's only mission is "to fight and win our wars," Ray quoted Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney as saying.

"Anything anyone does to inhibit the military's mission to fight and win our wars, to accomplish that very high calling with the fewest casualties, is also necessarily a threat to our national security," said Ray, who as a lawyer says he has handled homosexual claims under civilian civil rights laws.

One common-sense reason for excluding homosexuals is because their behavior violates "the most fundamental principles of military health practices and fundamental field sanitation," Ray said.

Removing the ban on homosexuals is not "analogous to the full integration of African-Americans into military service," said Charles Jackson, executive vice president of the Non Commissioned Officers Association.

"That action corrected a racial inequity based on an inert and benign characteristic, skin color," said Jackson, who is black. "Homosexuality is a behavioral characteristic.

"Neither is this situation analogous to the recruitment of women. Again, it is an attempt to equate an inert physical characteristic to an active behavioral one."

The military's purpose is "not to serve as a laboratory for social engineering," Jackson said. "It is not a right, as some proponents of lifting the current ban contend. If it were a right, then the military would not decline to accept the services of those who fail to qualify physically or mentally or those with criminal records or those with histories of illegal drug abuse."

The NCOA voted unanimously at its July meeting to oppose reversing the ban, Jackson testified.

At least half of the eight witnesses who testified warned the removal of the military ban was part of a plan to advance homosexual rights in American society.

Ray described such an action as part of a "comprehensive, far-reaching agenda to alter the American order."

"The lifting of this ban is a militant ideological push to forego everything else and force acceptance by the larger society," said Nancy Schaefer, president of Family Concerns Inc., a pro-family organization based in Atlanta

"Since moral behavior is the bedrock of military strength and the family is the teacher of moral behavior, may the traditional family be protected as a most-needed institution of virtue and be treated with the upmost respect by maintaining the military ban on homosexuals," Schaefer said.

Schaefer is a member of First Baptist Church of Atlanta and a trustee of the Christian Life Commission.

Also testifying against lifting the ban were two House members, William Dannemeyer, R.-Cal., and Cliff Stearns, R.-Fla.

Dannemeyer and Stearns were joined by Bob Dornan, R.-Cal., in conducting the Republican Research Committee hearing. The Research Committee is not a standing committee but a part of the House Republican leadership.

Shortly after his election, Clinton reiterated his campaign pledge to remove the military ban on homosexuals. Clinton has said he has not determined how he will take the action.

Among members of Congress who have announced opposition to lifting the ban is Sen. Sam Nunn, D.-Ga., chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

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CLC's counsel resigns ABA
over its pro-abortion stance

By Tom Strode

Baptist Press
12/11/92

WASHINGTON (BP)--The general counsel of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission recently resigned as a member of the American Bar Association in protest of an abortion rights resolution adopted by the ABA in August.

The Christian Life Commission "cannot in good conscience pay dues to the ABA to help fund its advocacy in public policy against values which we hold most dear," Michael Whitehead said in a letter informing the ABA of his resignation. "We will let Southern Baptists know of our decision, and we expect that many lawyers in SBC churches and other churches will decide to follow the same course."

Just short of 3,500 members had left the ABA because of the resolution as of Dec. 1, a spokesperson for the largest lawyer organization in the country said. The ABA had more than 368,500 members at the end of September, the spokesperson said.

The ABA's assembly and house of delegates voted in August to support abortion rights. Incoming ABA president Michael McWilliams also said he would lobby for passage of the Freedom of Choice Act, an abortion rights bill in Congress.

While he has appreciated the organization's services in other areas, the ABA's action "forced my resignation," Whitehead said in his letter. He cited the Southern Baptist Convention's adoption of anti-abortion resolutions at its annual meetings.

The CLC had "previously communicated to the ABA that the general counsel would remain a member of ABA so long as ABA maintained a neutral position on this and similar moral issues," Whitehead said.

In a Nov. 2 letter, Americans United for Life, the leading pro-life legal organization, urged pro-life lawyers to resign from the ABA. While they do not make the request lightly, AUL's lawyers said in their letter, they "believe the time has come to disassociate ourselves from an ABA that will aggressively commit funds, personnel and its name to pro-abortion advocacy. ... "

After the ABA action in August, the CLC joined more than 20 other groups in asking Attorney General William Barr to terminate the ABA's role in the selection process for federal judges and Supreme Court justices. The organizations told Barr the ABA "has chosen to be a political interest group rather than a non-political professional association."

Barr has not acted publicly on the request.

The attorney general refers nominees to the federal bench to the ABA's Standing Committee on Federal Judiciary, which assesses prospective appointees to federal district courts and circuit courts of appeals before nomination and appointees to the Supreme Court after nomination.

The ABA also voted to endorse abortion rights in 1990 but rescinded the action later in the year.

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Missionaries want to 'go home'
to Angola -- when war allows

By Craig Bird

Baptist Press
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HARARE, Zimbabwe (BP)--Straton Hatfield is too young to understand big words like "evacuation" and "civil war."

The 2-year-old keeps things simple and direct, insisting repeatedly on where he wants to be: "Straton home, Straton home."

When his missionary mom assures him "home is wherever Mommy and Daddy and Straton are," he fixes big, almost-teary eyes on her and asks: "Angola?"

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But for now home definitely is not Huambo, Angola, for Straton and his parents, Southern Baptist missionaries Mark and Susan Hatfield of Ashland, Ky. Or Luanda, Angola, for fellow missionaries Don and Carol Minshew of Memphis, Tenn., and Curtis and Betty Dixon of Stroud and Guymon, Okla. The three couples evacuated Angola in early November as the southwest African country reignited into firefights and bloodshed.

They now wait in Harare, Zimbabwe, trying to organize their futures.

The six missionaries understand those big words. Yet like Straton, they still yearn to "go home" -- as early as January, they hope. But adults know wars can last a long time. Angola has been fighting more than 30 years, except for a cease-fire that began in May 1991 but recently ended as fighting resumed.

"It was a beautiful time, those 16 months of peace," Dixon pointed out. "It seemed like Angola finally was wide open to the gospel and the church was going great guns."

But the Sept. 28 elections intended to stabilize that peace instead provoked more war. The rebel group UNITA, which had fought the Marxist government so long, refused to accept their ballot defeat.

Hundreds of people died in fighting in Luanda, the capital, and for the past month UNITA has been capturing more and more Angolan territory.

"We miss our Angolan friends and worry about them," Mrs. Minshew said. "We left all our material things behind, but the hard part is leaving the people we love so much."

Mrs. Hatfield admitted she sometimes cries with Straton. "I just miss my neighbors so much," she said. "What has happened to them since Huambo was captured?"

None of them detected any early warning signs they would have to abandon homes and work in Angola. Tensions rose during the election period, but when international observers declared the elections had been fair it seemed logical the country would continue to progress.

"I went to town and bought our Thanksgiving turkey on Friday Oct. 30, and on Oct. 31 we were on a boat evacuating," Minshew said. "The week before an ammo dump blew up at 1 a.m. and lit up the whole sky, but on a day-to-day basis everything seemed to be OK. The last week we were there everything seemed to fall together in our ministry. Everybody I talked to was agreeable to what we wanted to do. We were so excited."

The Hatfields, living in the UNITA stronghold of Huambo more than 400 miles from Luanda, reacted to the increased violence but still didn't plan to leave.

"We spent our first term as missionaries in Luanda and you can't do much agricultural work there," said Hatfield, who specializes in agricultural evangelism. "We finally got to move to Huambo in July and made contact with some of our churches that hadn't seen a missionary since 1975 and they were so excited. Even when the United Nations people started advising us to get out we struggled and refused."

When downtown Luanda exploded into violence, the Hatfields were visiting friends near the Conoco oil company compound in the area. The Minshews and Dixons were at home in Luanda. Half an hour before the Hatfields were to return home, fighting broke out all over the city. After two attempts to find routes around the turmoil they gave up.

Conoco officials offered the Hatfields a spot on a supply boat evacuating employees and called the Dixons after midnight with the same offer. The Dixons woke up the Minshews, who had moved into their hallway for safety from stray bullets, and told Conoco they'd have an answer by 4 a.m.

The Dixons -- first appointed to Angola in 1974, 10 months before the civil war forced all missionaries to evacuate, and the only Southern Baptist missionaries in the country from 1983-89 -- prayed and decided to stay.

"I told Betty she could leave if she wanted but I felt like I should remain," Dixon explained. "And she decided she wanted to stay with me."

The Minshews prayed and decided to evacuate. One prayer session was interrupted by popping noises in the office. Investigation turned up a bullet that had penetrated the outside wall and bounced off a closet door.

A normal 20-minute drive to Conoco took two hours because of roadblocks. About two miles from Conoco "the police told us they did not have authority to let us pass and we waited for 20 minutes under a tree, hearing explosions all around us and praying," Mrs. Minshew said.

When a police commander arrived, Minshew was ordered to unpack everything with rifles trained on him. "I honestly thought they were going to shoot me while I was kneeling on the ground going through suitcases," he said. Instead the commander politely explained it was their job to check for bombs, then escorted them to the Conoco compound gates.

The Hatfields had been aboard the oil supply boat for some time. Their short trip also had included a tense inspection at a checkpoint. Mrs. Hatfield fell as she and Straton climbed from the car. A soldier rushed to help her, noting, "You're really frightened, aren't you? Don't be afraid. We just have to do our job."

The boat waited two hours for U.S. State Department officials trying to get to the compound, but left without them at 10:30 a.m. Twenty-one hours later the two couples were in Brazzaville, Congo.

Meanwhile, the Dixons "were pretty much pinned down" at home for two days by shooting that seemed designed to keep people "inside and quiet." Monday supper was a "candlelight affair in the middle of the living room floor -- a turkey salad sandwich."

The next morning a call from U.N. officials warning of growing violence convinced the Dixons it was time to leave. But a tense drive to the airport was wasted when a Mission Aviation Fellowship flight was delayed 24 hours.

That evening things calmed down somewhat, so Dixon decided to venture out and retrieve the two mission vehicles from the Conoco compound where they were more vulnerable to looters. The streets were "a pitiful sight," Dixon said. "We saw people looting warehouses shot by guards and drove past dead bodies scattered everywhere."

Wednesday the MAF flight was canceled again -- after the Dixons had been dropped off near the airport. They connected with a U.N. caravan and obtained two of the 60 spots aboard a Russian Aeroflot cargo plane. Mrs. Dixon was given one of the two seats. Everyone else sat on the floor. Crew members passed around water (along with cotton for the passengers to stuff in their ears). The Dixons shared their sack of apples. As the plane gained altitude frigid wind swept the evacuees. The pilot came back and stuffed a towel into a gap in a broken window. Three hours later they landed in Namibia.

Now they're looking at possible temporary mission assignments in other countries. The Hatfields will take vacation and spend Christmas with family in Kentucky.

They don't know yet for sure where they are going. Worse, they don't know when they'll get "home."

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(BP) photo (horizontal) mailed Dec. 10 by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press. Cutline available on SBCNet Newsroom.

Faith, reason undergoing
rethought, philosopher says

By Pat Cole

Baptist Press
12/11/92

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--The postmodern era is opening up new avenues for increased dialogue between faith and reason, claimed Southern Baptist philosopher Dan R. Stiver.

Western thought has assumed for centuries faith and reason are not related, said Stiver, associate professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in a recent faculty address at the Louisville, Ky., school.

Faith, he said, was thought never to measure up to reason, which has been defined as what is certain, clear and historically universal. However, Stiver contended, reason itself could not measure up "to such a supreme standard."

Not until the last century have the 2,000-year-old presuppositions about faith and reason been challenged, Stiver said. "Only when their failure and the pain of this failure became so evident did we in desperation grope for the cause, like a drowning person fighting for the air that before was taken for granted but is now so urgently needed."

In the modern period, the prestige of reason increased while the regard for faith waned, Stiver said. Now, however, the promises of modernity are seen by many to be lacking, he said, noting humanity in the modern world has experienced two world wars and has lived with the threat of global destruction.

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The postmodern era, Stiver said, has emerged as a protest against modernity. He argued that now the truth of the Christian faith has greater opportunity to make its case. There is currently the possibility of "conceptual space for religion's stretching its arms and walking about in a way not possible in the cramped quarters allowed for it since the onset of modernity," he said.

Yet an increased opportunity for Christianity also entails greater responsibility for the church, Stiver said. "If our words do not have a thick backing, namely, a discipleship based on costly rather than cheap grace, we will be rejected as unauthentic, we will not be understood, our words of proclamation will make no sense. What's more, we will show that we have not understood the gospel ourselves."

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Christians called to share
faith in pluralistic society

By Sarah Zimmerman

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12/11/92

SALT LAKE CITY (BP)--In a country that is a "virtual supermarket of options" everywhere from the grocery store to the movie theater, Christians must share the absolute truth of their faith, said Roy Fish.

"Things we've held to are not merely eroding, they're being swept away," the evangelism professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, said during a Home Mission Board-sponsored meeting of state evangelism directors.

A spiritual awakening from God is the only thing that will change the pluralistic emphasis in society, Fish said.

As people from around the world came to the United States, Americans became aware of other world religions, Fish said. One result is that people have an array of options about beliefs and lifestyles, and society accepts all beliefs as equally valid.

"The golden rule of pluralism is tolerance," Fish said. Consequently, the Christian claim that Jesus is the only way to God is offensive.

Tolerance "undermines the concept of absolute truth. It says you can believe what you want to believe," Fish said. Pluralism leads to the concept that there is no ultimate standard for what is right and wrong, which in turn eliminates guilt.

Yet such views "do not satisfy the human heart. They leave a psychological and emotional instability," Fish said.

To witness in a pluralistic society, evangelism must move along the tracks of relationships, Fish said. "Cold turkey visitation," or sharing Christ with a stranger, is not as effective as it once was, he noted.

Evangelism also requires a boldness to penetrate the lost culture, Fish said.

"We must move outside our insulated tubes to incarnate Christ," Fish said. "It takes boldness to willingly make friendships with people who are as yet not friends with God."

Servant ministry is another key to effective evangelism, Fish said. "We must surprise and shock our world with going the second mile with Christian love."

While some people accept Christianity on an emotional basis, a pluralistic society also demands apologetics which explain Christianity logically and historically.

As always, the Christian message must be shared individually and it must ultimately confront people with the reality of their sin and need for forgiveness, Fish said.

Effective evangelism also requires an intentional equipping of people to witness and a dependence on the Holy Spirit as the "ultimate evangelist," Fish said.

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HMB president urges churches
to be wheels rather than hubs

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press
12/11/92

SALT LAKE CITY (BP)--The Home Mission Board president has a question for Southern Baptist churches: "Are you a hub or a wheel?"

The typical church is a good, strong hub, Larry Lewis said during a national meeting of state evangelism directors. In those cases, most of the church's energies and resources are concentrated on strengthening the church, not reaching the community.

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A church that is a wheel, on the other hand, needs a strong hub to pull it together. Yet it has many spokes reaching out and a rim that encircles the entire community, Lewis said.

Examples of spokes, he said, are marketplace ministries, multi-housing ministries, meeting people's physical needs and establishing congregations in unreached areas.

Churches wanting to move from being a hub to a wheel may have to change their patterns of thinking and behaving, Lewis said.

"The early church was very nationalistic, and in many ways Southern Baptists are no different," Lewis said.

"There was a time when we interpreted the Great Commission as only going as far north as the Mason-Dixon line," Lewis said. "Now we believe the Great Commission includes Boston as well as Birmingham."

Once Southern Baptists mostly tried to reach Anglo, English-speaking Americans with the gospel but now they aggressively seek to share Christ with members of all ethnic groups, Lewis said.

Just as the denomination has changed its outreach over the years, churches need to consider new ways of reaching their communities. "Don't get hung up on paradigms" or established attitudes and traditional methods, Lewis said.

Churches must be wheels rather than hubs if the nation is won to Christ, Lewis said, because ministry and evangelism are done through local churches.

"We at the Home Mission Board and state conventions exist to enable the local church to be Jesus in that place."

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Lilly Endowment designates \$93,500
in grants to Southwestern Seminary

Baptist Press
12/11/92

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--Three grants totaling \$93,500 have been awarded to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, by Lilly Endowment Inc., the Indianapolis-based charitable foundation.

The grants are designed to meet the need for special theological education for the seminary board of trustees and faculty, as well as for improving communication between board members, faculty and administration, according to Scotty Gray, executive vice president at Southwestern.

"With these grants, we have a significant opportunity to be a model in these areas, something exemplary for the denomination," Gray said. "The Lilly Endowment grants are an affirmation of our history and our desire to improve relationships and the quality of theological education."

Part of the money, \$51,000, is a "Collegial Governance Grant" aimed at improving cooperation among board members, administration and faculty. According to Gray, this "extensive and ongoing program for assessing institutional effectiveness" will use special retreats and guest speakers to improve communication between trustees and seminary staff concerning institutional goals and denominational issues. "We've made several significant steps in this direction, but would still like to see the relationships improved," Gray said.

The second of the three grants is similar and focuses on "Boards and the Study of Theology." This grant addresses the need of theological education for board members.

"Often, more than 50 percent of board members are laypersons and the majority of the other 50 percent are clergy who have been away from theological education for some years," Gray said. "This \$32,500 grant provides the means for trustees and faculty to be involved together in theological study."

The grant's goals include improving the quality of the board, fostering better relationships and addressing in-depth denominational issues.

"Seminary Faculty Scholarship Development Pilot Grants II" is the third grant. A total of \$10,000 will be directed toward providing funding for faculty study. The grant is aimed at encouraging dialogue between the schools of theology, religious education and church music; providing a systematic plan for rewarding excellence in teaching, research and scholarly writing; and increasing dialogue about professional development with the administrations of other theological schools.

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Lilly Endowment invited all 220 seminaries affiliated with the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada to submit proposals for the seminary faculty scholarship grant. Southwestern is one of 24 seminaries to receive grants in 1992.

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Students target schools
with Christian clubs

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press
12/11/92

SALT LAKE CITY (BP)--Christian clubs are mushrooming in secondary schools in Arkansas and Texas, say Southern Baptist evangelism leaders from those states.

Randy Brantley, associate director of evangelism for the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, said more than 100 of the 459 secondary schools in his state have Christian clubs.

"The Christian club movement is taking off," Brantley said during a national meeting for Southern Baptist coordinators of youth evangelism events. "God is doing a tremendous thing."

Chuck Flowers, youth evangelism associate for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, said at least 500 secondary schools in Texas have active Christian clubs. His goal is for each of the 1,500-plus secondary schools in Texas to have a Christian organization.

Club meetings take different formats because each is student-led. The club at Jonesboro (Ark.) High School meets every Friday before school. An average of 50 people come to the meeting to pray for their non-Christian peers, Brantley said.

The club at J.A. Fair High School in Little Rock, Ark., meets at 7:15 a.m. The group usually invites a guest speaker; as many as 45 students attend.

In addition to group meetings, some Christian clubs sponsor special events. The club in Jonesboro enters the homecoming parade and members throw evangelistic tracts and candy from their float.

At Cabot High School in Cabot, Ark., the "Jesus Uniting Students Together" club sponsored a graduation night party in the school gym as an alternative to beer parties students typically attend. "It was a roaring success," Brantley said. "It was well organized and well received."

Regardless of the club's activities, its purpose should be evangelism, directors said.

"We suggest that students adopt a motto about what they're doing to reach their campus for Christ," Brantley said. "Without that as their purpose, they have no purpose."

Dean Finley, youth evangelism specialist for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, said Christian student clubs must maintain their evangelistic zeal. "If they get turned toward themselves, they run out of steam pretty quickly. They must be outward focused."

Both Brantley and Flowers encourage students to form groups of three. Each of the three Christians is challenged to pray for and build relationships with three students who are not Christians. The goal is that by the end of the school year, the Christians will have an opportunity to share their faith with the students they have identified.

The three Christian students serve as a soul-winning team, plus they keep each other accountable for maintaining a godly lifestyle.

Occasionally students face opposition in their efforts. Flowers told of a Texas student who noticed that other campus clubs had pennants for their organizations on display in the school cafeteria. At first the student was told the Christian club could not display a pennant, but the student worked with the school's administrators to gain permission to display it.

Christian clubs should comply with school policies and they should be student-led, Flowers said. Schools may be closed to adults from off campus leading the groups but they are not closed to students, he noted.

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Signature ministries give
churches sense of identity

By David Winfrey

JACKSON, Miss. (BP)--Faced with urban flight in an inner-city neighborhood, Highland Baptist Church was in trouble.

"By all intents and purposes, we should have given up the ghost a long time ago," says pastor Cliff Shipp.

The neighborhood was in transition, crime eventually forced members to abandon Sunday night services and members who moved to the suburbs quit making the long drive back to church.

But Highland is one of several churches using unique ministries to defy their surroundings and grow or remain stable despite a shrinking population base.

Instead of closing its doors, the congregation aggressively started something not offered anywhere else: a ministry for mentally handicapped adults that included Sunday school, a music program and career help.

"We realized we had to come up with something that gave us a reason to be," Shipp says.

Despite the changing environment, the new ministry offered the church a sense of identity and purpose, he says.

"It gave our people a sense of stability. Instead of seeing themselves as a declining church with everybody moving off, they had a sense of 'This is why God wants us here,'" he says. "For a small church, I think we're doing fantastic."

The use of such "signature" ministries can strengthen small churches in shrinking towns, in changing communities or in the shadow of a "mega-church," says Gary Farley, director of the Home Mission Board's town and country missions department.

"When you have a mega-church rising up in a rural convention area, it frequently sucks the life out of these neighborhood churches," says Farley, who has worked in rural missions since 1984.

"They can't compete unless they can find some distinctive or signature ministry," he says. "For some, I think it's a matter of continued viability."

Near Columbia, Mo., Nashville Baptist Church has used its rural roots as an opportunity to reach into the community with gospel music concerts.

For about two years, the church band has played such songs as "I Saw the Light" and "Life's Railway to Heaven" at civic fairs and other churches.

"It's a good witness," says Kevin Collins, Nashville Baptist's pastor. "Not only the words to the song, but just the fact that we care about our community and we're there to take part in something like that."

In the process, musicians and others who enjoy the band's music have joined the church, he says. More importantly, he adds, "It's just given us a little sense of identity."

Chester Jones says he knows many churches could use that same sense of identity.

"They need a sense of ministry that says to them, 'This is mine,'" says Jones, director of missions for the Truett Baptist Association in the mountains of North Carolina.

Jones says pastors in his association like the idea of signature ministries, but some churches might view some of the work as non-spiritual.

"Some might interpret that to be a social work but not really a Christian priority and fail to see that it's leading to spiritual development," he says.

But for small churches with two or three families, such a ministry might be their best link with missions work and church growth, he says.

"They can talk about world missions and even home missions, but that is so big and they're so little and weak," he says. "They need a baby that they can provide what it needs and watch it grow."

Farley agrees, noting churches with signature ministry often draw people from farther than they would with normal programs.

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"They'll drive 30 miles to work. They'll drive nearly as far to a church that is doing something they're interested in," he says. Farley cites a number of unique ministries. Several churches, he says, cater to nearby resort and camping areas. A Nevada church with many members involved in the rodeo circuit has trained those people to lead Bible studies while on the road.

"There are all kinds of ministries they can do," he adds. "Part of it's going to be understanding what the needs are in your mile circle and the other part of it is understanding what kind of leadership God's gifted you with."

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Alum letter marks
50th anniversary

By Pat Cole

Baptist Press
12/11/92

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)-- The U.S. mail has carried a 50-year chain of unbroken friendship for four members of the 1942 graduating class at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

T. E. Robinett, Quentin Porch, A. D. Prickett and Frank Bowman agreed shortly after receiving their degrees from the Louisville, Ky., school they would keep up with each other through a chain letter. Their letter has made the rounds unabated the past 50 years. The four men and their wives gathered this fall at Unicoi State Park in Helen, Ga., to commemorate the 50th year of their letter and the 50th anniversary of their seminary graduations and marriages. All four married the summer following their graduation.

Now that each contributor has retired the frequency of the letter has increased from about four times annually to approximately 10 times, said Robinett, who has originated each cycle the past 50 years. The chain then goes to Porch, Prickett, Bowman and finally back to Robinett. Each person composes a new letter that includes information from others in the chain.

All have been fairly punctual in keeping the flow of information going, Robinett said. "If a fellow held it up, he would get gently reprimanded. Sometimes we would get some weird excuses why (the letter) got covered up on their desks."

Prior to retirement, Robinett was a pastor in South Carolina, North Carolina and Florida. Porch was a pastor in Alabama and later a professor at Judson College. Prickett was pastor in Virginia and then a Navy chaplain. Bowman was a pastor in Alabama and Pennsylvania. While Prickett was on active duty, the letter sometimes "went literally around the world," Robinett said.

Now Robinett lives in Bradenton, Fla. Porch, Prickett and Bowman all reside in Alabama cities -- Marion, Ashville and Dothan, respectively.

In recent years, the four have gotten together annually. "We talk about the seminary or about current events," said Robinett, noting they all were dormitory neighbors while in seminary. "We talk a lot about our experiences in the classroom. There's a lot of reminiscing about our days at Southern Seminary."

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