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In this issue:

- 2,100 attend service at Andy Stanley's church
- Baylor drops ban on dancing
- Coppenger's talk of 'prairie fire' leaves Virginia alumni cold
- Arkansas pastor commits suicide
- Fellowship council upholds Peace Fellowship defunding (revised)

2,100 attend service at Andy Stanley's church

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- About 2,100 people attended a Jan. 28 worship service at a new church in suburban Atlanta being started by Andy Stanley, son of former Southern Baptist Convention president Charles Stanley.

Andy Stanley formerly preached at the First Baptist Church of Atlanta's satellite congregation in Dunwoody. He resigned in August over concern that his father continues to lead First Baptist during a pending divorce.

The new congregation, North Point Community Church, kicked off a regular schedule with the 5:30 p.m. service on Sunday, Jan. 28, said Bill Willits, one of three associate pastors working with Stanley. Earlier, the new congregation held an organizational meeting in November and a Christmas service in December. "Last Sunday night was more of a typical worship service," Willits said.

The church plans to meet on Sunday nights, twice a month, at the Cobb Galleria Convention Center, Willits said. Negotiations are underway to buy property, where the church plans to build a temporary facility.

Willits said "it will probably be several months" before the church gets into a "regular, whatever regular is" schedule including weekly Sunday morning services.

Though it is not identified as a Baptist church in the name, the congregation plans to affiliate with the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as the Georgia Baptist Convention and Roswell Baptist Association, Willits said.

The church will emphasize a "seeker-sensitive," contemporary worship service, he said, featuring elements like drama and a "worship team" rather than traditional choir.

"I think it's an environment people can see inviting their friends to," Willits said.

As SBC president in 1985-86 and a popular television preacher, Charles Stanley is regarded a leading voice among conservatives in the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group. Willits said the new congregation does not intend to break with that tradition.

"Theologically, I think we're definitely conservative," Willits said, emphasizing a "strong view of Scripture."

"The message hasn't changed, just the methodology," Willits said. "To be honest, it's a methodology we've used at our north campus when we were still there."

Willits termed response to the inaugural worship service "really encouraging."

While acknowledging that many people probably attended out of "curiosity" about the new church, Willits said, "I think a good two-thirds of them are folks who are feeling like this is where they want to be."

"The age group is a lot broader than some would anticipate," Willits said. The church's six staff members are in their 30s. The church's steering committee is made up of men in their 40s and 50s. The rest of the congregation is "a great cross section of young families, great singles population, and middle-to-older-married adults," he said.

"I guess our target group is pretty broad," Willits said. "Nobody walked out of there not being challenged."

Andy Stanley announced plans to start a new church last November after leaving the staff of First Baptist over disagreement with his father's handling of the pending divorce.

Andy's mother, Anna Stanley, first filed for a divorce from her husband of 40 years in 1993. The couple have been separated since 1992.

The 13,000-member First Baptist Church has a long-standing policy that forbids divorced men from serving as pastors or deacons. Charles Stanley has said he will resign if the divorce becomes final, but contends separation is not the same as divorce and says he is seeking reconciliation. Anna Stanley has said reconciliation is impossible.

A committee at the church is studying a divorce policy. Stanley told the church in October he has no immediate plans to step down and the congregation voted overwhelmingly to approve a recommendation by deacons to keep him as pastor.

A divorce trial scheduled last November was delayed when Charles Stanley demanded a jury trial. The new trial date is not expected to come before April or May.

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Baylor drops ban on dancing

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Baylor University has dropped its traditional policy banning dancing on campus at the Baptist school in Waco, Texas.

Baylor President Robert Sloan, a Baptist preacher, announced the change recently in an informal question-and-answer period with students.

Students have pushed for lifting the ban for years, but administrators have in the past resisted the change. The policy has long been the butt of jokes about Southern Baptists' social conservatism and has come to symbolize Baylor's struggle to maintain a delicate balance between the school's academic prestige and its Baptist roots.

The dancing ban emerged from "a particular Southern evangelical notion of piety" that associated "a good Christian life" with avoiding vices like drinking, dancing and smoking, Baptist sociologist Nancy Ammerman told the Dallas Morning News.

Other Protestant denominations abandoned the ban on dancing years ago, Ammerman said.

About half of Baylor's 12,000 students are Baptist, but even Baptists have softened their stance on dancing.

"It's not the great issue of life," said Tim Hedquist, church administrator at First Baptist Church of Dallas. "I don't hear the preacher getting up and preaching about it."

Besides, "most of us as Baptists are too clumsy to dance," he said.

Not everyone is so nonchalant about the change, however. Some critics view it as evidence that Baylor is slipping into secularism since moving to distance itself from the Baptist General Convention of Texas five years ago.

Miles Seaborn, president of Southern Baptists of Texas, a coalition of conservative churches, said dances "are not the atmosphere you want to create to generate wholesome, godly living."

"Every dance is not going to turn into an orgy," Seaborn said, "but on the other hand we know that with the music we have in this day and time, the atmosphere, the dress, the emotions and everything else out there -- we're all human."

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-- By Diane Jennings and Bob Allen

Coppenger's talk of 'prairie fire' leaves Virginia alumni cold

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- President Mark Coppenger's use of "prairie fire" imagery to tout his new administration at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary is leaving some alumni cold.

Virginia alumni of the Kansas City, Mo., seminary, wrote an open letter to Coppenger, published in the Jan. 18 issue of Religious Herald, stating "concerns" about statements attributed to the president in news reports.

"As alumni of an institution we care about deeply, it is our desire to support Midwestern," said the letter from the Virginia chapter of Midwestern's alumni association. "As much as we want to be able to be supportive, many of us are having increasing difficulty in doing so because of some of your public statements," it added.

Coppenger, a conservative leader in the Southern Baptist Convention, assumed Midwestern's presidency last fall. He replaced long-time president Milton Ferguson, a moderate, who retired.

Upon his election as president, Coppenger described Midwestern as "a seminary waiting to happen." In an issue of the seminary's alumni journal, Coppenger linked alumni support with "spiritual decline" at the school and observed that "prairie fire," the revivalistic slogan adopted by his administration, "burns off its clutter."

The Virginia alumni took offense at those references.

"As products of the efforts of dedicated staff and faculty, we firmly believe that Midwestern has been a seminary 'happening' in a very positive way for decades," the alumni wrote. "What, or who, is the 'clutter' to which you refer?" they continued. "You seem to be ... referring to alumni like us, but not only us."

"If we are the 'clutter,' then so are the thousands of churches that have called and benefitted from the ministries of Midwestern alumni as well as seminary faculty and staff. Would you also include among the 'clutter' the hundreds of alumni who have invested their lives and ministries in answering God's call to missions all over the globe? Are you going to rejoice at the burning off of such 'clutter' as these?"

While acknowledging that Coppenger and the board of trustees have a right to steer the school in a conservative direction, the alumni complained that the statements attributed to Coppenger are "demeaning, unnecessary and -- we believe -- un-Christlike."

"We suggest that both the cause of Christ and of Midwestern Seminary would benefit if you would refrain from the use of such inflammatory language directed at people who want to be your supporters and supporters of Midwestern Seminary and who have been and continue to be ministering in the kingdom of God all around the world," the letter concluded.

A spokesman for Coppenger did not return a phone message left in voice mail.

In northwest Arkansas, meanwhile, Coppenger's vision for Midwestern Seminary drew rave reviews from an associational pastors' conference that reviewed a questionnaire being used to ensure that prospective faculty members affirm conservative views on a variety of theological and social issues.

"We are very excited about his (Coppenger's) vision for Midwestern Seminary," Jim Richards, director of missions for Northwest Baptist Association in Bentonville, Ark., told Baptist Press. Richards said he and other ministers in the region look forward to the seminary "bringing revival fire across this region of the country by putting fire in the hearts of the pastors and other ministers who go there to be trained."

Benny Thompson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Garfield, Ark., said Coppenger's election at Midwestern was an answer to prayer. "Who'd have ever thought I would see the day when our seminaries would take a stand such as this?" he said.

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Arkansas pastor commits suicide

EL DORADO, Ark. (ABP) -- A Baptist pastor in Arkansas committed suicide in late December, several weeks after informing his congregation that he and his wife were experiencing marital problems.

Floyd Lewis Jr., pastor of First Baptist Church in El Dorado, Ark., was found dead early Dec. 29 near the church office suite by members of a cleaning crew. Police said the death was apparently self-inflicted, but declined to comment on the mode of suicide.

The church staff issued a brief statement. It read: "A tragedy has occurred. Dr. Floyd Lewis Jr., the pastor of First Baptist Church, has taken his life. Our church family appreciates the concerns and prayers of the community during this difficult time."

Lewis, 43, had been pastor of the church since 1989. In a worship service last fall, Lewis told the congregation that he and his wife would undergo a trial separation and would be living apart for the remainder of 1995.

Before moving to Arkansas, Lewis was a pastor, associate pastor and youth minister at churches in Louisiana and Virginia. He was a graduate of Washington and Lee University and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

He was president of the El Dorado chapter of Habitat for Humanity and a founding member of the Interfaith Health Clinic.

Funeral services were held at the church Dec. 31. Burial was in Kentwood, La.

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-- By ABP staff. Information taken from news stories in the El Dorado News Times and the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is an updated version of Monday's story with the same headline. It includes reaction from Baptist Peace Fellowship Executive Director Ken Sehested in paragraphs 21-24.

Fellowship council upholds Peace Fellowship defunding (revised)

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's governing board voted Jan. 26 to affirm last summer's decision to defund the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America because of disagreement over the issue of homosexuality.

The Fellowship's Coordinating Council, meeting Jan. 25-27 in Atlanta, overwhelmingly rejected a motion by Jose Orraca of Kent, Conn., to rescind the vote defunding the Baptist Peace Fellowship for its pro-gay stance.

The council instead approved a substitute motion by Joel Snider, chair of the moderate group's ethics and public policy committee, that stopped short of affirming the Baptist Peace Fellowship but opened the door for case-by-case funding of specific projects.

The Baptist Peace Fellowship, which recently moved offices from Memphis, Tenn., to Lake Junaluska, N.C., adopted a "Statement on Gay and Lesbian Justice" last February that declared the organization a "welcoming place" for persons regardless of sexual orientation. American Baptists immediately defunded the group, but eventually restored ties after the Peace Fellowship adopted a revised "Statement on Justice and Sexual Orientation" in June. The revised statement backed off an earlier commitment to "take an active role at denominational meetings" to oppose anti-gay measures and stated the resolution was intended merely to "seek to deepen dialogue" on the issue.

Later, on the eve of the Fellowship's July 20-22 general assembly in Fort Worth, Texas, the Coordinating Council quietly deleted a budget-line item for the Baptist Peace Fellowship. The action was not reported at a plenary session, and many people attending the general assembly did not learn of the action until reading about it in news accounts back home.

Orraca said Fellowship money should not be used to wield control. The Fellowship supports not only its own alternative ministries to programs of the conservative-run Southern Baptist Convention -- including 100 missionaries -- but also gives money to outside agencies that provide services such as theological education, ethics, religious liberty, women in ministry and a free press to Fellowship-friendly churches..

"Our principles are to be inclusive, not exclusive; to cooperate, not to control," Orraca said.

"I'm concerned that if we continue this kind of action, then other organizations will be at stake," Orraca continued. "If we don't like what Women in Ministry do, if we don't like what the Alliance (of Baptists) does, then we will again use money to control."

But Snider, pastor of First Baptist Church in Rome, Ga., said confrontational language in the Baptist Peace Fellowship's original statement left the ethics and public policy committee no choice but to defund the group.

"We just simply didn't feel that, based upon the in-your-face tone of the statement, we would be good stewards of CBF money or relationships to continue funding of Baptist Peace Fellowship," Snider said.

Offering a wholesale affirmation to the peace group "would be to condone the statement itself," Snider said, which many Fellowship members find objectionable.

Since some Fellowship members "have appreciation for other aspects" of the Baptist Peace Fellowship's work, Snider said, his committee did not close the door altogether. Should the Peace Fellowship request money "for specific projects on a consensus issue," he said, "we said maybe we can work something out."

Snider defended the committee's decision last summer and opposed an amendment offered by Orraca to "affirm our cooperation" with the Peace Fellowship.

"We stand where we stand and that includes not condoning the statement," Snider said. "We would be open to working out a future relationship with them if things fall into place."

After a brief discussion, the Coordinating Council rejected Orraca's amendment by an overwhelming voice vote, then adopted Snider's substitute motion by voice vote with no opposition.

In an interview after the vote, Orraca said he was satisfied with the process by which his motion was handled but he believed more members of the Coordinating Council agreed with him but were "afraid" to speak out.

"Southern Baptists have always used money for control, even before the fundamentalists came," said Orraca, who is originally from Puerto Rico. "I find that despicable."

Orraca noted that moderates often criticize fundamentalists for being narrow and exclusive. "Sometimes we are hoity-toity about the other side. We are just as bad," he said.

Snider said local churches, not the Fellowship, should decide issues such as how to respond to homosexuality.

Snider said he believes the Coordinating Council was being "forced" to take a position on homosexuality against its will. "In my mind, we are trying to be positioned in this argument," Snider said. "It's a local church matter. We don't want to position the Fellowship."

Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, said he was "very disappointed" with the Coordinating Council's vote, but pleased the vote did not rule out the possibility of "cooperative ventures" between the two groups in the future.

"I still find it ironic that we are being punished for the very reason CBF was born -- the right to conscience in reading Scripture, a historic Baptist distinctive," Sehested said.

Sehested said the Peace Fellowship did not precipitate nor desire the controversy, noting gay rights "is not among our principle involvements."

"But we refuse, on grounds of conscience as free-and-faithful Baptists, to barter silence in exchange for a budget-line item," he said.

Homosexuality is perhaps the most divisive issue in American Christianity today. Most mainline denominations are experiencing struggles between conservatives who believe homosexual activity is sinful and liberals who argue the Bible's prohibition of homosexuality reflects the culture of biblical authors and is not binding today.

The conservative Southern Baptist Convention dealt swiftly with that question in 1992, kicking out two North Carolina churches that opened their doors to gays and amending its constitution to exclude any church that acts "to affirm, approve or endorse" homosexuality.

Ironically, as the Coordinating Council turned back Orraca's attempt to put them on record as being lenient toward gays, Fellowship leaders anxiously awaited a news story on the subject being written by Baptist Press. Staff of the SBC's Christian Life Commission recently issued a statement criticizing a two-year-old resource on ministering to people with AIDS prepared by the Fellowship, charging it is too accepting of gays. A reporter for Baptist Press had contacted several Fellowship leaders for comment, but the story had not appeared by the time the Coordinating Council met.

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