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New Orleans seminary trustees to decide whether to turn over autonomy to Southern Baptist Convention

By Mark Wingfield

Managing Editor

Trustees of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary will decide this fall whether to continue as the lone holdout among Southern Baptist Convention entities by refusing to make the SBC the "sole member" of their corporation.

The Executive Committee asked all the SBC's schools and mission boards to make the legal change to prevent its trustee boards from exercising the kind of break several colleges have made with state Baptist conventions.

More than 10 years ago, for example, trustees of Baylor University, fearing a fundamentalist takeover of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, amended the university's charter to remove the BGCT's authority to name the majority of Baylor's board. Similar action by five agencies of the Missouri Baptist Convention, which recently came under fundamentalist control, is being challenged in court.

New Orleans Seminary President Chuck Kelley says he opposes naming the

SBC as the seminary's "sole member" out of principle. He conceives no situation under which the seminary would or could depart from the SBC.

The legal change requested by the Executive Committee would not alter the way seminary trustees are elected, nor would it change the current governance of the seminary. However, it would give the SBC legal authority to overrule or remove the elected trustees if those trustees acted against the wishes of the convention.

Kelley opened the academic year at New Orleans Sept. 4 with a convocation address explaining the situation to faculty, staff and students. His topic was the autonomous organizational structure of Baptists.

To accede to the Executive Committee's request "could start a fundamental change in historic Baptist polity and compromise our practice of organizational autonomy," he declared. It also would introduce a form of connectionalism into Baptist life, he said, and start "a movement away from the decisive influence of the SBC and toward a direct control by the SBC."

As evidence of where this connectionalism could lead, Kelley pointed to recent debates over the future of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. In a recent address to members of the Missouri Baptist Convention's Executive Board, Missouri pastor David Baker reported that an SBC Funding Study Committee was considering closing or changing the focus of Midwestern Seminary.

That prompted an editorial in the Missouri Baptist Convention's newspaper, the Pathway, where one of the Missouri participants in the Seminary Funding Committee discussion was quoted.

In that small-group meeting, David Tolliver asked what would happen if Midwestern's trustees didn't go along with the proposed change. He said he understood SBC officials to say they would ask the convention to remove the seminary's entire trustee board.

In an attempt to quell the concern Tolliver generated among Missouri Baptists with that report, the president of the SBC Executive Committee released a letter to state Baptist paper editors Sept. 18. In the letter, Morris Chapman says no such threat was made.

Chapman concurs that the question was asked about what would happen if Midwestern's trustees did not consent to a change in status proposed by the SBC. But he recalls a different nuance to the answer: "I answered the question by saying: 'The SBC has left itself no recourse to overturn governing actions of an entity's trustees. The only course of action available to the SBC is the possibility of removing the trustees by vote of the convention in session.'"

Chapman added in his letter that such a step never has been taken and he can't imagine it happening.

Nevertheless, Kelley saw danger in the mere suggestion.

"To my knowledge, this stunning suggestion is unprecedented in Southern Baptist history," he said. "Knowing that Midwestern Seminary had already made the SBC the sole member of its corporation, these members of the SBC Executive Committee were assuming the power of sole membership made it possible to change an entire board of trustees at one convention. Whether they were right or wrong in their interpretation, such a suggestion would not have been made prior to the sole membership strategy."

Kelley warned the New Orleans family: "The change to sole membership suggests a new power would be in play at the denominational level. ... I believe it is impossible to say sole membership would never be used for anything but its original stated purpose."

Kelley lamented that SBC conservatives, after gaining control of all SBC boards through presidential appointments in the 1980s and '90s, would resort to such tactics to ensure they wouldn't have to call on God for a

miracle again.

"It saddens me that the biblical conservatives would be the group of record taking the first step toward connectionalism at the national level of SBC life," he said.

The risks of allowing SBC entities to remain fully autonomous are more palatable than the risks of connectionalism, Kelley declared.

He posed several other alternatives as possible ways to accomplish the Executive Committee's desire:

- ✖ Asking each person elected as a trustee of an SBC entity to "sign a covenant with the SBC to uphold all SBC guidelines for the entity he or she will serve.

- ✖ Amend the charters of SBC entities to require financial penalties for unauthorized charter changes.

Trustees of New Orleans Seminary are scheduled to take up the matter when they meet Oct. 6-8.

Another official with the SBC Executive Committee agreed with Kelley that "connectionalism should always be avoided," but said he believes the Executive Committee's request is of a different order.

Kelley has "inappropriately applied connectionalism, called 'hierarchicalism' by some, to the corporate subsidiary realm, an area to which it has no relevance," said Augie Boto, vice president for convention policy with the Executive Committee.

"The Southern Baptist Convention's use of sole membership only affirms the legal relationship between the SBC and its entities and has no bearing on the authority or autonomy of the local church. Because that autonomy is

unaffected, painting sole membership with the black brush of connectionalism is unjustifiable."

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