

Commentary: God's man for two seminaries_stone_81103

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By Ted Stone

Eleven years ago, area media accounts of the election of Paige Patterson to the presidency of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary carried the prediction by the more ardent detractors that his coming would result in the death of the Southern Baptist seminary, located in Wake Forest, N.C.

Many denominational loyalists wondered if the hard-driving Texan, who had earned his spurs as a leader in the conservative resurgence, would be a good fit for the more traditional East Coast seminary. After all, he was fresh from the presidency of Criswell College, and some feared that such a background ill-prepared him for the educational challenges of higher education.

Paige Patterson has been God's man for the 11 years spent in the town of Wake Forest, and by God's grace, he will occupy that same special designation at Fort Worth, "God's man for this special time!"

Friends and enemies were greatly surprised at the disarming, friendly demeanor of the Baptist leader who had been falsely heralded as a bully and administrator of an inquisition. By God's grace, and blessed with the visionary leadership of Patterson, the struggling campus began to rise from the ashes of despair to the pinnacles of Christian service it enjoys today. Some faculty members retired, while others chose to teach at other schools, but not one single faculty member was fired during the days of changeover.

Patterson's passion for evangelism and missions became evident during the early days of his tenure. Church planting became a priority, and students were encouraged to discover the meaning of missions firsthand by active involvement across the world. The seminary president and his wife, Dorothy, often traveled to foreign lands to offer encouragement to their dedicated young students. An outstanding Ph.D. program was instituted for the first time at Southeastern, and a thriving liberal arts college was founded. The student body grew by leaps and bounds.

Paige Patterson always has been accessible to students, faculty and others who love the seminary. His office is crammed with mementos from mission trips and safaris. That he is an avid hunter is no secret to his admirers. And the presence of his loyal dog in his office or the front seat of his car is an everyday event. Those who have been fortunate (and there are many) to enjoy the hospitality of Magnolia Hill, the presidential residence, know that the president and his much-respected wife are renowned as top-notch hosts. They love people!

When I returned home from the trustee meeting at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth in April, at which Southwestern's beloved President Ken Hemphill announced his resignation to pursue another area of denominational service, I was sad at his departure and frustrated with challenging problems that still needed to be resolved at the institution long considered the flagship seminary of our denomination.

The rumor mill was active, and the media speculated that Paige Patterson might be a leading candidate for the presidency of the largest evangelical seminary in the world. Because of my deep concerns for the future of Southwestern and the ties that had been developed with the Southeastern president during my tenure as a member of the Southeastern board of visitors, I scheduled a meeting with Patterson in his office at Wake Forest.

I poured out my soul, discussing each of the pressing needs at Southwestern. I knew already that this man of God shared my enthusiasm for evangelism, and I carefully told him of the dream that I shared with Southwestern professors Roy Fish and Malcolm McDow to see a school of evangelism established on the Fort Worth campus. And then he added to the conversation, "I believe there is a great need also to see a chapel erected in the heart of the campus!" I shouted "amen!" loud enough to be heard on the second floor of the administration building, for I had discussed only a few months prior that same vision with Southwestern Vice President Jack Terry.

Patterson, soon after arriving in Wake Forest 11 years ago, had turned his attention to developing an exciting and challenging chapel service as the core of the daily activities. Those attending this service at Southeastern are always impressed by a full house in attendance, and in recent years Southwestern chapel service, held in a less worshipful atmosphere, an auditorium, rather than a chapel with a steeple like the worship center at Southeastern, has lagged far behind with less than 200 often in attendance.

I asked my friend to join me in prayer for God's will to be done. We both knelt on our knees and prayed without ceasing, seeking God's plan for the two seminaries, both of which had special places in our hearts. When we returned to our chairs, I asked the seminary president for permission to recommend him to our search committee at Southwestern. I could feel his inward pain, because he and his wife have both come to love Southeastern so much. I knew, too, that those of us who love Southeastern would be

grateful to retain the services of Patterson until the Lord calls or until he comes. But because this faithful servant seeks nothing except to do God's will, he honored my request, and I mailed the recommendation letter to each search committee member. Many of these men were already praying that God would call a leader in the mold of Patterson.

My fellow trustees agreed with me that at Southwestern we need a president of great strength and fortitude, a team player, who will be emboldened by the knowledge that he daily seeks to walk in the steps of Jesus. Paige Patterson is such a leader. For weeks he and his wife prayerfully sought for evidence of God's clear call in the proposed move, and once they had found peace in God's leadership, the trustees of Southwestern on June 24, under God's direction, formally and unanimously extended the invitation.

When the trustees agreed to pray daily that Patterson follow in the steps of Christ in leading the seminary and asked him to, in return, pray for God's leadership for the trustees, the newly elected Southwestern president added, "Please pray always that God will grant me wisdom for the decisions that I must make." Remembering the human tendency to rush important matters, he reminded us that he was keenly aware that his every decision would greatly impact individuals and their ministries.

Certainly there will be some who will expect and others who will wish for the new president to come bearing a sword of change or a broom to sweep clean the institution's past history of service. Just as the fortunetellers were mistaken in their dire predictions 11 years ago, so will these current prognosticators be greatly surprised at the heart and spirit of this dedicated servant of God.

Patterson has a great appreciation for the legacy of the heroes of the faith who have helped develop Southwestern. There is no question that he will remain faithful to the charge of B.H. Carroll, the first president of

Southwestern, who urged his successor, "See to it that every day and hour, every month in every year, every year in the long future, this seminary is kept lashed to the Redeemer."

On July 31, with heavy hearts at leaving behind the magnolia-laden campus where God had used them in such a special way, yet buoyed by the sure knowledge that their move was directed by God, the Pattersons headed westward for a brief weekend visit in Arkansas with daughter Carmen, her husband Mark Howell, pastor of Little Rock's First Baptist Church, and the grandchildren. Then they continued on to Fort Worth and the exciting challenge that lies before them. They have already named their new residence "Hacienda del Pastor." Early Monday morning, Aug. 4, Dr. Patterson and his loyal dog, Noche, headed for the office and the mountain of seminary business that has been awaiting the new president's arrival.

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Ted Stone is president of Ted Stone Ministries, a member of Southwestern Seminary's board of trustees and Southeastern Seminary's board of visitors.