

Associated Baptist Press

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

March 28, 1995

In this issue:

- Missionary journalist hired in Florida, promises to 'move beyond' controversy
- Fellowship moves benefits plans for staff, missionaries away from SBC
- Whistle-blower says Annuity Board fired him for uncovering computer scam
- School voucher bill resurfaces in U.S. Senate
- Disbanded Atlanta church earmarks \$1.2 million for new theology school
- Northwest Baptist Convention finds buyer for building
- Sale of building to Baptist seminary draws criticism from Presbyterians

Missionary journalist hired in Florida, promises to 'move beyond' controversy

By Greg Warner

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Missionary journalist Michael Chute was named editor of the Florida Baptist Witness March 27, promising to "move beyond" the controversy that divided the newspaper's governing board and prompted the resignation of the last editor.

"I will be the editor for all Florida Baptists," said Chute, 44, who has served 12 years as overseas correspondent for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, stationed most recently in Hong Kong. A 20-year veteran of Baptist journalism, he is former managing editor of the Word & Way, the newsjournal of Missouri Baptists.

Chute was elected unanimously by the nine-member commission that governs the Witness, the official newsjournal of the Florida Baptist Convention. He succeeds Jack Brymer, who resigned last August complaining of "continued harassment" from the commission.

The political and theological tensions that have divided the Witness commission in recent years did not surface in Chute's interview with the group, the new editor said. He said he was not asked about his allegiance to the conservative movement that now holds sway in the Southern and Florida Baptist conventions -- a point of contention between Brymer and some commissioners.

"What happened in the past is in the past," Chute said from his home in Shawnee, Okla. "I have no agenda, and the commission did not try to set one with me."

Chute, who begins his duties June 1, said he does not expect to be hampered by the recent turmoil over the Witness's role in reporting the ongoing controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. "I don't think Florida

Baptists want to be political," he said. "I think they want to move beyond controversy. The Lord is doing great things in Florida."

"My No. 1 objective is to keep the Witness focused on what it is Florida Baptists are about, keeping the focus on God and on Christ," he said.

Chute said he is "concerned" about political tensions inherent in the situation but not apprehensive about his new assignment. "I feel like God's been in control of this decision."

Asked if the commission assured him of his editorial freedom, Chute said, "The commission is wanting openness and honesty." The newspaper's statement of editorial freedom, adopted at Brymer's suggestion in 1986, is still in force, he noted, and "it is a strong statement."

Chute said his commitment is to "be true to myself and be true to my Lord." "If all of us keep focused on God's will ... the paper will be successful," he said.

"I think Mike Chute is a fine man and an excellent journalist," said Brymer, who was editor 10 years. "My prayer for him is that he will be able to exercise his calling without harassment and intimidation and with the total support of his board."

Brymer said he hopes those who support press freedom for the Witness will rally behind their new editor. "It was not so much the noise of my critics -- who obviously were few in number but loud in volume -- but the silence of those who support a free and open press that produced my hopelessness," he said.

Lance Anderson, chairman of the Witness commission, echoed Brymer's assessment. "Brymer resigned in the face of unrelenting organized attempts by a small number of persons to impose censorship of coverage of news about Baptist activities," Anderson said. But the commission as a whole, he said, has a "history of support" for its editors and will support Chute.

Working in Chute's favor, Brymer said, is the fact he will work for the same commissioners who hired him. "All of those who elected me had long since left the commission." And, Brymer added, Chute's overseas service has allowed him to avoid identification with any political faction in the SBC.

Other colleagues agreed Chute's missionary experience will serve him well.

"He would bring no political baggage with him to the editorship of the Florida Baptist Witness," said Bob Terry, editor of the Word & Way, which Chute served as managing editor from 1978 to 1982. "As a foreign missionary, he would represent that which is the glue of our denomination."

As overseas correspondent for the Foreign Mission Board, Chute reported on Baptist mission work in Asia and the Pacific rim. He previously served in a similar position in South America. For the past two years he has been on leave from the FMB to complete his doctorate in mass communications, which he will receive in May from the University of Southern Mississippi.

A native of Illinois who grew up in Missouri, Chute currently serves as assistant professor of journalism at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, where he earned a bachelor's degree in journalism. He also holds a master's degree in communications from Southwest Missouri State University. He and his wife, Katherine, have two children: Ryan, 15, and Kristen, 11.

FMB President Jerry Rankin said he had "mixed emotions" about losing the missionary services of Chute and his wife, who also is a communications professional. But he added: "In my relationship with him, he has demonstrated unquestionable Christian character and integrity, and his leadership and people skills would be above average."

Chute was chosen over three other finalists: Leon Simpson, a former design editor for the SBC Sunday School Board; Tom Strode, director of media and news information for the SBC Christian Life Commission; and Mark Wyatt, editor of the California Southern Baptist.

Chute said commissioners did not ask him if he plans to publish news from Associated Baptist Press, an autonomous news service that critics say is slanted in favor of moderate Baptists. Brymer's use of ABP prompted

repeated criticism from some commissioners.

For the time being, Chute said, he will continue the paper's practice of publishing news from ABP and Baptist Press, the official Southern Baptist news service, but without identifying those sources. "Then we'll look at the situation and see," he said.

"We have two news services at our disposal," he continued. "But we want to do Florida Baptist stories. ... I want us to do our own stories whenever possible, and we will be running wire service stories only when we can't get our own story."

A priority for the newspaper, Chute said, must be to reverse a decline in subscriptions, a trend that has hurt virtually all Baptist publications. Witness circulation -- now at 45,000 -- has been cut in half in the last decade.

"We'll have to try to find out what it is Florida Baptists are interested in and what will help them make decisions," Chute said. "We will give them news and information first of all about what's happening in Florida and then in the Southern Baptist Convention."

"I'm going to be a visible editor," he promised. "I'm going to be in the churches, be with the people, among the pastors."

Chute said he plans no staff changes at the Witness. "If it's not broken, don't fix it. From a technical side, it's not broken at all." He said Interim Editor Lindsay Bergstrom "has distinguished herself" since assuming the post in September.

-30-

Fellowship moves benefits plans for staff, missionaries away from SBC

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Sent shopping by Southern Baptist Convention leaders for a new carrier for retirement and insurance plans for its employees and 62 missionaries, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship announced March 27 it will transfer its business from the Southern Baptist Annuity Board to the Minister and Ministries Benefit Board of the American Baptist Churches in the USA.

The move was negotiated because of growing concern that the Dallas-based Annuity Board would be pressured to drop coverage for the Atlanta-based Fellowship, an alternative missions-delivery agency for moderate Southern Baptists, said Fellowship Coordinator Cecil Sherman.

SBC leaders have "resolutely sought to force those of us in CBF from every nook and cranny of the Southern Baptist house we helped build," Sherman said in a prepared statement. Recent actions by the SBC Executive Committee, Sherman continued, "have made it clear that a decision to exclude us from participation in the Annuity Board is not a matter of 'if' but 'when.'"

The American Baptist "M&M Board," as it is commonly called, will offer employee benefits to the Fellowship "in response to the critical needs of our Baptist colleagues in the ministry of Jesus Christ," said Daniel Weiss, ABC general secretary. The benefits are offered with no stipulation about organizational ties to the 1.5 million-member ABC.

The decision "is consistent" with a tradition of providing benefits to staff members of "recognized Baptist organizations" including the Alliance of Baptists, the Baptist Joint Committee, the Progressive National Baptist Convention and the Baptist World Alliance, Weiss said. It also responds "to a partnership beginning to express itself" between the Fellowship and American Baptists in projects like mutual support of Central Seminary in Kansas

City, Kan., he added.

Sherman said he has written Annuity Board President Paul Powell to inform him the Fellowship will end its relationship with the Annuity Board by July 1.

Thomas Miller, senior vice president for public relations at the Annuity Board, said he had no comment about the change. "Our position has been this is entirely their (the Fellowship's) decision," he said.

The changeover will automatically affect only future contributions. It will be up to individual Fellowship employees whether to leave to-date contributions to their retirement plans with the Annuity Board or withdraw them for transfer, Miller said.

In addition to providing services to Southern Baptist churches and ministers, the Annuity Board manages retirement plans for about 300 agencies described in guidelines as "in the bounds of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Most are agencies under the SBC's control or operated by Baptist state conventions. A few, however, are organizations formed largely by and for Southern Baptists but with no formal ties to the denomination. Among those are Mid-America and Luther Rice seminaries and Criswell College -- all independently owned conservative alternative schools formed in the 1970s -- and the Fellowship, a moderate missionary-sending enterprise formed in 1991.

Last year the SBC Executive Committee questioned Annuity Board policies on managing programs for non-denominational entities. In February 1994 the committee asked the Annuity Board to "discontinue expanding" its retirement programs beyond the SBC. In September the Executive Committee adopted another recommendation requesting the Annuity Board to submit a written report of "all involvement" with the Fellowship, including any contracts.

Annuity Board President Paul Powell, in a letter to Executive Committee President Morris Chapman, said disclosure of contracts with the Fellowship would violate employees' right to privacy but assured the Executive Committee that the Annuity Board was "taking steps to assist" the Fellowship in finding other carriers for its insurance and retirement programs.

The Executive Committee acknowledged Powell's letter at their most recent meeting, in February, and adopted a recommendation encouraging the Annuity Board to provide "expeditious assistance" to the Fellowship in "finding other providers of retirement and insurance benefits to whom the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship programs may be moved."

Chapman declined to comment beyond referring to Powell's letter and the February vote of the Executive Committee, said Mark Coppenger, the SBC's vice president for convention relations.

A report of a blue-ribbon program and structure study committee unveiled in February proposes narrower Annuity Board guidelines that, if adopted, would exclude Fellowship employees from services. Also, Sherman said Fellowship leaders learned their contract with the Annuity Board could be canceled with only 30 days notice.

"We could either sit back and wait for the eviction notice -- and foolishly place our staff and our missionaries at risk -- or we could look for alternatives," Sherman said.

An ad hoc task force explored several options before approaching American Baptists, thinking it a "long shot" that the M&M Board would find a way to extend its services to Fellowship employees, Sherman said.

Because of the Fellowship's small staff and special circumstances of missionaries living overseas, other options for retirement and health insurance services were "limited and costly," Sherman said.

With the M&M Board, Fellowship employees will receive hospitalization and health insurance benefits comparable to those offered by the Annuity Board without additional costs to employees, he said.

"This is the best news I've had in my three years on the job," Sherman said. "There are not many things that keep me awake at night, but the possibility of our staff and missionaries losing their medical coverage has been one of them. This generous arrangement with American Baptists is nothing less than a gift from God."

The M&M Board was established in 1911 and is responsible for funds exceeding \$1.5 billion. It serves more than 10,000 pre-retired and retired members and beneficiaries.

The change will sever the only remaining formal link between the Fellowship and the SBC. Last summer the SBC prohibited denominational agencies from accepting funds from the Fellowship.

In the beginning, most funds sent to the Fellowship were earmarked for SBC work. In its first three years, the organization forwarded more than \$8.7 million to the work of Southern Baptist agencies and institutions. As the Fellowship's own missions program grew, however, funds earmarked for the SBC comprised a smaller share of Fellowship receipts. Last year, the Fellowship sent \$983,760 to SBC ministries, 9 percent of the total of about \$11 million handled by the Fellowship.

The offer by the American Baptists to open their M&M program to the Fellowship extends only to the Fellowship's staff and missionaries, and not to the churches that support its work, said Gary Skeen, the Fellowship's financial coordinator. However, current M&M Board policies do permit participation by churches which are dually aligned with the ABC, he said.

The vast majority of churches which support the Fellowship also continue to send funds to the SBC, qualifying their ministers for participation in Annuity Board programs.

-30-

Whistle-blower says Annuity Board fired him for uncovering computer scam

By Toby Druin

DALLAS (ABP) -- A former employee of the Southern Baptist Annuity Board says he was fired for uncovering a computer scam at the Dallas agency.

The Annuity Board said March 28 it has investigated the "allegations of impropriety" in the purchase of new computers for the board but no one has been fired for blowing the whistle. The board "suffered no [financial] loss" in the affair, the statement added.

The allegations of wrongdoing came from Tony Mlakar, a former Annuity Board employee. Mlakar told a Dallas weekly newspaper that he had been terminated "for poor job performance" after reporting what he considered to be "self-dealing" by an Annuity Board employee in the purchase of new computers for the board.

Mlakar, who installed and maintained the board's computers, found that many of the new machines purchased in early 1993 did not work properly. He said that he discovered they were not federally licensed, they had no serial numbers, many components were assembled incorrectly, and others lacked parts.

When he began to look into the matter, he told the Dallas Observer, he found that a board employee who had recommended the purchase of the computers from K.S. Computer Service of Forney, Texas, had business connections with the firm and was in fact purchasing computer components, assembling them and providing them for eventual delivery to the Annuity Board at a considerable profit.

Mlakar said that when he blew the whistle on the employee, an internal audit supported his claims and recommended that the employee be reprimanded. Instead, Mlakar said, he was terminated in July 1994 and Jerry Bell, the employee whose actions he had questioned, was never reprimanded.

According to Mlakar, the Annuity Board paid about \$85,000 for the faulty equipment before it stopped doing business with K.S. Computer, which is owned by a friend of Bell's. The purchases were part of a \$600,000 computer upgrade.

Thomas Miller, senior vice president for public relations, said the matter had been investigated and corrective action taken, but he added the board does not reveal the nature of corrective actions. Miller said that no employee had been terminated for reporting any perceived impropriety, but added that the board also does not discuss the nature of any separation from employment at the board.

The business and financial plan of the Southern Baptist Convention states "that as a normal procedure each agency of the SBC shall refrain from entering any business transaction with a trustee or employee, or a business enterprise in which a trustee or employee has an interest...."

Contacted by the Baptist Standard of Texas, Miller initially said the board would have no comment on the story. Later, after being told that the Standard had received several calls about the board's handling of retirement funds in light of the newspaper story, Miller responded with the statement that the board had suffered no financial loss and that no employee had been terminated for reporting the problem.

The matter was reported to the Annuity Board trustees at their fall 1994 meeting and they were given a review of the actions taken, Miller said.

"It sounded to me like there was definitely some wrongdoing and [Tony] had uncovered it," recalled trustee Steve Henderson of Lakeland, Fla., who serves on the audit committee. "I expressed real concern that it didn't look good," Henderson told the Observer. "It had the appearance that he was let go because he blew the whistle and embarrassed management."

-30-

School voucher bill resurfaces in U.S. Senate

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bill offered in the U.S. Senate to set up test projects for a "school choice" voucher plan is likely to renew a debate over tax funding of private schools, observers in Washington say.

Two senators announced March 24 that they plan to introduce a bill designed to test school voucher systems. The Low Income School Choice Demonstration Act, co-sponsored by Sens. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., and Dan Coats, R-Ind., would spend approximately \$30 million a year for three years to create 10 to 20 school-choice test projects for low-income children.

"Until now, only middle- and upper-income families have been able to choose the best school for their children," Coats said. "I think all families should have that choice, and this bill provides an opportunity to study how well this concept would work."

Contrary to critics who allege vouchers would lower the educational quality of public schools by robbing them of funding, the senators claim choice plans would stimulate quality by introducing competition into the educational system.

"Schools choice programs should be tested," Lieberman said. "They create alternatives to failing bureaucracies and failing schools. They reward public and private schools that work. And most important, they give our poorest students the chance for a better education and a better life."

But aside from the impact on public schools, some groups say there are constitutional problems associated with public dollars supporting religious schools. The bill would allow any school, public or private, to benefit from the voucher plan.

Melissa Rogers, associate general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington-based religious liberty watchdog group, said that "laundering public money through parents' pockets does not change the fact that

significant tax dollars eventually will be paid directly to parochial schools."

"While the [Supreme] Court has not ruled on vouchers per se, it is settled that one cannot do through the back door what cannot be done through the front," Rogers said.

Rogers also added that the co-sponsors' claim that the bill would give low-income children the same opportunity as other children is false. School choice plans usually fall far short of providing low-income children with enough money to afford private schools, she said.

Similar voucher-style aid programs have been struck down in federal courts in New York and Wisconsin.

Coats and Lieberman co-authored a school voucher amendment to an education bill in the last session of Congress that enjoyed broad bipartisan support but was narrowly defeated.

-30-

-- By Shannon Harton

Disbanded Atlanta church earmarks \$1.2 million for new theology school

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A disbanded Atlanta congregation has earmarked about \$1.2 million from a recent property sale for a proposed theology school at Mercer University.

Emory Baptist Church completed a sale of its property March 7 to neighboring Emory University for \$1.5 million. Eighty percent of the proceeds are designated for a new theology school in Georgia, the Christian Index reported March 16.

Supporters hope the Mercer University School of Theology will open in the fall of 1996 on the Baptist university's Atlanta campus. The school would join the list of theological education alternatives cropping up in response to growing conservatism at seminaries owned by the Southern Baptist Convention.

Among existing alternatives is a Baptist studies program at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, a Methodist school also located in Atlanta. The program is supported by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization promoting missions and theological education alternatives for disenfranchised Southern Baptist moderates.

The 48-year-old Emory Baptist Church disbanded last year. Other recipients of the sale's proceeds include the Georgia Baptist Children's Home and Family Ministries, Georgia Baptist Healthcare Foundation, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and First Baptist Church of Decatur.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

Northwest Baptist Convention finds buyer for building

PORTLAND, Ore. (ABP) -- The Northwest Baptist Convention has found a buyer for its offices in Portland, Ore., clearing a hurdle to a move to nearby Vancouver, Wash., according to the convention's executive director.

The sale will generate between \$750,000 and \$800,000 for construction of a new Baptist Center, Executive Director Jeff Iorg told the Northwest Baptist Witness.

The new building, which is already under construction, will improve parking for staff and provide space for expansion of the Northwest Center of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, which is housed in the convention's offices, said James Watters, editor of the convention's Baptist state paper.

The new location is still in the Portland metropolitan area and is near the intersection of two interstate highways, improving access for seminarians, Watters said.

The convention leaders plan to use as much volunteer labor as possible and hope to hold construction costs below \$2 million, Watters said.

-30-

-- By Bob Allen

Sale of building to Baptist seminary draws criticism from Presbyterians

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- A plan by Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond to buy a permanent building from its current landlord is dividing supporters of the 81-year-old Presbyterian School of Christian Education.

Trustees of the Presbyterian school voted March 13 to sell the largest of the buildings on its Richmond, Va., campus to BTSR, which has rented space on the campus since 1989. BTSR trustees agreed March 20-21 to begin negotiations for the purchase of Watts dormitory and a possible joint-use agreement for Lingle Hall, which currently houses a dining facility and book store.

The Presbyterian school's board said it might sell off other buildings to help offset an annual deficit of \$500,000 and deferred maintenance estimates of \$1 million.

Critics quoted in a March 27 story by Presbyterian News Service said they fear selling off property endangers the school's future and that trustees should have involved more Presbyterians in the discussion before making their decision.

"There has been inappropriate secrecy," said Sara Little, who has taught at PSCE in various capacities for more than 40 years. "Involving the church at large would have been beneficial," she said. "The board should have explored all options before selling off PSCE piece-by-piece to the Baptists."

Isabel Rogers, former General Assembly moderator and PSCE professor, agreed. "I don't believe there has been serious effort to tell Presbyterians about our problems here," she said. "I am distressed that we're turning to the Baptists before we even ask Presbyterians for help."

Trustee chairman Jackson Sadler, however, said the sale is necessary because the school owns more

property than it needs or can afford to maintain. Excess space, he said, "is costing us faculty and program and if the choice is buildings or faculty and program, I think we should choose faculty and program."

PSCE President Wayne Boulton described BTSR as "a buyer we can trust," and said solving the property problems had to be done now. "With a more manageable physical plant," he wrote in a March 22 letter, "we can focus on our programs and mission, continuing to find better ways to prepare the church's future Christian educators."

Sadler agreed. "The way we were going, we had no future, so this will position us to meet the future creatively," he said. The deal with BTSR is "a small step toward a final solution of PSCE's financial problems," he added. "We're trying to get our fiscal house in order so we can embark on a capital campaign that will ensure the school's future."

-30-

-- By ABP staff

END