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May 28, 1987

87-83

Attorneys Argue  
SBC Lawsuit Appeal

By Dan Martin

ATLANTA (BP)—The appeal of a lawsuit against the Southern Baptist Convention and its Executive Committee was argued at the 11th U.S. Court of Appeals May 27.

The appeal, which has been pending for more than a year, concerns a lawsuit filed Dec. 5, 1985, by four messengers to the 1985 annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention who said their rights had been violated by rulings made concerning the election of the 1986 Committee on Boards, Commissions and Standing Committees.

Robert S. and Julia Crowder of Birmingham, Ala.; Henry Cooper of Windsor, Mo.; and H. Allen McCartney of Vero Beach, Fla., had asked the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia to interpret SBC bylaws, direct the SBC to comply with that interpretation and to vacate the 1986 Committee on Boards.

U.S. District Judge Robert Hall decided the suit in favor of the SBC, ruling May 5, 1986, that federal courts have no jurisdiction over the internal affairs of religious bodies and that the First Amendment shields matters of church governance, polity and administration from civil jurisdiction.

He declined to go into the "merits of the case," noting the question of whether the rulings "were correct or patently incorrect is irrelevant because a decision as to validity of (the) rulings would involve this court in the internal affairs of the Southern Baptist Convention, a position the court cannot assume."

After Hall's ruling, the Crowders, Cooper and McCartney appealed the decision to the 11th Court of Appeals, arguing that Hall had erred in his decision and could have decided the matter of bylaw interpretation under "neutral principles of law" without involving the court in the free exercise of religion.

During the May 27 arguments, attorneys for the opposing sides — arguing before a three judge panel — staked out the case on similar grounds.

Perry E. Pearce, an associate to former U.S. Attorney General Griffin Bell in the Atlanta lawfirm of King and Spalding, which represents the SBC, argued the appeals court "should affirm the lower court decision that the First Amendment prohibits courts from involvement in internal church affairs."

Jane F. Vehko, an associate with the Atlanta lawfirm of Bondurant, Mixson and Elmore, said the district court had made an "overbroad" interpretation of the First Amendment and asked that the case be remanded to the district court for a rehearing on the merits of the case.

The appeals court panel which heard the appeal was composed of the youngest judge, the oldest judge and the only woman judge among the 12 active and five senior judges on the 11th Court of Appeals, which handles appeals from Alabama, Georgia and Florida. Phyllis Kravitch, 66, presided. She has been a member of the appeals court since being appointed by former President Jimmy Carter in 1979. Other judges were Elbert P. Tuttle, 89, who has served as an appeals court judge since 1954, when he was appointed by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Larry Edmondson, 39, who was appointed to the bench in June of 1986 by President Ronald Reagan.

The panel did not announce when it will render a decision, but court observers indicate a conclusion to the suit should be made within the next 90 to 120 days — by August or September.

'Spectacular' Fire Destroys  
Sanctuary of Missouri Church

By Bob Terry

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (BP)—A spectacular two-alarm fire destroyed the sanctuary and the top floor of the adjoining administrative building of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo., on May 24.

More than 250 people were attending the church's Sunday evening worship service when the fire was discovered about 7:25. It raged for more than six hours before fire fighters from Jefferson City, Columbia and Boone County could bring it under control.

The flames could be seen for miles around the capital city and drew hundreds of spectators. Jefferson City fire Chief Robert Renick described the blaze as "the most expensive fire in the history of Jefferson City." He said his men had never fought a more difficult fire.

Fire marshals said the fire started beneath the choir loft in the 1,200-seat auditorium. The \$3 million auditorium facility, dedicated in October 1985, was among the newest and largest Missouri Baptist worship facilities. The facility had been the site of the statewide Sunday school convention, the 1987 Missouri Woman's Missionary Union annual meeting and the November 1986 memorial service for former Missouri Baptist Executive Director Rheubin L. South.

Cause of the fire was listed as accidental, although fire officials refused to rule out faulty electrical wiring. Renick said the fire had probably been burning at least 30 minutes before it was discovered. He explained that worshipers would not have noticed the fire because the air flow "created a natural chimney effect" which took the blaze upward, where it spread between the sanctuary's ceiling and roof.

Workers from the Union Pacific railroad, located about a block from the church, noticed a thick, black pillar of smoke coming from the church roof and called an emergency number to report the fire. A policeman who was passing the church at the time of the report entered the building to order an evacuation. However, before the message could be conveyed to pastor G. Nelson Duke, the smoke alarms in the building sounded and the congregation immediately evacuated the building without incident.

Several worshipers said they first thought it was a false alarm. But once outside, the heavy column of smoke proved an omen of things to come.

Associate Pastor Don Gundy said flames broke into the sanctuary within minutes of the evacuation. He recounted how he was leading firemen to the top floor of the building when fire shattered the large stained glass windows above the choir area, showering the auditorium with broken glass and sending fingers of fire across the ceiling.

"That was less than five minutes from the time the alarm sounded," he said. "I think we were very fortunate that no one was hurt."

Renick said firemen battled the blaze from inside the church for more than half an hour. When they were unable to contain the blaze, they were ordered out of the building. Hundreds of feet of hose and other equipment had to be abandoned when the ceiling started falling.

"It was close," Renick said of the fire fighters' evacuation. "The ceiling fell right behind them as they came out."

Once the fire fighters were out of the building, officials used water cannons and other equipment to battle the blaze from the roof down. Renick said they were hindered by the height and massiveness of the auditorium and the inaccessibility of the fire.

Firemen were able to keep the fire out of the church's adjoining four-story educational building, but they could not keep it off the administrative building roof. About midnight, the steel beams in the administrative building buckled from the heat and collapsed, sending a fireball hundreds of feet into the air. However, fire fighters were able to contain the blaze to the top floor of the attached three-story building.

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For a time officials feared the walls of the auditorium would give way, but they did not. The extent of structural damage to the walls of both the auditorium building and the administrative building is yet to be determined.

In addition to losses from the fire, the church complex suffered extensive water damage. Water ruined musical instruments, carpets, furnishings, books and other supplies in the lower floors of the auditorium building. Similar losses occurred in the administrative building.

Church members were able to salvage most of the music library, many church records and the pastor's personal library from the administrative building. Losses were minimized when church members arranged to have paper records flash frozen and freeze dried to remove the moisture.

In all three buildings, electrical systems were destroyed and ceilings and floors were extensively damaged.

The greatest water damage may have occurred in the educational building, away from the fire. Officials fear the heavy water flow may have broken seals which safeguarded asbestos put on the building when it was constructed in 1958.

Ceilings have fallen on every floor of the four-story structure, officials noted. They are awaiting a report from an engineering firm to determine if there is an asbestos problem. In the meantime, the educational building has been sealed off as have the auditorium and administrative buildings.

A temporary office complex has been set up in a church-owned house which adjoins the church complex. The church's family life center will be converted into a worship center for use while the buildings are rebuilt. The family life center escaped damage because it is not connected to the other buildings.

The church's daycare program, which serves 150 children, will be housed temporarily at Concord Baptist Church in Jefferson City, while determinations are made about the future of existing buildings.

The church plans to continue its programs. Its two worship services will be held on Sunday as usual. Sunday school will be rearranged, with all adults meeting together in the worship center. Youth and children will meet in the Missouri Baptist Convention building located two blocks from the church. Preschoolers will meet in the worship center also.

"It isn't what we would like," said Duke. "But at least we will be able to meet together and worship together. Our people need that."

Duke said the fire had produced an outpouring of help from neighboring churches as well as from church members: "I don't know when I have seen so many people voluntarily come to work as we had here the day after the fire. When this is all over, we are going to be closer to the Lord and closer to each other."

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James Jordan Elected  
Shorter College President

Baptist Press  
5/28/87

ROME, Ga. (BP)—James D. Jordan, president of North Greenville College in Tigerville, S.C., since 1981, has been elected president of Shorter College in Rome, Ga.

Jordan, 54, was recommended unanimously to the Shorter board of trustees by its presidential search committee, following review of 58 applicants and on-campus visits of five finalists.

Jordan will succeed George Balentine, who accepted the pastorate of Hayes Barton Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., last October, following four years at Shorter.

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Jordan taught at Georgia Southern College in Statesboro for 12 years before going to North Greenville College. He also taught at Mars Hill College in Mars Hill, N.C., and the Oxford College of Emory University in Atlanta.

The native of Charleston, S.C., holds a bachelor of arts degree from Furman University, a bachelor of divinity degree from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and a doctor of philosophy degree in church history from Duke University. He studied on a Fulbright Scholarship at the University of Strasbourg in France during 1955-56.

He was ordained to the ministry in 1956 by Ashley River Baptist Church in Charleston and was pastor to the Calvary Baptist Church in Newton, N.C., while studying at Southeastern seminary.

North Greenville College is affiliated with the South Carolina Baptist Convention. Shorter College is affiliated with the Baptist Convention of the State of Georgia.

Jordan is married to the former Barbara Jean Watts of Lugoff, S.C., and they have two children, Jean Denise and James Daniel, III.

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Evangelism Should Bind  
Baptists, Fuller Says

Baptist Press  
5/28/87

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)—A commitment to evangelism should be what holds Southern Baptists together, Charles Fuller told Baptist associational leaders meeting at Ridgecrest (N.C.) Conference Center May 11-13.

Fuller, pastor of First Baptist Church of Roanoke, Va. and chairman of the Southern Baptist Peace Committee, addressed the associational leaders one week after the first Southern Baptist Conference on Biblical Inerrancy held at the same location, where scholars gathered to discuss and debate the issue dividing Southern Baptists.

Southern Baptists' commitment to evangelism should be their main business, although their beliefs are very important, said Fuller in reference to the eight-year controversy in SBC life.

"Some of us have been so involved in political matters in the denomination that we ought to be embarrassed," added Fuller, calling on associational leaders to make a fresh commitment to their ministry.

"Our primary goal should be winning the lost," or non-Christians, to faith, he said.

Fuller added Southern Baptists should not confuse "our way as being the only way" when carrying out the tasks of missions and evangelism.

"Evangelism and missions," he added, "is not a style or method but an assignment. Preaching is not the only way to do evangelism."

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Faith Mixes With Sorrow For  
Families Of Stark Victims

By Greg Warner

Baptist Press  
5/28/87

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)—Barbara Kiser didn't waste any time forgiving the Iraqi fighter pilot who killed her husband. One day after Steve Kiser and 36 other crewmen on the USS Stark were killed by an Iraqi missile, Kiser sent a letter of forgiveness to the pilot who mistakenly fired at the Navy ship.

The letter was to be delivered to an official of Iraq's government, said Nevin Alwine, pastor of San Pablo Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., where the Kisers are members.

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Included with the letter is a copy of the New Testament in Arabic in which Mrs. Kiser marked Christ's words on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) Although the widow has not talked with reporters since the May 17 tragedy, she has called Alwine from the Persian Gulf every day since the attack to assure church members she is coping well. Her calls have "greatly comforted" the congregation, the pastor said.

For six weeks Mrs. Barbara Kiser and her 5-year-old son, John, have been in Bahrain, an island nation in the Persian Gulf, where the Stark frequently docked during its planned six-month tour of duty. The young family often followed Steve Kiser, an electronics mate, overseas in order to spend as much time with him as possible.

The morning of the deadly attack, which has been labeled accidental by the U.S. and Iraqi governments, Kiser and her son waved good-bye to their husband and father as the guided-missile frigate left Bahrain's port. Alwine, who said he has been inspired by the widow's handling of the tragedy, said Mrs. Kiser has the strongest faith of any woman in San Pablo Baptist Church. "If you want to see what a Christian is really like, look at Barbara," he said.

When Mrs. Kiser told Alwine her husband had been "called home" to heaven, she said, "Rev, God doesn't make mistakes." Although she would not presume to explain everyone's loss that way, Alwine said, she is confident God can use the tragedy for good.

"As a matter of fact, Steve's dad, who has been an agnostic all his life, became a Christian three nights ago," the pastor said. The elder Kisers live in Elkhart, Ind.

Before his death, Steve Kiser tape-recorded a devotional to send to his parents. Mrs. Kiser, who had not yet mailed the tape, played it during a memorial service aboard the Stark a few days after the attack.

The San Pablo congregation planned to hold a memorial service for the 36-year-old sailor after Barbara Kiser returned with his body. The 300-member church is located near Mayport Naval Station, home port for the Stark.

The Kisers are among several Baptist families in the Jacksonville area who were deeply affected by the Stark tragedy.

Randy Pierce, 28, never saw his four-week-old son before the sailor died aboard the Stark. His 21-year-old wife, Diana, a member of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville Beach, was recognized as the youngest mother in the church on Mother's Day. Pierce, a data systems technician on the Stark, and his wife also have a three-year-old daughter.

Capt. Glenn Brindel, 43, skipper of the crippled ship, is a member of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville. Brindel has been deeply troubled over the deaths, friends said.

Navy families play a significant role in many churches in and around Jacksonville, which hosts three naval bases. Pastor Alwine conducted a service aboard the Stark with Navy Chap. Robert Lewis before the ship left Jacksonville in February.

Lewis, a chaplain for several smaller ships in the Mayport-based Practical Destroyer Squadron, had served aboard the Stark and knew many of the 220 crewmen, including Steve Kiser. A Methodist who attends San Pablo Baptist Church regularly, Lewis hosted the Kisers for dinner in his home before the ship left port.

"This hit me particularly hard," Lewis said. "I see the faces of the people I ministered to. I'm not concerned about Steve, because he's with the Lord, but the others I'm not so sure about." Because of progress he had made ministering to the Stark's crew, Lewis said he considered going with the ship on its Persian Gulf tour until one Stark crewman encouraged him to stay home. The crewman was killed.

"But for the grace of God, I could have been there," Lewis said. Lewis is scheduled to accompany another group of ships to the Persian Gulf in a couple weeks. Because of the grief felt among seamen on other Navy vessels, particularly in the Persian Gulf, the chaplain has asked to stay with the ships longer than normal.

"Through all of this, the Lord is going to get the glory," Lewis said. "It hasn't whipped us, because he is still on the throne."

Lewis was one of three or four chaplains who waited with the families of Stark crew members in a community center on the Mayport base while the list of survivors came in. Although most received good news, Lewis had to tell the wife of Joseph Watson, 25, that her husband was not on the list, but was reported missing.

Lewis waited with Diane Watson for an hour until a Navy casualty-control officer arrived with official word of the sailor's death. But the officer also needed help, Lewis recalled, "He said, Chaplain, I can't tell her. You're going to have to do it." Chap. Franklin Johnson, a Navy lieutenant stationed at Jacksonville's Naval Air Station, also had to deliver a death message to a crewman's family. The wife had suspected the news and took it calmly, Johnson said, "but there's still that blow."

Other chaplains from beyond Mayport helped in the painful notification process, Johnson said, so that each was asked to make only one call and could try to establish a pastoral relationship with that family.

Johnson, a Titusville, Fla., native who attends Crown Point Baptist Chapel in Jacksonville, said even though military families are aware of the dangers, "it doesn't make it any easier, because a loss is a loss."

One of the families' struggles is trying to find a reason for the deaths, Johnson said, "particularly in this case where it is such a tragic accident."

Even Stark crewmen who survived have to deal with their unique grief, Johnson said. One sailor who sought counsel from the chaplain had been transferred off the ship two hours before the Iraqi missile exploded in the Stark's sleeping quarters.

"Everybody in his section was killed, and if he had been there he would have been killed," Johnson said. The seaman was deeply shaken, Johnson said, "but he had a very profound sense that there was a reason he was spared."

While 1,100 Navy personnel and families joined President Ronald Reagan in a nationally televised memorial service at Mayport Naval Station May 22, Johnson helped lead a smaller simultaneous service for Jacksonville residents near city hall.

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Mother Continues Hoping  
For Daughter's Release

By Jerilynn Armstrong

Baptist Press  
5/28/87

DALLAS (BP)--The Mozambiquean right-wing rebels have announced they will free seven captured foreigners, including Southern Baptist Kindra Bryan of Texas, seized from a mission farm in a central province of Mozambique.

The group known as the Mozambiquean National Resistance stated May 20 in Lisbon, Spain, the seven whites would be freed with the help of international humanitarian organizations but did not specify when they would be released.

Bryan's mother, Mary Jo Free of College Station, Texas, said in a telephone interview May 27 that she had been assured her daughter was all right and was hopeful that she would soon be released.

"I am very, very grateful for all the prayers and concern for Kindra," Free said. She also requested people to "continue to pray for Kindra's safe release."

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