

# Associated Baptist Press

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## Florida Baptist Witness editor resigns citing 'harassment' by paper's board

By Greg Warner

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) – Jack Brymer, editor of the Florida Baptist Witness for the past 10 years, resigned abruptly Aug. 26, citing "continued harassment" from the newspaper's governing board.

Brymer's resignation came at the end of a two-day meeting of the Witness commission in Orlando, Fla. The nine-member governing body is elected by the Florida Baptist Convention, which owns the 110-year-old Jacksonville-based publication.

For more than a year, the commission, while affirming Brymer's performance, has repeatedly debated the editorial practice of the Witness, particularly its role in reporting the ongoing controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. For more than an hour Aug. 26, commissioners discussed Brymer's use of stories from Associated Baptist Press, an autonomous news service that critics say is slanted in favor of moderate Baptists.

A motion asking Brymer to avoid using ABP deadlocked, 3-3. But Brymer resigned anyway, saying commissioners can't put the issue to rest.

The issue is not ABP, Brymer said, but his professional integrity and editorial freedom. "The issue is whether or not people are going to be adult enough and open enough to the truth," he told commissioners.

"I'm in it for the integrity of the paper and my own conscience, which says if you are going to be a newsjournal you've got to keep the people informed, even when it's not popular and when some power people don't like it."

Brymer, 58, said his efforts to please the board have become "hopeless," according to transcripts of the meeting. "I just don't see the wisdom of me continuing. I just can't do that and maintain a degree of credibility."

Last August commissioners voted to affirm Brymer despite an effort by some commissioners to restrict his coverage of controversial issues and to align the newspaper with the conservative element in the state convention.

Last February, at Brymer's urging, commissioners again pledged support for the Witness in an attempt to quell what Brymer called "lingering doubts" about their affirmation.

But it was clear at the most recent meeting in Orlando that those concerns had not been resolved.

Bob Parker of Lake Mary, a longtime critic of Brymer and Associated Baptist Press, made a motion that the Witness not print any stories from ABP.

Parker said ABP is linked to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a group of moderate Baptists who hold "radical" theological views. Noting that the Southern Baptist Convention took action in June to distance itself from the Fellowship, Parker said the Witness should follow suit by abandoning use of ABP.

Brymer reminded commissioners that 85 percent of Florida Baptists favor the use of ABP, while only 4

percent are opposed, according to a study conducted last year by an independent research firm.

Associated Baptist Press was founded by a group of Baptist editors Sept. 19, 1990, the day the SBC Executive Committee fired the editors of Baptist Press, the denomination's official news service. ABP was established with an autonomous board of directors, all of whom are Southern Baptists. It receives about 46 percent of its funding from the Fellowship.

ABP was formed before the Fellowship, Brymer told his commissioners, and is not affiliated with the Fellowship. It was endorsed by the Southern Baptist Press Association, the organization of state newspapers, because of fear that Baptist Press' credibility had been compromised by the firings and continued political pressures.

Most Baptist newspapers now use material from both ABP and Baptist Press. The Witness ranked 11th last year in use of ABP stories among Baptist newspapers. At least three-fourths of the national news in the Witness comes from Baptist Press, the rest from ABP, Brymer estimated.

John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention, told commissioners he is against restricting Brymer's editorial freedom. But he asked that Brymer establish a practice of choosing Baptist Press articles over ABP when stories are available from both news services. "That would be my stance," said Sullivan, who participates in commission meetings as an invited guest.

Last August Sullivan spoke against the motion to restrict Brymer, saying he would consider withholding the state convention's \$207,500-a-year support of the Witness if directors "circumvented" the editor.

But restricting the editor is not a bad idea if the restriction is "healthy and good and wise," said Parker, one of the Executive Committee members who voted to fire the Baptist Press editors in 1990. "There is no such thing as absolute freedom for most of us. All things have perimeters."

Eliminating ABP stories would find favor among conservative pastors in Florida, Parker added, which would increase subscriptions. "I believe it would help our paper. I want to help."

"This is the worst thing we could do in passing this motion," said commissioner Arthur Lawrence from Tallahassee. "To tell the editor what he can and cannot publish is to eliminate his credibility, as well as the credibility of the Witness."

"If we tell Jack he can't use ABP, we will strike a blow to the very heart of this 110-year-old publication," Lawrence continued. "... This undermines what journalism is about, including Baptist journalism."

J. C. Mitchell of Winter Park offered a substitute motion that the commissioners "suggest" that Brymer use Baptist Press "as much as possible," following Sullivan's request.

The vote on the substitute was a tie, 3-3, with Parker, Mitchell and Scott Leonard of Palm Harbor voting in favor. Lawrence, Michael Mott of St. Augustine and Dot Adams of Pensacola voted against. Acting chairman Waylon Moore, from Tampa, did not vote. Two commissioners -- chairman Lance Anderson of DeFuniak Springs and Thomas Ranew of Ocala -- were absent.

A similar motion was tabled. Parker's original motion was dropped. And commissioners went on to other business.

However, at the close of the meeting Brymer said he wanted to respond to the discussion.

He voiced frustration that most commission meetings in recent years have focused on the same debate. While the commissioners have declined to restrict him or amend the editorial guidelines, which gives the editor the freedom to determine the newspaper's content, they have repeatedly complained about his decisions, Brymer said.

"I can't operate that way," he said. "You've given me guidelines in which to operate. If you want to amend the guidelines to say I can't use certain things, then I think you ought to do that."

To affirm the editor's performance, but then to say he should do the job differently, questions his judgment, Brymer said. "If I am not making reasonable judgments, you ought to fire me," he said.

Brymer said he has tried to represent fairly both moderates and conservatives in the hope "that eventually we might could come back together."

"I have tried to walk, as best I can, a line that would keep (in the convention) as many people on both sides of the controversy as you can," he said. "And I'm not sure I can do that. You either are going to have to get somebody (as editor) committed to the conservative cause or somebody committed to the moderate cause. And it will probably be simpler on everybody to do that. Either way ... you are going to cut out a sizeable section of the convention. ... "

"You can replace the name 'Brymer' as editor and you can get someone in here that is even a fundamentalist if you want to. The issues will continue."

"I'm not angry," Brymer concluded, "but you reach a point where you admit that it is an impossible task."

Mitchell, a conservative who has supported Brymer, called the resignation "another great tragedy of the convention controversy."

"But because of where Florida Baptists are, where some of our leading conservative pastors are, Jack knows it's not going to be any different," Mitchell told his fellow commissioners. "That's unfortunate. But I understand his frustration. Even though he says he's not hurt, it hurts me that we have reached this point."

Waylon Moore, acting chairman, asked Brymer to withdraw his resignation or delay it until November. But Brymer said that would be "putting off the inevitable."

Commissioners agreed to appoint a committee to negotiate a departure date and terms of Brymer's severance. Brymer said he has no immediate employment plans.

Brymer became editor of the Witness in March 1984 after 17 years as managing editor of the Alabama Baptist.

Brymer is a native of Alabama. He holds a bachelor's degree from Samford University in Birmingham and a master's degree from University of Alabama. He is the only person to serve two consecutive terms as president of the Southern Baptist Press Association (1993-94).

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