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Charles Stanley gives up some duties, will resign if divorce becomes final

By Greg Warner

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ATLANTA (ABP) -- Charles Stanley will remain in the pulpit of First Baptist Church of Atlanta -- at least for now -- but will relinquish his administrative duties in an attempt to quiet a dispute over his pending divorce.

Stanley, one of the best known preachers in the country, told the church Aug. 13 he will resign completely if the divorce becomes final.

He and Anna, his wife of 40 years, have been separated since 1992. Anna Stanley first filed for divorce in June 1993. She later sought a legal separation instead but refiled for formal divorce in March of this year, saying attempts at reconciliation had failed.

Stanley, 62, has remained in the pulpit despite criticism that his family problems disqualify him as pastor. Many church members -- and Stanley himself -- say the Bible limits the pastorate to men with intact first marriages. But Stanley insists he is still seeking "reconciliation" with Anna.

Church members debated the biblical qualifications for pastors, particularly from I Timothy, during an emotion-charged four-hour meeting of the congregation Aug. 13. The emergency meeting was called by a group of eight church leaders who wanted Stanley to resign or take a leave of absence.

A day earlier, however, Stanley met with the church's deacons for more than four hours and worked out a three-part compromise which was approved by the congregation Sunday night. Under the agreement:

-- Stanley will relinquish all administrative duties Sept. 1 and be replaced by a seven-man team appointed by the deacons. "The group of seven will recommend to the church the time at which my administrative oversight responsibilities would resume," he told the church in a prepared statement.

-- A committee appointed by the deacons will study the biblical qualifications for pastors and deacons and recommend a church policy within 90 days.

-- Another committee will study the feasibility of constituting the church's northside satellite congregation into a separate church, which apparently would end plans for the historic downtown congregation to move to the suburb of Dunwoody.

Stanley's son, Andy, resigned Aug. 2 as pastor of the northside congregation, which was established in 1988 and governed by the elder Stanley. In the first public indication of a breach between the father and son, Andy told his congregation in a letter Aug. 13 that despite his love for both his parents, "I felt my father should step down as leader of First Baptist of Atlanta."

Charles Stanley, pastor of the 14,000-member church since 1972, agreed to give up part of his duties in order to remain in the pulpit.

"I have worked and waited two years hoping and praying my marriage would be healed," Stanley said in his statement to the congregation. "I recognize that this has been a difficult time for me, my family and this

fellowship. I believe I have been obedient in these matters up to now and that this step is necessary to continue in that obedience."

The three-part plan was approved by the congregation after lengthy debate, in which Stanley supporters argued the Bible did not require his removal as pastor. At Stanley's request, Jimmy Draper, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, moderated the meeting.

Tim Turner, a deacon and one of the eight who forced the emergency meeting, told Associated Baptist Press he voted for the three-part plan when it was approved by the deacons but later had second thoughts.

"I voted for it at that time because I really wanted to be gracious to the pastor," said Turner, a marketing specialist. "But I really wish he would step down and focus on his marriage without any strings attached."

Turner said Draper did a "very good job" moderating the meeting fairly. "Overall, the spirit was good," he said. "It did get emotional on both sides."

Supporters of Anna Stanley asked to have a letter from her read during the meeting. Draper ruled that request out of order because of the personal content of the letter.

Charles Stanley told the congregation he will take a sabbatical of at least a month "to seek the Lord's divine guidance and direction for my life."

The Stanleys could not be reached for comment Aug. 14.

Anna Stanley's divorce filing asks for a jury trial and seeks alimony, division of the couple's assets and possession of their north Atlanta home.

Stanley, whose "In Touch" TV ministry has made him one of the best known pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention, served as SBC president in 1984 and 1985.

First Baptist, founded in 1838, is one of the SBC's largest congregations. In 1988 the church negotiated the sale of its historic downtown property as part of a plan to move to the suburb of Dunwoody. New property was purchased later that year and a satellite congregation established, with Andy Stanley as pastor. Plans to reunite the two congregations were delayed, however, when sale of the downtown property fell through.

The northside congregation has since grown to an average attendance of 4,000, slightly larger than the downtown church, which regularly attracts about 3,800 worshippers.

Guest preachers will fill the northside pulpit until a decision is reached on the congregation's future, according to the plan approved Aug. 13. If and when it becomes a self-governing church, it can choose its own pastor, which perhaps could return Andy Stanley to the pulpit. However, the younger Stanley's plans are unknown.

According to church staff members, Andy Stanley resigned to his father Wednesday, Aug. 2, and was unaware of plans for the called church conference.

Three days earlier, longtime church administrator Nolen Rollins resigned. In a letter to friends, Rollins later said, "I have become increasingly less able to give full support without compromising my personal integrity." He would not elaborate in a telephone interview Aug. 11.

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-- Gayle White contributed to this story.

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