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Dilday: No plan to run for SBC  
president, despite N.C. letter

By Herb Hollinger

Baptist Press  
4/14/94

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--Russell H. Dilday Jr., fired president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, said he has no plans to be a candidate for president of the Southern Baptist Convention and urged support for Florida pastor Jim Henry.

Dilday responded to an "Open Letter to Dr. Russell H. Dilday" composed by John Reid, director of missions for the Tuckaseegee Baptist Association in Sylva, N.C. The letter was sent to all state Baptist papers and other news media as well as to Dilday.

The letter suggests it is "time for Southern Baptists to decide that both conservatives and moderates will share equally in the governance of the (SBC). Let us start in Orlando this June by electing you as the president ... ."

Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, and Fred Wolfe, pastor of Cottage Hill Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala., are the two announced candidates at the SBC annual meeting in Orlando June 14-16. Both are acknowledged conservatives.

The Tuckaseegee association consists of 50 churches, with about 10,000 members, in Jackson County, about 60 miles southwest of Southern Baptists' Ridgecrest Conference Center. Reid said the letter was his and was not approved by the association although it was sent to news media on the association's letterhead.

"I have had several groups, individuals, alumni groups and others ask me to be a candidate," Dilday told Baptist Press. "But I do not have anything in my plans or on my agenda, at the present time, in this matter."

Dilday said he sympathizes with those who feel strongly about his firing at SWBTS and the effort to get the SBC "back to its main purposes and correct this misdirection of the past."

Regarding Henry, Dilday said the Florida pastor is a symbol of "reclaiming of heritage ... he represents the constructive conservatives, rather than the hard-line, rigid fundamentalist spirit which is not open to alternatives."

Asked specifically if he would accept a nomination for president, Dilday said "right now, no."

Dilday was fired as SWBTS president on March 9 by the seminary's trustees.

EDITORS' NOTE: The following three stories focus on Dave Leestma, NASA's director of flight crew operations.

Space expl ration, faith  
c mpatible, astronaut says

By Art Toalston

HOUSTON (BP)--In just two days, Dave Leestma was slated for liftoff aboard the space shuttle Challenger in the fall of 1984.

"When you get ready for a shuttle flight, especially your first one, the one thing astronauts are all aware of is the risk you take," Leestma recounted. "You don't worry too much about the fear, but still, it kind of nags at you."

Leestma was in the habit of reading the chapter in Proverbs that matches the day of the month. It was Oct. 3, two days before the launch, and Prov. 3:25-26 caught his attention: "Have no fear of sudden disaster ... for the Lord will be your confidence ... " (NIV).

"I got a real peace from that," Leestma recalled. "I was ready to go. And ff we went and had a good flight."

Leestma flew on two more shuttle flights, in 1989 and 1992, logging more than 500 hours in space.

Named last year as NASA's director of flight crew operations, he now oversees NASA's astronaut office, along with needed engineering support and aircraft operations, the latter involving more than 30 jets for astronaut training and two 747s to transport the space shuttle.

Leestma, a member of Houston's University Baptist Church, said he thinks "God probably smiles" as men attempt to explore his universe.

"Looking back at the earth, it takes your breath away. It brought tears to my eyes," Leestma said. "The earth is such an incredibly beautiful creation. You look down there and you know it is no accident. This is the design of somebody who is so far beyond us we can't even imagine ... . It didn't just happen, because there's nothing in the physical world that goes to order; it all goes to disorder.

"And everything had to come together in perfect order to become the earth. Physical laws don't work that way just by themselves."

Leestma said he sees no problem with the compatibility of faith and science. Space exploration, he said, relies on "the physical laws God has put in place, laws that allow us to fly in space. And they're true everywhere.

"I believe in the Bible and I believe that God, when he created this world, put some very firm laws and physical realities in place, and he challenges us to discover them," Leestma said. "God says we're to have dominion over the earth, and to have dominion means to understand as much as we can about it. We're not going to understand everything, but what we can might just help us understand God a little better."

The 1986 Challenger disaster for a time left him pondering, "Is this something I really want to do?" Leestma said.

"It affected us all, in that we lost seven people, we lost the orbiter and we lost a lot of faith of the American people in NASA to do a space program. And that hurt us a lot." Too, Leestma and his wife, Patti, had four children (and now six).

"But, yes, I felt a real call that I needed to stay in the space program." "We really went in with a lot of renewed vigor to make sure that something like that would never happen again. A lot of us in the astronaut office spent a lot of tim in a lot of different places working with folks to come up with a better design for the booster rockets and to put some fixes into the shuttle to make it safer. We've done as much as we possibly can within the budgets we're allowed by the government.

"We've got a wonderful space vehicle, the space shuttle, but there's always risk involved.

"The Challenger disaster," Leestma said, "was something that was not un xpect d am ng the people in the know with the shuttle. It's a very, very complicated machine that has tremendous forces at work during the launch phase. It's not that (a disaster) is out of the realm of possibility, but it's something you really don't expect, because the people who work on it do such a fantastic job."

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(BP) photos available upon request from the Baptist Press central office.

**Crisis pushed astronaut from  
self-reliance to deeper faith**

**By Art Toalston**

HOUSTON (BP)--Dave Leestma, NASA's director of flight crew operations, once had lots of reasons for self-confidence.

He had been selected as an astronaut and was looking forward to his first space shuttle flight. Earlier, he had been a Navy F-14 pilot and had graduated first in his class at the U.S. Naval Academy.

And he had the beginnings of a picture-perfect family, a wife, 2-year-old son and 1-year-old daughter.

"'Pretty good,' I started thinking" of his ability to handle challenges each step of the way. "I started to depend on myself a lot.

"And I kind of put my spiritual life aside, put it on hold."

Then one night his son, Ben, struggled to breathe.

After rushing the 2-year-old to a hospital emergency room and watching him hurriedly wheeled into an operating room, Leestma said, "It really hit me -- God just hit me, it seemed, with a two-by-four, 'See, Dave, you can't control everything.'

"I had been thinking I was in control of my destiny and whatever I was doing. If things went wrong, I always felt I could learn from it and do better and keep coming out on top.

"Right outside that operating room, I remembered who was in control. I realized that the important things, the things that really matter, I had no control over.

"I got down on my knees with my wife, Patti, and we prayed," Leestma said. "We hadn't prayed together in a long time.

"We prayed for Ben's safety and his health. But we also prayed that God would help us accept whatever he decided to do.

"I came out of that with the most tremendous peace and understanding that it's God who's in charge, and I'm not, and I'd better start acknowledging that and living like that."

Ben survived the sudden attack of epiglottitis of a swollen air passageway.

"But my life," Leestma said, "was changed at that point. I knew who I need to acknowledge as my Lord and Savior and master. And I've been working that way ever since."

Leestma once had been an active Christian. His father was a pastor and, with his mother, provided a solid Christian upbringing. "I made a commitment to Christ early in high school, was very active in the church youth group and a firm believer in Jesus and the Bible."

Then came college "and the more successful I got, the more I put my spiritual life in the background," Leestma said.

"The real challenge to most Christians is that the better things get, the more we ought to put him in the forefront," he noted. "But I did the wrong thing. When you put your spiritual life in the background, it becomes pretty rusty, it starts rotting away. And that was happening with me."

When the crisis hit, "I think my life could have totally crumbled, but I had something to fall back on. My parents had built me a safety net" -- an abiding awareness of Christ's call to faith and commitment, Leestma said. "I didn't know the safety net was there, but it was there all the time. And it came into action.

"Hopefully you never fall off the wire, but I had fallen off and had been falling for a long time, but I hit the safety net before I hit the craggy bottom."

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**Bible, miracles pass  
his scientific tests**

**By Art Toalston**

**Baptist Press  
4/14/94**

HOUSTON (BP)--The Bible, no matter how many centuries old, is as relevant to Dave Leestma as the most recent discoveries in space.

Leestma, NASA's director of flight crew operations and veteran of three space shuttle flights, described himself as "a scientific, inquiring person. I don't accept things at face value. Most of us in a profession like this don't."

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In trying to prove a scientific hypothesis is right, he said, "the only way to do that is to try to prove parts of it wrong."

As to the Bible, he noted, "There's nothing I've found that's wrong. It just lays out some real, basic spiritual truths."

"And if you live by those, your life works. That's how God made us. He made us to operate under those spiritual principles. If we don't, our lives won't work."

The Bible is "not affected by contemporary thinking," Leestma continued.

"For example, homosexuality. Homosexuality is an abomination to God."

"And you mention that today and they say, 'Yeah, maybe it was then, but in contemporary thought it's just another lifestyle.'"

"Well, what does contemporary thought have to do with what God says? God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. And so it's still the same to him."

"Some people base everything on what people think, and that is stepping into quicksand," Leestma said. "I firmly believe that if some matter isn't rooted in the Bible or you can't find a firm conviction for it within your faith in God, then you are heading for a disaster."

Leestma said some skeptics challenge, "Well, if I saw a miracle, I could believe."

"Well, they happen all the time. The birth of my sons and daughters (three boys and three girls). I was there at all of them. I've gotten to witness miracles. The birth of a baby is a miracle, absolutely a miracle. That God allows us within our bodies to create new life is, just, fantastic."

Leestma even has a down-to-earth miracle story about how he and his family joined University Baptist Church in Houston.

In looking for one that was "really Bible-based and met our spiritual needs," they attended University once -- "and didn't like it."

Six months later, on a New Year's Day, they decided to try it again.

"We had planned to go in, listen to the service and then leave -- quick. That's the way people are when they investigate churches. You don't get to know any of the people and you really don't get to know the church, and you make your evaluation without having the facts."

But University Baptist wasn't having a regular Sunday service that New Year's Day.

Just Sunday school. And the family was invited to attend.

"Well, it was too late to get out of it, so we went," Leestma recounted.

In the class he and his wife, Patti, attended, "the teacher was great, the people we met were wonderful and we really found a church home -- because of the people."

"A lot of the time, the minister is the one who appeals to you," Leestma said. "This time, it was the people in the church. And that's what churches are all about -- people."

Leestma said his plea to church members, based on his experience at University Baptist, is "if you see somebody you don't know, go up and tell them who you are and shake hands with them."

"It might bring them back a lot more quickly than hearing a good sermon."

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Steel guitar, fiddle flavor  
Country Music Church worship

By James Dotson

Baptist Press  
4/14/94

ATLANTA (BP)--An electric guitar and drums are no longer unusual in many church worship services. But a steel guitar? How about a fiddle?

At the Country Music Church of Atlanta, they are commonplace, in one of the newest examples of a congregation targeted to a particular affinity group.

Meeting on Sunday evenings at Sandy Springs First Baptist Church, the Country Music Church is designed to reach a growing segment of the population that feels more at home with the soulful twang of steel guitar than the rich tones of a pipe organ.

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"You come nearer to getting a person who doesn't have a Christian background to come to a church that has country music than you would any other way," said Henry Smart, pastor of the new congregation. "So it's another type of door we can open for the people."

Smart is no neophyte in the ministry of starting churches. He serves as a field service consultant for 13 states and Canada with the Home Mission Board's church extension department, and his new pastorate is completely a volunteer venture.

He said many studies and books have shown the value in organizing churches according to lifestyle groups, with language and ethnic groups serving as good examples. "We're convinced ... that we need to try to reach people who feel good about worshipping together."

About two years ago, Smart started thinking of targeting the cultural group that has grown up around country music, as well as the younger people who are joining the growing popularity of the genre. One Atlanta nightclub will seat 4,000 people, he said, although many would be unlikely to show up at a traditional church. Other similar congregations have recently sprouted in other cities as well, the oldest being The Cowboy Church in Nashville.

"My theory was, Why couldn't people come to an event that would feature gospel music through country music, to reach people that need to hear the gospel?" Smart said.

Country music is a return to a boyhood love for Smart. As early as the sixth grade in his hometown of Windsor, Mo., he was performing with his brother and a friend.

"We even auditioned on a radio station one time and used to sing on sort of an amateur station on Sundays occasionally," he said. "But when God called me to preach I gave that up."

He moved into singing folk music as an adult, but his ministry and country music merged once again with the idea for the citywide Country Music Church.

"I recognized that people would probably come to a service that is relaxed, informational and tends toward gospel music performed by a country music band," he said. "This was on my heart, so I decided to try it as an experiment."

Services began last fall at Morningside Baptist Church in Atlanta with the encouragement of then-pastor John Bledsoe. Several weeks ago, however, the church was reorganized at Sandy Springs First Baptist, where Smart is a member. The Country Music Church takes the evening service, and Sandy Springs members help fill out the congregation as it grows.

The Sandy Springs church has committed to six months of giving the Country Music Church control of the evening service. At that point, Smart said, a decision will be made whether to move toward making it a separate church with Smart as its pastor or to assimilate the congregation as an alternative service with new leadership and sponsor other congregations in other churches under Smart's leadership.

The service is somewhat less formal than many. There is plenty of music, of course, from one of two professional bands who regularly fill the stage. They sing favorite gospel hymns, but there are also plenty of specials.

The sermon is usually short and informal. There is not always an invitation -- sometimes response cards are used as a low-pressure alternative -- but where there is, it too comes in the country style. The familiar strains of a country gospel classic, "Just a Closer Walk With Thee," were used during one recent invitation.

The ideal method for building churches is through building relationships, Smart said, but modern methodology such as direct mail and telemarketing now often are used instead. With a focused group such as country music fans, there is a natural shared interest in addition to faith in Christ that speeds the development of those personal relationships that are at the heart of a church community.

"You have to establish friendships," Smart said. "You have to establish rapport, and country music is the event around which people can establish friendships."

**Va. board resolutions address  
Dilday, Annuity Board issues**

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Resolutions decrying the firing of a seminary president Russell H. Dilday Jr. and affirming investment policies of the Southern Baptist Annuity Board drew support from the Virginia Baptist general board April 13.

The statements -- which garnered only a handful of opposition votes -- came during the regular spring meeting of the 98-member board, which carries out business between sessions of the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

In one of its resolutions, the board affirmed "the work and ministry" of Dilday, whom trustees fired March 9 as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"... We decry the action of the trustees ... and challenge the trustees ... to deal with others in the future in a Christ-like manner," the resolution said.

The statement was similar to another one passed by the BGAV's denominational relations committee April 11 which praised Dilday, questioned the manner in which he was dismissed and warned the action will cause further division among Virginia Baptists.

Affirmation of the Annuity Board's investment policies followed controversy earlier this year between it and the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee. The Executive Committee had asked the Annuity Board to avoid investing in companies that support abortion, including those which contribute to Planned Parenthood. Annuity Board officials said it is virtually impossible to identify such companies and refused to expand its list of prohibited investments beyond the gambling, alcohol, tobacco or pornography industries.

The two agencies apparently agreed to a truce in February, when Annuity Board President Paul Powell promised to "avoid, or divest in orderly fashion, equities in any company that is found to have a service or product that is publicly perceived as uniquely aiding, supporting, or promoting abortion."

In their resolution, general board members commended Powell and Annuity Board trustees for "having in place a workable, realistic ethical policy to guide them in their investments."

It also encouraged general board staff to inform board members of "any danger the present and future Virginia Baptist annuitants face."

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**Virginia cooperation council  
agrees on objective statement**

Baptist Press  
4/14/94

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Members of Virginia Baptists' Council on Cooperation have agreed on an objective statement and on six areas for future discussion.

The committee, which is examining ways for various theological groups in Virginia Baptist life to cooperate in mission and ministry, was appointed last December by Ron Crawford, president of the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

Although the group was not seeking to adopt a statement in its April 4 meeting, the objective statement will help it "find a focus on what we're trying to accomplish," said BGAV Executive Director Reginald McDonough after the meeting.

The group's goal is to find "a new/improved style of cooperation that respects differences of conviction within the Virginia Baptist family and enable unity of effort to maximize mission and evangelism."

Also agreed at the meeting were areas for discussion in future meetings: moral statements or resolutions, mission support and the budgeting process, program style, representation in decision making, structure or organization and fellowship and spiritual formation.

Discussion at the meeting, held under background rules, focused on the Virginia Baptist budgeting system, which permits a wide array of choices in world mission giving; on the merits and problems associated with resolutions at the annual BGAV meeting; and on the question of Southern Baptist identity.

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The council is not an official body of the BGAV, but will report any recommendations to Crawford, who may pass them on to the BGAV, the Virginia Baptist general board or committees of the general board or the BGAV.

At its April 4 meeting the council agreed any recommendation must receive at least a two-thirds majority vote.

As at its first meeting March 10, members spent much of the time at this month's gathering sharing emotional pain engendered by 12 years of strife among Southern Baptists.

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Jackson evangelism center  
to move to Howard Payne

Baptist Press  
4/14/94

BROWNWOOD, Texas (BP)--Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas, will become the home of the Jackson Center for Evangelism and Encouragement this summer, according to founder and president Richard Jackson.

The past three years the center has operated in cooperation with Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, where Jackson formerly was pastor of North Phoenix Baptist Church.

Jackson is a Texas native and a 1960 graduate of Howard Payne who also has received an honorary doctorate by the school.

According to the Texas Baptist Standard, Jackson has indicated he will accept an invitation from Howard Payne to be an adjunct professor in the school of Christianity.

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Baptist computer users  
slate Orlando meeting

Baptist Press  
4/14/94

ORLANDO, Fla. (BP)--The Southern Baptist Computer Users Association will hold its annual meeting Friday and Saturday, June 10-11, at First Baptist Church in Pine Castle, Fla.

"Pioneering Ways to Communicate in the Southern Baptist Convention" is the theme for the two-day meeting. Topics to be addressed will include electronic mail, information highways of the Home Mission Board, client/server environments and church profile information systems. Officers for 1994 will be elected.

SBCUA is an organization of Southern Baptist employees who meet to discuss common computer-related issues.

Any employee of a Southern Baptist church, association, state convention, agency, educational institution, commission or auxiliary who directs, supervises or works in a computer-related role may join SBCUA. Annual membership dues are \$10 for an individual or \$20 for an organization with two or more members.

Registration fee for the meeting is \$25, which includes a luncheon on Friday, June 10.

To preregister for the meeting or obtain more information on becoming a member of SBCUA, contact David Stovall, SBCUA treasurer, at Hardin-Simmons University, HSU Station Drawer 1, Abilene, TX 79698. The registration fee also can be paid at the door.

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