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March 19, 1993

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KENTUCKY -- Woman's ordination tears at closely knit association.  
ALABAMA -- Ministers recall tensions of Birmingham, Ala., in '63.  
NASHVILLE -- Editors' notes, correction.

Ministers recall tensions  
of Birmingham, Ala., in '63

By Mark Baggett

Baptist Press  
3/19/93

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--It was one of the most traumatic and pivotal years in American history. In the course of 1963:

-- April 3: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference launch a protest of segregated lunch counters and restrooms in Birmingham.

-- April 12: King is arrested on Good Friday. While confined over the Easter weekend, he writes the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

-- May 2-7: Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor answers SCLC marches with police dogs, fire hoses and mass arrests.

-- June 11: Alabama Gov. George Wallace stages his "Stand in the Schoolhouse Door" to block integration of the University of Alabama.

-- Aug. 28: 200,000 people participate in the March on Washington, climaxed by King's "I Have a Dream" speech.

-- Sept. 15: Four black children die in the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham.

-- Nov. 23: President Kennedy is shot in Dallas.

Memories of that turbulent spring in Birmingham still draw sensitive responses, including the recollections of Southern Baptist ministers who were thrust reluctantly into the spotlight.

Dotson Nelson, Earl Stallings and John Porter -- each a fairly recent arrival to Birmingham in 1963 -- watched the unfolding drama firsthand. In its Feb. 14, 1963, issue, The Alabama Baptist tried to play down tensions, but later events betrayed the editorial hope:

"All of us know there are radicals in both races, but the main stream of life here in the South moves along happily, and we do not believe either group wants the race tensions which are in the North."

But that stream gathered a swift and dangerous momentum as it rushed toward a frenetic Easter weekend in which King was jailed.

Porter, the black pastor of the influential Sixth Avenue Baptist Church (now a member of Birmingham Baptist Association), had come to Birmingham from Detroit in late 1962 and had marched arm-in-arm with King.

His participation in the civil rights movement is depicted along with King and two other men kneeling in prayer in a sculpture now sitting in Kelly Ingram Park across from a just-opened Civil Rights Institute and across the street from Sixteenth Street Baptist Church.

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As he advocated the end of segregation in Birmingham, Porter said he saw "tremendous suffering in the white pulpit. You couldn't even appear to be moderate (in the white community). Any attempt to address the issue from a moderate point of view and you were penalized gravely. It was a cut-and-dried issue."

One of those he saw struggling was Earl Stallings, one of eight ministers whom King addressed in his famous letter.

Stallings, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Birmingham from 1961-65, was a member of the Committee for Reconciliation, which had written a letter to King asking him to stop the protests.

King's letter -- now published widely as required reading in college textbooks -- immortalized those ministers, several of whom are still alive. Although they were racial moderates by Birmingham standards, some of them resented the way they felt King painted them as segregationists.

Stallings, now 76 and living in Sun City, Ariz., wasn't unhappy with the letter; in fact, it paid him and the church a compliment by noting its open door policy, a policy Stallings says was started before he came by former pastor Grady Cothen. Still, he was in a precarious position. "We (on the committee) were trying to find a neutral ground to accept blacks as citizens," he said. "We were meeting with a great deal of regularity. There was some opposition from church members, but I still think it was the right thing to do."

Stallings soon found himself on the cover of the April 15, 1963, New York Times, over the headline "Fighting Erupts in Birmingham," shaking the hand of a black woman who had worshipped at the church as part of a group of six people, which included Andrew Young, later mayor of Atlanta.

"Attention focused on the Baptist churches," said Stallings, "because that's where they thought the trouble would be." He remembers shaking hands that Easter Sunday morning, then looking out in the street where people surged as far as the eye could see, much of the crowd generated by the crush of news media in Birmingham.

Porter, who owns a carbon copy of King's letter, said the letter didn't have an immediate impact and was written partly "with an eye for media consumption," in light of King's artful use of the media.

"With King coming to town, you had an acceleration of people coming from all over the country," Porter said. "One of the keys to the movement was that it got national news media attention. I was a bit naive about that. He understood the press and its power. I thought one just depended on the Lord."

Nelson, who has just celebrated his 78th birthday, was busy advising his church members at Mountain Brook Baptist, where he is now pastor emeritus, to "Keep cool. Keep hate out of your heart. Keep our community in your prayers. Keep God in your thinking. Keep Christ in the center of your consciousness."

Mountain Brook already had decided to welcome anyone who wanted to worship. "There were none of us preachers who were not sorry it was happening," Nelson recounted. "But there was not much we could do about it but try to get attitudes changed."

Nelson felt a real hopelessness when on Sept. 15 of that year a doctor in the church who had been at University Hospital passed a note to the pulpit, informing Nelson four girls had been killed in the Sixteenth Street bombing.

"We were on the radio, and I didn't announce it until I got through my sermon," he said. "I felt like it couldn't possibly be true." His "Pastor's Paragraphs" in the church bulletin the next week referred to the "tragic crisis" in the city and called for a "spiritual miracle of brotherliness." He went to the funeral home to express sympathies and afterward was led to his car by a black minister friend who feared for Nelson's life.

Porter remembers the funerals of three of the girls at his church, Sixth Avenue. He recalls looking out and seeing a group of white and black ministers who had walked down to the church and stood outside during the service.

"Never before or since have I seen such a gathering of clergy," he said. A month later, the Saturday, Oct. 12, 1963, Birmingham News reported a speech by Nelson on its front page, in which Nelson had urged the crowd to solve Birmingham's problems "by doing what is right, even under provocation."

He thought it was a rather tame speech, but the phone calls began pouring in, many of them threats. He could sympathize with Stallings, with whom he used to eat on a weekly basis and whom he called "a good man -- highly intelligent, quiet, not one who mounted a soapbox."

Stallings, who moved to Arizona in 1977 to lead a pilot study program on the weekday ministry of the church with senior adults, remembers 1963 as a "lonely" and "depressing" time in which he saw the fire hoses and dogs unleashed, felt the bomb explosion on Sept. 15 and also felt the sting of opposition of church members. He never met with King (King didn't attend a meeting set up between the two groups) but did go to Washington to discuss the events with President Kennedy, a meeting he called "very wholesome."

Porter and Nelson, for their part, still meet monthly as part of a ministers group that Nelson says goes back to 1926. They both emphasize the strides Birmingham has made.

Porter said it was a long time after the September bombing before he could talk about the events of 1963 "without getting full of emotion."

But he praises human perseverance: "It's a testimony to the ability people have to rise above tragedies, above their differences."

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Women's ordination tears  
at closely knit association

By Mark Wingfield

Baptist Press  
3/19/93

DANVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Debate over the role of women in the church is causing a painful rift among churches in Kentucky's small, closely knit South District Baptist Association.

Although the conflict may not be resolved until the association's annual meeting in October, apparently either a church that has ordained two women will be forced out of the association or at least seven other churches that oppose those ordinations will leave the association.

The association is located in central Kentucky around the towns of Danville and Lancaster and encompasses 28 churches and one mission.

At issue is the ordination by Lexington Avenue Baptist Church in Danville of two women, one as a minister and another as a deacon. After Lexington Avenue ordained the woman deacon last year, the association's moderator, Robert Rush, appointed a special committee to formulate a response. Some in the association were calling for the church's expulsion based on that ordination alone.

However, the stakes increased Jan. 24 when Lexington Avenue ordained to the ministry Jo Garnett, the church's minister of education.

Garnett also serves as the associational clerk and Sunday school director.

Garnett has been a member of Lexington Avenue 25 years and on the full-time ministerial staff eight years. Before becoming minister of education, she was the church's weekday preschool director and part-time minister to children.

The emotionally charged issue of ordaining women is complicated in this case because Garnett is so well-known and respected within the association, several area pastors explained. No one interviewed for this article had anything negative to say about Garnett personally.

"I have nothing against the people of that church," noted Tim Mathis, pastor of Danville's First Baptist Church, which is located within close proximity to Lexington Avenue church. "Their ministers are friends of mine. ... We don't hate one another; we just disagree."

Garnett echoed that assessment: "I certainly hold no bad feelings or animosity against any of the brothers who oppose this. I really don't take it as a personal affront."

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Opposing Lexington Avenue's ordination of women is "a painful operation," admitted Bill Hall, pastor of Gethsemane Baptist Church in Danville.

"It's not that we have anything against anyone," he said of himself and others who oppose the ordination of women. "We just have convictions. We believe there is an erosion of conviction, that there's a slippage of standards based on the Scripture. We feel to go along with it is tantamount to agreeing with it, and that's compromising ourselves."

Hall and six other pastors from the association have signed a letter saying Lexington Avenue should rescind the ordination or withdraw from the association -- either voluntarily or involuntarily. If neither of those options happens, the pastors have indicated, their churches would be compelled to withdraw from the association.

Garnett's ordination, like her decision to begin working for the church in the first place, was prompted by the church rather than her own interests, she said.

When the church asked her to be weekday preschool director, she went back to school and got a master's degree in early childhood education to prepare herself. When the church later asked her to become minister to children and then minister of education, she enrolled in seminary and earned a master's degree in Christian education.

And she only consented to the ordination, she explained, when her congregation encouraged her to be ordained.

"From the very first, I had a covenant with God that ... I was not going to pursue ordination," she said. "I decided if this is something that will enhance my ministry, that's in God's will for my life, I was going to let God do it."

When the church first offered ordination, she refused, in part because the church did not have a pastor at the time. But ultimately she consented, realizing ordination would open additional opportunities for ministry, she said.

Both Lexington Avenue and the opposing churches claim to have the Bible on their side.

While men are not superior to women, the Bible does assign men and women different roles, Hall explained. "I don't think a woman is given the prerogative to be ordained into one of the two New Testament-sanctioned leadership roles in the church. I just don't think it's scriptural."

But the ordination of women is "in keeping with Scripture," countered Tim Noel, pastor at Lexington Avenue. Further, this matter of scriptural interpretation is a local church issue that should not be a "test of fellowship" in the association, he said.

Although the special committee is working to find a solution to the differences of opinion, no one seems optimistic that a split can be avoided.

"I don't think there's going to be reconciliation in the sense that we would remain 28 churches and one mission," said moderator Rush, pastor of First Baptist Church in Lancaster. "We are praying for God's will to be done. We are praying we will retain a Christlike attitude."

Likewise, Noel said he doesn't see any way to avoid a break in the association's ranks.

"We are comfortable with what we have done, and we're not going to change our minds on this," he said. "It was a very careful and very prayerful decision."

"The pastors of these seven churches ... probably have taken such a stance with their churches that they can't back down without appearing to compromise their convictions. When you take that kind of stance, it leaves little room for dialogue."

EDITORS' NOTE: In the (BP) story titled "Broad support expressed for HMB report on Masons," dated 3/18/93, the following paragraph can be inserted after the 10th paragraph:

The HMB report, while "not as I would have made it," offers little support to Southern Baptist Masons, Holly stated, maintaining they "should immediately remove themselves from the Masonic Lodge."

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EDITORS' NOTE: In light of the Home Mission Board's adoption March 17 of a recommendation to the Southern Baptist Convention on Freemasonry, please substitute the following paragraphs in the (BP) story titled "SBC to tackle Freemasonry issue, final vote on homosexuality stance," dated 3/12/93, for the 17th through 23rd paragraphs:

Concerning Freemasonry's compatibility with Christianity, messengers will vote on a report and recommendation on Freemasonry from the Home Mission Board, which concludes:

"In light of the fact that many tenets and teachings of Freemasonry are not compatible with Christianity and Southern Baptist doctrine, while others are compatible with Christianity and Southern Baptist doctrine, we therefore recommend that consistent with our denomination's deep convictions regarding the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church, membership in a Masonic Order be a matter of personal conscience. Therefore, we exhort Southern Baptists to prayerfully and carefully evaluate Freemasonry in light of the Lordship of Christ, the teachings of Scripture, and the findings of this report, as led by the Holy Spirit of God."

During last year's SBC, a motion to create a special committee to study Freemasonry was amended and then approved by messengers to instruct the HMB's interfaith witness department to study Freemasonry and for the board to bring "a report and recommendation" to this year's meeting.

The matter is scheduled for SBC consideration at 10:25 a.m. Wednesday, June 16.

Prior to the HMB's adoption of its recommendation March 17, the issue was volatile on several fronts:

-- Writers in a key Scottish Rite journal called the SBC study the "most vicious attack in 100 years" and a potential "devastating blow" against the fraternal organization; Masons initiated a letter-writing campaign to various SBC leaders; and one Masonic writer urged Southern Baptist Masons to become messengers, attend the SBC and vote against any anti-Masonry SBC stance.

-- The key advocate of an anti-Freemasonry stance by the SBC, James "Larry" Holly, a Beaumont, Texas, physician, issued a call for the resignation of the HMB's interfaith witness department director, Gary Leazer, who gave a draft of the Freemasonry study to two Masons, including former Baylor University President Abner McCall, to review before submitting it to HMB President Larry Lewis. Leazer subsequently asked to be reassigned to a field position in the department.

After the HMB adopted its recommendation, Holly said it was "not as I would have made it," but he voiced support for it, that it offers little support to Southern Baptist Masons, who "should immediately remove themselves from the Masonic Lodge." A Scottish Rite spokesman, meanwhile, Fred Kleinknecht, head of the Southern Jurisdiction, commended the board's focus on personal conscience regarding Masonic membership.

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EDITORS' NOTE: Please update (BP) story titled "Tennessee youth brave snow; storm closes countless churches" dated 3/16/93 by substituting the following two paragraphs for paragraphs 3 and 4:

Nationally, the 600-mile-wide "Blizzard of '93" killed more than 200 people in 25 states and the District of Columbia, including four Baptists in Florida, a 5-year-old girl killed by a tornado that destroyed her family's mobile home, a 13-year-old boy electrocuted while riding a bicycle and a 10-year-old boy and 20-year-old woman who drowned at Dekle Beach, Fla., in a storm surge of nine to 12 feet. They were among more than 40 fatalities from some 50 tornadoes that hit that state.

Beyond thousands of homes damaged by tornadoes among 21 Florida counties declared disaster areas by President Clinton, many in areas ravaged by Hurricane Andrew last year, at least eight Florida Baptist churches also were damaged. Two Florida disaster relief feeding units were dispatched to hard-hit areas.

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CORRECTION: In the (BP) story titled "Southeastern trustees elect 8 to faculty," dated 3/18/93, please correct the 5th paragraph to read:

For more than an hour March 15 trustees met ... . Trustees went into executive session March 16 ... .

Thanks,  
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