

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL  
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES  
Historical Commission, SBC  
Nashville, Tennessee

\*\*\*\*\*

A S S O C I A T E D B A P T I S T P R E S S

\*\*\*\*\*

Editor: Greg Warner Phone: (904) 262-6626 Fax: (904) 262-7745

February 8, 1994

IN THIS ISSUE:

- \* Trustees fire president of Florida family agency
- \* Florida newspaper gets backing from board
- \* Sex-abuse verdict costs Miami church \$4.2 million
- \* Church, gay group work to avoid confrontation
- \* Ethicist finds gambling to be life-or-death issue
- \* Common ground among Baptists often overlooked, speaker says
- \* Roger Williams' legacy lives on in Baptist group

Trustees fire president  
of Florida family agency

By Jack Brymer

LAKELAND, Fla. (ABP) -- Richard Phillips, president of Florida Baptist Family Ministries for the past 10 years, was forced to resign Feb. 3 after a daylong closed-door session of the agency's board.

"During this meeting, as well as prior committee meetings, it became apparent that the president and the board no longer share the same philosophies concerning growth, maintenance of the programs, financial management, and management techniques," the trustees said in a statement released by chairwoman Jacqueline Perrin.

Phillips declined comment, saying only that he had agreed to the statement released by Perrin.

Florida Baptist Family Ministries has been in financial distress for more than two years. An agency of the Florida Baptist Convention, Family Ministries operates children's homes on three campuses, as well as a retirement center and group homes for the developmentally disabled.

Charles Hodges, the agency's vice president, will serve as acting president until a permanent replacement is employed.

Hodges acknowledged the agency's financial difficulties. "Those challenges have been faced by both board and staff with adjustments made to keep the institution on a solid financial basis," he said in a prepared statement. "Our church family across Florida can rest assured that this ministry will be well managed and appropriately monitored by staff and trustees."

The agency's financial woes became public last March when the trustees announced a second round of budget cuts, totaling \$865,000, which forced the termination of 20 employees, displaced several children and caused the temporary closing of some children's residences at each of the campuses in Lakeland, Miami and Tallahassee.

The news created considerable concern among Florida Baptists. In May, the State Board of Missions asked for an explanation of the financial

situation, claiming, "Our credibility is on the line."

On Sept. 21, trustees learned of an expected \$270,000 budget shortfall and agreed to suspend services to residents of the Northwest Florida Children's Home until January 1994.

But the "straw that broke the camel's back," according to a trustee who asked for anonymity, was a confrontation between Phillips and Lloyd Godwin, administrator of the Central Florida campus in Lakeland, during which Godwin resigned.

Less than a week later, on Jan. 27, the board's executive committee met in Lakeland, which led to the special called meeting of the board and ultimately Phillips' resignation.

The trustees' Feb. 3 statement noted that during Phillips' tenure the agency had been reorganized and had shown considerable growth in its services. Hodges likewise had praise for Phillips.

"Richard has shown vision and progressive thinking demonstrated in the advances made in serving needy children, families, senior adults and the developmentally disabled during his presidency," Hodges said in his statement.

"I respect and appreciate each member of the board of trustees who has taken seriously their trust from Florida Baptists to always keep watch over a widely dispersed ministry that is so critically important."

-30-

Florida newspaper gets  
backing from board

By Bob Allen

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Commissioners of the Florida Baptist Witness pledged unqualified support for the weekly newspaper Feb. 4, a move editor Jack Brymer hopes will end lingering doubts about the publication and its future.

In his report to commissioners Feb. 4 in Orlando, Brymer said they sent mixed signals to Florida Baptists during their last meeting, when an effort by some commissioners to censure Brymer eventually became a vote affirming him.

Brymer asked for a statement to resolve lingering doubts about whether the commission fully supports the newspaper's role in Florida Baptist life. The Witness is the official newsjournal of the Florida Baptist Convention.

Brymer, who observes his 10th anniversary March 1, noted that in recent years commission members have repeatedly chided him for bias, inflammatory content and failure to promote changes in denominational life. Yet, at the same time, the nine-member commission has voted each year to affirm Brymer's overall job performance as being in accordance with the commission's policies and guidelines.

"These dual actions -- criticism of skills but affirmation of performance -- are sending confusing signals to Florida Baptists, as well as to your staff," Brymer said.

A stronger statement of unity was needed, he said, to arm the staff for an upcoming circulation promotion effort.

"Until this commission comes to the point it can positively and enthusiastically endorse the publication as a vital part of the ministry of Florida Baptists, we will never be able to 'sell' the Witness to our constituency, regardless of our marketing and/or circulation strategies," Brymer said in his report.

"If you don't believe in the Witness and its importance, neither will anyone else in this state," he said.

Commissioner J. C. Mitchell offered a motion pledging the commission's "enthusiastic support" for the paper and urging "church leadership and membership to subscribe to the Witness to further the work of the Florida Baptist Convention and the cause of Christ."

The motion was approved without opposition but with one abstention.

The ambivalence expressed at last August's meeting left Brymer confused and frustrated, the editor said in his report. He said he recently came to realize that he had allowed concern for commissioners' agenda to compromise the paper's commitment to truthful reporting.

"In our efforts to incorporate everyone's concerns, we are bordering on the Witness being edited by committee, or commission, rather than by an editor," he reported.

"I have put more censorship on myself that you have put on me," Brymer added. "I've not done that out of fear for my job. I've done that more out of respect for your position."

"But I can no longer surrender my mind and my pen to the aspirations of factions within our great convention, or even to this commission," he said. "I must release my spirit to the greater cause of my calling -- to report truth no matter to whom or to where it leads me."

Among the concerns expressed in Brymer's report was that some members of the commission are pastors of churches which do not subscribe to the paper. That came as a revelation to other commissioners. So did the acknowledgement that some members had apparently been nominated to the board for the purpose of changing the Witness to reflect a more sympathetic slant toward the conservative leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention.

New commissioner Arthur Lawrence, an appeals-court judge from Tallahassee, said "nobody gave me an agenda" when he was nominated to the commission. Lawrence also said he was shocked that a trustee would sit on the commission while his church did not subscribe.

However, commissioner Scott Leonard said the fact that he does not want members of his church to read the paper reflects his strong disagreement with the current editorial philosophy and not a lack of support.

"If I gave (the paper) to new Christians in our church, I would confuse them a lot," said Leonard, pastor of Palm Harbor Community Church in Palm Harbor.

Bob Parker, pastor of First Baptist Church of Markham Woods Baptist in Lake Mary, said he supports the Witness and considers it important. But as an elected trustee, he said, "I have the same right as Jack (Brymer) does to talk about how I perceive truth."

-30-

Sex-abuse verdict costs  
Miami church \$4.2 million

MIAMI (ABP) -- A Dade County Circuit Court has levied a \$4.2 million judgment against Wayside Baptist Church of Miami for negligence in hiring a youth minister who sexually abused nearly a dozen teenage boys.

Although the youth minister, Keith Geren, was terminated from the staff and is currently serving a 15-year prison sentence for sexual battery, the jury found the church negligent not in its supervision but in its hiring practices.

A church official said the youth minister had served previously in a Florida Baptist church and his references were "squeaky clean." He acknowledged, however, that no police or other background checks were made.

"The conduct of the church was inexcusable," Ron Weil, attorney for one of the boys, said in closing arguments in the case. "The boys weren't hanging out with the wrong crowd. They were hanging out where they thought they were safe."

During a worship service at the church Feb. 6, Pastor Murrill Boitnott asked church members to pray for the attorneys and for the plaintiffs as they decide the appropriate action to take in response to the judgment. The church has malpractice insurance, and an attorney for the insurance company told the congregation they are considering at least six options, including appeal.

The jury awarded one of the boys, Daniel Artis, \$4 million for his emotional pain and \$179,000 for psychological treatment. Artis claimed he was abused by the youth minister at least four times in his mid-teen years, from 1986-1988.

Wayside Baptist's facilities suffered \$4 million in damages by Hurricane Andrew in August 1992.

-30-

-- By Jack Brymer

Church, gay group work  
to avoid confrontation

By Ken Garfield

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) -- Looking to defuse a potential confrontation with First Baptist Church of Charlotte, organizers of a North Carolina gay-rights rally have changed the starting time of the June 5 event.

Instead of assembling at noon in a park behind First Baptist, leaders of the annual statewide gay-rights parade will hold off assembling until 1 p.m. -- after Sunday worshipers have gone home or to their favorite restaurant.

The unusualness of gays and Southern Baptists agreeing on something even as basic as a starting time was not lost on parade co-chairman Dan Kirsch.

"Everything's within the realm of possibility," said Kirsch, who hand-delivered a letter to church officials Feb. 2 citing several proposed concessions. "We just see it as working with our neighbors."

"We're very happy to accommodate their request and respect their right to worship," said Kirsch, operations manager for North Carolina Dance Theatre. "We want them to respect our right to peaceably assemble on public property right after they've finished with their worship service."

Kirsch's group, sponsors of a three-day gay-rights celebration culminating in the parade and rally, also volunteered to keep participants from parking in church spaces.

The event, sponsored by North Carolina and Gay Pride in Durham, is expected to draw 4,000 marchers to Charlotte. An interfaith religious service is set for the Saturday before the parade, also in Marshall Park.

While restating his opposition to homosexuality and the June 5 event, Charles Page, pastor of First Baptist, said Feb. 2 he can live with a parade that won't put churchgoers and gays in each other's path.

"My original point was I was fearful of confrontation," said Page, who wrote the city's parade committee urging it to reject a permit for the gay-rights event. "I'd still rather not have it, but everyone has freedom to express themselves. ... I appreciate their willingness to work with us."

Despite the peace offerings -- Page even chatted for a moment with one of the gay rights organizers outside the church Feb. 2 -- it's clear that neither side has budged on long-held principles.

Kirsch said no consideration was given to moving the parade to Saturday, as some critics sought. "Bending over backward would have been changing the date of the march," he said. "We're not prepared to do that right now."

Page, whose lobbying helped kill a proposed anti-bias ordinance in Charlotte two years ago, said he won't stop speaking out against homosexuality.

-30-

-- Reprinted with permission from the Charlotte Observer.

Ethicist finds gambling  
to be life-or-death issue

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Paul Griffin Jones II sees gambling as a life-or-death issue. When Jones fought gambling in Mississippi, he and his family received 64 death threats, and 14 attempts were made to harm them.

Jones, executive director-treasurer of the Mississippi Christian Action Commission, described his experiences to a group of gambling opponents in Texas Feb. 4. He also described the challenge the Texans face in opposing casino gambling in their state.

"If you get visible, if you get vocal, they'll want you, they'll go after you," he warned the board of directors of Texans Against Gambling at their annual meeting in Dallas of Texans Against Gambling Feb. 4

Jones recounted his family's brushes with drive-by shootings, stalkers and vehicular assaults:

-- An attempted assassin with a 9 mm automatic gun shot 11 holes in the side of his car, including one that missed him by only four inches.

-- A stalker followed his wife from a mall, down a busy highway at high speed, and into the parking lot of a police station before realizing where she was leading him.

-- A driver forced Jones' car off an embankment, doing \$4,000 worth of damage to his car and missing a steep cliff by just half a mile.

Pointing out that some of the death threats and violent acts likely were due to his positions on racial justice and family violence as well as gambling, Jones said any public stand for righteousness carries risks.

"Be paraboloni," he challenged the Texans, citing the New Testament Greek word that the Apostle Paul used to describe one who gambled his life and fortune for the sake of what was right.

Among the risks facing Texans Against Gambling is the risk of failure, unless they can overcome the kind of hurdles that hindered anti-gambling forces in Mississippi, said Jones.

Baptists and other conservative Christians in Mississippi were unable to defeat gambling in their state, he said, because of their inability to create alliances across boundaries of theology, politics, economics, gender and race.

"Mississippi lost the fight against gambling in 1619 when the first Africans were brought to what is now the United States and slavery was imposed," he said. The resulting legacy of mistrust between the races in Mississippi made it difficult to build coalitions against gambling three

centuries later.

That division became even more deeply entrenched in the 1950s and 1960s when Southern Baptists failed to stand with African-Americans in the struggle for civil rights, he said.

"We came to them when we wanted something from the black community, but we were unwilling to invest ourselves in the African-American community," Jones said.

Likewise, Baptists and other evangelicals failed to relate to others -- the disadvantaged, women's groups, public education, the business community and mainstream denominations -- until the need arose for coalition-building in the fight against gambling. Then, Jones said, it was too late.

Because conservative Christians were unable to build alliances, there are now 19 casinos operating in Mississippi -- including four in what had been the nation's poorest county -- and pawn shops are the number one growth industry along the state's coast, Jones said.

Seventy percent of the money wagered in casinos is bet by Mississippians, he said. "That's \$500 million that's not being spent on real goods and services."

Broadening the base of support for Texans Against Gambling -- including providing the organization a more secure financial base -- was a major topic of discussion at the board meeting.

Citing a Gallup poll that revealed two-thirds of Americans see nothing wrong with gambling, Dan Martin, executive director of Texans Against Gambling, pointed out that includes a considerable number of church-going people.

"We must find a way to make gambling a front-burner issue again in our churches," Martin said. "And we don't have a year (until the next Texas legislative session) to do it. Now is the time to begin fighting casinos. Now is the time to begin building public opinion."

The multimillion-dollar casino industry has "pulled out all the stops" in an effort to gain entry into Texas, he said. But unlike the well-financed casino lobby, Texans Against Gambling is struggling to survive financially.

"The next two to three months will tell the tale of whether this organization will continue to exist as a full-time presence in Austin," the state capital, Martin said.

In other business, the board agreed to consider joining the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission in filing a legal brief urging the state attorney general to rule that a statewide constitutional referendum would be required before casino gambling could be legalized in Texas.

The board agreed to operate under the name "Texans Against Gambling," retaining the name "Texans Who Care" only in formal legal documents.

-30-

Common ground among Baptists  
often overlooked, speaker says

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The tragedy of the disunity among various Baptist groups today is that they are standing on common ground and don't even know it, according to a Massachusetts pastor.

Tom McKibbens, pastor of First Baptist Church in Newton Centre, Mass., reminded a group of 100 Baptists from several states that all Baptists in the United States worked together under one denominational roof for a brief time

in the 1800s.

Since then, however, the Baptist legacy has been marred by division.

"On the denominational battlefield, we all have reasons to apologize," McKibbons said. "We are friends, compatriots, in some cases the closest of friends, who for reasons beyond our control found ourselves not only separated, but sometimes fighting against each other.

"We are surrounded by casualties, any one of which is too many. Some of us here are staggering in this place with wounds which refuse to heal unless some power beyond our own does the healing."

McKibbons spoke to a Feb. 3-5 conference jointly sponsored by the Roger Williams Fellowship of American Baptists and the Northeast and Virginia chapters of the Alliance of Baptists.

Both the Alliance and the Roger Williams Fellowship emphasize freedom of conscience. The Roger Williams Fellowship has worked in this area among American Baptists since 1935, and the Alliance, formed in 1987 by moderate Southern Baptists dissatisfied with the conservative direction of the Southern Baptist Convention, has emphasized freedom of conscience and other Baptist beliefs.

Exploring the theme "Together ... for Freedom's Sake," the conference at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington featured worship, workshops and discussion groups.

McKibbons pointed to a period of about 30 years -- from 1814 to 1845 -- when Baptists North and South worked together in one denomination. Acknowledging that Baptists were never entirely free from the tension created by the issue of slavery, he said they briefly marched united under the banner of missions.

The Triennial Convention -- a national denomination of Baptists -- was forged, but African American Baptists soon grew displeased and began seeking independent associations.

"This independent movement of black Baptists would never have taken place had it not been for restless black Baptists who had been ushered up to the balconies of many a Baptist church in both the North and the South.

"In spite of the great advances we have made in this generation, a truly inter-racial as well as inter-regional organization of Baptists is yet to be seen in this land."

Even though the Triennial Convention was not an inter-racial organization, McKibbons said it represents the closest thing Baptists have ever had to an inter-regional one. He pointed to five leaders within that denomination as examples: Richard Furman, William Staughton, Thomas Baldwin, Francis Wayland and Richard Fuller.

Furman was "the George Washington of Baptists," McKibbons said. The first president of the convention, his presence inspired and unified the widely separated Baptists.

Staughton, the first corresponding secretary, was one of the most respected ministers of his day, leaving scores of published sermons -- including one McKibbons characterized as among the finest of the 19th century.

Baldwin, secretary of the Triennial Convention, more than anyone else urged the denomination to include home missions as a part of its task.

"Furman, Baldwin and Staughton were the leaders during the only time in our history when Baptists North and South were truly united," McKibbons said. "When they died ... the common ground began to shift.

"The early rumblings of sectionalism began to be heard, growing progressively louder until a great fissure split the common Baptist ground into North and South in 1845, a preview of the civil earthquake to come 15 years later."

Wayland and Fuller, like the nation, were torn by the sectionalism and ensuing fight. But they represented perhaps the greatest example of how two Christians on opposite sides of an issue can find commonality. In 1856 a series of letters between the two was published and contained a startling graciousness and genuine affection for one another.

"They (letters) showed how great and good people could differ, and differ in love. ... Richard Fuller (and) Francis Wayland were the best of men in the worst of times.

"The unity of Baptists, of course, was never reclaimed after the Civil War," he continued. "But there were those days from 1814 until 1845 when, at least in denominational structure, Baptists spoke with a unified voice. We stood on common ground.

"The tragedy, of course, is that we still stand on common ground, but we too often don't know it. The level of Baptist ignorance about Baptists in other sections of the country is extraordinary."

The joint conference is a step in the right direction, he said.

Alan Neely, professor of missiology and ecumenics at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey, warned of the trouble religion can cause.

Pointing to Baptist forebear Roger Williams, Neely said Williams came to be "suspicious of religion, particularly institutionalized religion. And he became more accepting of people whose views radically differed from his."

The trouble with religion, Neely said, is threefold: religion can become the rationale for oppression and manipulation of others; it can divide, separate and isolate people from each other; and it can become the underlying ideology for intolerance and rejection of others.

Neely challenged conferees to love one another by getting to know their neighbors, asking about their faith, refraining from judging them and trying to begin an interreligious dialogue.

-30-

#### Roger Williams' legacy lives on in Baptist group

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Roger Williams, founder of the first Baptist church in America, would have much in common with a modern-day group that bears his name.

The Roger Williams Fellowship of American Baptists is an organization of about 200 people, most from the Northeast, who are committed to freedom of conscience and religious liberty.

Williams, one of the most significant religious figures in colonial history, regarded separation of church and state as essential to ensuring soul freedom. Williams' vision is now protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

The Roger Williams Fellowship grew out of a controversy of the 1920s, when a group of "fundamentalists" tried to enforce religious conformity among American Baptists, said Phil Shear, a longtime group member and director from Jefferson, Ohio.

Another group emerged to contend for freedom and inclusiveness, Shear said. Fifteen years later, that informal group organized into the Roger Williams Fellowship with 45 charter members.

The organization has several objectives, including:

-- to bring together a varied group of American Baptists who believe in the value of frank and free discussion and who earnestly desire to preserve

- and promote the traditional Baptist spirit of free, creative inquiry;
- to sustain and promote Baptist heritage of open and free discussion, respecting diversity in viewpoints;
  - to pursue critical, creative theological inquiry that is informed by biblical and historical criteria, as well as developments in the area of human sciences;
  - to encourage an understanding of ministry that transforms faith into public policies and social institutions that ensure peace, freedom and justice for all;
  - to widen and strengthen the fellowship of those who share these goals.

Shear and his wife, Betty Mae, have done extensive research on the history of the Roger Williams Fellowship. Even though the group embraced diversity from the start, all of the original members were men, noted Betty Mae Shear, who is secretary-treasurer of the group.

She recalled a time in 1936 when a woman pastor, whose husband also was a pastor, requested membership. She was denied it on the basis of her gender. Now not only are there women in the organization but they take active leadership roles, she said.

When leaders of the Roger Williams Fellowship uncovered the episode while researching the group's history, they searched for the woman and gave her a lifetime membership.

-30-

-- By Pam Parry

\*\*\*\*\* END \*\*\*\*\*