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Leazer says he was fired
to appease Masonry's critics

By Jack Brymer

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Gary Leazer, the lead researcher in a controversial Southern Baptist study of Freemasonry, says he was fired from his Home Mission Board job primarily to appease a critic of the study, and not for insubordination, as his former boss has claimed.

Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis said Oct. 25 he asked for Leazer's resignation as assistant director of the board's interfaith witness department because Leazer disobeyed an order to refrain from any involvement with the Freemasonry issue after a demotion in March.

Lewis said Leazer was dismissed for "gross insubordination" after giving a speech to a Masonic group in Atlanta Aug. 6. Leazer's "outright advocacy for the Masonic Lodge (in the Aug. 6 speech) is extremely unprofessional and calls into question his ability or willingness at this point to be objective," the HMB president said.

But Leazer said he recalls no specific prohibition against speaking out on the issue.

Leazer told the Florida Baptist Witness that HMB administrators were more concerned about backlash from Larry Holly, a Texas physician and leading critic of the study, than the truthfulness of his research on Masons.

"Their concern was damage control, not truth," Leazer said of his first discussion of the study with Lewis and HMB Vice President Darrell Robinson, Leazer's immediate supervisor.

Leazer said he believes the major reason for his dismissal is to try to pre-empt Holly's ongoing challenge to the HMB's study.

Holly suggested Leazer's theory has some merit.

"Gary Leazer was caught in the vortex of an administrative boondoggle," Holly told Associated Baptist Press Nov. 3.

"I believe to some degree Gary Leazer has been fired for doing the very thing he was instructed to do: to bring out a report that would be as favorable to Masons as possible and throw out a bone" to critics of the Masons.

Holly said HMB trustees and administrators who were committed to

avoiding a controversy over Freemasonry have only made the situation worse by accepting a flawed study. Now, he said, the Masonic issue "won't go away."

Holly wrote HMB president Lewis Oct. 27 disavowing "any support and/or endorsement" of the report, which he said was flawed by Leazer's sympathy for the Masons and the HMB trustees' "indefensible compromise" in accepting Leazer's research.

Holly urged that the Freemasonry investigation be redone so that Southern Baptists will have "an honest and objective study of one of the scourges of the kingdom of God."

In his response Oct. 28, Lewis defended the study and report and noted trustee leaders rejected Holly's call for a new study. Lewis said Baptists want the HMB to spend no more time studying the Masons, "and that is precisely what I intend to do."

Holly acknowledged, in a Nov. 3 response, that "there is no stomach among Southern Baptists for another study." Instead, he said, HMB trustees should withdraw the study from circulation, renounce the Masons' favorable interpretation of the report, and warn Southern Baptists about those Masonic beliefs and practices the HMB found incompatible with Christianity.

Lewis was unavailable to discuss Holly's latest request or Leazer's charges, but an HMB spokesman reiterated Lewis' position that Leazer was dismissed for insubordination and that the HMB is through with the Freemasonry issue.

The study of Freemasonry was ordered by messengers to the 1992 Southern Baptist Convention at Holly's request. Leazer performed the research but asked that his name not be attached as author because of substantial changes after he turned over his findings to Lewis.

In the study, Leazer said he tried to point out some of the "weak and misleading" information in an anti-Mason book written by Holly and in similar writings by televangelist John Ankerberg.

"Since Dr. Holly was the primary catalyst behind this study, I used a lot of his materials in my research," Leazer said. "After I submitted it the first time, I was accused of being overly critical of Dr. Holly's little book and subsequently asked to remove all of the references to him."

Later, Leazer said, "they put some of the references back in the study."

"I honestly tried, as much as is humanly possible, to be objective in the study," he said. "I tried to point out the weaknesses of both sides."

Lewis, he said, "took out much of the criticisms of the theories of Holly and Ankerberg but did not take out any of the criticisms of the weaknesses of Masons."

The edited study was submitted to HMB trustees, who then approved their own brief "Report on Freemasonry." A concluding paragraph of the board's report was adopted overwhelmingly by SBC messengers last June.

Lewis removed Leazer from the ad hoc committee preparing the study last February for what Lewis called "inappropriate" comments Leazer made about the Freemasonry issue in a letter to a friend.

Later, according to Leazer, Holly called Lewis and said he had learned of another letter which Leazer supposedly had written to a Mason. As a result, Lewis conducted his own investigation, sending two staff members to Leazer's office and home to remove and examine all of his correspondence.

Leazer said he signed a release allowing the search and seizure "because I had nothing to hide." The administrators discovered "two or three" letters they deemed "inappropriate," Leazer said. "Primarily, their concern was that I had encouraged several Masons to go to the Southern Baptist Convention and vote their conscience."

Leazer said he was "officially" asked to step down as director of the interfaith witness department in early March. "Unofficially," he said he was

told that if he did not step down, some board members would attempt to have him dismissed.

At the time that Leazer was relieved of director's duties, Lewis said, he was directed "to refrain from any and all involvement in the Freemasonry issue." Leazer, however, said he does not remember being instructed to refrain from such involvement, only from the study and the HMB report.

"I have looked through my files, notes and personal journals and can find no notes that would indicate those instructions," Leazer told Baptist Press. "That is not how I recall the conversation."

Lewis, however, said he has a vivid memory of the conversation. "In fact, Dr. Leazer asked if he could fulfill speaking engagements on the issue and we told him no."

Darrell Robinson, HMB vice president, said the prohibition was clearly communicated. "Dr. Leazer was removed from the entire Masonry assignment and was instructed not to address the issue further," Robinson said.

Holly had his own reading on the disputed directive. "If that conversation took place and can't be documented, then it calls into question the board's management style," he said.

In Leazer's Aug. 6 speech that prompted his dismissal, he told a Masonic group that his study "does not agree with the conclusions in the Home Mission Board report." Despite the changes made, he said he still believes the HMB study is the most accurate and fair of any done by a non-Mason.

In his speech, he encouraged Masons to oppose the report. "You should not be satisfied with the report. I hope you will respond clearly and quickly."

"I hope you will consider the criticism in the study which I wrote," he added in his closing remarks. "I wrote it out of no malice toward Freemasonry but with a genuine desire that the controversy surrounding your fraternity can be stopped once and for all."

In the speech, which was later printed in a Masonic publication, Leazer criticized the HMB's handling of the Masonic issue.

Of his dismissal, Leazer told the Witness he is angry but not unhappy. "I was ready to leave the HMB," he said. "I just felt that I had done about all the work I was able to do in good conscience. With all the politics and control, I couldn't continue to do this and live with myself."

As to his future, Leazer said he is not certain. "Right now I am looking for some place to serve." He added, "I am going to write a book on the last two years and my study."

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-- Greg Warner and Bob Allen contributed to this article.

Voters reject vouchers,
defeat gay-rights measures

(ABP) -- Voters in California rejected public funding for private education Nov. 2, while voters in three cities in three states rejected laws protecting homosexuals.

By a margin of more than two-to-one, California voters soundly rejected a proposal that would have allocated tax funds to pay for tuition at private and religious schools.

The measure, called Proposition 174, would have provided vouchers worth up to \$2,600 for parents to send a child to the public, private or religious

school of their choice.

Baptists with strong feelings are found on both sides of the voucher issue.

The Christian Life Commission, an agency of the Southern Baptist Convention, has not taken a position on school-choice issues, citing a lack of consensus among Southern Baptists.

Other Baptist voices were heard, however.

"It is encouraging that this vote is even more lopsided than the last time Californians rejected a proposal to use public dollars to finance religious education," said James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington-based religious-liberty agency.

Dunn noted that Californians rejected a 1982 parochial aid initiative by a margin of 61 percent to 39 percent.

"We still hold some truths to be self evident: that public money goes only for public purposes, that no one pays taxes to support religious institutions, that Americans have a common commitment to the common school," Dunn said.

"Twenty times since 1966, voters in various states have been asked to approve parochial aid schemes and have said no in every case but one," he said.

Gay-rights initiatives took a beating in three cities.

In Cincinnati, Ohio, and Lewiston, Maine, voters repealed new city ordinances outlawing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The margin was more than two to one in Lewiston, slightly closer in Cincinnati.

In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, voters instructed their city council not to adopt a similar ordinance. The vote was 62 percent to 38 percent.

The local measures follow an anti-gay trend initiated last November by Colorado voters, who voided gay-rights laws in three cities by passing a statewide measure prohibiting protection for gays. Implementation of the Colorado initiative is on hold while courts test its constitutionality.

Michael Whitehead, general counsel for the SBC Christian Life Commission, welcomed the votes on the gay-rights measures, which he said attempt "to make a moral wrong seem like a civil right."

"The homosexual political agenda has been masquerading as a civil-rights issue for too long, but the American voter has not been fooled," he said. "Homosexuals should -- and already do -- enjoy equal protection of their civil rights, because civil-rights laws are neutral with respect to one's sexual orientation."

Arthur Kropp, president of People for the American Way Action Fund, lamented the passage of the anti-gay ballot initiatives and predicted more will follow. "Lopsided anti-gay votes on ballot initiatives set the stage for a much wider attack on gay civil-rights in next year's election," he said.

Kropp blamed the results on the influence of the religious right, which he said "is exploiting intolerance against gays and lesbians."

The role of the religious right attracted significant attention in Virginia, where the lieutenant governor's race featured a Republican candidate often identified with causes supported by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

Republican Michael Farris, an attorney linked with a variety of religious-right causes, lost to incumbent Democrat Donald Beyer. Beyer, who won 54 percent of the vote, attempted during the campaign to paint Farris as a religious extremist outside the mainstream in Virginia.

Farris' defeat came despite the fact he shared the Republican ticket with George Allen, who won the governor's race with 58 percent of the vote.

Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, interpreted Farris' 46 percent showing as a vindication and a rejection of religious

bigotry, reported the Washington Post.

But Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said Farris' loss shows the religious right to be a liability, not an asset in public office.

"Even in a year when Republicans did very well in Virginia, voters simply would not accept the extremism of Mike Farris," Lynn said. "The results prove that a majority of voters will reject candidates with direct ties to the religious right."

Lynn said that new governor Allen won by distancing himself from fellow Virginian Pat Robertson and portraying himself as a moderate. Robertson favors a ban on abortions, a position Allen rejected. Robertson endorses education vouchers, but in the last week of the campaign Allen said he will not push for vouchers.

Lynn said Gov. Allen may prove to "be more friendly to religious-right causes than many voters think, but there is no denying that he labored to distance himself from Robertson and the religious right and did not embrace their agenda, as Farris did."

But Kropp of People for the American Way said the religious right should be pleased with the results. "Pat Robertson has every reason to gloat over these election returns," he said.

"The Virginia election clearly re-established the religious right as a powerful political player to be reckoned with," said Kropp. "George Allen's open embrace of groups like the Christian Coalition helped bring them back into mainstream Republican politics."

"Even an extremist like Michael Farris fared respectably, despite months of exposure of his views."

According to a post-election survey commissioned by the Christian Coalition, most Virginia voters thought Beyer should have focused attention on issues other than Farris' religious views.

In the survey, conducted by Marketing Research Institute of Pensacola, Fla., 75 percent of voters said Beyer should have focused on issues "such as crime, jobs and education," while 18 percent said the Democratic incumbent did the right thing by attacking Farris "for being too close to Pat Robertson."

Most Virginians surveyed (70 percent) said the negative campaign attacks on religion made no difference in voting choices.

"Born again" Christians made up 37.7 percent of the electorate, according to the survey. This group voted overwhelmingly for Republicans Allen for governor (75.5 percent) and Farris for lieutenant governor (60.9 percent).

Also of note in the Nov. 2 elections, Southern Baptist Nancy Schaefer of Atlanta surprised many people by collecting 11 percent of the vote for mayor in a field of 12 candidates. Schaefer, a trustee of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, directs a family-issues lobby with ties to First Baptist Church of Atlanta.

The conservative Schaefer was credited with forcing a runoff between well-known candidates Bill Campbell (49 percent) and Michael Lomax (23 percent). Both Campbell and Schaefer did well among white voters in north Atlanta, with Schaefer drawing enough support from Campbell to deny the city councilman a majority. She placed fourth with 9,057 votes.

Gay-discrimination disputes
addressed by Supreme Court

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Colorado can't implement its anti-gay-rights initiative until the measure's constitutionality is settled in court, the U.S. Supreme Court said Nov. 1.

The high court declined to review lower-court actions that halted implementation of the initiative, which was approved by voters in November 1992. The amendment to the state constitution would prohibit the state or localities from protecting homosexuals from discrimination.

The action in the Colorado case came just three days after the Supreme Court acted on another gay-rights dispute. On Oct. 29 the high court lifted a court order that had effectively halted implementation of the Clinton administration's new policy on gays in the military.

The Clinton administration asked the high court to lift a federal court's injunction that barred discrimination against gays in the military. The administration complained the injunction went too far, preventing implementation of Clinton's compromise "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

The federal court issued the military-wide injunction in the case of a Navy petty officer who challenged his discharge under military regulations that barred military service by gays.

In an emergency appeal filed Oct. 26, Solicitor General Drew Days III said the injunction "will cause irreparable harm" unless it is put on hold while the government appeals its case.

The injunction, issued Sept. 30 by a federal district court in California, barred the military from discharging, denying enlistment or taking "any actions whatsoever" against any person based on sexual orientation, except in cases involving proven sexual conduct that interferes with the military mission of the armed forces.

Clinton's controversial "don't ask, don't tell" policy, announced last summer and soon to be enacted, establishes sexual conduct, rather than orientation, as the basis for judging the suitability of persons to serve in the military.

In Colorado, where voters approved an anti-gay initiative last year by a 53-47 percent margin, implementation has been delayed by courts who said it appears to be unconstitutional. A trial court has yet to rule on that question.

The initiative, if allowed, would void gay-rights ordinances in Aspen, Boulder and Denver and prevent similar ordinances from being enacted in the future.

A state judge and the state Supreme Court said that the measure infringes on fundamental rights protected by the federal Constitution's equal-protection clause and that the state had failed to demonstrate a compelling reason for the amendment's enactment.

In other Nov. 1 actions:

-- The Supreme Court declined to review a church's First Amendment challenge of municipal zoning rules.

Grace Community Church said its First Amendment rights to freedom of religion and freedom of assembly were abridged by a Bethel, Conn., zoning regulation that requires churches to obtain a special permit to build in a residential area.

After a trial court ordered the city to grant the permit, the church continued its constitutional challenge to the zoning regulation. But an appeals court said the special permit process is a reasonable response to potential planning problems associated with construction of a church in a

residential neighborhood.

The regulation serves an important governmental interest of ensuring that traffic problems do not undermine the residential character of the neighborhood, the appeals court said.

-- The high court declined to get involved in the case of a Wisconsin boy, now 14, who alleges he was left with a hearing loss when a doctor's attempt to abort him in 1979 failed. The court left standing a ruling by the Wisconsin Supreme Court that the physician could not be sued for battery of a fetus since the mother had consented to the abortion.

The plaintiff originally was awarded \$1.1 million from the doctor before an appeals court threw out that judgment.

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-- By Larry Chesser

President signs bills
of interest to Baptists

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton recently signed spending measures of interest to Baptists, including non-profit postal-rate reform legislation and two bills involving taxpayer-funded abortions.

Clinton signed an appropriations bill Oct. 28 that will raise slightly the cost of mailing most state Baptist newspapers, beginning Nov. 21.

The bill will phase in a 12 percent rate increase for second-class non-profit publications over six years. Third-class non-profit publications face about a 20 percent increase over the same time period.

The bill signed by Clinton redefines how preferred rates are calculated and requires commercial mailers to pick up costs currently borne by taxpayers.

Clinton also signed a budget bill that allows the District of Columbia to use local funds to pay for abortions for poor women.

The \$3.4 billion D.C. budget lifts a five-year-old ban issued by Congress. Prior to 1988, the district used local funds to help poor women who wanted abortions but could not afford them.

Another appropriations bill signed by Clinton, for the Department of Health and Human Services, modifies the ban on federal funding of abortions for poor women.

The measure will allow Medicaid funding for abortions in cases of rape or incest. Previous law had allowed funding of abortions only to save the life of the mother. Abortion-rights advocates had hoped for an outright lifting of the ban rather than the compromise.

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-- By Pam Parry

House clears RFRA for
president's signature

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (H.R. 1308) is ready for President Clinton's promised signature as the U.S. House of Representatives adopted a slightly modified version of the bill Nov. 3.

The House unanimously approved RFRA May 11, but the bill had to come

before the chamber again because the Senate version contained some technical changes. The House approved the changes without opposition.

The bill would restore a high level of protection the Supreme Court formerly required government to meet before it could restrict a citizen's religious practice.

Previously, government had to demonstrate a compelling interest, such as public health or safety, and use the least restrictive means of safeguarding that interest before it could limit religious exercise. But the high court virtually abandoned that protection in its 1990 Oregon vs. Smith decision.

"I'm pleased that RFRA has now cleared both houses of Congress intact and that attempts to limit the religious liberty of prisoners have failed," said Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, which led the coalition backing the bill. "We are looking forward to President Clinton signing it into law in the very near future.

"Religious liberty has been shackled for over three years. It's high time to turn it loose."

James Dunn, BJC executive director, said Clinton's support for the bill "may well have offered the critical margin necessary for the defeat of the disabling prison amendment (in the Senate)."

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-- By Pam Parry

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