

Tennessee Baptists drop challenge to Belmont University: Test of whether Southern Baptist-related colleges can be independently run

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In the latest test of whether Southern Baptist-related colleges can be independently run, Tennessee state Baptists have reached an agreement to drop their lawsuit to regain control of the 4,800-student Belmont University in Nashville.

Belmont will provide the state organization a total of \$11 million toward a ministry-endowment fund, and Tennessee Baptists will end their attempt to regain control, lost in 2004 when the school's trustees acted to make it independent.

State convention messengers, or delegates, meeting in Kingsport, received the news from a negotiating committee with applause. The pact ends the convention's 56-year-old relationship with the school and also likely marks the end of a sometimes bitter dispute.

"One of the things that we must learn from this is that relationships are extremely valuable and that they are sometimes fragile, and I hope that we have learned that as we have worked together as brothers and sisters in Christ, we will not always agree," said Clay Austin, pastor of First Baptist Church in Blountville and chair of a convention negotiating committee.

Marty Dickens, chair of Belmont's trustees, released a statement November 13 saying the settlement "honors the many significant contributions that Tennessee Baptists have made to the university" and upholds the teachings of Jesus Christ. Under the terms, Belmont will provide an initial \$1 million gift, followed by annual gifts of \$250,000 for the next 40 years into an endowment supporting ministries.

In 2004, Belmont trustees proposed that they elect their own successors and that the school be allowed to draw up to 40 percent of its trustees from Christians of non-Baptist traditions, among other plans.

But disagreements emerged, and in May of last year a rare special meeting of the state convention rejected a \$5 million offer from Belmont to settle the case.

Messengers then voted to declare the school's entire trustee board vacant and established Austin's committee to negotiate with Belmont officials. -*Associated Baptist Press*