

Associated Baptist Press

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FBC Atlanta elects Reighard to lead satellite congregation

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Ike Reighard, 45, was unanimously elected senior associate pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta Jan. 14 and will assume pastoral duties of the church's satellite congregation.

The move puts Reighard in line to succeed 62-year-old Charles Stanley as pastor of the 14,000-member congregation, one of Southern Baptists' largest. But all involved say Reighard has not been guaranteed the job.

Reighard has been pastor of New Hope Baptist Church in nearby Fayetteville, Ga., for the past 20 years.

More than 2,000 members of First Baptist gathered for the Jan. 14 vote, which was postponed a week by a snowstorm. There was no opposition expressed by those present, reported Boyd Wages, the church administrator. "It was really an exciting time, and there was a good spirit among our fellowship," Wages said.

Stanley "thoroughly endorsed" Reighard's election in a statement to members, Wages said. The new associate is expected to begin his duties in February, but no firm date has been set, he added.

One member asked if Reighard had been promised Stanley's job as part of a deal, Wages said. "The answer was, 'no, he has not,'" Wages said. "He's coming on faith."

Reighard and Stanley do plan to trade pulpits about once a month in an attempt to reunify the congregation, Wages said.

First Baptist has been meeting in two locations since 1988, when the historic downtown church opened a satellite congregation in north Atlanta with plans to move to the site. The move was delayed when sale of the \$28 million downtown property fell through.

Stanley, who became pastor in 1972 after serving as associate, has been under pressure to resign for several months because of his pending divorce from his wife of 40 years, Anna. The church voted Oct. 1 to keep Stanley as pastor, but he has said he will resign if the divorce becomes final.

Weekly attendance at the downtown facility is about 3,800. Attendance at the satellite site has dropped from about 4,000 a week to 2,200 since the resignation of Andy Stanley, Charles Stanley's son, as associate pastor and leader of the satellite congregation.

Andy Stanley resigned last August, saying his father's pending divorce disqualifies him as pastor.

Many conservatives -- including Charles Stanley -- say the Bible limits the pastorate to men with intact first marriages. The elder Stanley is contesting the divorce and says he is seeking reconciliation. But Anna Stanley says the marriage cannot be salvaged. The couple have been separated since 1992.

Reighard was nominated for the associate's post at First Baptist by a seven-man committee that has been running the church since Stanley relinquished administrative duties last August.

Reighard agreed there is "a lot of speculation" that he will succeed Stanley, whose "In Touch" television ministry has made him one of the country's best-known preachers. But Reighard added, "I sure hope Dr. Stanley stays and works through his marital situation. I think that's what would be the best thing for God's kingdom and the church."

Reighard serves on a four-man committee named by First Baptist to recommend a church policy on divorce in the ministry. The committee has yet to bring its report, despite a long-past deadline. But Reighard said he sees no reason why Stanley can't remain pastor.

Reighard, a graduate of Mercer University and Luther Rice Seminary, said he was first contacted about the associate's position in early August, soon after Andy Stanley's resignation.

Wages said Reighard's election is expected to bring stability to First Baptist, which has lost several key staff members in recent months, and to prepare the way for the downtown church to complete a long-planned move and merger with the satellite congregation.

In 1988 the church bought a former Avon cosmetics distribution center in suburban Dunwoody and started a new congregation in the site's 375,000-square-foot building, with Andy Stanley preaching.

Since the move was delayed, members say, the two congregations have grown apart, with the satellite congregation adopting a contemporary worship style and the downtown congregation maintaining a more traditional approach. Many members doubted that the merger could be completed, Wages said. And there was discussion about the two groups parting ways.

But Andy Stanley's resignation and the potential hiring of Reighard have revived plans to move and reunite the two congregations.

The downtown congregation is ready to move north as soon as a new buyer is found for its property, Wages said. A new worship center is planned.

Andy Stanley, meanwhile, has announced plans to begin a new church in north Atlanta, but no start date has been set.

Reighard, a native of North Carolina, grew up in downtown Atlanta. A prominent leader in the conservative movement of the Southern Baptist Convention, Reighard served as president of the SBC Pastors' Conference in 1994. He is a trustee of the SBC Home Mission Board in Atlanta and served two terms as president of the Georgia Baptist Convention (1988-90).

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Clinton pays tribute to Martin Luther King

By Larry Chesser

ATLANTA (ABP) -- President Clinton praised Martin Luther King Jr. Jan. 16 as a man who "redeemed the moral purpose" of the nation.

During a service honoring the life and legacy of the slain civil-rights leader, Clinton spoke from the pulpit

of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church where King preached regularly. Clinton said King "reminded us that since all of us are created equal -- and that's what the Constitution says -- all of us are equally entitled to the full benefits of American citizenship."

The president praised King as a "man who challenged us to face our flaws and to become a better nation; to use our great power in the service of peace and justice."

"That was his dream and that is the spirit of this holiday," the president said.

America has moved toward fulfillment of King's dream, Clinton said, but more work needs to be done toward achieving equality and justice.

"We have to continue to heal the racial divisions that still tear at our nation," he said.

If King were present, Clinton suggested, he would say, "'You're doing better, but that's not nearly good enough.'

"He would say, 'Ask yourselves this question as you walk out of this church today: How can it be that the crime rate in America is down, but the crime rate among young people between the ages of 12 and 17 is up? Are they still out there raising themselves? What are you going to do about that?'"

Clinton said the job of ending discrimination in the United States is not over.

"That's why I still believe we need the right kind of affirmative action," he said. "We can mend it, and some day we can end it. But we can't end it until everybody with a straight face can say there is no more discrimination on the basis of race."

Clinton predicted the next century will be a "great age of possibility" in which many Americans will do well.

"The great issue is whether we will go into that age of possibility together or divided, whether America will be a society -- a great society -- where winners can take everything, or whether it will be an even greater society in which everyone has a chance to win."

Focusing on racial and ethnic identities is a good thing, Clinton said, if it "builds pride and self-esteem and gets people back to good values that we all share."

But it's a bad thing, he said, if "it leads people to the Bosnian war or killing in Northern Ireland or a lack of resolution in South Africa or continued carnage in the Middle East or on our own streets."

King, his father and grandfather served for eight decades at Ebenezer Baptist Church. King was assassinated April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tenn. His birthday was designated as a federal holiday in 1986.

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-- By Larry Chesser

Churches form corporation to increase buying power of African-Americans

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Five African-American religious organizations are joining hands to create a corporation to give black Americans greater access to home mortgage loans and insurance.

Leaders announced plans for The Revelation Corp. of America at a news conference in Washington Jan. 15 -- the day the nation observes Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.

The corporation, aimed at boosting economic development for African-Americans, is in keeping with the legacy of the slain civil rights leader, spokespersons said.

"It is one of the tiers he (King) would have led us to," said E. Edward Jones, president of the National Baptist Convention of America Inc.

About 34 million African-Americans live in the United States, spending about \$400 billion a year, but many find it difficult to finance and purchase homes, the group noted in a press statement.

"Dignity without the means to be dignified is mockery," Jones said. He noted that churches must seek to empower the black community. "We will rebuild the black community's infrastructure by providing access to capital with substantially less credit requirements," Jones added.

Blacks are turned down more than whites when seeking loans because of poor credit, said Henry Lyons, president of the National Baptist Convention USA and chief executive officer of the new corporation.

"The Revelation Corporation of America is not a call for government assistance or handouts. Revelation follows Dr. King's vision of black Americans helping themselves through the leadership of the church," Lyons said.

Lyons recalled that toward the end of King's life economic development was a priority and that was the purpose of King's trip to Memphis, where he was assassinated April 4, 1968.

The Revelation Corporation will work much like the American Association of Retired Persons program, according to John Lowery, president of the Lowery Riggan Co. and executive vice president of the new corporation. Lowery will run the day-to-day operations and will answer to a board of trustees.

Revenues will be produced through partnerships with several Fortune 500 companies. Revelation Corp. members will buy products and services such as automobile insurance, groceries, education and training. They may purchase items at a discount with a coupon book and also will be able to order products from a catalog.

Computers will track members' purchases and companies will rebate a percentage of those sales. Most of the proceeds from the rebates will go into a housing fund, while some money will go to churches for minister-pension funds.

With the housing fund, Revelation will be able to "assume the risk" and guarantee construction loans and permanent mortgages for families, commercial and industrial development and church buildings. Spokeswoman Dawn Alexander said not only will people be able to get loans but they will get them at good rates.

The organization was named after the book of Revelation in the New Testament, explained Bennett Walker Smith Sr., president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc. Quoting the phrase "I saw a new heaven and a new earth" from Rev. 21:1, Smith added, "This is about a new America, a redistribution of wealth."

In addition to the three Baptist groups headed by Jones, Lyons and Smith, the organizations launching the corporation were the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. The five groups combined claim 20 million members in 43,000 churches across the nation.

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Supreme Court rejects claim by prisoner denied religious text

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court refused Jan. 16 to hear a former soldier's claim that his 20-month sentence on cocaine-related charges should be reduced because he was denied use of a pagan religious text while he was jailed awaiting trial.

After trial before a military judge at Fort Bragg, N.C, Allen L. Phillips Jr. was discharged for bad conduct and sentenced to 20 months' confinement. On appeal to two military review courts, he argued that denying him use of a document used as a religious text by the Wiccan religion violated his First Amendment right to free exercise of religion. Both appeals were rejected.

Phillips was awaiting trial in the Cumberland County (N.C.) Jail when he was refused access to the Book of Shadows, sometimes referred to as the Wiccan bible. Testimony during Phillips' trial showed that a jailer denied access to the text because Wicca "wasn't a recognized religious practice in the state of North Carolina."

A military court described Wicca as "a pagan religion not unlike the ancient Druid faith, believing in the sacredness of nature." The court noted that prejudice against Wiccans exists "because of popular confusion between witchcraft (which is part of the Wiccan faith) and Satanism."

In an unrelated action Jan. 16, the Supreme Court rejected a second attempt by a state to restrict Medicaid funding of abortion. Without comment, justices let stand a federal-appeals-court ruling that invalidated Nebraska's Medicaid policy of paying for abortions only if they are performed to save the life of the mother.

A federal law which provides funding for abortions in cases of rape and incest, as well as to save the life of the mother, pre-empts Nebraska's policy, the appeals court said.

Last month, Colorado also lost its bid to deny Medicaid-financed abortions for pregnancies resulting from rape and incest. The high court refused to review lower-court rulings that Colorado must pay for such abortions as long as it chooses to participate in Medicaid, a jointly funded federal-state program that provides health-care services for indigent Americans.

Until the fall of 1993, federal policy prohibited the use of federal funds for abortions except when the life of the mother was endangered. But the 1993 version of the Hyde Amendment expanded the exceptions to include pregnancies resulting from rape or incest. Named after its sponsor, Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., the Hyde Amendment is regularly added to funding bills for federal health care programs.

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-- By Larry Chesser

Interfaith Alliance chapter established in Georgia

ATLANTA (ABP) -- An organization advocating "a reaffirmation of our religious diversity" to counter conservative views of the Religious Right was formed in Georgia Jan. 16.

Several Baptists took part in the launch of the Georgia Interfaith Alliance, announced at a news conference on the steps of the Georgia state capitol.

The Interfaith Alliance is a faith-based national organization established in 1994 to counter views of the Religious Right. The Georgia Alliance is one of more-than-a-dozen state and regional chapters that have emerged from the movement.

The Georgia chapter was formed to bring "compassion, tolerance, justice and civility to political debate," said David Key, a Baptist pastor who moderated the Atlanta meeting.

"We are concerned that the sole religious voice many Georgians hear is that of the radical right," said Key, pastor of First Baptist Church in Union Point, Ga. "We are troubled that those who disagree with the radical right platform are often demonized or considered 'lesser' Christians, Jews, Muslims or people of other faiths."

Following the news conference, Key moderated a forum sponsored by the Georgia Interfaith Alliance. Speakers at the forum included two Baptists: Jack Harwell, editor of Baptists Today, and S.S. Williams, an African-American pastor in Greensboro, Ga.

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-- By ABP staff

Ronnie Prevost joins Hardin-Simmons faculty

ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- Christian educator Ronnie Prevost has joined the faculty of Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology as associate professor of church ministry.

Since 1994, Prevost has been visiting professor of religious education at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. He also taught formerly at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Prevost's main responsibility will be to teach in Hardin-Simmons' new master of divinity degree program, said Lanny Hall, president of the Baptist university in Abilene, Texas. Prevost is scheduled to begin teaching in the spring term.

The master of divinity program is directed by Vernon Davis, a longtime administrator and professor at Midwestern Seminary who moved to Hardin-Simmons last January.

Hardin-Simmons is one of about a dozen Baptist colleges to begin offering ministerial training in recent years, as leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention steered denominational seminaries in a more conservative direction.

Midwestern Seminary is the most recent SBC school to elect a conservative president, Mark Coppenger. Since his election last year, several faculty and staff members have left.

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-- By ABP staff

Richmond seminary gets gifts worth \$147,000

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond has received two recent gifts totaling \$147,000, according to the seminary.

Retired Virginia pastor Henry Langford and his wife, Florence, gave life insurance worth \$100,000 to help fund the Edwin Truett Langford Scholarship, named after their son, who died in 1994.

A disbanded church near Pittsburgh, Pa., also gave \$47,000 earned from sale of their property to train future ministers at the moderate seminary in Richmond, Va. The gift from West Hempfield Baptist Church will be used to renovate a classroom in Watts Hall, the building Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond is buying from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education.

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-- By ABP staff

Tear-gas attack fails to halt film

TOULOUSE, France (ABP) -- A tear-gas-bomb attack on a Baptist church in Tolouse, France, injured no one and failed to disrupt a showing of the film, "The Hiding Place."

The European Baptist Press Service said extremist "skinheads" were responsible for the November attack on the Baptist Mission of Tolouse. The attack might have been prompted by publicity about the film, which tells the story of a faithful Christian who suffered and died at the hand of Nazis during World War II.

A promotional leaflet for the film carried a swastika emblem superimposed over a map of France. Baptist leaders speculated the attackers may have been angered by the negative depiction of the Nazi symbol, which is still used by right-wing extremists in Europe and elsewhere.

The pastor of the mission congregation, British missionary Robert Atkins, said the film was shown after the bombing. No one was injured, but spectators complained of burning eyes throughout the evening, he said.

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