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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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March 12, 1985

85-27

SBC Politics Threaten  
Church Starting Efforts

By Michael Tutterow

DENVER (BP)—Southern Baptists' infighting threatens to undermine the denomination's efforts in starting new churches, a Southern Baptist church extension expert warned.

"Current arguments, debates, fusses and deliberations between fundamentalists, conservatives and moderates are undoubtedly diverting funds and energies away from some church starting projects," said Nelson Tilton, director of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's church starting department.

Tilton made the statements in a speech during the annual church extension conference for state missions and state church extension directors sponsored by the board.

He referred to an on-going controversy within the 14.3-million member Southern Baptist Convention between fundamentalists and moderates, each seeking control of SBC agencies and institutions. Tilton warned, "These diversions could become extremely significant and detrimental if they begin to center around racial issues, ordination of women or a common system of biblical interpretation.

"Southern Baptists are once again facing a test of their stance on the autonomy of the local church," Tilton said. Church starting in a pluralistic society could be damaged by such polity decisions, he added. "We'll tend to form churches in our own form and style and that is not what pluralism (in society) calls for," he said.

Tilton maintained tensions within the denomination could be creative and help Southern Baptists increase church starting efforts. "Some of the debates have led a considerable number of Southern Baptists to be more specific about their identity," he explained. "A specific identity, a clear direction or definite targets usually help a church starter.

"If the debates do not reach unChristian extremes, it is possible they can contribute positively to the total church starting picture," said Tilton.

Church starting is central to Bold Mission Thrust, the denomination's goal to present the gospel to every person on earth by the year 2000, said Tilton.

"Church starting is as much at the heart of the Southern Baptist Convention as evangelism," noted Tilton. "These mission actions are so vitally connected that to separate them is to mutilate the Great Commission."

Tilton pointed out if Southern Baptists would baptize 500,000 new converts every year for the next 15 years, the denomination would reach its goal of 50,000 SBC churches by the end of the century. Likewise, if the denomination began another 14,000 churches during the next 15 years, said Tilton, "we will be baptizing at least 500,000 new converts every year.

"In either case," he added, "the Southern Baptist Convention will be reaching to fulfill the Great Commission to an extent which exceeds our best efforts to date."

Southern Baptists are within reach of their goal, said Tilton. If every SBC church would pledge to begin just one new church during the next 15 years, Southern Baptists would reach the 50,000 church goal, he noted. Likewise, if all the churches with more than 250 members started one church every five years, the denomination would reach its goal, he said.

Religious Organizations  
Out-Give Secular Groups

WASHINGTON (BP)--As tax deductible contributions to charity come under the scrutiny of a tax reform-minded Congress, a new study indicates charitable giving by religious organizations in the United States probably surpassed \$7.5 billion in 1983.

According to a report from the Council on Foundations, which conducted the comprehensive study, total giving by religious organizations in 1983 surpassed the combined charitable contributions of corporations and secular organizations by about \$1 billion.

Corporations and their foundations contributed \$3.1 billion to charitable causes and other secular foundations gave another \$3.46 billion, the study found. The report indicated the estimate of religious charitable giving does not include an estimated \$1 billion given at the congregational level and possibly billions more which escaped identification in the survey.

The report noted the creativity and sophistication of giving by organized religion, pointing out "religious organizations are indeed donors, not just recipients." Religious charitable giving, it added, has diversified to meet a wide variety of human needs, especially in the aftermath of government cuts in support for the needy.

"Every conceivable need in society is being addressed, from soup kitchens in urban areas to making films about social justice, from building wells in the Sudan to emergency food aid in Ethiopia," said James A. Joseph, president of the Council on Foundations.

More than one-half of the religious organizations studied were active internationally. While there was a tendency to fund projects which reflected the makeup of their membership, most groups supported projects touching at least two or three racial groups, the study said.

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'Concerned' Arkansas Pastors  
Call For 'Proper' Ballot

By Mark Kelly

Baptist Press  
3/12/85

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (BP)--Six Arkansas Baptist pastors took to the podium Feb. 28, at Little Rock's First Baptist Church, in an effort to counter what they see as a "drift toward liberalism" in the Southern Baptist Convention.

A public sequel to a private meeting Dec. 13, 1984, the gathering was intended to let Arkansas Baptists voice concerns about the current SBC controversy and discuss ways to continue a trend toward conservatism in the convention. A crowd of 900 gathered for the afternoon meeting. Apparently less than 100 of those present were pastors and church staff members.

"We have an insatiable, indefatigable desire to speak," declared host pastor John Wright at the meeting's outset. "Many groups over the Southern Baptist Convention have met to express the opposite view of the trends (within the SBC). We believe it would be a sin against God and our great denomination to remain silent and not voice the point of view represented by the conservatives of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Wright said the churches served by the program personalities contributed collectively more than \$1 million to the Cooperative Program in 1984, describing the speakers as loyal to the Southern Baptist Convention and representative of the denomination's "mainstream."

Wright also announced an open question and answer period planned at the close of the meeting had been eliminated to ensure the session would not become "a time of debate" but would be characterized by "harmony, peace and good will." Persons with questions were invited to approach the platform after the program to consult with the speakers.

W.O. Vaught, pastor emeritus of Immanuel Baptist Church, Little Rock, spoke on, "Reason and Faith." He said current difficulties in the convention rise from the undue influence of 19th century German higher criticism (which attempts to clarify the meaning of scriptural texts by identifying the process through which they developed to their present stage).

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Use of this technique forces one to submit the Scriptures to human reason, Vaught insisted. Thus, reason "rips the heart out of the Holy Scriptures—miracles slip away" and the Southern Baptist Convention begins the path of decline traveled by other U.S. denominations.

Johnny Jackson, pastor of Forest Highlands Baptist Church, Little Rock, spoke on "Unprecedented Attacks on the SBC President." He recalled an article by Arkansas State Convention President Jon Stubblefield, in the Feb. 28 Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine, which counseled avoiding the "unprecedented" meeting for the sake of harmony and reconciliation.

The meeting was without precedent, Jackson agreed. However, he said the SBC also is faced with an unprecedented situation, especially in what he called "an open, organized campaign to unseat the president of the convention (Charles Stanley of First Baptist Church, Atlanta)."

The appearance of groups across the SBC organizing to oppose the election of Stanley to a second term convinced him to "join the fight publicly," Jackson said.

"It's time for some of us in Arkansas to get riled up," he declared. "They are doing exactly what they've accused us of doing for many years. There is no organization as these men have said in Arkansas at this moment—I challenge anyone anywhere to produce one shred of evidence to the contrary. But we're fixing to get organized!"

Thomas Hinson, pastor of First Baptist Church, West Memphis, addressed the topic, "Theology and Methodology." His thesis was the SBC has strayed in recent years out of its traditionally narrow theological perimeters.

As evidence of the "drift toward liberalism," Hinson cited the association of a Southern Baptist (W.W. Finlator), with the American Civil Liberties Union, which opposed Arkansas' controversial creationism bill in 1982; the hiring of an ordained woman, Mollie Marshall-Green, to the theology faculty of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.; the testimony of a Southern Seminary ethics professor, Paul Simmons, against Amendment 65, Arkansas' ill-fated 1984 anti-abortion proposal, and passages from 1969 commentaries on Exodus and 2 Kings by Roy L. Honeycutt, then professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., and now president of Southern Seminary.

Southern Baptists always have maintained a narrow theology and, since 1925, have held an equally narrow method of missions support, Hinson asserted.

Recently, however, "some have arisen among us, insisting on their freedom to broaden the theological perimeters while denying others the right to simultaneously broaden the methodological perimeters," he said. "If Southern Baptists are to return to and remain in the great historical and biblically-conservative positions that have made us this century's greatest force for missions and evangelism, we must repair and re-establish those traditionally effective narrow perimeters of theology and methodology."

Kerry Powell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Forrest City, addressed the issue, "'Biased Journalism of Baptist Press and State Editors.'" He said SBC leadership "has generally moved to a more liberal theological position and when concerns about the drift are raised, those who raise them are accused of being radicals and independents."

Portraying administrative responses toward criticism as "defensive" and "hostile," Powell insisted denominational leaders and the Baptist media have discredited and attempted to shut out "conservative" SBC voices.

"I don't like it when the press turns us all into a camp and brands us as a wild-eyed fundamentalist faction," Powell declared. "The liberal/moderate element has totally captured the denominational press with a minority view. There has been a concerted, orchestrated effort on the part of Baptist Press to take the real issue off the theological and put the focus instead on a fundamentalist political organization."

Powell praised the SBC Executive Committee's call last fall for an investigation of Baptist Press reporting practices and philosophy. He also attacked Baptist Press reports and an editorial on the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Kansas City which were carried by the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine June 21, 1984.

Powell took issue with the use of the word "faction" to describe the movement in the convention aligned with Texans Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler. He also challenged ABN Editor J. Everett Sneed's disapproval of an attempt to defund the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, which Sneed called "not only a reversal of historic position, but the worst thing to happen at this year's convention."

"I came back from Kansas City impressed at what had taken place, then I picked up the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine and I read about a convention altogether different than the one I had attended," Powell reported. "I thought it was a great convention until the press told me how foolish I was to think that."

"To me, it seemed like a deliberate attempt to discredit, to slant and adjust the news to suit somebody's own philosophy," Powell declared. He said biased reporting was "a large part of the unrest in our convention" and "a disservice to thinking Christians everywhere."

James Bryant, pastor of Grand Avenue Baptist Church, Fort Smith, replaced Bill Bennett, pastor of Fort Smith First Baptist Church, to speak on, "What Can We Do?" Bryant challenged pastors and laypersons attending the meeting to understand what is happening in the convention and to understand why and how it is happening.

He told the audience the election of denominational officers and selection of members for the Committee on Boards had been manipulated by a small group for "15 of the last 20 years," but "when a more conservative group discovered how to do that, they began to cry 'foul.'"

Bryant insisted, however, doctrinal, rather than political, motives "are behind the new surge of conservatism in Southern Baptist leadership." That shift is due to "grassroots" Southern Baptists taking a stand for the inerrancy of the Scripture, he added.

Bryant also counseled the group to follow the advice of Jesus in relating to persons embroiled in the controversy. "These are our brethren. They know and love the Lord." Bryant pointed out, before quoting Jesus words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Bless them that curse you, do good to them that despitefully use you."

"I can't be very hard on anybody else when I look at my own human sinfulness in the light of the Lord Jesus Christ," Bryant confessed. "As he has forgiven us, we ought to forgive one another." He challenged the group to pray for revival at the 1985 Convention meeting in Dallas and called on them to "turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, overcome evil with good—and vote the proper ballot in June at the Southern Baptist Convention."

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SBC 'Liberal Drift' Charge  
Off Course, Dilday Says

By Mark Kelly

Baptist Press  
3/12/85

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (BP)—Charges the Southern Baptist Convention has "drifted toward liberalism" and stands in need of a theological purge of its institutions are wholly unfounded, the president of Southern Baptists' largest seminary said after a Feb. 28 meeting in Little Rock in which such allegations were leveled.

Russell Dilday, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, who attended the meeting, said he agreed with the contention of several speakers at the meeting that "Baptists believe in and expect their leaders to hold the Bible as the inerrant Word of God."

"I disagree with the statements, however, that our denomination is 'drifting away from the Bible,' and that our seminaries are teaching liberalism," Dilday declared. Casting himself as "fundamental" in beliefs, Dilday said, "I don't mind calling my position (on the Bible) inerrancy. I believe in the infallibility, the complete, perfect trustworthiness of Scripture."

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After agreeing the controversy originally arose over a concern for the "doctrinal integrity of the institutions," Dilday said he sees no evidence of a "drifting" convention and believes "the controversy no longer centers around 'conservative' or 'liberal' theological questions but on questions such as 'What kind of convention are we going to be?', 'What kind of leaders should we elect to guide us in the future?' and 'Who will be in control of our institutions and agencies?'"

Dilday said if, as Houston Judge Paul Pressler has said, the "only issue" in the SBC is whether or not "Scripture is entirely God's Word and does not make mistakes," then "the argument's over, because there's no debate about that in Southern Baptist life. I don't know anybody in the SBC who would not agree the Bible is the inspired, authoritative Word of God."

"Functional inerrancy" has been the position of Southwestern Seminary over the years and its faculty members have all signed an endorsement of the statement "the Bible is a perfect treasure of God, that it is truth without mixture of error," Dilday said.

"If the issue were the Bible, then I would think we would have had a strong endorsement of Southwestern as a leading spokesman for that position," he continued. "But we've not had that. In fact, the opposite is true. The attempt to takeover an institution is probably more strongly visible at Southwestern than any other agency."

Dilday also agreed with W.O. Vaught, pastor emeritus of Immanuel Baptist Church, Little Rock, who declared at the meeting faith must not surrender to reason.

"But I disagree with the implication seminary teachers have adopted a rationalistic theory of biblical interpretation and we have surrendered faith to reason," Dilday insisted. "That is not true."

Calling German higher criticism an outdated theory which "no longer has any serious impact on modern scholarly pursuits," Dilday defended his faculty as persons who approach the Bible "in a serious, scholarly way but never allow reason to displace faith. They still hold to the miraculous, the Mosaic sources for the Pentateuch and the historicity of the Old Testament."

Conservative scholars, however, "ought to use every legitimate method available to us to better understand the Word of God," Dilday added. In many cases, some tools of higher criticism may be used "to help us understand the text and the cultural and historical settings and know what the Lord is saying to us from his Word," he said.

Dilday also answered another charge by Pressler that he (Dilday) had called premillennialism (the belief in Jesus' return to earth prior to his 1,000 year reign) a heresy. Dilday called his own position "historical premillennialism," as opposed to "dispensational premillennialism," which divides history into seven time periods and describes multiple plans of salvation. The latter view, Dilday said, conflicts with Baptist doctrines of the church, salvation and the people of God.

Regarding the charge leveled at the meeting that he was an active participant in "an open, organized campaign to unseat the president of the convention," Dilday said he has "taken a clear stand. I do not favor a political solution to the political takeover I see already facing the convention."

Although some groups have arisen which have taken an "organized, political form," Dilday said he feels "there are better ways of meeting the challenge on a spontaneous level of persuasion and information."

And though he has "very personal convictions about the kind of leaders we ought to have," Dilday vowed, "I will not be a part of telling anyone else how to vote."

"My activity is to have as many churches as possible with as many messengers as possible participating in the decision-making process" at the convention in Dallas, he said. No messengers should be told how to vote but should simply be "informed, open, prayerful and willing to follow the Holy Spirit's leadership."

Dilday said the Little Rock meeting was "obviously an attempt to suggest one kind of vote and even imply if you voted contrary to that position you were voting conservatism out and would be a party to seeing our convention go down to liberalism."

Instead of seeing the "unprecedented attacks" on the SBC president envisioned by one speaker, Dilday said he sees "expressions of great concern about the leadership qualifications of our elected leaders, that they ought to be not only people who are Bible-believing conservatives in their theological stance and evangelistic in missionary activity but people who have a proven track record of support for convention causes and agencies."

Dilday said although each church has the right to determine its own level of support for Southern Baptist causes, he believes "it has been pointed out very clearly" the current convention president (Charles Stanley of First Baptist Church in Atlanta) and his church have not been very involved in associational, state or SBC mission programs.

Dilday also objected to the idea that efforts are being made to "unseat" the current SBC president. Though SBC bylaws allow for presidents to serve two terms, they are also clear that each year a "carefully stated choice" is to be made by messengers as to who should be president, Dilday said.

"It's not a matter of unseating anybody," Dilday said. "I don't think there are any provisions in our bylaws for unseating or impeaching a president. But the bylaws do give a very solemn responsibility to the messengers each year to decide at that point in our history who ought to be president."

Dilday also said several persons approached him after the Feb. 28 meeting to ask whether he had used Cooperative Program funds to cover his expenses for the meeting.

Although he believes a legitimate case might be made for the use of regular seminary travel funds, Dilday informed those persons his travel expenses for such meetings are covered by donations from persons designated for that purpose.

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(Mark Kelly is a staff writer for the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine.)

Baptist Missionary Doctor  
Negotiating Cambodia Entry

By Marty Croll

Baptist Press  
3/12/85

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (BP)—A Christian doctor who lived and worked in Cambodia from 1980-83 is negotiating reentry into that nation as the first Southern Baptist missionary there.

Marvin Raley, a pediatrician, has met with several top officials of the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime in Phnom Penh to discuss representing the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in two possible works of compassion.

Cambodia urgently needs seed rice for its food-producing provinces, which have been ravaged by flood, drought and 10 years of bloodshed, Raley said. If the Foreign Mission Board can secure the needed type of rice and find an open channel into the nation, Raley could be in Cambodia to help distribute about 1,100 tons of it in time for this spring's rain.

A longer-term service Raley might provide is medical treatment for mothers and children and health care education for the Khmer people. He possibly will shuttle in and out of Cambodia during the next few years to set up health care projects as he and his family learn to speak the Khmer language in another country.

"Our intentions are clear," said Raley, 37. "We hope by helping the Khmer people (Cambodians) we can share God's love at a time when they desperately need it to transcend the hopelessness of their lives."

Raley, a Texan, and his wife, Judy, the daughter of missionaries in Venezuela, were appointed Southern Baptist foreign missionaries last October.

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They and their two children began an eight-week orientation session Feb. 8 at the Cauthen Missionary Learning Center in Rockville, Va.

Raley went into orientation after returning from a week-long survey trip in January to Phnom Penh and the surrounding countryside. He was one of three members of a task force sponsored by the politically non-aligned, U.S.-based Indochina Project of the Center for International Policy. In Phnom Penh he met with government foreign ministry and health officials, the governor of Prey Veng Province and Cambodia's director of all international agencies. In mid-February he reported his findings to private volunteer organizations at Wingspread, a conference center near Racine, Wis.

Raley's first experience with Khmer people, a six-week emergency trip in the Foreign Mission Board's effort to help refugees in 1979, came after what he terms a "shake-you-loose-at-the-seams renewal experience."

During a period of soul-searching in the late 1970s he began to reset his priorities. In 1979 a friend confronted him in an offhand way with the needs of the stream of Cambodian refugees that had begun pouring over the Thai border during military and political upheaval beginning in 1975. Raley sensed a need to go and led a Southern Baptist emergency medical team of five doctors and three nurses to the border refugee camps.

Raley and his wife later applied for missionary service with Southern Baptists. But since the denomination maintained no presence in Cambodia, he accepted an offer in 1980 to work for World Vision International as medical director for Cambodian work and project director for developing the country's only pediatric hospital.

Raley worked with Cambodians to help organize the National Children's Hospital, staffed in the beginning by about 80 untrained people and seven nurses. Before he left in 1983, the Cambodian staff and a handful of expatriates had recorded some 300,000 outpatient visits and 7,000 admissions. Raley had trained eight pediatric nurse practitioners, five doctors and about 130 medical students.

"There is no place in the health sector in Cambodia where there are not enormous needs," said Raley. And since the United Nations can offer no extensive help to a non-member country, Cambodia has received very little outside help, he added.

"In the villages of Prey Veng Province, I suspect one-fourth of the children under eight years old whom I saw (on the survey trip) may not be there when I go back in six months unless something is done," he said. "Nearly all the children, regardless of age, are malnourished."

Raley sees Southern Baptists poised at the edge of an opportunity to bring a ministry of encouragement to Cambodians. "If you're doing a positive work that's making a difference, then suddenly you're supplying hope that a lot of people buy into because it's their only source of hope. And when you can help the Khmer do that work themselves then you're not only giving them hope, but you're fostering the return of their self-esteem."

A thousand years ago the Khmer people ruled an advanced kingdom reaching throughout Indochina. But in 1975 the Khmer Rouge, a group of communist revolutionaries within the country, took control and began destroying ties to that rich history and executing the nation's established cultural leaders.

By the time Vietnam forced the Khmer Rouge out of power in 1979, what remained of Cambodia was in total upheaval. U.S. State Department estimates place the number who died during the rule of the Khmer Rouge at one million or more; others estimate up to two million died.

"You're talking about a culture that has had tremendous pride historically—and now that's down the tube. These people have suffered every possible blow to self-esteem," Raley said. "So when you help them do a good work and they look at it and see it's a good work, the advantages go far beyond simply rendering health care to a child."

"It's a whole matter of the reconstruction of a civilization—returning self esteem to a civilization. There is tremendous long-range benefit that goes beyond what's apparent."

During college Raley sensed a clear need to do mission work after deciding during his childhood he would help people. But by his early 30s he'd become troubled in his relationship with his Creator.

He had accomplished in two years every goal of an eight-year plan he had laid out for his life. His salary had quadrupled and he'd gone from an instructor to an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine-Columbia. A recent promotion had put him in charge of the university hospital's pediatric and adolescent outpatient clinics. He had moved his family into a home overlooking a lake in an upper-middle class neighborhood. But worldly success brought no peace.

At one point he struggled for weeks to reopen communication with God but felt he was getting nowhere. "On the nights that I wasn't on call I would put the kids to bed at 9 o'clock and go to the room downstairs and stay there sometimes until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning trying to pray. I felt that desperate, pulled apart."

His first trip to Cambodia came after God used this time to restore his spiritual strength, Raley explained.

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From 'Nurse Casey'  
To 'Dr.' Elliot

By Phil Royce

Baptist Press  
3/12/85

MURFREESBORO, N.C. (BP)—During the height of her acting career in New York City, Joyce Elliot was "Nurse Casey" on the daytime soap opera "Search for Tomorrow."

Elliot also appeared often in "The Secret Storm," another daytime soap, as well as numerous commercials promoting products ranging from coffee to detergents.

Today, however, she has traded her acting career for that of a housewife and college professor. From the hustle of New York to the quiet atmosphere of tiny Sunbury, N.C., Elliot now teaches voice and diction at Chowan College, a junior college in Murfreesboro supported by the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

Elliot, who has been at Chowan since 1984, had decided acting was no longer for her 10 years before. "Ten years ago my life changed when I decided acting was not what I wanted anymore. I began to realize acting was a self-indulgent life. I had to stay at 114 pounds. My hair and nails had to be just right. It looks glamorous to the outsider, but you feel like you're just a commodity."

In 1974 she entered the doctoral program at Teachers College, Columbia University, where she earned the Ed.D. in gerontology and theater.

While living in New York she became involved with the Social Action and Urban Involvement Committee of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church which worked with drug addicts, prison ministries, senior citizens and others. She also worked with Project FIND, an organization which sponsored coffeeshouses "for old people who used to just sit around the bus station."

Elliot also worked with theater projects for older adults and later taught drama in New York, Pennsylvania and Texas. She moved to North Carolina in 1978 when she married Bedford Horton Brown "who had deep roots in the area."

Elliot has not given up acting completely. She continues to be involved in drama in the local community as well as on campus. She developed community theater for area senior citizens and youth and recently appeared in the Chowan Players' production of the Broadway play "You Can't Take It With You."

The difference today, however, is her priorities. "I still think of myself as an actress, but acting is no longer number one in my life. A member of the Episcopal church, she cited her "Christian faith, husband and teaching" as her main concerns.

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(Phil Royce is director of college relations for Chowan College.)



Expelled Family Sues  
Church For \$2.5 Million

By Marv Knox

SUNSET, La. (BP)—A \$2.5 million lawsuit filed against First Baptist Church of Sunset, La., by a family which was expelled from the congregation has implications in three areas: the ecclesiastical authority of a congregation to discipline its members, a pastor's responsibility in regard to confidential information entrusted to him and the government's authority to seize documents from a church.

The suit was filed Feb. 22 in district court in Opelousas, La.

Plaintiffs in the lawsuit are Lloyd Benjamin Ruth, Taye Carter Ruth and their 16-year-old daughter. Defendants are First Baptist Church of Sunset and Pastor William M. Hill Jr.

The suit contends that in a meeting of the congregation on Wednesday evening, Jan. 9, Hill made accusations concerning the girl's character and sexual activities. It also maintains the pastor made the remarks while knowing they were false.

The suit also claims the girl's privacy was invaded by the accusations and claims publicizing such charges is "not of legitimate concern" to the congregation or the public.

A petition presents only the plaintiffs' positions in a legal case; the defendants have not stated their position formally yet by filing an answer to the plaintiffs' petitions.

Contacted by the Louisiana Baptist Message (the newsjournal of the Louisiana Baptist Convention), Hill denied both accusations of defamation and invasion of privacy. The suit is a "threat to Baptist polity" (or method of self-government), he contended, noting it questions "the right of a congregational church to discipline its members."

Also in contention in the case is the temporary seizure and copying of the church's membership records, business meeting minutes and deacons' meeting minutes dating back to last fall, other church papers and the receipt of the church's checking and savings account numbers.

Under court order, those documents were taken Feb. 22 by the Ruths' attorney, Chris Goudeau of Opelousas, two St. Landry Parish sheriff's deputies and the Sunset chief of police.

The documents were photocopied and returned early the next week.

However, Hill has protested the seizure of church documents by the court, maintaining the action "violated the civil rights" of the congregation and it also "violated the principle of separation of church and state."

District Judge Joseph LaHaye has sealed the documents pending a hearing on the matter, tentatively set for later this month.

Attorney Goudeau told the Baptist Message there was no violation of law or rights in receiving and copying the documents.

"The Code of Civil Procedure (1492) provides a party may obtain a court order...to inspect and copy certain documents," he said, noting he did not "seize" the documents but "removed (them) for duplication."

"I just don't see...where a church involved in litigation has any rights superior to any other corporation involved in litigation," he added.

However, the church voted Feb. 28 to permit its attorneys, F. Jean Pharis and Fred Pharis of Alexandria, La., to file a suit on behalf of the church in regard to alleged violations of its civil rights.

Fred Pharis said in an interview the procedure used in obtaining the documents was "totally without authority of law and a violation of the (United States and Louisiana) constitutions."

"There is no statutory authority for removal of documents for any entity which is amenable to a suit," he said.

Concerning the defamation suit filed by the Ruths, Pharis noted in "case law from the U.S. Supreme Court on down, ...traditionally, courts have declined to take part in judging actions of ecclesiastical bodies to determine if those actions are pertinent."

"It is our opinion that the Constitution guarantees separation (of church and state), ...and courts have ruled that constitutional and practical considerations prevent them from overriding the highest authority" within a church, he said. "And in the Southern Baptist Convention, we know that the local church is the highest authority."

Hill vowed he and the church "will see this thing through to the end and set a precedent." The Ruth family declined to discuss the case, referring all contact to their attorney, Goudeau.

The \$2.5 million suit they filed seeks \$1.5 million for the girl for defamation, invasion of privacy, humiliation, emotional pain and distress.

The father seeks \$650,000 in damages because he lost his deacon's post; was stripped of church membership and allegedly threatened with arrest if he returned; because of lost income and trade, and embarrassment, humiliation and emotional distress.

The mother seeks \$350,000 for embarrassment, humiliation and distress.

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