

Associated Baptist Press

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'Stealth support' from executive prompted resignation, Brymer says

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) — Jack Brymer, who resigned abruptly as editor of the Florida Baptist Witness Aug. 26, said "stealth support" from John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention, was a major factor in his decision to step down.

Sullivan attends meetings of the Witness Commission, a nine-member group which oversees the paper's work on the state convention's behalf, as an invited guest. He participated in a discussion Aug. 26 about whether Brymer should print articles from Associated Baptist Press, an independent, alternative news service funded by moderates.

While he is against restricting the editor, Sullivan told commissioners, he would "suggest" Brymer use ABP only if a similar article is unavailable in Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist Convention's official news service. Sullivan then left the meeting because of schedule demands.

Moments later, acting on Sullivan's suggestion, commissioners considered a motion to ask Brymer not to use ABP for a period of six months. The motion deadlocked, 3-3. But at the end of the meeting, Brymer announced his resignation, saying commissioners could not put the issue of editorial freedom to rest.

In an interview, Brymer accused Sullivan of "stealth support, which really was no support at all."

"I don't see how you can support someone and not support them at the same time by saying, 'I wish you would do different than you are doing,'" Brymer said.

Part of the editor's role, Brymer said, is to defend his decisions against those who disagree. Critics, he said, are "sort of like a steroid; they keep me pumped up." But, he said, "I cannot fight my own brothers in missions. If the man you're closest to is not pleased with your work ... that hurts."

Brymer said Sullivan has been supportive of editorial freedom in the past, coming to Brymer's aid last year when commissioners considered restricting the editor. At the recent meeting, however, Sullivan called ABP biased and criticized an editorial Brymer wrote about the SBC presidency.

Brymer said he considered himself and Sullivan to be on the "same team" and believed his efforts to adapt the Witness to a fragmenting constituency while maintaining editorial integrity bolstered the convention's work.

"When I recognize I'm not really a member of the team if I don't make correct political decisions, it's futile for me," Brymer said. "My conscience won't let me continue."

Sullivan declined to discuss his comments at the meeting or Brymer's charges. He told ABP only that he is "disappointed" by Brymer's decision to resign.

Brymer said Sullivan told him privately that he did not intend to undermine his position and intended his comments to help the editor. Another source who confronted Sullivan said the executive director insists he did not withdraw support for Brymer and that he has always held the opinion that the Witness should give preference to Baptist Press stories.

In addition to Sullivan's statements, Brymer cited several other factors in his decision. Among them was repeated criticisms from commissioner Bob Parker of Lake Mary -- criticisms Brymer said were based on "outright falsehoods."

Parker, pastor of Markham Woods Baptist Church in Lake Mary, was not available to comment. Parker is a member of the SBC Executive Committee, which oversees Baptist Press. He is an outspoken critic of ABP, which was established in 1990 after Parker and other members of the Executive Committee voted to fire the editors of Baptist Press.

Parker, who made the Aug. 26 motion that Brymer not use ABP, has been the subject of recent ABP stories about a lawsuit filed against him by a former church member to obtain access to church financial records.

As other factors in his decision, Brymer cited "unfounded and false claims against ABP which are nothing more than politics," "failure of the commission to move beyond political objectives," and the "futility of battling a hidden agenda."

"That agenda was by the political conservatives to get rid of Brymer," the former editor said.

Although Brymer's 10 years at the Witness have been punctuated by frequent differences with commissioners, his ability to make friends out of his adversaries has muted much of the criticism. Most observers thought he would be able to ride out the recent storm. But votes affecting policies of the state paper should not be a popularity contest, Brymer said.

"What is crucial here is a much broader issue that is the heart and soul of who we are as Baptists -- freedom of expression, freedom of speech," Brymer said. "And while these people that are very kind and supportive are saying at the same time 'When you can, don't use a certain news source,' it just flies in the face of that very principle."

"You've got to get beyond" the question of the editor's popularity, Brymer said. "You've got to get to the principle, the issues. That's the point Dr. Sullivan and everyone else is missing here."

The commission's 3-3 vote over use of ABP was "not over Brymer," he said. "It was over whether or not Brymer would be allowed to use his professional judgment and Christian conviction to make those decisions without being coached by people to do the 'right' thing."

"I may be wrong," he said, "but I think those people (commissioners and Sullivan) are oblivious to that."

Brymer said he already "had done basically what the commission had asked me to do" about using less ABP copy.

Last year the Witness ranked 11th among Baptist papers in use of ABP articles, down from third a year earlier. Brymer said three fourths of the Witness' national news is from Baptist Press. For the commission to resurface the issue now indicates "a total disregard for the efforts I have made in the past to hear them," he said.

Brymer said his recent experience makes him pessimistic about the future of Baptist journalism. Baptist state papers "represent the very heart and soul of who Baptists are, and that is free people," Brymer said.

"I'm not about to suggest my departure is pivotal, (but) at what point does the dam break or the wall cave in? You can keep removing the foundation stones and the wall will stand for a long time. But you remove enough of them and it only takes one to bring the whole wall down."

"I don't think the wall's going to cave in just because I move. That's just not the case. But I do think it's one more brick out of the foundation of who Southern Baptists have been and are."

Brymer said he has no immediate plans "other than to try to get rid of the garbage that has collected in the past and to get my thinking straightened out and get well and head for the future, whatever that may be."

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Witness chairman denies 'harassment'; others lament Brymer's resignation

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- The acting chairman of the Florida Baptist Witness Commission denied charges by editor Jack Brymer that Brymer was "harassed" into resigning Aug. 26.

While the publication's governing board has often criticized Brymer for his news judgment, "I have not felt that our meetings have been consistently negative or violent or unloving or unfeeling," said Waylon Moore of Tampa, who presided over Brymer's resignation in the absence of the commission's elected chairman, Lance Anderson of DeFuniak Springs, who is in Africa on a mission trip.

"I have felt Jack had almost total support, consistently, of the board members that I knew," he added.

Moore said no determination has been made about terms of Brymer's severance or how long he will remain on salary, but commissioners are honoring his desire to leave as soon as possible. Moore said he is polling members of the board in an effort to set up a meeting in September when "we will make plans for the searching out of a new editor and possible repositioning of the Witness to meet the personal and church needs of Florida Baptists."

Reaction to the resignation was mixed, but supporters and critics alike express admiration for Brymer. Some persons contacted for comment decried the situation which prompted him to resign, while others said it probably was inevitable.

James Watters, president of the Southern Baptist Press Association, said Brymer "has represented the very best in Christian journalism" over the years, embodying the adage "trust the Lord and tell the people."

"Now it would appear that his exemplary ministry has become victim of 'kosher' journalism, a curious result of the wish to protect Southern Baptist readers from all news other than a ritual reporting of events, edited by prescribed rules," said Watters, editor of the Northwest Baptist Witness in Portland, Ore.

Baptist Press director Herb Hollinger said: "Any time an editor feels the need to resign, it is an unfortunate situation. Jack has demonstrated over many, many years he has exceptional qualifications. I'm very sorry to hear that happened. I don't know all the circumstances, but I find it very unfortunate that something couldn't be worked out."

Scott Leonard, a member of the Witness Commission and pastor of Palm Harbor Community Church in Palm Harbor, Fla., said he feels for Brymer but understands his decision.

"I love and respect Jack. I also like Jack and I hurt with him for the pain and stress he is experiencing right now," Leonard said. "The more I have understood Jack's perspective on the controversy in our convention, the more I have believed that he would struggle in the light of the climate among Florida Baptists. I felt if he was going to satisfy the Witness commissioners' definition of balanced reporting, he would struggle between compromising his convictions and resigning. I would request that Florida Baptists pray for Jack and for the commission as we seek for God's man to take on this great responsibility of editing the Florida Baptist Witness."

Another conservative Florida pastor said Brymer is simply out of step with the conservative mood of the state.

"In my personal opinion, Jack is a good man, a genuine Christian man. However, I do not believe he represents the basic, grass-roots Florida Baptist or Southern Baptist," said Michael Hailey, pastor of First Baptist Church of Lakeland and a former conservative candidate for state convention president. "His more moderate predilection was more than obvious to me in his editorials and his selection of news sources."

Hailey said the Witness Commission should replace Brymer with an editor "who has been a part of the

conservative resurgence. If that's where we are as a convention, and I think it is, then I think the state Baptist paper ought to be there too."

Pat Anderson of Lakeland, moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Florida, said Brymer was victim not of the grass roots but of a political process that "put people on the Witness Commission to get Brymer out."

"Jack has really tried to be fair," he said. "The message is you can't be fair and work for the Southern Baptist Convention. Fairness is not what they want. They want control of all information, ... making the state paper just a mouthpiece for the ruling elite."

"The commissioners have made it clear they are more interested in political expediency than responsible journalism," said Greg Warner, executive editor of Associated Baptist Press, an autonomous news service.

"When a talented and committed journalist like Jack Brymer, who has shown grace and determination to make an impossible situation workable, finds he can no longer continue the effort in good conscience, I worry for the future of Baptist journalism and Baptist freedom in general," Warner said.

Brymer resigned Aug. 26 after members of the paper's governing board debated for the fourth time in two years his coverage of controversial news, and particularly of his use of Associated Baptist Press. Critics say ABP is slanted in favor of Baptist moderates.

Bob Parker, a member of the SBC Executive Committee which oversees Baptist Press, the denomination's official news service, asked the commission to adopt a policy banning the Witness from using ABP articles.

Parker said ABP is perceived to be "connected" to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the organization of moderates upset with the SBC's rightward leadership. The Witness should ban the news service to follow suit with the SBC's decision in June to distance itself from the Fellowship, Parker argued.

Commission members deadlocked on Parker's motion, 3-3. But Brymer resigned at the end of the meeting anyway, saying he was convinced the board could not put concerns over his editorial policy to rest.

Warner said ABP "has become the focus of anger for the SBC's conservative leadership, who are unhappy because they can't control what the rest of us read and know."

"When they can't assail ABP on the merits, they resort to guilt by innuendo," Warner said, including what he called a "national campaign by some SBC leaders to link ABP with the Fellowship." While ABP receives funds from the Fellowship, as most SBC agencies did before the June SBC vote, ABP is not controlled by the Fellowship, Warner said.

"ABP's job is to tell the unvarnished truth," he said. "We will continue to do that as long as there are Baptists willing to listen."

Charlie Martin, pastor of First Baptist Church of Indian Rocks and a leading conservative, echoed Parker's claims that ABP is linked to the Fellowship. Florida Baptists should end all contact with both, Martin said.

"It's kind of like a church split," he said. "We try to do everything to work it out while they are here. But when they leave, we go about our own business. ... The situation was never going to heal as long as we tried to keep an association that has been severed."

Martin said he "thought the world of Jack." But just as a pastor wants loyalty from his staff, Martin said, the next editor "needs the same type of loyalty to the Florida Baptist Convention."

The Witness, like most other state Baptist newspapers, uses stories from both ABP and Baptist Press. According to Brymer, Baptist Press stories outnumber ABP 3-to-1 in the Witness. Ten state papers used more ABP than the Witness in 1993.

Guy Henderson, editor of the Baptist Record of Mississippi, said while he has received letters to the editor criticizing his use of ABP, there has been no pressure from officials to censor the copy. "I think the value of ABP has been proven and there is no need trying to defend it," he said.

Brymer has "made a very significant contribution to Southern Baptist journalism," Henderson said. "I really hate to see him go out this way. ... I think Florida is going to be the big loser, but we all lose some."

Jack Harwell, editor of Baptists Today, a moderate news publication based in Atlanta, called Brymer "a

creative and courageous editor, offering a balanced but honest interpretation of a difficult time in Baptist history."

"It speaks ill for the future of Southern Baptist journalism if this type of crucifixion is to become the pattern of fundamentalists, who seem determined to control every single aspect of religious thought and news," Harwell said.

Harwell said there are "very clear parallels" between Brymer's troubles and forces that brought his own dismissal as editor of Georgia's state paper, the Christian Index, in 1987.

One factor in Georgia was the "vacillation and cowardice on the part of state leadership who could have been supportive," Harwell said. Critics also stacked the board of the Christian Index with "fundamentalists" and canceled subscriptions, then blamed the editor for the circulation loss, Harwell charged.

Baptist state paper editors have been under intense pressure during 15 years of controversy in the SBC, but most have managed to survive. Harwell predicted trouble for other editors in states with a divided constituency. In South Carolina and Alabama, where long-tenured editors are nearing retirement, he said, "monumental struggles" will ensue as successors are sought.

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Pastors' conference relocates to accommodate Falwell

By Trennis Henderson

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) — Jerry Falwell, who has made news lately with controversial accusations against Bill Clinton, is not welcome in the president's home church, says its pastor.

As a result, an invitation to Falwell to preach at next month's Arkansas Baptist Pastors' Conference, originally to be held at Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, was first withdrawn, and then re-issued after the meeting was moved to another site.

Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., will be the closing speaker for the Oct. 31 conference at First Baptist Church of Little Rock, according to Wallace Edgar, president of the pastors' conference. The state convention annual meeting, which begins the following day, will be held across town at Immanuel Baptist Church.

Uncertainty about Falwell's on-again, off-again participation in the conference has centered around its original location — where President Clinton is a member -- and Falwell's promotion of an anti-Clinton videotape on his "Old Time Gospel Hour" television program.

Edgar, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Texarkana, invited Falwell to speak at the conference, noting that "several people said it would be a boost in evangelism, soul-winning and witnessing."

Following a meeting this summer with Immanuel pastor Rex Horne, state convention Executive Director Don Moore and convention president Ronnie Rogers, however, Edgar sent a letter to Arkansas Baptist pastors announcing that he had "been asked by some of our state leadership that (Falwell) not be permitted to come." He added that Falwell "said he understood and would honor their request."

Horne, who said he would personally "accept any blame" for asking that Falwell not speak at Immanuel, insisted that Edgar, Moore and Rogers "had nothing to do with the decision."

Emphasizing that "there are bigger issues involved than one issue or one personality," Horne added, "Most people think its Falwell vs. Clinton, which is simply not the case."

Although he initially was willing for Falwell to speak during the conference at Immanuel, Horne said a closer examination of what Falwell was promoting on his television program led him to determine "that I was not comfortable having Falwell in our pulpit."

Noting that Immanuel is "first a church and not a convention center," he said, "I feel a responsibility to our people for what I preach and practice and what we believe together. I feel certain things are appropriate and other things are not."

"I respect the pastors' conference leadership and their right to invite whoever they want and meet wherever they want," Horne said. He reiterated, however, that the move to withdraw Falwell's invitation "was something I requested. The decision was mine alone."

Following the statewide mailout to pastors, Edgar said he was "flooded with letters," most of which favored Falwell speaking at the conference. In response, Edgar contacted Bill Elliff, pastor of First Baptist, about moving the pastors' conference there.

Elliff, who said he is not a big fan of either Falwell or Clinton, said the decision to host the conference "is not a big deal." "Our decision was not so much pro-Falwell as the right of the pastors' conference to have who they want to have," he said.

"I would be sympathetic with Rex's concerns that if Falwell came there it would be a media event more than if it was at another church," Elliff said.

Despite the controversy surrounding Falwell's presence, Edgar said: "We're looking forward to a great conference. We're expecting God to do some great things."

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Video prompts concern over Falwell's trip to Little Rock

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) – Jerry Falwell, a prominent independent Baptist pastor and televangelist, is no stranger to controversy. A Jacksonville, Fla., television station recently canceled his program in response to protests about the show's political content.

The protestors picketed WTLV-TV in opposition to what they described as sexually explicit language used by Falwell to describe allegations that President Bill Clinton made unwanted romantic advances toward a state employee when he was governor of Arkansas in 1991.

Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour" carried excerpts from a videotape which accused Clinton of arranging for the murder of an Arkansas investigator, among other claims. Falwell, calling Clinton "the most radical and controversial president in our nation's history," offered the tapes to viewers for \$43 each.

The videotape, which Falwell began selling in May, has drawn widespread criticism and media coverage.

Falwell's representatives asked to air the video on Southern Baptists' ACTS cable network, but the Radio and Television Commission declined, said Deborah Key, RTVC vice president for network operations.

"We basically have an unwritten policy that we try to keep the networks out of the political arena," Key explained. "The Falwell piece was not only very politically charged but was making some very strong allegations that we didn't feel were appropriate for the networks."

Marv Knox, editor of the Kentucky Baptist Western Recorder, noted in a recent editorial that spreading unsubstantiated rumors about Clinton damages conservative Christians' credibility. If Falwell and others "have hard evidence to back up their assertions, they should hand it over to prosecutors," Knox wrote. "If not, they should apologize."

Arkansas Baptist Pastors' Conference president Wallace Edgar, who invited Falwell to speak at the statewide meeting next month, said he has heard of the video but he has not seen it.

Matthew Watson, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Mabelvale, is among Arkansas Baptists who have seen

Falwell's promotion of the video. As a result, he said, "I will attend the pastors' conference but not the part when Jerry Falwell's there."

Describing himself as "a conservative, fundamental Baptist preacher," Watson said, "I'm not against Falwell for his doctrine or theology. I'm saying we don't need his political baggage in Arkansas." He said he has spoken with several pastors throughout the state who feel the same way.

Noting that Falwell "did a tremendous job preaching at the Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference in Orlando" earlier this year, Edgar added, "By and large, our pastors are saying if we want to come we will; if not they don't have to."

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-- By Trennis Henderson

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