

Former seminary head John David Hopper dies

January 14, 2015

SAN ANTONIO (BNG)—John David Hopper, former president of the European-based International Baptist Theological Seminary, died Jan. 10 at age 80.

Hopper led the seminary when the Southern Baptist Convention's [Foreign Mission Board](#) suddenly defunded the school. Despite having promised four years before to phase out funding for the school gradually, trustees of what today is called the International Mission Board removed \$365,000—about 40 percent of the seminary's annual funding—from the 1992 budget.



John David Hopper helped shepherd the International Baptist Theological Seminary's move from Rüschlikon, Switzerland, to Prague (above) after the seminary was defunded by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1992. The newly formed [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) responded by offering to cover the salaries of missionaries who no longer in good conscience could stay affiliated with the Foreign Mission Board.

First CBF ‘missioners’

Hopper and his wife, Jo Ann, accepted the offer. They, along with SBC missionaries T and Kathie Thomas in Romania, were introduced at the CBF 1992 General Assembly as the first four “missioners,” as the Fellowship’s field personnel were known at the time.

Jim Smith, director of field ministries for the CBF, remembered Hopper as “a wonderfully kind and deeply spiritual person who was blessed with exceptional intellect.”

“He kept his Christian principles during many trials but refused to slip into bitterness,” Smith posted on Facebook. “He lived a good life.”

Fluent in eight languages, Hopper earned the bachelor of divinity degree from Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary and master of theology and doctor of philosophy degrees in church history from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. The Hoppers were appointed as missionaries in 1965.

Work in Eastern Europe

Hopper taught practical theology at the international seminary four years and then taught and did research at a Baptist seminary in Yugoslavia four years before being named the mission board’s fraternal representative for Eastern Europe in 1976.

In 1987, he became president of the international seminary, then based in Rüschlikon, Switzerland. The school was formed in 1949 to help rebuild Baptist unity in Europe following World War II. Struggling since the 1970s due to declining exchange rates for the U.S. dollar, Rüschlikon had seven presidents in the previous 10 years.

In 1988, the FMB agreed to transfer ownership of the seminary to

European Baptists and “a gradual subsidy reduction” for as long as 15 years beginning in 1992. At the FMB trustee meeting Oct. 9, 1991, however, trustees voted 35-28 to withdraw \$365,000 from the 1992 budget earmarked for Rüsçhlikon.

Supporters of defunding cited news that Glenn Hinson, a longtime Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor often accused of “liberalism” in the battle of what is now commonly called the SBC “conservative resurgence,” was teaching there during a four-month sabbatical.

Break with the SBC

Then, mission board officials told Hopper speaking about Rüsçhlikon in U.S. churches violated the organization’s fund-raising policy. Rather than let the seminary die, the Hoppers resigned after 27 years as Southern Baptist missionaries in April 1992. Hopper continued as president of Rüsçhlikon until he retired for health reasons in 1997.

Adapting to changing educational needs for European Baptists after the end of the Cold War, International Baptist Theological Seminary relocated to Eastern Europe in 1997. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship mobilized more than 1,000 volunteers to travel to the Czech Republic and help remodel buildings in preparation for the opening of the new campus in Prague, Czech Republic.

In 2014, the school relocated again to Amsterdam, with a new focus on doctoral studies instead of master’s-degree training now offered in national seminaries opening up across the continent in recent years.

After retirement, Hopper lived in San Antonio with his wife of 56 years, who survives. He also leaves behind three sons, their spouses and seven grandchildren.

A memorial service is scheduled at 11 a.m. Feb. 3 at [Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio.](#)