



- - BAPTIST PRESS

News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

NATIONAL OFFICE

SBC Executive Committee
901 Commerce #750
Nashville, Tennessee 37203
(615) 244-2355
Alvin C. Shackelford, Director
Dan Martin, News Editor
Marv Knox, Feature Editor

BUREAUS

ATLANTA *Jim Newton, Chief, 1350 Spring St., N.W., Atlanta, Ga. 30367, Telephone (404) 873-4041*

DALLAS *Thomas J. Brannon, Chief, 511 N. Akard, Dallas, Texas 75201, Telephone (214) 720-0550*

NASHVILLE *(Baptist Sunday School Board) Lloyd T. Householder, Chief, 127 Ninth Ave., N., Nashville, Tenn. 37234, Telephone (615) 251-2300*

RICHMOND *(Foreign) Robert L. Stanley, Chief, 3806 Monument Ave., Richmond, Va. 23230, Telephone (804) 353-0151*

WASHINGTON *Stan L. Hasty, Chief, 200 Maryland Ave., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, Telephone (202) 544-4226*

July 19, 1990

90-92

Missionaries wait for rebel
permission to leave Liberia

By Donald D. Martin

VOINJAMA, Liberia (BP)--Two Southern Baptist missionaries in Voinjama, Liberia, said they will evacuate to Guinea as soon as they receive permission from rebel leaders whose troops captured the city July 14.

Missionary Chris Wilkinson of Gainesville, Fla., said via relayed radio messages July 19 that he and his wife, Gwen, of Ardmore, Tenn., were safe and planned to leave Voinjama in the next few days, but were awaiting permission to pass through rebel roadblocks.

Voinjama, a Liberian provincial capital about 140 miles north of the country's capital, Monrovia, was captured by rebel troops of the National Patriotic Front less than 24 hours after peace talks in Sierra Leone broke down July 13.

Wilkinson asked the assistant rebel commander July 18 for permission to cross into Guinea, a few miles away, with Mrs. Wilkinson and a small group of missionaries from other mission organizations. The assistant commander said he would not let them go until he cleared it with his commander, who was expected to return to Voinjama in a few days.

Wilkinson stressed the missionaries were not under any form of house arrest.

Missionaries Kenneth Nicholson of Magdalena, N.M., and Joyce Nicholson of Seaside, Calif., the other Southern Baptist couple who worked in Voinjama, left July 11 for the United States.

When the Wilkinsons receive permission to depart, the only Southern Baptist missionaries remaining in Liberia will be Ed Laughridge, of Rock Hill, S.C., and Fran Laughridge, of Great Falls, S.C. They work at a Baptist mission station in Mano River, a small mining town about 80 miles northwest of Monrovia near the Sierra Leone border.

Mrs. Laughridge said via radio messages July 19 that she had not seen any fighting in Mano River, but most roads into the town were blocked by government troops. The town has no electricity, and food and fuel are becoming scarce. The Laughridges stay in contact each day with missionary Steve Springer in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, via a radio powered by a generator.

The rest of the 60 Southern Baptist missionaries assigned to Liberia are temporarily in the United States or in countries bordering Liberia.

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The rebels, led by Charles Taylor, a former aide to Liberian President Samuel Doe, have demanded that Doe resign and stand trial for corruption, nepotism and human rights abuses. Most international observers believe Doe's government could fall any day.

Human rights groups have accused both sides of killing hundreds of civilians in the seven-month war, which has been fought mostly along tribal lines.

Lack of food for refugees is the remaining missionaries' greatest concern, Mrs. Laughridge reported July 19. Stores of rice and medical supplies at the mission station were depleted after they aided several waves of refugees moving through Mano River to Sierra Leone.

Mrs. Laughridge said they only had enough fuel to run their generator two hours a day for about five more days. If more supplies are not found, they also will have to leave in the next few weeks.

Other mission and relief organizations report similar problems. Press reports said food shortages in the Monrovia area, as well as other parts of Liberia, are becoming critical.

Nuns at St. Theresa's convent, a refugee center in Monrovia, told reporters that they could only provide one small bowl of rice each day to all but the youngest children, who receive an additional small amount of cornmeal.

Some 23 refugee camps set up in and around Monrovia now house more than 40,000 people.

John Cumbers, deputy general director of the Society for International Ministries (SIM), said SIM missionaries in Monrovia's eastern suburb, Paynesville, are sheltering 12,000 refugees. SIM is a nondenominational evangelical mission agency.

SIM mission workers already have exhausted a supply of 17,000 pounds of rice delivered by local relief workers July 14. The grain lasted only a few days, although workers restricted each person to about one cup of rice a day, Cumbers said.

Water in many areas also is becoming scarce because of power shortages. Most of Monrovia's water supply comes from deep wells and is brought to the surface by electric pumps.

A lack of rain has aggravated the water shortage. Although July is part of the rainy season in Liberia, rivers and creeks are low. One press report said the U.S. Embassy in Monrovia sends water trucks escorted by U.S. Marines to collect water from a creek near Doe's headquarters, but few others go near the creek for fear of attack by government soldiers.

Five Southern Baptist mission administrators for Liberia met July 17-18 in Atlanta to start planning what will need to be done in Liberia once the fighting has stopped and missionaries return.

SBC Executive Committee
fires Baptist Press staff

By Marv Knox

NASHVILLE--The Southern Baptist Executive Committee fired Baptist Press staff members Alvin C. Shackelford and Dan Martin during a called meeting July 17 in Nashville.

Committee members deliberated for three hours behind closed doors, guarded by armed off-duty Nashville police officers.

The committee did not cite cause why BP Director Shackelford, 58, and News Editor Martin, 51, were fired.

Committee members voted to keep their deliberations secret and declined to discuss the actions after the meeting. A statement announcing the outcome was read by the committee's executive vice president, Ernest E. Mosley. The statement was attributed to EC Chairman Sam W. Pace, who refused to meet with about 200 Baptists who had sung hymns while waiting for the meeting to adjourn, and reporters from across the country.

"The Executive Committee has voted by a margin of three to one to terminate Al Shackelford and Dan Martin from their duties at the Executive Committee and Baptist Press effective immediately," said the statement attributed to Pace, a director of associational missions from Lawton, Okla.

Two-thirds of the document dealt with the committee's decision to conduct its business in a closed session.

"We chose to meet in executive session even while recognizing the intense interest of Southern Baptists in matters which concern their right to information and a free press," it said.

"We held these deliberations in private to preserve the Executive Committee's privilege of conducting a full and free debate on personnel matters without fear of causing our employees a legal injury. ...

"Today, the Executive Committee felt the need to permit its members to debate the Southern Baptist Convention's business freely, without fear that lawsuits would be filed against them for expressing their opinions and without fear that their comments would needlessly damage the professional reputations of two Christian journalists."

The statement added: "We believe in the fundamental need for Southern Baptists to know how we are conducting ourselves and their business. We chose the only course open to us which secured our right to unrestrained debate, which protected the reputations of Christian brothers from false or defamatory attacks, which preserved our responsibility to keep our convention free from expensive and destructive litigation and which would diminish the efforts on the part of any group to suppress the Cooperative Program (unified budget).

"The Executive Committee affirms the value of a Southern Baptist Press which honors the virtues of objectivity, credibility, balance and Christian deportment in journalistic pursuits."

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The statement's expressions of concern for Shackelford and Martin's welfare are a "false guise," said Nashville attorney Frank C. Ingraham, who provided legal counsel to the pair.

"My clients have asked for openness and charges and the opportunity to answer," he said. "This information about protecting their interests, their embarrassment is a farce."

The Executive Committee's administrative subcommittee, which met for two hours prior to the full committee meeting, invited Shackelford and Martin to speak to the subcommittee for five minutes each.

At that point, the subcommittee already had closed its meeting, and Shackelford and Martin each read a two-sentence statement: "As journalists who are committed to openness, we cannot in good conscience participate in your closed executive session. As employees, we submit to you our written statements to do with as you please."

Shackelford's statement noted his 35 years as a Southern Baptist journalist and 41 months with Baptist Press. "I have long held to the historic Baptist adage, 'Tell the truth, and trust the people,'" he wrote. "For this adage to operate properly, Baptist leaders -- whether in a church or denominational body -- must fairly and objectively present all information to the members or messengers who will make the decision.

"A part of my trust of the Baptist system is that Baptists -- the person in the pew -- can be trusted with the truth, even when that truth is unpleasant. I believe Baptist state papers and Baptist Press itself must be as open and honest as possible with grassroots Baptists. Our people are smart enough to understand and to interpret for themselves the significance of an event or an issue. ...

"The real issue you face today is not the control of Baptist Press nor its director, but the control of the right and responsibility of Baptist church members to know what is going on in their denomination. ... Your vote today must not be based on your perception of the journalistic abilities of Dan Martin and me, but on our commitment to trust our fellow Baptists and on your willingness to allow their right to discern truth as presented to them through an objective, free news service."

Martin's statement noted his 10 years at Baptist Press and cited his commitment -- made to Conservative leaders his first week on the job -- to be fair and to provide open access to Baptist Press.

"Baptist Press is a news service," he wrote in his statement. "The purpose of a news service is to inform, inspire, educate and even entertain its constituents. The events and personalities should be understandable to the person in the pew, who must have accurate information on which to base informed decisions. Sometimes the facts are hard and difficult, but never require intentional injury or hurt to individuals. In the words of (the apostle) Paul, we have not rejoiced in iniquity, but have rejoiced in the truth."

Shackelford and Martin were not invited to address the full Executive Committee, but their written statements were distributed to the members.

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After the committee adjourned, members declined to discuss the issue and say why the staff members were fired.

Shackleford told reporters, "We were not given cause when we were told to resign (June 19) and have not been given cause since then." Last year, Baptist Press carried 1,298 articles, and the staff was challenged on 10 or less of them, he said.

"I think we were fired because they want their own minister of information," Martin said. "They're going to want somebody who's going to be a 'spin doctor,' who's going to put the spin on stories the way they want them.

"That is why I think we were dismissed, because the last thing revolutionaries who succeeded in taking over the palace want is a free press and an objective observer."

Ingraham said the firing resulted in three loses. "There was a loss of journalistic integrity, a loss of credibility of leadership of Southern Baptists and a loss of voluntary cooperation among our churches," he noted.

Responding to reporters' questions, Ingraham said legal action against the Executive Committee is not pending on behalf of his clients: "I have never been engaged to bring any legal action or consider any legal action. I was asked to be an agent of reconciliation. Any talk you hear about fear of lawsuit ... is inconsistent with the facts that I have continually related."

Shackleford and Martin said they do not know what jobs they will hold next. "We felt we needed to get beyond this meeting today," Martin said. "Now it's past, and we'll start looking at options."

Their severance arrangement "provides for them to continue receiving their full salaries plus their normal retirement, medical insurance and life insurance benefits for a period of seven months, which includes accrued vacation" of four weeks each, Pace's statement said. Ingraham provided the committee with an independent study of fired executives in middle Tennessee. It indicated people with responsibilities and salaries comparable to Shackleford and Martin's got an average of 12 months' pay and benefits.

Pace and committee President Harold C. Bennett were unavailable for comment after the meeting, but Mosley said the actions regarding Shackleford and Martin were the only ones taken.

"By counsel and vote of the Executive Committee in executive session, I am prohibited from sharing information from the meeting," he said. "I believe ... I am free to say there was no other business."

With the firings of Shackleford and Martin and a previous resignation, the entire professional staff of the Baptist Press central office is vacant. The service has five bureaus and also receives information from other Baptist sources.

"I am not aware of any decision that has been made by Dr. Bennett in terms of distribution of news or other tasks related to BP," Mosley said of the immediate future.

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Cost of the called meeting, which about 60 members attended, is not certain, Mosley said. Previous estimates began at \$50,000.

Employment of the armed off-duty Nashville police officers apparently was arranged by the committee's legal counsel, James P. Guenther of Nashville, and the committee's six officers, Mosley said.

The full committee's meeting violated Robert's Rules of Order because it was closed before the members voted to close it, Ingraham said.

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Note to editors: This article was written by Marv Knox at the request of Southern Baptist Press Association and is being distributed through Baptist Press without editing.

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