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March 16, 1993

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Baptist state editors question  
Mohler nomination; draw criticism

Baptist Press  
3/16/93

By Herb Hollinger

NASHVILLE (BP)--Two Baptist state paper editors have questioned the nomination of fellow editor R. Albert Mohler Jr. of Georgia as president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The editorials appeared in North Carolina's Biblical Recorder Mar. 13 and Kentucky's Western Recorder Mar. 2. In simultaneous letters, sent Mar. 11 to the papers, two candidates who were on the "short list" with Mohler for the Louisville, Ky., seminary post criticized the editorials.

The seminary's presidential search committee announced Feb. 22 in Nashville Mohler as its choice among three candidates who also included Richard D. Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, and Timothy George, dean of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala.

Land and George co-signed the two letters.

The North Carolina editorial, by editor R. Gene Puckett, was the most critical of the nomination, calling it "purely political, one that Mohler has been working toward for years."

"When such decisions are made for political reasons, bathed in pious phrases, the cause of Christ and Baptists is not well served," Puckett wrote.

Puckett said Mohler's age, 33, was a problem despite "the effort to minimize the age factor by comparing Mohler to three other presidents who were elected in their 30s ... ."

"To borrow a political phrase, those who know Mohler know that he is no James Petigru Boyce, E.Y. Mullins or Duke K. McCall," Puckett wrote in referring to three Southern presidents of an earlier era.

Wayne Allen, suburban Memphis, Tenn., pastor and chairman of the seminary's trustee board and search committee, said Mohler's age could be viewed as a "liability" but it also "may well be a strength." In a Feb. 22 news conference Allen said "studies of institutions reveal that long-tenured administrations have the most significant shaping influence on a school."

Puckett questioned whether Mohler is capable of such a demanding job as seminary president since "he has never been pastor of a demanding congregation, never managed a large staff or large budget." Puckett also said Mohler's four years as Georgia editor were "hardly the role model." He urged "someone" to take a "better look" at Mohler's administration as editor, including a suggestion to "analyze (the paper's) finances along the way."

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Land and George responded in their letter: "Your defamatory comments, published even prior to his election, were unprecedented, uncalled for and contrary to the spirit of Christ.

"You cynically characterize the process which led to Dr. Mohler's nomination as purely political. We see it as providential and are confident that Dr. Mohler will make a superb president . . . ."

Puckett told Baptist Press Mar. 15 he would publish George and Land's letter in the Biblical Recorder's Mar. 27.

The Kentucky editorial, by editor Marv Knox, detailed what Knox saw as Mohler's strengths and weaknesses.

"A longshot won the Southern Seminary Derby," Knox wrote in an apparent Kentucky Derby reference to Mohler's nomination. Knox said Mohler is short on experience compared to the other two candidates but apparently convinced the search committee "his strengths outweighed Land and George's and his weaknesses weren't as significant as theirs."

Knox applauded Mohler's "powers of analysis" which "should enable him to formulate a winning vision for the seminary." Mohler's rhetorical abilities should enable him to articulate that vision to all the groups the seminary must reach to thrive, Knox wrote.

In a series of questions in the editorial, Knox asked if Mohler would have "the mettle to stand between both the faculty and trustees . . . the wisdom to see past the many obstacles which stand in the way of quality theological education . . . the fortitude to do what is right, despite intense pressure to kowtow to partisan politics . . . and self-confidence to hire top quality faculty and staff without fear of being upstaged."

"If Al Mohler can advance the fortunes of Southern Seminary as distantly and rapidly as he has advanced his own career, his tenure will stand unparalleled. He has the intelligence, and most likely the vision, to do it. Does he have the integrity, personality and wisdom?" Knox wrote.

Land and George said Knox's editorial not only pointed out Mohler's "perceived weaknesses" but also besmirched his character and called into question his personal integrity.

They echoed their charge that Knox's editorial, like Puckett's, "is unprecedented, uncalled for, and contrary to the spirit of Christ.

"We are confident that Al Mohler will be a superb president of Southern Seminary," Land and George wrote. "Southern Baptists are indeed fortunate to have such an intelligent, articulate, dedicated man of God occupy this strategic position of ministry in our denomination."

Land and George also took issue with statements in Knox's editorial claiming the CLC is "on the right edge of the denomination." After citing a number of positions and publications issued by the CLC, the Land-George letter asked "where must one stand to describe such a (CLC) record as being on the denomination's 'right edge'?"

Knox told Baptist Press he also would publish the Land-George editor in the Western Recorder and that "Baptist people can be trusted to decide for themselves what is true and accurate."

Knox said the Mar. 2 editorial "speaks for itself in balanced language that all Baptists can understand." He said he would share a copy of the editorial with anyone who requested it.

Contacted Mar. 15 by Baptist Press, Mohler said it would be inappropriate for him to comment on the matter.

Mohler's nomination will be considered by the Southern Seminary trustees at a special meeting Mar. 25-26 at an Atlanta airport hotel.

Bertha Smith documentary  
to air on VISN/ACTS April 3

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--"Bertha Smith: Handmaiden of the Lord," a documentary about the legendary Southern Baptist missionary who died in 1988, will air on the VISN/ACTS cable channel April 3.

The 45-minute profile -- augmented by a 15-minute segment about spiritual revival, Smith's favorite theme -- begins at 11 p.m. Eastern time.

"Miss Bertha," who died in 1988 just five months before her 100th birthday, worked 42 tumultuous years in China and Taiwan, enduring wars, revolution, imprisonment by the Japanese, poverty and isolation.

She also was at the center of the Shantung Revival in China, one of the great spiritual movements of modern times, and was the first Southern Baptist missionary to go to Taiwan, where she worked alone for months before others joined her.

After retiring at age 70 in 1958, she began a nearly 30-year second career in the United States as a popular speaker and conference leader. She also began the Peniel Prayer Center in 1973 across the street from the house where she grew up in Cowpens, S.C. Hundreds of spiritual seekers found direction for their lives there under Smith's guidance.

The documentary, produced by her nephew, Bob Smith, and other family members, looks at the missionary's life from childhood years in South Carolina to filmed highlights from her latter-day prayer conferences. Prominent pastors and Christian leaders interviewed include Charles Stanley, Jack Taylor, Peter Lord and Stephen Olford.

First released last year during the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, the program has sold more than 1,000 copies in video format.

Bertha Smith was "a law unto herself. There was nobody like her," said the late Martha Franks, longtime friend and missionary colleague who lived and worked with Smith in China and Taiwan.

During the Depression, Smith returned to China from a U.S. furlough with no salary and worked two years without pay. Other missionaries and donors helped her survive. After the Japanese invaded north China, she witnessed more military action than many soldiers.

She ignored evacuation orders to Americans, including one from President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself. Smith's reasoning: "The President had not sent us to China ... . The Lord carried me to China." She stayed at her post.

Smith was finally placed under house arrest by the Japanese after the Pearl Harbor attack and was repatriated to the United States 10 months later in a prisoner exchange. After the war she promptly returned to China, only to find herself in the middle of civil war and communist revolution.

But the most profound experience of Smith's missionary career had nothing to do with physical danger; it was a spiritual revolution. The Shantung Revival of the '20s and '30s swept missionaries and northern Chinese churches first, then society in this region with a conviction of sin, repentance and renewal, accompanied by reports of miraculous signs and healings. Smith prayed for it, saw it all and was close to Swedish Lutheran missionary Marie Monsen, perhaps the central figure in the revival.

The revival experience formed the simple method for spiritual renewal Smith used for the rest of her life to change thousands of other lives. To be filled and led by the Holy Spirit, she maintained, a believer must list his or her sins one by one, confess them "up to date" to God and others, repent and make a clear break with sin, and "get on praying ground." Then and only then, she said, can God do his work.

Bob Smith and his family production company, Lighthouse Productions, will produce another documentary -- this time on the Shantung Revival itself. They plan a fact-finding trip to China and Taiwan and are looking for people with firsthand knowledge of the events and people involved in the revival. They may be contacted at Lighthouse Productions, P.O. Box 2593, Hendersonville, N.C. 28793.

HMB tests new computer  
missions games at NOBTS

By Debbie Moore

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--Annie Armstrong and the old tic-tac-toe game have entered the computer age.

Just in time for this year's season surrounding the annual Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for Home Missions, the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board has unveiled a new computer game to be played on personal computers: "Tic-Tac-Annie."

The brainchild of John Hocking, an HMB computer specialist, "Tic-Tac-Annie" is one of four new computer programs designed by Hocking and showcased on the campus of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary during a recent Home Mission Board emphasis week.

While playing "Tic-Tac-Annie," students put their skills up against the computer, testing their knowledge of Annie Armstrong and the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering efforts. Since most computers lack humility, the program responds with an "I must be having a rough day," if the student wins the game.

Hocking also designed a program especially for use on the NOBTS campus "so you can see where your alumni are and what they are doing," he said. Using this prototype system, soon to be available to the other five of the six Southern Baptist seminaries, students can access information concerning NOBTS graduates now serving with the Home Mission Board. Graduates can be located either by last name or by state. Information available includes full name, place of service, HMB department and job title.

Students also can put their knowledge of the Cooperative Program up against the computer in "Climbing Jacob's Ladder." After a question is shown on the screen, students try to beat the computer in answering it.

Another feature sure to be of interest to many Southern Baptists is "Find Your Birthday Missionary." After telling the computer what his birthday is, the student is presented with the names of HMB missionaries who share that birthday, along with their addresses so a card can be sent. Since some missionaries are located "in the boondocks," Hocking said, "or in places far from friends and loved ones, they really appreciate a note or card from someone who is praying for them."

Hocking envisions having these computer programs available to local churches for use as missions learning tools.

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(BP) photo available upon request from NOBTS office of public relations.

Leazer discusses how to talk  
to Branch Davidians, others

By Debbie Moore

Baptist Press  
3/16/93

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--One of the great issues facing the nation today is that "we are too religious," said Gary Leazer, a specialist in the area of cults, sectarian groups and new religious movements.

One of three Southern Baptist Convention Home Mission Board representatives to address students at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary during a recent home missions emphasis week, Leazer said the people of the United States actually are brought together more like a pot of New Orleans gumbo than the old image of a melting pot.

Rather than all blending together, the different people groups in the United States -- and their different religious beliefs -- do not lose their identities; instead, they "rub together, causing friction," Leazer said.

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According to HMB statistics, 636 languages and dialects are known to be spoken in the United States; Southern Baptists worship each week in 98 of those different languages and dialects. Also, more than 1,500 religious groups can be found in the country. Leazer, part of the HMB interfaith witness department since 1979 and director of that office since 1987, estimates the HMB has files on one-third of those religious groups.

"Some of them are quite large and we're very familiar with them, like the Mormon church and the Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Science," he said.

"Some of them are growing very rapidly in our country, like the New Age Movement and Islam. Some of them are quite small and are located in only one particular area of the country like the Branch Davidian (or Koreshean) sect just east of Waco, Texas. And maybe they have only a half a dozen members centered on the teachings of one individual.

"But if you have a loved one in that group, you don't care whether they have six members or 6 million members. To you it is a significant group."

Along with the profusion of religious groups in the United States, modern multimedia technology "brings religious ideas into our homes in an unbelievable way," Leazer said.

"The people that you and I try to reach with the good news of the gospel are not unreligious. They might not be saved, they might be lost, but they can still be religious. They might be unchurched but they can still be religious," he said.

He recommended the following strategy for talking with a person whose religious beliefs differ radically from one's own:

"First of all, ... we need to know what we believe and how to share that with other people," Leazer said.

He encouraged the NOBTS students to "take every advantage of getting a broad education so that you will be better equipped to face this religious world in which we are called to minister." Leazer said every course he took as a master of divinity and doctor of philosophy degree student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, has been used in some way during his years of service since graduation.

"Knowing how to share our faith with a wide variety of people is so essential," Leazer said. "Sometimes one approach will be best. Another time another approach will be best. Sometimes you're just going to have to improvise."

Secondly, "We also need to know ... something about the people that we're trying to reach," he said.

Just as someone needing car maintenance would never go to a mechanic for service if that mechanic did not know where the engine was located, "If we're going to be effective witnesses in our world today, we need to know something about the Muslims so that when we witness to them we don't erect barriers unnecessarily to an effective witness," Leazer said.

Christians must use an approach that communicates the gospel with understanding, he said, "for ... real witness does not take place unless we have communicated the message so that that individual understands it and has the opportunity to respond to it."

"Third, we need to be open to God's leadership," Leazer said.

"How many of us would go into that (ancient) city of Athens, sit on a park bench and look out at all these idols and twiddle our thumbs and say, 'Man, what a terrible place this is. I wish God would call me to some place that I like better.'"

If the truth of the gospel is going to get out, Christians need to be willing to go and speak a word of witness in more than just the places they like and feel comfortable in, Leazer said.

As Christians are open to God's leadership, they will be led to people who are religious but lost, Leazer said, and then they can say as the Apostle Paul did to the ancient Athenians, "What you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you."

CORRECTION: In (BP) story titled "'Church growth guru' has lab to experiment," dated 3/15/93, please note a photo to accompany the story will be mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the Atlanta bureau of Baptist Press.

CORRECTION: In (BP) story titled "Southeastern initiating Islamic study center," dated 2/10/93, please change the 17th paragraph to read:

Shorrosh pointed out the early church was Arabic and, yet, many Christians today have misconceptions about Muslims and Arabs in general. For example, Shorrosh pointed out there are 15 million Arabs who are Christians.

Thanks,  
Baptist Press

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March 17, 1993

MEMO TO: SBC Building employees receiving (BP)

FROM: Herb Hollinger

RE: In-house (BP) delivery

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If you wish to make copies of the (BP) that comes to your office and hand them out, that is fine with us. We hope you will continue to keep informed of the news of the Baptist world.

Thanks,

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