

Associated Baptist Press

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

July 27, 1995

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Woman fired in ordination flap sues state convention, association

By Bob Allen

GALVESTON, Texas (ABP) -- A woman who was fired from her job as a Texas Baptist Student Union director after being ordained to the gospel ministry is suing her former employer, claiming gender discrimination.

The woman, Raye Nell Dyer, 44, who now lives in Houston, was removed from her campus ministry position at University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston because of controversy over her ordination. Later, after turning down a demotion, she was terminated by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, her employer for 10 years.

The suit, filed July 17 in Galveston County district court, names as defendants the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Galveston Baptist Association and Jack Greever, who recently resigned as the Texas convention's director of student work.

While several controversies have erupted in the past over the issue, Dyer's is thought to be the first lawsuit in Southern Baptist life involving women's ordination, said a spokesperson for Baptist Women in Ministry, a national clearinghouse based in Louisville, Ky.

The suit alleges that Dyer's removal from her director's position at UTMB and subsequent termination by the Texas convention were based on gender and that she was paid at a rate "substantially lower than male counterparts," both in violation of the Texas Labor Code.

Dyer seeks an unspecified amount for compensatory and punitive damages and a permanent injunction to prevent the Texas convention from engaging in "any employment practices which discriminate on the basis of gender."

The suit also charges the Texas convention with "intentional infliction of emotional distress." It cites "continuing" harassment that was inflicted either deliberately or "in reckless disregard of the probability of causing Plaintiff's emotional distress."

Dyer's firing "caused injury and harm" to her professional reputation, as well as "humiliation and embarrassment," the complaint alleges. The firing also "breached the covenants of good faith and fair dealing," the suit continues.

It charges Galveston Association with "tortious interference," alleging that leaders "with malice" interfered with Dyer's employment relationship to the Baptist state convention. In doing so, they contributed to "severe

damages" related to her losing her job as well as "sustained mental anguish and emotional distress," the suit alleges.

William Pinson, executive director of Baptist General Convention of Texas, told the Baptist Standard, the Texas Baptist newspaper, that the convention has done nothing wrong.

"We respect the right of any person to file a suit but do not believe the convention has discriminated against her," Pinson said.

"It is inappropriate for me to comment further at this time, and we pray for a positive resolution of the situation," he added.

Greever declined comment. Greever, 62, stepped down in May after nearly 16 years as student ministries director, saying he believes it is time for new leadership to assume guidance of the program. Following a study leave, Greever is expected to be reassigned.

Both Dyer and her attorney declined to discuss the lawsuit. "This is not something that is really open for debate," said Houston attorney Mike Kerensky. "We know we're right and we're just going to have to let the court decide.

Paul Comer, interim director of missions for Galveston Association, said July 27 he had not yet been served with a copy of the lawsuit. He declined to comment at this time.

Galveston Association's executive board voted 29-10 last August to ask that Dyer be removed from her position at the medical school because of "irreconcilable differences" related to her ordination.

In the Southern Baptist Convention, decisions about ordination are left up to local churches, which ordain their own ministers without denominational approval. Many Baptists believe the Bible prohibits women from serving as pastors, but about 1,300 Southern Baptist women are ordained, according to estimates by Baptist Women in Ministry.

Dyer first sought ordination at First Baptist Church in Galveston in the summer of 1991. Uncomfortable with ordaining a woman, the church's deacons recommended only a "partial" ordination recognizing her gifts and calling to ministry. Dyer appealed directly to the church, which voted narrowly to ordain her on Oct. 6, 1991.

The vote immediately divided the church, however, leading to a delay in the ordination service and a study of ordination by the congregation. Eventually, Dyer withdrew her request to be ordained by the church.

The controversy spilled over into the association, which established a committee to investigate Dyer's theology and make recommendations regarding her future employment at the medical school.

After months of "harassing" phone calls and "slander" by various individuals, Dyer claimed, she left the Galveston congregation and began attending South Main Baptist Church in Houston, in a neighboring association, under "watch care" or partial membership.

Later, she joined the Houston church, which voted unanimously to ordain her in November 1993. Dyer's mother, who supported her daughter's decision to be ordained, attended the ordination service while in the final stages of terminal cancer. Two weeks later, she died.

Back in Galveston, Dyer's decision to go to another church outside the association for ordination was perceived as an act of defiance. An associational BSU advisory committee wrote Greever in February recommending that Dyer be removed from her position at the medical school, citing her "strong-willed determination" to be ordained. Later, the group agreed to defer to the wishes of the association's full executive board, which met in a called session to discuss Dyer in July 1994.

At the meeting, which was attended by reporters from Galveston and Houston, the executive board rescinded the request that Dyer be fired and instead asked the BSU advisory council to work with Dyer to establish guidelines for "reconciliation and healing."

At first, Dyer told reporters she was hopeful for reconciliation. Later, however, she said she was not included in negotiation of the guidelines.

The committee drafted 10 recommendations, including that Dyer agree the manner in which she sought ordination was "divisive and inconsiderate" and that she offer "a sincere apology" to both her former church and association. They also asked that Dyer "agree that this is a family matter and that the press is not to be the vehicle that we use to promote our views," a condition she termed a "gag order."

Dyer refused to accept the guidelines, describing them as "offensive" and seeming to imply "that I haven't been doing my job."

The executive board voted again on Aug. 29, 1994, to ask that Dyer be "removed with haste" from her position at UTMB.

Dyer was later offered another job as a BSU associate, which friends say she turned down because she felt it was not comparable to her previous position. She remained on salary without an assignment until being notified in April that her salary and benefits were terminated effective March 31.

Dyer has also filed discrimination charges with both the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Texas Commission on Human Rights. Neither body has commenced action on her complaint, according to her lawsuit.

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CBF pledges funds for West Texas prisoner family ministry project

By Ken Camp

ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- A proposed "Hospitality House" for families visiting prison inmates in Abilene, Texas, has received a "significant boost" in the form of a \$100,000 gift from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the chairman of a local task force says.

At the July 19 meeting of the CBF Coordinating Council, the Fellowship's global missions ministry group announced the grant to First Baptist Church of Abilene. The church's pastor, Phil Christopher, requested the grant, with endorsement by pastors of Pioneer Drive, Caps and Beltway Park Baptist churches.

"This grant gives a significant boost to the proposed Hospitality House," said Michael Waters, president of Hendrick Medical Center in Abilene and chairman of the local Hospitality House Task Force.

The shelter for the visiting families of inmates will be jointly sponsored by Abilene Baptist Association and Double Mountain Baptist Area, which includes the Haskell Knox and West Central associations. Texas Baptists have also committed funds to the project through their Mary Hill Davis Offering for State Missions.

The grant will enable the associations to begin looking for a building site, Waters said. Construction costs for the proposed facility could be up to \$500,000, but that could be reduced by as much as 40 percent if volunteer labor is used, he said.

Two Texas Department of Criminal Justice facilities are located in Jones County, north of Abilene. The French Robertson Unit, a maximum security facility, houses about 2,900 inmates, and the John Middleton Unit, a transitional facility, holds about 1,900 prisoners.

"Particularly at the French Robertson Unit, there are several hundred visits by family members every weekend," Waters said.

Eunice Chambless of Abilene's Southwest Park Baptist Church has an ongoing ministry to those family members, and she provided the spark to get the associations to respond to their needs, Waters said.

Chambless, a longtime Texas Baptist lay leader and director of the missions development council for Abilene Baptist Association, serves on the local Hospitality House task force.

"This Hospitality House is needed so badly," Chambless said. "People are hurting. And if Christians don't reach out to them, it will be a lost cause."

The 1995 state missions offering allocates up to \$50,000 for the Abilene prisoner family ministry, a similar proposed project in Amarillo and the established Hospitality House in Huntsville.

In nine years, more than 45,000 people have visited the Huntsville Hospitality House, and more than 400 have come to faith in Jesus Christ as a direct result of its ministries.

"The Hospitality House is the most gracious and kind ministry there is around prisons today," said Stanley Wilson, Southern Baptist chaplain at the French Robertson and John Middleton units.

"I'm looking forward to the day when I get a call from a family in Houston that doesn't know where to turn, and I'll be able to say, 'We have a Hospitality House for you here.'"

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CORRECTION: Due to an error in a handout distributed at the recent Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly, Ben Murphy of Tennessee was incorrectly identified in ABP's July 25 issue as a new trustee of the CBF Foundation. Murphy told ABP July 27 that he was asked to serve on the Foundation, but after consideration declined nomination.

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