

Criswell College president resigns after public spat with Dallas pastor

August 7, 2008

DALLAS (ABP)—Criswell College President Jerry Johnson resigned Aug. 5, after a public clash with the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas over the institution's future.

His resignation, accepted during a called session of the college trustees' executive committee, "was due to philosophical differences the president had with the chancellor and trustee leadership about the future of Criswell College," board members said in a statement released Aug. 6. The resignation takes effect Aug. 15.

An interim president is expected to be named quickly, Jerry Johnson trustee chair Michael Deahl said by telephone Aug. 7.

"Our plan and expectation is to have someone named and to be in place as close to that (Aug. 15) date as possible so there will be no gap in leadership," Deahl said.

Possibility of selling the assets

He also confirmed that controversy over the possibility of selling the college's assets "played a part" in Johnson's decision to step down.

Johnson and at least one Criswell trustee recently accused First Baptist Church of Dallas and its pastor, Robert Jeffress, of planning to sell the institution's assets. The proceeds, they contended, would go to fund a massive new proposed sanctuary for the historic church.

First Baptist, under the guidance of its legendary then-pastor, W.A. Criswell, established Criswell College in 1971. The church must approve appointment of the college's trustees, over half of whom must be First Baptist members, and the church's pastor serves as the school's chancellor. Criswell College is affiliated with the fundamentalist Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

"For six months, the chancellor has been trying to cannibalize Criswell College to fund his building program at the church, which will cost \$170 to \$240 million," Johnson told the *Dallas Morning News* a week prior to his resignation.

The president also accused Jeffress of planning to stack the board with trustees who would agree to sell the Dallas-based campus and its radio station, KCBI. The FM station and its two satellite stations broadcast over large portions of Texas and Oklahoma.

Johnson claimed Jeffress said earlier this year that nearby Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary would absorb Criswell. Southwestern operates its own undergraduate college at its Fort Worth campus.

Criswell College trustee Steve Washburn, pastor of First Baptist Church of Pflugerville, also accused First Baptist of plotting to sell the school's assets, in a letter released in late July.

According to news reports, Johnson and some trustees, such as Washburn, have pointed out that the college is meeting financial and enrollment challenges. But Jeffress has advocated for a study to determine whether a need for the institution still exists.

Praise for Johnson

In spite of the disagreement, trustee chairman Michael Deahl praised Johnson's leadership in the college's Aug. 6 statement. He expressed

gratitude for the “accomplishments that have been achieved at the college and KCBI under Dr. Johnson’s leadership, which are too numerous to mention.

“I firmly believe that, due in no small part to Dr. Johnson’s contributions, the greatest days at Criswell College are yet to come.”

Calls to Johnson and Washburn were not returned by press time.

Johnson was named Criswell’s president and a professor of theology and ethics in 2003. Prior to that date, he was dean and assistant professor of ethics at Boyce College, the undergraduate program at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Johnson is a Criswell alumnus, earning a bachelor of arts degree in biblical studies from the institution in 1986.