

Associated Baptist Press

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

October 2, 1995

**SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES**
Historical Commission, SBC
Nashville, Tennessee

In this issue:

- Atlanta church votes to keep Stanley as pastor
- Charles, Andy Stanley spotted together in Atlanta
- Fellowship to rent offices, buy land from Mercer
- Addition

Atlanta church votes to keep Stanley as pastor

ATLANTA (ABP)-- Members of First Baptist Church of Atlanta voted Oct. 1 to retain Charles Stanley as pastor despite the embattled preacher's pending divorce.

In a members-only meeting behind the locked doors of the church's sanctuary, Stanley told about 5,000 people in attendance it is not God's will for him to leave.

Stanley said God told him, "'You keep doing what I called you to do, where I called you to do it, until I tell you to do something else.'"

"If God wants to move me, he can move me instantly," said Stanley, 62. "If God tells me I'm finished at First Baptist, I'll move. I'm not going to step down in disobedience to God. ...

"If you want to move me out, you live by it," he challenged church members.

The recommendation to keep Stanley as pastor, approved earlier by deacons 35-3, passed easily on a show-of-hands vote. Observers estimated the margin at greater than three to one.

Criticism of Stanley has grown recently as efforts to reconcile his 40-year marriage have failed. Stanley and other conservatives believe a divorced man is disqualified from serving as a pastor, and Stanley himself told the congregation Aug. 13 he will step aside if the divorce becomes final. The trial starts Nov. 27.

Stanley, and his wife, Anna, have been separated since 1992, and Anna Stanley, who filed for divorce, says there is no chance of reconciliation.

Many church members say separation is the same as divorce in the eyes of God. The church is seeking to resolve that question, naming a committee to draft a church policy on divorce and the pastorate.

The Oct. 1 meeting was the second called by Stanley's opponents to address the issue of his leadership. During the Aug. 13 meeting, Stanley agreed to a deacon-approved plan to relinquish his administrative duties for an unspecified time. He also took a one-month leave from preaching duties during September. But he made it clear to the congregation Oct. 1 he is still in charge. "Somebody has to give direction," he said.

Stanley's pending divorce was not discussed during the October meeting, and a letter to the congregation from Anna Stanley, ruled out of order in the Aug. 13 meeting, was again not allowed to be read.

Also during the Oct. 1 meeting, members voted not to allow the congregation's satellite campus in north Atlanta to become a separate church. Until Aug. 2 the north site was led by Stanley's son, Andy, who resigned as pastor because of his father's refusal to leave the First Baptist pulpit.

Members were told Oct. 1 Andy Stanley would not accept the pastorate of the north congregation if the group were to separate from First Baptist. Instead, Andy Stanley is considering starting a new congregation elsewhere in north Atlanta.

After the vote, Stanley thanked church members for their "support and love." Several members said later they were pleased with the outcome.

"I feel that what happened tonight was exactly what needed to happen," said Clint Willis, a member for about five years. "I think what we did tonight was what God wanted us to do."

But deacon Tim Turner, one of several leaders who called for the first meeting on Aug. 13, said "there are still serious issues in his [Stanley's] life that need to be addressed."

"We are very, very concerned about where he is headed," he said. "We cannot understand why he wouldn't take time away [from the pulpit] to focus on his marriage before it is destroyed."

The committee to draft a policy for pastoral qualifications will be chaired by church staff member Dennis Mock, who already has issued a draft policy that says separation should be treated the same as divorce.

The committee also includes two local pastors -- Nelson Price of Roswell Street Baptist Church and Ike Reighard of New Hope Baptist Church in Fayetteville -- and church counselor Al Scardino and evangelist Stephen Olford.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

Charles, Andy Stanley spotted together in Atlanta

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Two days before a called business meeting to discuss his future as pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Charles Stanley was spotted in a restaurant with his son, Andy.

The two carried on a long and at times animated conversation Friday, Sept. 29, at the Rio Bravo restaurant in northwest Atlanta.

Approached by a reporter, both declined to be interviewed, but Charles Stanley hinted he was working toward resolving differences with his son..

Andy Stanley, who recently resigned as pastor of the church's satellite campus because of the dispute, responded curtly to the interview request. "No. We're having dinner," he said.

"Let me put it this way," Charles Stanley said. "Seeing us here together, leveling with each other, talking together, ought to be message enough."

Stanley's leadership of the Atlanta congregation has been placed in question by his estrangement from his wife of 40 years, Anna Stanley. The couple are separated and she is seeking a divorce.

The church does not appoint divorced deacons, believing the Bible limits the office to men with intact first marriages.

-30-

-- By Bob Allen

Fellowship to buy land, rent offices from Mercer

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will purchase a \$1.25 million tract of Atlanta property from Mercer University and enter into a five-year rental agreement on the university's Atlanta campus.

The agreement, approved Sept. 30 by the Fellowship's Coordinating Council, calls for the Fellowship beginning in 1997 to rent office space in a building that will be built to house Mercer's proposed theology school, scheduled to begin in 1996.

In addition, the Fellowship will buy approximately four acres of land adjacent to the university campus. The property will be paid for from investment funds. Eventually, it could be used to build a permanent headquarters for the Fellowship or sold at a profit, leaders of the Atlanta-based organization said.

The five-year lease -- totaling \$750,000 -- will be paid in advance by the Fellowship. Coupled with the land purchase, the deal will give Mercer \$2 million to build its theology school.

Supporters of the agreement said it provides a "win-win" situation for Mercer, which needs the new building but can't yet afford it, and the Fellowship, which has grown rapidly during its first four years but cannot yet predict its long-term space needs.

Opponents of the measure, which the Coordinating Council adopted by a vote of 46-10 with five abstentions, said it could give the Mercer school -- one of several theological education initiatives supported by the Fellowship -- an unfair advantage in budget negotiations.

Earlier during the four-day meeting of the 84-member body, Cecil Sherman, Fellowship coordinator since 1992, announced he plans to retire next June.

"The thing that I was asked to do has happened," Sherman said Sept. 28. He said he and his wife, Dot, "were called to this position to get this infant organization -- which was almost an idea -- up and going. I think that has happened."

Sherman, 67, is the first executive of the Fellowship, which was organized in 1991 by moderate Baptists opposing a conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1980s. It currently receives support from more than 1,400 churches and, with an annual budget of \$13 million, employs 21 staff members and 80 missionaries, and funds a variety of ministries.

The Fellowship's current lease for office space ends in December 1996. Based on projected space needs, office rental for the following five years will total about \$750,000, leaders said. Proponents said it is better for the Fellowship to move a few miles in order to pay rent to a "friend" than to an independent third party.

"Money twice spent is good stewardship," said Fellowship Coordinator Cecil Sherman.

Mercer has already raised about \$1 million for the theology school. Proceeds from the \$2 million purchase-and-rental package will put Mercer over the top of an estimated \$3 million fund-raising goal needed to construct the building.

The arrangement raises concerns that having the Fellowship's staff based on a seminary campus could compromise the process by which the organization budgets funds for theological education, said Beth McConnell, leader of the Fellowship's theological institutions committee.

"We do not want to contribute to any inequity between the schools we support," McConnell, of Columbia, S.C., said.

The Fellowship owns no seminaries but provides partial funding for several schools, including the independent Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond in Virginia and the George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University in Texas. Funds for theological education are meted out according to needs, judged on a case-by-case basis.

Among the Fellowship staff members who likely will work in the rented Mercer facility is the yet-to-be-hired Baptist principles coordinator, who will supervise Fellowship funding of seminaries. Having that person in such close proximity to one school would make other schools wonder if they were being treated fairly, several council members contended.

John Tyler of Webster Groves, Mo., chair of the Fellowship's Baptist Principles Ministry Group, admitted that the lease arrangement makes sense financially but added his group's "stock and trade is equitable treatment" of the various theological schools.

Tyler said the group declined to either support or oppose the recommendation but pointed out that "the sorting out of hurt feelings will not fall to those who brought the motion, it will fall to the Baptist Principles Ministry Group."

Welton Gaddy of Monroe, La., countered he supported the recommendation, "assuming this whole endeavor had to do with what was good for CBF, not what was good for theological education in any one school."

"If we do this, how specifically does this hurt Truett or Richmond (seminaries)?" Gaddy asked. "This is a really good deal for CBF and it is really a good deal for Mercer. I personally support it unless I can see how it hurts CBF and what the direct injury to our sister institutions would be," he said.

Carolyn Massey of Tifton, Ga., urged the Coordinating Council "to think of this not so much as favoring of one school as in support of theological education."

Don Schmeltekopf, vice president of Baylor University, said he supports the deal because it helps bridge the gap between churches and Christian universities.

Money for the lease-purchase will come from invested funds, which currently total between \$10 million and \$12 million, said Bill Owen of Ardmore, Okla., chair of the Fellowship's finance committee. He said the committee considers the purchase a land investment and not a commitment to build a permanent headquarters.

"I don't think we are ready to discuss purchasing a piece of land for a permanent headquarters at all," Owen said. But he added that using the property as a construction site at some point in the future "is always an option."

The Coordinating Council accepted an amendment to the recommendation proposed by Jon Doler of Leland, Miss., calling for a study committee to begin looking at options related to facilities after the conclusion of the five-year lease.

Mercer's theology school is scheduled to begin accepting students in the fall of 1996. Projections call for an inaugural class of about 50 students, expected to grow to 150 by the end of the third year, according to a sheet describing the rental-purchase agreement. Eventually the theology school expects to fully occupy the facility, the document said.

The Fellowship was housed briefly at Mercer's Atlanta campus before moving into its current rented office suite in Chamblee in northeast Atlanta. The Georgia Baptist university has owned the Atlanta campus for more than 20 years. Mercer's main campus is in Macon.

While not a commitment to build, the purchase of land adds a dimension of permanence to the Fellowship, moderator Pat Anderson of Lakeland, Fla., said. "We're saying to the world Atlanta is our headquarters," he said. "We're also saying to the world we are putting down some roots. We've kind of prided ourselves to this point in being the kind of organization that could back a U-Haul trailer to the door and move everything we own in about six hours."

"This action takes us into land ownership," Anderson said.

Some members of the council said they do not want the Fellowship to become institutionalized too soon.

"My question is do I want to own anything as a CBF member," said Kitty Johnson of Richmond, Va. "Ownership is not cost-free. Rent has its expenses but ownership does too."

Jean Meredith of Amhurst, N.Y., noted that the Fellowship is still in transition. "Where we want to be in five years is something I don't want to say yet," she said.

In other business at the meeting in Atlanta:

-- Anderson reported that a committee he appointed to study whether the Fellowship should declare itself a new Baptist convention has begun its work. The committee, chaired by Randall Lolley of Greensboro, N.C., will study the question intensely but is not necessarily working toward a recommendation, he said.

"When people ask you what they ask me, 'Is it true that the CBF is going to declare itself a denomination?' say, 'That's not what we're all about,'" Anderson said. "We are studying this thing so we can deal with it in an informed manner."

-- Adopted the report of a task force appointed to define relationships between the Fellowship and its "friends," independent organizations that collaborate with or receive money from the organization.

Dan Hobbs, a member of the Coordinating Council and the board of directors of Associated Baptist Press, offered an amendment to a phrase defining friends as organizations that "publicly demonstrate their sympathy with the CBF and its ministries."

"The press may not always demonstrate their sympathy because they must be even-handed," Hobbs said. "They must always tell the truth."

The council approved unanimously Hobbs' amendment changing the phrase to "sympathy with the principles" of the Fellowship.

-- Received a report from a Fellowship task group studying chaplaincy issues. "We're doing our very best to respond redemptively to the anxiety many people have about (chaplain) endorsement," said Hardy Clemons of Greenville, S.C., a member of the committee.

Chaplains hired by the military or industry must be endorsed by the faith group they represent, leading some chaplains who support the Fellowship to far they may be denied endorsement by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, which handles chaplain endorsement for the SBC.

"As of today, nobody has been turned down by the Home Mission Board and we do not expect that to happen in the near future," Clemons said. "The problem is not that people are applying and being turned down. The problem is more we wonder if that will happen in the future."

-30-

ADDITION: When the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship announced the members of a search committee seeking a successor to retiring Coordinator Cecil Sherman, the name of one member was inadvertently omitted.

David Currie of Texas is a member of the search committee, but his name was not included on a list of members introduced Sept. 29.

Please add Currie to the listing of committee members at the end of the Sept. 29 ABP story, "Cecil Sherman says he will retire from Fellowship post next June." Also please change the numerical reference in the sixth paragraph to a "12-member search committee."

Currie is coordinator of Texas Baptists Committed, a moderate organization based in San Angelo.

END