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Ruling expected in January
in suit against SBC leader

By Bob Allen

SANFORD, Fla. (ABP) -- A ruling is expected by Jan. 7 in a lawsuit against a Southern Baptist Convention leader.

Bob Parker and the church he serves as pastor, First Baptist Church of Markham Woods in Lake Mary, Fla., are being sued in Seminole County Circuit Court. Parker is one of four Floridians on the SBC Executive Committee.

Ann Haynes, a charter member and former church clerk for the 13-year-old congregation, is suing Parker and the church, asking the court to overturn church action expelling her from membership and to grant her access to the church's financial records.

Haynes said in a Dec. 20 hearing she believes church members were never given a proper accounting for a \$416,334 bequest given to the church -- funds she suspects Parker spent improperly. She also alleges Parker deeded personal property into the church's name to obtain tax-exemption privileges and that he obtained interest-free loans from the church.

Haynes made a written request Aug. 17 to inspect the church's financial records. She, her attorney and former church member John King, who is a certified public accountant serving as her agent, appeared at the church Aug. 23. They were met by Parker and told they could not see the records because Haynes was not a member of the church.

A few days later Haynes received a letter informing her the church had voted Aug. 18, one day after her request, to withdraw fellowship from Haynes, her husband and a third elderly member.

Deacon Jack Diemer testified Dec. 20 that the expulsion of Haynes actually had been voted by two of the church's three deacons and endorsed by

"the men of the church" at an Aug. 4 meeting, which meant Haynes was not a member when she made the request to inspect church records. The congregation's action Aug. 18 ratified her expulsion, which Diemer said was "in response to some of the things that had been said and so forth."

The church's attorney, John Campbell of Orlando, contended Haynes filed the lawsuit as part of an overall attempt to discredit Parker and harass him into resigning as pastor. Both she and her husband denied that allegation.

Haynes' husband, M. T., who was the third deacon, refused repeatedly to meet with church leaders to attempt to resolve disputes with the pastor, Diemer said.

Before the dispute over the records, M. T. Haynes said, he considered the church to be "a fine Christian fellowship" and he "loved" Parker. The court action "is really a matter of business," he said. "It's a church, surely. But churches also have business dealings. It was reasonable, I thought, to ask about the business dealings of the church."

The plaintiff's attorney, Tim Askew of Sanford, said Ann Hayne's first request to view the records should have been honored because the deacons' Aug. 4 expulsion of her was invalid. The deacons relied on an addendum to the constitution giving them authority to determine membership of individuals, but that addendum contradicts the church's articles of incorporation, which define membership as a matter for the entire congregation to decide at a regular meeting, Askew said.

Both attorneys will submit summary statements and closing arguments in writing no later than Jan. 1. Judge Newman Brock said he will rule within five days after that date.

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Pastor bumped from committee
because of CBF involvement

OKLAHOMA CITY, Okla. (ABP) -- A Lawton, Okla., pastor has been bumped from his position on a Baptist state convention strategic planning committee because of public support for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Oklahoma Baptist Messenger reported Dec. 16.

The pastor, Gary Cook, of First Baptist Church of Lawton, had been selected for the committee -- which is charged with developing a strategic plan to guide the work of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma -- in part to represent Oklahoma Baptists who feel disenfranchised by the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention, committee chairman David Willets told the paper.

However, Willets said he asked Cook to serve not knowing of his involvement with an Oklahoma chapter of the CBF, a protest organization promoting alternatives to SBC programs.

Cook reportedly has moderated a discussion group at an Oklahoma Fellowship meeting, introduced CBF coordinator Cecil Sherman at a regional listening session and agreed to serve on the state Fellowship's coordinating committee.

"If Gary had told me of his forthcoming involvement in the CBF, I would not have enlisted him," Willets said. "So I was disappointed to see that kind

of involvement."

"The climate of the annual convention was very clear that the CBF is perceived and is in reality a competing organization to the Cooperative Program," he added.

The CBF was targeted for criticism at Oklahoma Baptists' Nov. 15-17 convention in the president's address and in a motion which asked the state convention's retired executive director, Joe Ingram, to "cease and desist" his support of the Fellowship.

At the convention, Willets said, a number of people approached him to express concern over Cook's inclusion on the committee because of his identification with the CBF.

Willets said he called Cook and "asked him, in deference to the central purpose and focus of the strategic planning committee, that he give me the assurance that he would not participate in public, aggressive support of the CBF."

"I did not ask him to change his beliefs," Willets said. "He has every right to choose his path, but he could not give me that assurance."

Cook said he regrets being removed from the committee. "It is grievous to me that I can grow up and be nurtured in my own state by everything that Oklahoma Baptists stand for -- if there was ever anybody who is a product of Oklahoma Baptists, I am -- and now find myself unacceptable to serve Oklahoma Baptists."

Cook said he has "not come to any firm conclusions" about long-term involvement with the Fellowship. "I have simply tried to maintain relationships with people on both sides and thought I had been fairly successful with that."

Cook said his church is a state leader in Cooperative Program giving and last year increased its Lottie Moon foreign missions offering receipts by 25 percent.

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Isolation puts pastors
at risk of sexual sin

By Greg Warner

(ABP) It is an axiom of the preaching trade: there is no quicker way to self-destruct in the ministry than to be caught in adultery.

From King David's tryst with Bathsheba to Jim Bakker's affair with Jessica Hahn, the reputation of the "man of God" has been tainted by sexual scandal.

While most preachers begin their ministries forewarned, and buttressed with all good intentions, all face sexual temptation and many succumb.

When they fall, they usually land hard. And no wonder. Preachers have an image as sexual killjoys, railing against the evils of sexual license. When they are caught in their own snare, they find little sympathy from the watching public, which reserves its harshest judgment for religious hypocrites.

A world that may have been shocked by the televangelist scandals of the 1980s has now grown accustomed to a steady stream of risque revelations involving Christian leaders of all stripes. The public reaction is now less

shock but no less scorn.

Is the disdain warranted? How common is sexual misconduct among clergy?

Counselors who work with wayward ministers agree more incidents of sexual misconduct are coming to light today. But they disagree on whether the problem is actually worse or if exposure is simply more common.

"What's changed is people aren't keeping quiet about this," said Mark Jensen, a Baptist chaplain and counselor in Winston-Salem, N.C. "We are in a cultural transition that won't put up with it anymore."

Shifts in the public mindset on sex abuse and women's issues are making it harder to sweep ministerial misconduct under the rug, said Jensen, chaplaincy supervisor at North Carolina Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem.

"It's been underground, but now the masks are coming off," agreed Norris Smith, a church-staff consultant at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board. "It is documented. We can no longer ignore it. We need to address it."

Smith tracks minister firings, which averaged 116 a month in the Southern Baptist Convention in 1988. Immorality -- sexual and other kinds -- was the second leading cause of pastor firings in Smith's 1988 study. Lack of communication was first.

In a survey in Christianity Today magazine, in which pastors told on themselves, 12 percent said they had engaged in sexual intercourse outside of marriage and 23 percent admitted to some other form of extramarital sexual contact.

That was lower than for the lay people who responded to the survey (23 percent and 28 percent). And both clergy and laity can claim to be more faithful than the general population, about half of whom admit to extramarital affairs in similar surveys.

But the frequency among clergy is still enough to cause concern.

"According to informed estimates, about 15 percent (of clergy) either have or are violating sexual ethical boundaries," said Baptist counselor Roy Woodruff, executive director of the 3,000-member American Association of Pastoral Counselors.

"I don't think I would use the word 'epidemic' ... but I suspect the number of incidents is increasing," said Woodruff, a member of Vienna (Va.) Baptist Church. "There is some cause if not for alarm at least for concern."

While sex scandals in the Catholic priesthood have grabbed the headlines in recent months, Southern Baptists also have been stung by revelations about the sexual dalliances of high-profile pastors in their own fold.

Woodruff said no denomination has escaped the spotlight of scandal.

"It's across denominational lines. We work with 60 to 70 faith groups, and we see no pattern."

Counselors and denominational workers say sexual misconduct has invaded big-city superchurches, small-town pastorates and both ends of the theological spectrum.

If virtually all pastors are tempted to sin sexually, why do some fall and others don't? Any adequate answer is complex. A decision to stray is seldom an isolated action, say both counselors and offenders, but is more often a confluence of circumstances and motivations, few of them simple.

Woodruff said those who succumb often fit one of two profiles -- the "prima donna" and the depressed pastor.

"The prima donna pastor is one who operates out of a lot of power and control, loses touch with appropriate boundaries and overdirects people's lives," Woodruff said. Such a leader "develops a sense of 'I can do no

wrong," he added.

Central to this type of thinking is the idea of entitlement, Woodruff explained, "that somehow they are entitled to certain behaviors that others are not entitled to. ... That's the most dangerous pattern because that person seems to be a repeat offender."

The prima donna principle has been played out in recent years not only in the highly publicized televangelist scandals but also in a few Baptist megachurches, like Prestonwood Baptist in Dallas, where former pastor Billy Weber was forced to resign after being accused of a series of sexual affairs with church members.

The modern megachurch presents an unusually ripe setting for prima donna pastors, the counselors agreed. The megachurch tends to flourish under a charismatic, authoritative personality, who often operates in a realm somewhat removed from his parishioners and therefore tends to become larger than life in their eyes -- and ultimately his own.

Some of these superchurch pastors eventually begin "living above the law," concluding "the rules don't apply to me," explained sex-abuse expert Marie Fortune of Seattle, who has written a book on pastoral sexual misconduct.

This "Lone Ranger" pastor, as Fortune calls him, inhabits not only the rarified air of the megachurch and televangelist but also the more mundane world of the county-seat pastorate. This is the world of the depressed pastor.

Explains Roy Woodruff: "The other extreme is the depressed pastor, whose judgment becomes cloudy because of very low self-esteem and a kind of depression in which he can function but not very well. So he becomes more vulnerable to relationships that provide gratification."

For many people, pastors included, the extramarital affair begins not in a search for sexual gratification but in a desire to be understood. "It's someone who knows your stresses, who likes you -- a soul mate," explained one female observer. "It becomes very easy to think that sex is just an extension of friendship."

The prima donna and the depressed pastor share one fatal weakness, counselors agree -- isolation.

"Isolation is the greatest enemy," said chaplain Jensen, who has dealt with wayward pastors in his counseling practice, as a member of a church personnel committee, and in hospital psychiatric wards.

In his own field of pastoral counseling, Jensen said, those practitioners most likely to become romantically involved with their clients are "those who are practicing in isolation, not talking every day at work with a group of colleagues."

"That really defines the high-profile pastor," he explained. "He seems to be in front of everybody all the time, but he seems to himself to be very much alone."

Added Woodruff: "The more isolated one becomes from a supportive group of peers, the greater the risk."

Couple that with a heavy workload, Woodruff said, and you have the most common recipe for sexual misconduct.

Why? "You are giving out a lot and not doing anything to take in -- spiritually, emotionally, relationally -- and you are probably having diminishing positive interaction with your own spouse and family. It creates more possibility of burnout."

Ironically, a pastor can become vulnerable to an affair at a time when, for all appearances, he is at the height of his career, having achieved most all of his goals. It is then that some pastors wake up suddenly and ask themselves, "Is this all there is?"

David Matthews was a prominent Southern Baptist pastor in 1986, at the peak of a promising career, when his extramarital affair became public. It cost him his job, his marriage, his reputation and very nearly his livelihood.

"You can reach a point in ministry where those career goals have been met, the striving that goes with a growing career dies off, and other needs tend to surface," he recalled in an interview with Associated Baptist Press.

Matthews said he did not consider himself sexually vulnerable at the time and in fact was unaware of the personal needs that prompted his fall. "I was pretty blind to my needs, the deeper, more emotional areas."

"A self-sufficient person has a tendency to fail to deal with a lot of emotional issues because you really are not aware they are there until you discover it in some unfortunate way."

What need sparked his relationship with a female church member? "The capacity to trust another person emotionally, which I had not allowed myself to do in other relationships."

The relationship was not sexual at first, he said. But it became sexual, and eventually became known to the church.

He was left with neither his wife nor his lover. "From that point forward, the marriage was broken. And I had no further contact with the other person involved."

He was able to salvage something of his career, however. He now is pastor of an interdenominational church in another state. He volunteers to tell church members about his past, but few have asked. He remarried four years ago.

Matthews counts himself blessed, since many fallen ministers emerge with less. He said he misses the contact with his former pastoral colleagues, but he also feels sorry for them, many of whom are afraid to confront their needs, even with each other. "They sense that opening up too much is a high-risk thing."

But opening up -- confiding in a trusted counselor, colleague or peer group -- is precisely what most pastors need, according to counselors Jensen and Woodruff.

"I wish every pastor had a trusted consultant with whom he could talk," said Woodruff. Such an arrangement provides support, accountability and a break from the isolation that goes with the profession, he said.

Ideally, Woodruff added, it should be a paid counselor, to assure objectivity, and the church should pay for it. "Some pastors achieve that through a small support group of other pastors, but it's pretty rare."

Jensen, an associate with the Baptist Center for Ethics, said he has seen pastor-support groups work. "These are people who love you enough to tell you the truth, who will let you be who you are, instead of needing you to be someone you're not."

It is equally important, however, for pastors to deal honestly with their personal needs -- physical, spiritual and emotional -- the counselors said. They should attend to the "ordinary things" that constitute self-care, Jensen said, including prayer, family time, vacations, time apart from the congregation, continuing education and time alone.

"We need the courage and grace to face ourselves," Jensen concluded. Those who end up in extramarital affairs, he said, are finally forced to do just that, "to say, 'I'm a needy soul too.'"

"I just wish it didn't have to be so public and final."

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Watch for warning signs
of sexual misconduct

- 1) Is the person doing a lot of counseling that is beyond his or her scope of responsibility?
- 2) Is the person not taking care of himself or herself, canceling vacations, neglecting time with family?
- 3) Does the person tend to sexualize conversations?
- 4) Are mechanisms of accountability being ignored? Is lay leadership discouraged? Does everything in the church focus on the pastor?

Source: Marie Fortune, sex-abuse specialist, author of "Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin" and "Is Nothing Sacred?: When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship"

Precautions for pastors:
How to avoid sexual misconduct

- 1) Don't engage in physical touching in a private setting.
- 2) Have some trusted person or persons with whom you can talk freely about yourself and your work.
- 3) Keep constant check on your marital and family relationships, since problems there put you at greater risk in other relationships.
- 4) Allow adequate time off from the job.
- 5) Apply common-sense self-care.

Source: Roy Woodruff, executive director of American Association of Pastoral Counselors

With sexual misconduct,
all suffer in blame game

By Greg Warner

(ABP) -- Who's to blame?

Is it the pastor who abuses his ministerial authority by taking advantage of a trusting, vulnerable church member, dragging both into sexual sin?

Or is it the church that puts its pastor under incredible pressure to perform, robs him of the freedom to be human, then denies him the resources to deal with his human frailty until he suddenly crashes to earth a broken

vessel?

"I feel like I'm responsible for the decisions I made," said David Matthews, who was a prominent Southern Baptist pastor in 1986 when his affair with a fellow church member became public. It cost him his job, his marriage, his reputation and very nearly his livelihood.

"It doesn't help me to say it was because of the job pressure or the ministry or anything. These were decisions I made, for whatever reason, that I have to bear responsibility for. We preach forever that there is only real redemption when there is an honest acceptance of responsibility."

Blaming the church for its high expectations is too easy, Matthews said. "Let's face it, there is stress and pressure in almost any kind of job," he said.

"I don't want to make my problem the church's problem," said Matthews, 53, now pastor of an interdenominational church in another state. He remarried four years ago.

Granted, pastoral pressure is tremendous, he said, and ministers are held to a different standard. But most of the pressure Matthews felt was self-imposed, he said.

"We pastors buy into an unrealistic image too and feel pressure not from church members but (pressure) to be self-sufficient."

Most counselors agree there is enough blame to go around.

"I work every day with pastors," said Mark Jensen, a Baptist counselor and chaplain. "I am in touch with the absolutely impossible expectations they have of themselves and the congregation has of them. To the extent they buy that and internalize that, they set themselves up to be a failure every day."

To survive over the long haul, pastors need to make "a sober theological analysis" of what they can give, said Jensen, chaplaincy supervisor at North Carolina Baptist Hospital in Winston-Salem.

Sympathy for pressured pastors has its drawbacks, says Marie Fortune, a sex-abuse expert from Seattle. "The question is, where do we place the primary responsibility?"

Sure, church members expect too much from their pastors, Fortune said, "but that's not what is causing him to do this."

"We need to say, 'Look, it was wrong. It was unethical behavior.'"

"Many people in some way try to remove the responsibility of the pastor. I want to provide a corrective to that," said Fortune, a United Church of Christ minister and author of the book "Is Nothing Sacred?: When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship."

Some church members want to excuse the pastor and even slip into denial "because of the pain of recognizing this person who is so important to so many people could also be doing things that are harmful."

"It's not fair to the pastor or congregation to ignore the problem."

David Matthews now looks at his situation with the benefit of seven years of hindsight. What he sees is that he and a lot of pastors suffer when they are unwilling or unable to acknowledge their neediness.

"Ultimately the minister has a serious responsibility ... to tend to his or her deepest emotional needs, to his or her marriage, and to avoid getting caught up in some career track ... so that you feel like you can't deal honestly with people. You end up hiding things from yourself, without even knowing it."

"Maybe some of us can be negative examples of what happens when we don't take care of our lives."

There's little reward for pastors who admit their neediness, however.

"Many folks in churches don't want to hear about the pastor's struggle," conceded chaplain Jensen. "They need the pastor to have it all together."

"There are church members exactly like that," agreed Matthews. "They want God-like ministers who can just give them answers. But others are comforted in knowing the minister is human and has needs, and is finding appropriate ways of meeting those needs."

For some pastors who find it impossible to admit their needs, or find no audience that will listen, the only way out is a drastic one. Some court disaster, becoming involved in illicit, even flagrant, relationships. Such a professional death wish often hits the most promising and talented of preachers.

"It does seem that those who get propelled to the top and get so isolated there might be trying to commit professional suicide in order to say, 'That's not the way I am. I'm just like you,'" noted Jensen.

Matthews said such a description doesn't fit his situation but he has seen it happen. "Some pastors who are under pressure are looking for a way to stop the world and get off."

But Fortune insists most offending pastors violate ethical sexual boundaries long before they commit professional suicide. Their cries for help come only after they have abused their pastoral authority and do not excuse the behavior.

"It's not about sex," she said flatly.

"It's a misuse of power. Some people like to use their power in that way. ... It's the misuse of the role to the detriment of other people."

"It's a very attractive profession for anyone who is looking for vulnerable people, because that's who we work with. And there is very little training and very little supervision. So it is a very open field."

"If you are wanting to take advantage of vulnerable people and do this in an unfettered setting, then I would recommend the church."

"The need for all of us in ministry is to realize we are all at risk to cross these boundaries every day because we are dealing with vulnerable people who have expectations of us."

Some pastors "spend a lot of time denying that they have power," Fortune said. "The power that comes with a pastor is a given ... and if we don't recognize and deal with it we make the situation worse."

Roy Woodruff, executive director of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, agrees pastoral power is ripe for abuse.

"It certainly does create an opportunity. There are no controls. The average parish pastor has no one he reports to or is supervised by. And he has a lot of needy people coming for help. A pastor who could be needy himself can exploit the needs of others."

Even for sexual relationships between pastors and parishioners that are described as consensual, abuse of power is an issue, said Woodruff, a Baptist counselor.

"Consensual sex with a significant power imbalance can be just as abusive. ... Whenever it is a professional-client relationship, in whatever area, there is a power imbalance."

Sexual misconduct is usually a career-killer for pastors, at least when it becomes public. Some who can slip out of sight quietly frequently resurface in the ministry later, whether or not the problems that prompted the fall are resolved.

David Matthews, whose fall from grace was as public as any in recent Southern Baptist history, considers himself fortunate to still be in the ministry. "It almost was a career killer. The church here was literally the only job opportunity."

"Since 1986, there has been a great deal of grace in my life. I am extremely grateful to have a place to do the things I have prepared to do."

Some people who have known Matthews for years say he has grown from the experience, that his preaching is more sensitive and thoughtful.

"A lot of life's experiences will do that for you ... (but) I feel like in many ways I'm more equipped for some kinds of ministry than I was 10 years ago. And I value my ministry more than I did."

"People in the darkness need to know there really is grace in the world. There is a place of beginning again and going on."

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Pastoral infidelity takes toll
on church, successor testifies

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- First Baptist Church lies in a small city on the east coast. It is a 350-member, moderate, Southern Baptist congregation. About 40 percent of its members are persons of color. The church has deep roots in its community, going back 70 years. It is committed to staying in the neighborhood, which is rapidly transforming from suburban to urban in character.

But First Baptist has had little time to focus on challenges related to ministering in a changing community. Three years ago, rumors began to fly that the pastor of nine years was involved romantically with a married woman in the church.

Confronted, the couple admitted the rumors were true. The church asked for the pastor's resignation immediately. He was gone within a week.

"It doggone near killed the church," his successor, who came to the church in 1992, told Associated Baptist Press. He asked that the church not be identified.

Though he didn't know it until moving to the church, the pastor says it was not First Baptist's first experience with sexual misconduct by a minister. In fact, it was the third pastorate in a row marred by talk of immorality.

The former pastor's immediate predecessor survived an attempted firing amid widespread acknowledgement of an affair with a church secretary. The pastor before him was fired for allegedly molesting teenagers.

Still, neither of those episodes was as devastating to the church as the last, the current pastor said.

Based on reports he has heard involving friends and acquaintances over the years, he said First Baptist's experience may not be all that unusual. "It's an awesome epidemic," he said. "A lot of my buddies, they're falling like flies -- liberal and conservative."

But the church is a case study of the devastation that can be left behind when a pastor falls from grace.

Though he began his new ministry fully aware of the church's

circumstances and believed the church, despite its problems, had attractive qualities, the current pastor got the first hint of the unique challenge before him during the interview process with a search committee from First Baptist.

The search process involved a background check by a detective. And the search committee demanded that members of the old church's deacons and church council be included in interviews about whether the prospective pastor had had any hint of marital problems.

"I thought that was a little odd, but now that I've been here, I understand exactly why they did that," he told ABP.

The search committee seemed preoccupied with establishing that their new pastor and his wife have a strong marriage. As pastor at First Baptist, he has become even more convinced of the need to keep it that way. "It's caused me to be extra cautious. I've seen the hurt. It's still here."

When he arrived, he was met by a great need for pastoral care. Some people, however, were reluctant to open up immediately, feeling if one pastor had betrayed their trust another should be suspect. Over time, he said, "I have assumed the role of pastor and most people have allowed me to claim it."

Pastoral care had been the previous pastor's Achilles' heel. He had a reputation for being very effective at counseling church members and offering spiritual direction one-on-one.

Those gifts placed him in situations ripe for abuse, his successor said. Women -- many physically attractive -- were drawn to what the counseling relationship offered them.

"He would be to them everything their husbands were not. He would listen to them, take them seriously and give them respect" -- in stark contrast often to husbands who "take them for granted."

Adding to the vulnerability of the situation was "our priestly, prophetic role." Hearing the preacher expound on deeper thoughts and insight, admiring parishioners can attribute heroic qualities to their pastor.

"It's like a power thing, in a sense. There's a power attached to the pastor and intimacy set up in one-on-one counseling. There's a set-up there, I believe. You're bound to get an opportunity. The best solution, I believe, is to decide ahead of time it's not going to happen."

An affair developed with a key leader in the church. She was a deacon and a pillar of the congregation. In terms of impact on the church, "it couldn't have been a worse person," the current pastor said.

She, her husband and children were part of a close-knit circle of friends closest to the pastor and his family. The scandal, the new pastor believes, was hardest on that group. Some of the couples left the church. One couple immediately befriended the new pastor. Another still keeps its distance.

When news of the relationship broke, both attendance and giving plummeted. Families left by droves -- some who sided with the fallen pastor and others so offended by the situation they wanted no part of it.

Other members "saw it for what it was and said it wouldn't prevent them from being a part of the church. Those are the type you can build a church around."

The crisis devastated the youth group. One teenager who had admired and looked up to her pastor was crushed. She told him she could no longer trust anything he had to say. Close friends to the old pastor's children, at one time the core of the youth group, are no longer involved in church.

The new pastor said any minister tempted to interject an affair into the life of a church ought to consider carefully, "Is it worth it?"

"It's not just a man and a woman. It's far reaching. It's like taking a feather pillow and cutting it up and shaking it in the wind. How are you ever going to get all those feathers back in that pillow?"

"You cause your church to lose it's credibility when you do that," he said.

People can overlook it when lay leaders or politicians are rumored to be adulterers, saying as long as they perform their job it's nobody's business what they do on their own time. "You can't say you don't care with a preacher. We should be at least trustworthy."

Surprisingly to the new pastor, the most accepting people were the senior adults. Granted, they were shocked by their pastor's behavior, but they were the most willing to put it behind them and move on, he said.

Slowly the church has begun to recover. "After six months, we turned it around," the pastor said. "Now we're holding our own. We're not growing by leaps and bounds." For the first time, new people are coming into the church that don't know about the previous pastor.

Last year the church pledged its budget and appears ready to do so again. They recently hired a full-time associate pastor and a part-time minister of education, two positions left vacant in the wake of the crisis. "We're back to where we were in '90, and it's a good feeling to be moving forward," the pastor said.

The former pastor is "very bitter" with the terms of his dismissal and other problems left unresolved when he left, his successor said. He "blames the church" for contributing to the emotional state that led to his indiscretion. He complained that church demands kept him too busy for family. He was dogged by problems throughout his nine-year tenure, the new pastor said, and "still does not feel like what he did was bad or wrong."

The former pastor, who happens to be an old friend of his successor, now works in a secular business, but he has performed pulpit supply duties in another church. That church was prepared to hire him, but he declined. "I wouldn't be surprised if he would go back to a church someday," his successor said.

"Other churches can be forgiving. This church will never forget."

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Prevention best protection
in sexual misconduct cases

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- When it comes to protecting churches from damages associated with sexual misconduct, the proverbial ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, according to a Baptist legal specialist.

Brent Walker, general counsel at the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee, said the reported incidence of sexual misconduct by clergy and other church employees is escalating and drawing greater attention in the courts and the media.

"More clergy are sued for sexual misconduct than for any other reason," Walker said. "It is much wiser and easier, not to mention more cost

effective, for churches to take steps to avoid this problem than to deal with its consequences."

"Most importantly, churches should do this for the sake of preventing harm to potential victims," he said.

Churches ignore this issue at their own peril, Walker warned, because many courts are making it easier for victims to recover damages not only from offending clergy and other employees but also from the church or religious agency involved.

"You would expect ministers to be sued when they exploit their position for sexual or financial reasons, but courts are increasingly extending liability to the church or organization where they work."

Churches, like all employers, are required to exercise a "reasonable" degree of care when hiring people, Walker said. Particularly in hiring ministers, counselors and child-care workers, what is "reasonable" amounts to a "relatively high degree of care" because of the fiduciary relationship that exists between some church employees and parishioners.

That relationship, Walker said, carries the moral and legal expectation that a position of power and trust not be abused or exploited for personal gain.

Churches' responsibility to exercise "reasonable" care applies not only to the hiring process, but also in supervising both employees and volunteers.

Walker said the price for churches failing to act responsibly as employers can be high in a number of areas, including shattered lives, wrecked marriages, scarred children and derailed careers. In addition, the financial costs can be staggering.

He cited \$2.7 million in punitive damages awarded by a Minnesota trial court in a child-molestation case and reports that a New Mexico Catholic archdiocese may have to seek bankruptcy protection because of sex-abuse lawsuits seeking \$50 million in damages.

"Courts are less and less inclined to wink at abusive behavior by clergy and churches," he said.

Walker suggested five precautions churches may take:

-- Conduct a thorough background check when hiring ministers and other employees and soliciting volunteers, paying particular attention to any allegations of sexual misconduct.

-- A minister, other employee or volunteer accused of sexual misconduct ordinarily should be suspended while a full investigation is conducted. Because the church has an obligation to protect ministers and others in its supervision from unsubstantiated charges, the investigation should be conducted as carefully and privately as possible.

-- Professional rehabilitative treatment should be required for ministers and other employees not terminated after their involvement in sexual misconduct.

-- Churches have a moral and legal obligation to disclose substantiated incidents of sexual misconduct when a prospective employer inquires about a former minister's employment record.

-- Maintain adequate liability insurance covering sexual misconduct.

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