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NATIONAL OFFICE
SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2355
Herb Hollinger, Vice President
Fax (615) 742-8919
CompuServe ID# 70420,17

BUREAUS

ATLANTA Martin King, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 898-7522, CompuServe 70420,250
DALLAS Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 333 N. Washington, Dallas, Texas 75246-1798, Telephone (214) 828-5232, CompuServe 70420,115
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RICHMOND Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151, CompuServe 70420,72
WASHINGTON Tom Strode, Chief, 400 North Capitol St., #594, Washington, D.C. 20001, Telephone (202) 638-3223, CompuServe 71173,316

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INDIANAPOLIS--Tom Elliff nomination set for SBC president; photo.
MISSOURI--Coppenger: Faith compatible with his military service.

**Tom Elliff nomination
set for SBC president**

By John Yeats

INDIANAPOLIS (BP)--Tom Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Okla., will be nominated for president of the Southern Baptist Convention at the SBC annual meeting in New Orleans by Fred Wolfe, pastor of Cottage Hill Baptist Church, Mobile, Ala.

Wolfe, a nominee for SBC president in 1994 and former chairman of the SBC Executive Committee, said in a telephone interview, "I prayed about it and sensed the leadership of the Holy Spirit" to nominate Elliff, "then consulted with several friends from around the country and they were as excited and positive about Tom as I am."

Elliff, a former president of the SBC Pastors' Conference, confirmed he has prayed about Wolfe's initiative and will serve in the position if elected.

"Tom Elliff has experience and maturity," Wolfe said. "He's served as one of our Southern Baptist foreign missionaries. He's led great churches. He has what it takes to lead us through the transition brought on by 'A Covenant for a New Century,'" the SBC restructuring approved by messengers during the 1995 SBC sesquicentennial in Atlanta to reduce the number of convention agencies from 19 to 12 and heighten home front SBC efforts through a new North American Mission Board.

"I believe God has brought him to the kingdom for such a time as this," Wolfe said of Elliff.

Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church, Dallas, affirmed Elliff's nomination. "Tom Elliff is a proven leader among Southern Baptists. There is a strong consensus among pastors and laypersons across our convention that Tom is the man to lead us," Graham said. "The restructuring presents a formidable opportunity for Southern Baptists to launch into the next century with greater effectiveness. We need a man with a heart for missions and evangelism to be our leader. Tom is the man for such a time as this."

Graham nominated current SBC President Jim Henry for the post at the 1994 SBC annual meeting in Orlando, Fla. Henry, pastor of Orlando's First Baptist Church, won a two-nominee ballot with Wolfe and was re-elected to a second one-year term in Atlanta.

Elliff is a third-generation Southern Baptist pastor. Both his father and grandfather were pastors and directors of associations.

He earned his undergraduate degree at Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, Ark., and his master of divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas. He received an honorary doctorate from Southwest Baptist University, Bolivar, Mo.

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Elliff's pastoral experience includes churches in Arkansas, Texas, Colorado and Oklahoma. During his 10 years as senior pastor at D 1 City, in suburban Oklahoma City, the congregation has witnessed more than 4,500 baptisms. Elliff's passion for world evangelism is evidenced by the church's outreach with more than 100 partnership mission teams and sponsorship of a local mission in the Oklahoma City area. The Del City church also has four language missions, in Spanish, Russian, Ghanian and Korean. In the last 10 years, the church coordinated with Southern Baptist missionaries to begin mission churches in Brazil and St. Lucia. The mission in the Caribbean is a Chinese-language church.

Elliff came to the church in 1985 when Oklahoma's economy was in a nosedive and the church had just assumed a major debt for a new facility. The church nevertheless has given nearly \$1.7 million to a range of Southern Baptist causes during the past 10 years, including \$700,000 in Cooperative Program giving, with recent years' CP giving showing additional increases. The church's \$3 million budget in 1995 allocated 4 percent to Cooperative Program and associational causes. The church has been one of the largest givers to the Oklahoma City-area Capital Baptist Association during the year. Additionally, the church supported numerous other evangelistic and missions efforts, including its overseas partnership commitments and its own language and missions ministries.

One of Elliff's previous churches, Eastwood Baptist in Tulsa, was the second-largest congregation in Oklahoma during his tenure, after First Southern in Del City.

Elliff and his wife, Jeannie, are parents of four children. Two daughters, Beth and Amy, are married; Sarah and Jonathan are students at Oklahoma Baptist University and recently participated in mission work in Poland and Africa.

From 1980-83, Elliff and his family served as Southern Baptist missionaries to Zimbabwe. An auto accident preempted their work, forcing them to resign to secure medical treatment for their oldest daughter. Before the election of Jerry Rankin as president of the Foreign Mission Board, Elliff was seriously considered for the post.

In addition to his 1989 presidency of the SBC Pastors' Conference, Elliff has been SBC convention preacher; chairman of the Committee on Order of Business; and a frequent Pastors' Conference speaker.

Two of Elliff's books, "Praying for Others" and "Pathway to God's Presence," were published by Broadman Press, the publishing arm of the Baptist Sunday School Board now named Broadman & Holman. He also has contributed to BSSB discipleship and Bible study materials.

Asked in an interview with the Indiana Baptist newsjournal about his vision for the Southern Baptist Convention, Elliff said, "We currently are experiencing some of the greatest days of mission outreach. I believe the SBC stands on the threshold of our greatest days of ministry. God has honored the SBC in a unique way. He's blessed us because of our commitment to him, his Word and the great value we place on sharing the gospel with the whole world. It is imperative we hold to those commitments in the days ahead."

Concerning the Covenant for a New Century restructuring, Elliff said, "Any organization that cares about being effective is constantly seeking better, more effective methods. God's people must be constantly seeking for the best ways to be stewards with the resources God has given us to share the gospel with the world. The restructuring is not the first time Southern Baptists have sought to restructure to make us more effective. If our Lord tarries, we'll probably do it again.

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"Many Southern Baptists don't realize how critical our effectiveness is," Elliff noted. "We must realize how many people around the world are waiting on us to do the right thing. The increases in baptisms and Cooperative Program giving are outward indications of God's blessing Southern Baptists. The restructure doesn't change our message. We aren't changing our biblical doctrines. We are changing our methods to eliminate as much duplicity as possible. We must operate simply and effectively, so we can squeeze out the best for our Lord. The restructure is not a threat to anyone. It is merely a means of improving our methods."

Elliff, who has informally mentored a number of young pastors, said, "... the key is priorities. We must help pastors understand that their being is more important than all their doing. Pastoring is not simply an academic or philosophical issue. Pastors must first have a deep personal walk with God. The number of falling pastors is an indication that many men aren't spending time on their knees before God, nor are they accountable before other men of faith. If a pastor finds himself isolated, he's headed for trouble. Pastors need friends with whom they can be openly transparent and accountable."

Elliff added, "A pastor's marriage and family are his priority relationships. A pastor's faithfulness doesn't begin at the marriage, but faithful and pure before marriage."

L. Joe McKinney, pastor of North Richland Hills Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas, and a longtime friend of Elliff, said, "Tom Elliff may be one of the most balanced pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention. If you needed a mission conference speaker, he could do it. If you needed an evangelism conference speaker, he could do that. If you wanted a dynamic speaker on marriage and family, he could do that. If you needed someone to speak on at a deeper life conference, he could do that. Many preachers are known for their messages in one of these areas, but Tom does them all. What makes him most effective is, his message is consistent with his walk. He is committed to the Scriptures. He is faithful to his marriage. He is a personal soul-winner. He participates in mission work. He is competent in all Southern Baptists hold dear."

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(BP) photo posted in SBCNet News Room and to be available from Baptist Press' central office in Nashville, Tenn. Art Toalston contributed to this story.

Coppenger: Faith compatible
with his military service

By James A. Smith Sr.

Baptist Press
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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)--Time for a "pop quiz."

The average seminary president is best described as:

a) a theologian and philosopher who has spent many years in academia teaching about the things of God;

b) an able administrator and denominational executive with a vision for his institution; or

c) a "ground pounder" who may sleep in the mud, train in the desert and command infantry battalions, as well as act as a Pentagon spokesman for the Army?

When it comes to Mark T. Coppenger, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Mo., the best answer is: "all of the above."

Coppenger's academic excellence is widely known -- he holds a Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University, taught for a number of years at Wheaton College and has had several books published.

Additionally, Coppenger's recent election to the presidency at Midwestern Seminary and his five years of service at the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee demonstrate a visionary leadership.

Fewer persons, however, know about Coppenger's 25 years of military service.

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Coppenger currently holds the rank of lieutenant colonel in the United States Army Reserve and is assigned to the public affairs office of the Department of the Army in the Pentagon. Each summer, Coppenger serves two weeks of active duty as a part of his Army Reserve responsibilities.

Coppenger's military role was on display Dec. 22 as he led the swearing-in ceremony for Jim Fisher, a Midwestern master of divinity student who was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Army Reserve.

Fisher, with 11 years of previous military service with the Air Force and Mississippi Air National Guard, has come to Midwestern to complete the necessary requirements to serve as a chaplain in the Army.

"I perceive that God is working in the military to call out ministers," Coppenger said in light of Fisher's swearing-in.

Although Coppenger is an ordained Southern Baptist minister, unlike Fisher and most other ministers in the military, he does not serve as a chaplain. And yet, Coppenger finds in his military service an unique opportunity to serve Christ.

"I have never served without the opportunity to witness," Coppenger said. "Whenever I go on active duty, I find myself with the opportunity to tell people about the Lord.

"I don't believe in a distinction between sacred and secular. The Reformation, led by Luther and Calvin, taught that all vocations are sacred so long as they are served under the lordship of Christ."

While some question whether a minister of the gospel can serve the state, Coppenger sees no contradiction.

"Under Romans 13:1-7, God ordains earthly powers," Coppenger said. "So, it's not as though I'm working outside the sphere of God's influence. He uses armies to accomplish his will. Civil authority and the bearing of arms is a part of his design."

Military service, Coppenger said, has been helpful to his vocational ministry.

"I am very grateful for the military. I enjoy the opportunity to serve my country," Coppenger said. "I've learned a lot that has helped me in my church and denominational work -- how to respond under pressure, traits of leadership and attention to detail in logistical matters."

Serving in the military is a "great change of pace for me. I step outside denominational work and work in the world of civil government. It's a refreshment to me."

Because he is in the Army Reserve, Coppenger could be "called up" at any time.

Recently, he was given the opportunity to volunteer for a nine-month active duty assignment in the European theater in conjunction with NATO peacekeeping efforts now under way in war-torn Bosnia. Given his responsibilities at the seminary, Coppenger had to decline. A similar opportunity was turned down during the Gulf War in 1990, a few weeks after he began his service with the SBC Executive Committee.

The mortality of life is a constant issue for those who serve in the military, according to Coppenger. "All of us who train to fight wonder how we might perform in battle," noting that in his 25 years of military service, he has not seen combat.

While there is some frustration "at not having the chance to prove your mettle under fire, on the other hand there's great gratitude that I've not had to face the horror of war." Instead, "the Lord has left me to work in college, church and denomination unscathed."

Noting that he had witnessed the death of 10 persons in connection with several training accidents, Coppenger commented, "I've been very fortunate."

Coppenger also rejects the notion that military service violates Christian principles of peacemaking.

"Throughout the years, I've had some very gratifying friendships with Mennonites and members of other peace churches," Coppenger said. "But I have always held to a just war theory -- that there are circumstances and methods appropriate for war. I wrote an article on the 'Golden Rule' and war for the Criswell Theological Review in which I explained the 'Golden Rule' can call upon someone to engage in war."

While serving God and Caesar is not necessarily contradictory, sometimes it may cause confusion.

Coppenger reminisced that in 1994 within one month's time, he answered questions for a reporter from the Anniston (Ala.) Star, first as spokesman for the SBC, through his role as vice president for convention relations, and then as an Army spokesman. When the reporter reached Coppenger at the Pentagon, the reporter commented he thought the telephone message was somehow mixed up with his earlier contact with Coppenger.

Coppenger was commissioned as an officer in 1970 upon graduation from Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas where he was enrolled in the Reserved Officers Training Corps (ROTC). Coppenger said he expects he will continue to serve in the Reserves for several more years.

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