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89-17

Baker, CLC trustees
resolve 'differences'

By Dan Martin

N-10

NASHVILLE (BP)--After a 25-minute discussion, members of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission concluded "all outstanding differences between the commission and Dr. Larry Baker arising out of his service and resignation as executive director-treasurer."

During a called semi-annual board meeting in Nashville, Jan. 30-31, commissioners agreed to accept payment of \$6,635.27 from Baker and signed a mutual release that prevents either party from taking legal action against the other.

About five of 23 commissioners present voted against the agreement. Although the action was taken on a voice vote, five trustees voted minutes earlier against ending discussion.

The 25-minute meeting contrasted with the September 1988 annual meeting, when trustees, staff and convention attorney James P. Guenther of Nashville, met for more than five hours behind closed doors.

At the time, they declined to divulge the topic of the executive session, but in the January meeting, they referred to spending the time discussing Baker's tenure as executive.

Commission leaders and Baker said they hope the action ends the controversy, which marked Baker's 16-month tenure at the agency. It began with his selection to replace Foy D. Valentine as head of the Southern Baptist social and moral concerns agency.

Primary criticism centered on Baker's views on abortion, capital punishment and the role of women in the church.

Baker was elected by a divided commission, accepting the call on a 16-13 vote in January, 1987. In September 1987, he survived an effort to dismiss him on a 15-15 vote.

Baker resigned June 10, 1988, accepting a severance pay package of \$41,835.45 and title to a 1984 Oldsmobile automobile. He became pastor of First Baptist Church of Pineville, La.

The controversy continued after his leaving, as members of the six-person CLC executive committee met several times regarding Baker's performance as executive.

Part of the conflict was resolved in September 1988, when Baker returned \$2,808, to the commission, and requested they sign a one-way release protecting him from any possible legal action.

In briefing the commissioners on the action, attorney Guenther said the \$2,808 had been paid Baker when he left in June. "What the \$2,808 represented was not exactly clear, but memorandums listed it as being for 'services rendered'," Guenther said.

The controversy continued following the September board meeting and concerned Baker's salary during his last year at the CLC. It apparently has been resolved by the signing of the release and Baker's provision of a money order for \$6,635.27. In all, Baker has returned \$9,443 to the CLC.

In a statement Baker made available to Baptist Press, the former executive said questions arose about the "appropriateness of a salary adjustment which I had received in conjunction with my six-month anniversary as executive director."

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Baker said he had been told it was commission policy to automatically increase one grade step upon completion of six months employment. He authorized his salary to increase from step one to step two.

He added he has explained his rationale for giving himself the salary increase, but said the CLC's six-member executive committee has "refused to accept the explanation of the action and its appropriateness. Consequently, they have continued to insist that I reimburse the commission for the purported overpayment."

Guenther told commissioners the executive committee has been negotiating since the last board meeting in an attempt to resolve the controversy. He added the audit, conducted after the 1987-88 fiscal year which ended Sept. 30, "had determined \$6,635.27 as the amount by which Dr. Baker was overpaid during his tenure. The salary was paid for step two when the commission had only authorized step one."

The attorney told trustees that under the mutual release, the "payment in no way should be interpreted as an admission of guilt, wrongdoing or the payment of a just debt." The release, he said, specifies that the "payment is made to resolve a controversy"

In his statement made available to Baptist Press, Baker said:

"During December 1988, I concluded that I would reimburse the commission for the purported overpayment and that I would enter into a mutual release with the CLC. I have taken these two actions as means of bringing to cloture an extremely painful era in my life and ministry

"In my view, I did not owe any money to the CLC"

The statement, which was given to Baptist Press by Commissioner Richard Elkins, a land developer from Albuquerque, N.M., concluded:

"My family has lived through enough pain to last beyond a lifetime. The money is less important than the well-being of my loved ones and my own peace of mind.

"It is time for me to invest my energies in my God-given ministry without the burden of an unrelenting assault by adversaries. God's gift of life is too short and spiritual energies too precious to squander them in conflict with these foes.

"In bringing this struggle to an end, I have said, 'No more!' to a tide of hostility that has tried to engulf and destroy me."

Most of the discussion by commissioners concerned the release. Chairman Joe Atchison, a director of Baptist associational missions in Rogers, Ark., said the idea of a release had been injected when Baker proposed a one-way release in September. He said Guenther recommended the commission execute a mutual release, "drawn as broadly and carefully as possible."

Guenther said: "One of the things that seems to me to be significantly of value is that the commission will be able to know this relationship and the controversy surrounding it are at an end. That is an emotional advantage and I think a legal advantage."

While he said he does not believe Baker has "any potential cause of action" to sue the commission or its trustees, the attorney said the release is "important to individual trustees in that you have the protection" of the document.

One trustee, Hal Lane, pastor of Eutawville (S.C.) Baptist Church, and a member of the executive committee, told fellow commissioners he supports the action.

"This is a good way to put this in the past forever," he said.

Another trustee, Gary Crum, a professor of health sciences from Washington, told Baptist Press he voted against the action.

"The reason I was against it was that I think the \$6,000 was part of a just debt. That statement said it wasn't. To me, it was a matter of truthfulness," he said.

Christian life trustees
issue statement on race

By Dan Martin

N-100

NASHVILLE (BP)--A seven-point resolution calling for opposition to racism "whenever and wherever it occurs" has been adopted without dissent by trustees of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

The resolution, adopted during the commission's Jan. 30-31 semi-annual meeting in Nashville, ends the CLC's "silence" on race, according to Chairman Joe Atchison, a director of Baptist associational missions from Rogers, Ark.

Controversy arose after the commission's September 1988 annual meeting, when commissioner Curtis W. Caine Sr., a medical doctor from Jackson, Miss., made an improptu speech in which he called slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. a fraud, and said apartheid in South Africa "was beneficial ... because it meant separate development."

The comments, which went unanswered in the September meeting, have caused criticism to be directed at the commission for its silence and at Caine for his views. Calls also have been made for Caine's resignation as a trustee.

Atchison said the board had been criticised "for our silence. Well, we have responded from our silence by adopting this statement."

The series of seven resolutions was proposed by Richard Land, executive director-treasurer of the commission, who was elected shortly before Caine's statement in September.

Land proposed the statement to a recent CLC-sponsored race relations conference, held in commemoration of King's birthday in Nashville. The statement then was proposed to the January CLC meeting by the commission's six-member executive committee, who reported "wholehearted and unanimous" support.

When Atchison took the vote on the matter, he at first announced the acceptance had been "unanimous," but Caine waved his hand at the chairman.

Atchison asked if Caine wished to have an opposing vote recorded, but the physician said, "No. No."

Atchison then announced the resolutions had been adopted "without opposition."

After the vote, commissioner Richard Elkins, a land developer from Albuquerque, N.M., said he finds it "difficult to understand why someone who feels as strongly as he (Caine) does can serve on a commission which has responsibility for race relations."

When he attempted to ask Caine to explain his position, Atchison ruled Elkins out of order.

Atchison said the position of the commission had been spelled out in the resolution. "It should be clear to anyone where we stand on the race issue," he said.

Following the meeting, Elkins, who did not attend the September meeting, said he "wanted to hear why he (Caine) could serve on this commission," and added, "I was concerned about what was said and the fact that nothing was said at the board meeting to repudiate what was said."

Of the resolution, Elkins said he believes it "was proper and speaks very plainly that the SBC does not stand for racism."

Atchison noted he is pleased because the action "does not deal with any personality; it deals with the issue."

Caine, when asked to comment, declined to make any response.

Land proposed the resolution as a series of challenges to Southern Baptists during the mid-January race relations conference, which drew 193 black and white participants.

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In it he called on Southern Baptists "to resolve to stand publicly and privately for racial justice and equality and to speak out against racism whenever and wherever it occurs."

He also called on Southern Baptists "to urge their agencies and institutions to seek diligently to bring about greater African-American representation at every level of Southern Baptist institutional life."

He called on Southern Baptists to reach across racial boundaries, and to observe Race Relations Sunday.

Another challenge called on Southern Baptists "to repent of past bigotry and to pray for and minister to those still within its deadly clutches, either as persecuted or persecutor."

A final challenge was to call on Southern Baptists "out of our own incessant past experience with, and intermittent present experience with, racism, to witness at home and abroad to its devastating impact on both its victims, the persecuted and the persecutor."

He pledged, "As Southern Baptists, we have not always stood for these things, but God has, his Word has, and with his help, we do now and we shall in the future."

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Baptists turn 'crack house'
into city's 1st black mission

By Greg Warner

F-10
(1/10)

Baptist Press
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BOYNTON BEACH, Fla. (BP)--Imagine the surprise of local residents when they found out the "crack house" down the street that harbored neighborhood drug users belonged to a church.

Abandoned by its owner for two years, the small, concrete-block house in Boynton Beach, Fla., had become the target of vandals and a haven for crack and cocaine users who hid inside its dilapidated walls.

Finally, when the city of Boynton Beach cited the church last year for abandoning the property, the absentee landlord knew it was time to take action.

"We would have been judged by God if we hadn't done something," said Richard Walker, pastor of First Baptist Church of nearby Lantana.

Now Walker and other area Baptists are turning the former crack house into a mission, the first black Southern Baptist congregation in Palm Lake Baptist Association.

Several years ago, First Baptist member who died, willed a small house to the church. The house, which had been the home of the member's gardener, was several miles from the church in the predominantly black community of Cherry Hills, a run-down neighborhood of Boynton Beach with a reputation for its drug traffic.

At first, the predominantly white Lantana church saw little use for the house and planned to sell it, Walker said. Because of a mix-up concerning the property deed, however, the church found the house impossible to sell.

After the church was cited by the city, First Baptist members began to see the house as an outreach opportunity "dropped down from heaven," Walker recalled. "We thought maybe the Lord wanted us to start a mission over there," he said, noting Cherry Hills had only one small church serving its 5,000 residents.

The 25-year-old Lantana church never had started a mission before. But its new pastor, who had been a missionary to Brazil, was more experienced.

Church members committed to raise \$6,900 to renovate the house, the same amount they were spending on a new steeple. The sentiment of the members, Walker said, was "if we can put money into a steeple for ourselves, we can do something for these people."

The church later budgeted another \$300 a month in support.

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But the most critical need, Walker said, was to find a pastor willing to move to Cherry Hills. "If we couldn't get someone to live there, then there wouldn't be any need to start the work," he said.

With the help of local Baptist mission leaders, they found Parker Williams, a maintenance worker and ordained minister living 40 miles south in the Hallandale community of Fort Lauderdale. Williams said he wasn't discouraged by the deteriorating condition of the Cherry Hills community. He had reason to believe that could change.

Hallandale "was as bad as Cherry Hills" before he and other Christians helped turn the neighborhood around, Williams said. They worked through the local community association to clean up streets. They successfully sought government funds to renovate housing.

Such a turnaround is possible in Cherry Hills, Williams said, if concerned Christians band together. By reaching out to residents with both a helping hand and the love of Christ, Christians can "show real concern for not only their spiritual souls but the whole person," he said. "This tells them they can get out of their situation."

Williams and his wife, Adell, now live in a tidy, comfortable home on a Hallandale street that is free of the debris of urban decay. So why would they agree to move to a former crack house in another dilapidated neighborhood?

"That's the price you have to pay," replied Williams. "To be meeting the needs of the community, you have to be there."

The Williamses had hoped to move into the house last year, but repairs have not been completed. Damage was so extensive that much of the interior had to be gutted. The ceiling, windows, flooring and some walls had to be replaced. Already more than \$10,000 has been spent on the house, and another \$4,000 will be needed.

But the delays have not kept Williams from getting started. He canvassed the neighborhood for prospective members for a Sunday school, which began meeting in the partially completed house last August.

About a dozen people now attend the Sunday school each week. Most are young people, but some adults are beginning to come, Williams said. During the first month, two people were baptized in the Cherry Hills community swimming pool. Another was baptized in January.

The mission hosted a Thanksgiving dinner for 100 area residents at a community center and delivered Thanksgiving food baskets to 22 families. Christmas toys and food went to 12 families, Williams said, and the mission pastor maintains a food pantry for needy residents.

Williams has started going to community meetings in Cherry Hills to offer his help to residents who want to clean up the neighborhood and its image. He said the mission has been well received by residents, including members of other churches: "They say, 'The more, the merrier.'"

The mission is "holding its own," but living 40 miles away makes his ministry more difficult, Williams said. He and his wife make the drive about four times a week for Sunday school, a Tuesday night Bible study, Wednesday night prayer service and some Saturdays to visit and work.

But Williams, who now works as a youth counselor for an agency near Fort Lauderdale, said he needs more time on the field to make a real impact. The mission is not financially able to hire him full-time, however, so First Baptist of Lantana is looking for another congregation to help sponsor the work.

Meanwhile Williams continues to commute. He admitted he might be able to find a church to serve that's closer to home. But he's convinced starting a church in Cherry Hills is more important because "there are plenty of churches around here," he said from his Hallandale home.

So he spends what time he can meeting residents and sharing Christ door-to-door around the Cherry Hills neighborhood. "That's what's going to make a difference," he said.

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(BP) photos available upon request from Florida Baptist Witness.