

Associated Baptist Press

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

February 8, 1996

(96-12)

In this issue:

- Florida Baptist mission board excludes charismatic churches
- Quayle touts religious anti-poverty programs
- Mohler fills two high-level posts
- Free speech concerns raised over telecommunications reform
- Arkansas Baptist leader dies
- Richmond-area church forges a new covenant
- Corrections

Florida Baptist mission board excludes charismatic churches

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Three churches have been kicked out of the Florida Baptist Convention for "neo-Pentecostalism," a charge that pastors of two of the churches deny.

Florida's state board of missions voted Jan. 26 to deny membership credentials to Citrus Christian Ministries, formerly First Baptist Church of Homassassa Springs; Riverside Christian Fellowship, formerly Riverside Baptist Church, in Hernando; and Main Street Baptist Church in Inverness.

Last year, Alachua Baptist Association voted to disfellowship the Homassassa Springs congregation. The Inverness church resigned from membership in the association in August, followed by the Hernando congregation in October.

According to a news report in the Florida Baptist Witness, Florida Baptist Executive Director John Sullivan told state board members the three Central Florida churches recognize speaking in tongues as a measure of filling of the Holy Spirit, restoration of the office of apostle and the "laughing revival" associated with the controversial Toronto Airport Vineyard church.

"I urge that we stand along with this association," Sullivan told board members prior to the vote. "You cannot just believe anything or everything and be Baptist."

It is thought to be the first time the Florida convention has ever disfellowshipped a church.

Pastors of two of the churches, however, told Associated Baptist Press that Sullivan's quote did not accurately describe their views, that leaving the association had more to do with personality conflicts than doctrine and that Florida Baptist leaders made no effort to investigate charges before taking action against them.

Leary Willis Jr., pastor of Main Street Baptist Church in Inverness, said his church voted to withdraw from Alachua Association not over charismatic doctrine but "in a spirit of Christian love, simply recognizing we could no longer walk with the association."

Willis denied the church advocates non-Baptist teaching, but acknowledged "we may not be viewed by some as a traditional Southern Baptist congregation."

"Our church worships in a very strong charismatic style," Willis acknowledged. "We're not Pentecostal, but our worship style is charismatic."

Since leaving the association, Willis said the church has continued to support the Southern Baptist and state conventions through gifts to the Cooperative Program unified budget and support for state and national missions offerings.

The church also subscribes to "The Baptist Faith and Message," a statement of consensus Baptist beliefs approved by the SBC in 1963, he said.

"The only place we deviate with it is a statement concerning the baptism of the Holy Spirit," he said, which the church describes as "a gift" providing "evidence of power" for witnessing.

The church "believes all gifts of the Holy Spirit as described in Scripture are still in existence today and are for our church," he said. Speaking in tongues is mentioned in a listing of spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12 and is "a valid gift for the church today, as are all gifts," Willis said.

Willis denied his church supports the "laughing revival" phenomenon. "We are in no way a part of that. We have never espoused any part of the laughing revival."

"We don't depart too far from what most Baptist churches are doing today in areas of practice," Willis said. "Our worship style is more contemporary, thus called charismatic. Many Southern Baptists are moving toward a contemporary style of worship."

Chuck Brennan, pastor of Riverside Christian Fellowship in Hernando said his church decided to leave the association over a dispute that "has been going on for about three years."

The association "tried to vote us out three years in a row," unsuccessfully, he said. "Finally, this year they brought it up again and we resigned. We're tired of putting up with it."

Brennan said he believes opposition to his church was the result of "a personal vendetta" by "one or two pastors" in the association more than theology.

Brennan said describing the church's teaching as "neo-Pentecostalism" is "totally in error, mainly because they don't even understand what the term is."

"I'm disappointed because the state convention only went on one side," Brennan said. "They didn't bother to check with us or anything else. I'm really disappointed in our leadership for their lack of checking the facts."

Asked about a reference made in the news story to papers outlining the three churches' doctrinal beliefs and allegations they support the "laughing revival" concept, Brennan said, "I have no idea what they're talking about; none of that is applicable to us."

Efforts to reach Jimmy Sheats, pastor of Citrus Christian Ministries in Homassassa Springs, failed. Joseph Maddox, director of missions at Alachua Association, did not return a reporter's phone call.

Sullivan was out of the country on a mission trip and unavailable for comment. State convention spokesman Don Hepburn said, however, that leaders of the convention had reviewed material provided by the churches to the Alachua Association's credentials committee. Based on those documents, Sullivan concluded "the theology practiced by those three congregations represented neo-Pentecostalism" and "in his view did not represent Baptist polity or theology," Hepburn said.

Hepburn said the state board "decided to stand beside the association" in the dispute, "even though we are not bound by what the association does or does not do."

The state convention recognizes about 25 "state-at-large" churches that participate in the state convention but not a local association, Hepburn said. A state convention study committee is currently looking at the question of what constitutes "a cooperating church," he said.

Willis and Brennan said they believe charismatic-leaning congregations will come under increasing scrutiny, but that local churches have a right to interpret the Bible for themselves.

"We believe in the whole Bible," Brennan said. "'The Baptist Faith and Message' is a great writing, but that's not Scripture. We use the Scripture as the basis for establishing our doctrine."

"We believe in all the spiritual gifts and we believe they are applicable for today and, of course, tongues is one of them," Brennan said. "But the Bible says it's the least of the gifts. We realize it is a gift and if God chooses to give it to one of our people, I don't want to be the one to tell God, 'I don't want what you're giving me.'"

Brennan said "there are many churches in the Florida convention and across the United States" that hold similar views. He predicted other congregations will be singled out for charismatic practice.

"I believe they are going to be starting a witch hunt," he said. "I believe it's going to tear up our Southern Baptist Convention even more than the moderate-conservative-liberal thing did a few years ago."

The basic Baptist notion is that "each church is autonomous" to make its own decisions about doctrine and worship style, Brennan said. "That's not the basis for fellowship. The basis for fellowship is Jesus Christ."

"Not once has anyone in the association or state convention ever accused us of being unscriptural," Brennan said. "They only accused us of not doing it according to 'The Baptist Faith and Message' and Baptist tradition."

"We are a fundamentalist church," echoed Willis. "We believe the Bible is inerrant; the infallible word of God. We stand on the Bible."

"I thought this battle for the Bible was over. We believe the Bible all the way, but we are being disfellowshipped because our practice is a little bit different than what they could consider acceptable practice."

Since being kicked out of the state convention, Willis said he has been "inundated" with phone calls from other churches with similar leanings wondering if they will be next.

Hepburn said he does not believe the ouster of the three churches is a "test case" for charismatic worship in the state convention, but "is certainly providing us background" for the committee studying what constitutes a "cooperating" church or association.

Traditionally, associations have exercised freedom to discipline local churches on doctrinal grounds, while state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention have based good standing on support of denominational programs.

"We strongly believe that historically and presently the association is the theological watchdog in Southern Baptist life," Hepburn said. "But the other side of the coin is that churches as autonomous groups can affiliate or not affiliate with the local association, the state convention and the SBC. As a result, we -- the state convention -- are trying to deal with 2,400 autonomous churches across the state and have reached the point where we have to develop a theological framework that will serve as a guide to help us determine who are folks like us and who are not."

Sullivan "strongly believes the Bible must serve as the basis for this theological framework," Hepburn said.

The action by the state board of missions calls for state leaders to meet further with the pastors of the three churches. An original motion called for denying messenger credentials to the three churches at the annual state convention meeting and to refuse their gifts to the Cooperative Program, the convention's unified budget.

A motion by Clytee Harness of Elfers, however, recommended against refusing gifts pending further discussion, since that move would disqualify the pastors from participating in denominational retirement programs. "If we discover in the May (board) meeting (the complaint) is valid, we will return their funds," Harness said. The state mission board approved his motion.

Quayle touts religious anti-poverty programs

By Mark Wingfield

INDIANAPOLIS (ABP) -- Religious organizations do a more effective job of helping hurting people than government ever can, former Vice President Dan Quayle told the nation's religious broadcasters Feb. 6.

"Some of the best work on behalf of the poor and desperate is being done by faith-based organizations," Quayle said in a keynote address to the National Religious Broadcasters convention in Indianapolis.

"What we need in America is not more government programs that don't work," he said. "What we need in America is more religious programs that do work."

The former vice president echoed a theme sounded earlier the same day by freshman congressman J.C. Watts of Oklahoma, one of only two black Republican members of the House of Representatives.

Like Quayle, Watts was received warmly by the 2,700 NRB members and guests attending the annual conference. Watts spoke at a breakfast meeting, from which he left immediately after his presentation to hold hearings on legislation he is proposing to encourage faith-based groups to meet the needs of the nation's poor. He cited a program in Indianapolis that he believes could become a national model.

Both Watts and Quayle talked about the importance of their faith influencing their politics.

"I want to be a political leader who allows my faith to navigate my politics rather than my politics navigating my faith," said Watts, a former University of Oklahoma football star and youth minister at Sunnyside Baptist Church in Del City, Okla.

The Bible presents a blueprint that could solve America's moral and fiscal problems, if only people would accept it, Watts said. "From Genesis to Revelation, God gives us social and economic policies. The problem is we refuse to adhere to them."

Quayle talked about the "poverty of values" facing America and relished the fact that even moderate-to-liberal commentators have finally conceded he was right in his famous 1993 Murphy Brown speech. That speech drew howls of protest in the secular media because of Quayle's assertion that Hollywood was wrong to glamorize the TV character Murphy Brown bearing a child out of wedlock.

If America's rate of illegitimate births continues on its current trend, within 15 years one-half of all children will be born to unwed mothers, Quayle told the NRB members.

"Who's job is it to reverse the breakdown of civic virtue?" Quayle asked. "Who's job is it to rebuild the foundations of faith, family and responsibility?"

"My friends, it is our job," he said to applause.

Also in his address, Quayle talked about his forthcoming book, which portrays the healthy aspects of five American families, and paid tribute to former President Ronald Reagan. The day Quayle spoke was Reagan's 85th birthday.

He also took a swipe at Hillary Rodham Clinton's new book on children's advocacy issues, "It Takes a Village." The title is taken from an old African proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child."

"The phrase 'It takes a village' ... has validity only if the village you're talking about is friends, family ... and church," Quayle asserted. "If the village you're talking about is government, then it will fail. Government doesn't raise children; parents do."

Quayle praised the religious broadcasters, particularly the news and talk-show producers, for their work. "You're doing one outstanding job for America. I know that because I listen to you," he said.

He encouraged the broadcasters to continue their advocacy that the First Amendment was intended to protect the church from government but never intended to protect government from the church.

"Keep telling the truth," he urged. "Our communities desperately need to hear the truth. If we can hear the truth, the republic will be saved."

During the Reagan and Bush administrations, the president routinely addressed the NRB's annual convention. However, Bill Clinton never has addressed the group and was not invited to do so this year either.

"The president was not invited because the organization didn't want to invite him," explained NRB President Brandt Gustavson. "It's the best answer I can give.

"Our membership generally does not appreciate some of the public positions the president takes," Gustavson said, citing homosexual rights and abortion rights as examples.

In the past, election years have brought presidential candidates to the NRB conventions. However, none were present this year. The NRB has scheduled a "public policy" conference Sept. 4-5 in Washington to address social and moral issues.

Among a number of awards presented during the annual convention, the NRB presented lifetime achievement awards to Cliff Barrows and George Beverly Shea for their work with the Billy Graham organization. Barrows could not attend the event, but Shea and his wife were present.

Shea received three-prolonged-standing ovations from the crowd and electrified the audience by singing two verses of one of his crusade standards, "I'd Rather Have Jesus."

-30-

Mohler fills two high-level posts

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- President Albert Mohler has filled two key vacancies on his administrative team at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Daniel Akin, currently dean of students at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., has been named vice president for academic administration and dean of the theology school.

Akin will succeed David Dockery, who has been elected president of Union University in Jackson, Tenn. Both Akin and Dockery officially begin their new roles June 1.

Mohler also announced the immediate reassignment of Doug Walker, currently dean of students and vice president for student services, to the role of vice president for institutional advancement.

Walker, who was a pastor before joining the seminary administration in 1993, succeeds Tom Mabe, who left Southern in July to accept a fund-raising position in Virginia.

In his new role, Walker will supervise programs of fund-raising, alumni relations and public relations. No replacement has been named for the dean of students/vice president for student services position Walker is vacating.

Walker has been a chief supporter of Southern Seminary's move to a more conservative direction under Mohler's administration. As dean of students, he has cultivated a cadre of students who have sought ways to speak in churches and in media reports in order to give a positive perspective on the seminary's turbulent transition.

Mohler praised Walker as one who has brought "incredible gifts and unquestioned commitment" to the administration.

Akin has been dean of students and professor of theology at Southeastern Seminary since 1992. He previously taught at Criswell College in Dallas.

Although Mohler had the authority to appoint Akin to the dual administrative role, his appointment to the seminary faculty required trustee approval. Southern Seminary's trustee executive committee elected Akin associate professor of Christian theology Feb. 6.

Both Akin and Walker face significant challenges in their new roles.

The seminary's transformation under Mohler's administration has alienated many donors and alumni, meaning Walker will have to build a new base of financial support from individuals and groups who support the seminary's new direction.

Meanwhile, the seminary is awaiting news of its status with three accrediting agencies which have been investigating changes in the school's faculty hiring policies and other issues.

The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada met Jan. 25 to consider what actions, if any, it will take against the seminary. Mohler was summoned to a brief meeting with ATS accreditors that day in Pittsburgh, but the seminary has not yet received a final report from ATS.

The final report from ATS, which could involve either specific notations of problems or a move to place the school on probationary status, should be received by seminary administrators no later than Feb. 25. Details of the report may not be made public until March 25.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and the Council on Social Work Education also are evaluating their accreditation of the seminary and should issue similar reports in the coming weeks.

-30-

Free speech concerns raised over telecommunications reform

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A sweeping telecommunications reform bill signed Feb. 8 by President Clinton requires manufacturers to put a device in television sets to allow parents to block violent and other objectionable programs.

The overhaul package also contains provisions intended to encourage telecommunications competition.

But the requirement for a so-called "v-chip" in television sets and regulations of Internet communications are drawing criticism. The law includes a provision establishing criminal penalties of up to \$250,000 in fines and two years in prison for people who put "indecent" material on the Internet.

The House approved the conference report on the reform measure Feb. 1 by a vote of 414-16. The Senate approved it 91-5, clearing the way for Clinton's signature.

Under the v-chip provision, an advisory committee will recommend a system for rating television shows. The law encourages broadcasters to implement their own rating system within a year. After that, the Federal Communications Commission may accept the broadcasters' proposal or recommend another system.

Broadcasters would use the rating system to accompany certain programs with a signal to the v-chip, which would block a show from airing on the set if the chip is activated by parents. Critics charge a government-mandated rating system is unconstitutional.

"Any legislation that requires the rating of television programs based on their inclusion of violence, depictions of sexual misconduct or the like is a content-based burden on speech," said Rep. Jack Fields, R-Texas.

Fields, who voted for the bill, continued, "Inserting the federal government into the area of deciding what should be on television or how the content of television programs should be rated sets a dangerous precedent that threatens the very rights the First Amendment is designed to protect."

A spokesman for Fields said some Republican colleagues would disagree, but parents, not government, should change the channel. He said government staying out of those kinds of decisions is "the best part of conservatism."

The provision banning "indecent" speech on the Internet has drawn criticism from civil-liberties groups and abortion-rights activists.

The American Civil Liberties Union has said it will file a legal challenge to the ban on certain Internet material, saying the language of the bill is too broad.

In addition, Rep. Pat Schroeder, D-Colo, has raised concern over a provision that she says will prevent information on the Internet that tells where and how an abortion may be obtained.

The provision, added by Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., extends the 1873 Comstock Act enacted to stop indecent material from being transferred through the mail. The act covered information on birth control and abortions. In 1971, Congress deleted the prohibition on birth control, but the abortion provision remains.

Hyde said the measure does not interfere with the freedom to discuss the topic of abortion over the Internet. The language "prohibits the use of interactive computer service for the explicit purpose of selling, procuring or facilitating the sale of drugs, medicine or other devices intended for use in producing abortions," Hyde said.

Schroeder said, "This interpretation threatens women's ability to use the Internet to find out where and how to get a medical procedure that is legal in this country."

The law's primary provisions would remove some monopoly protections in the telecommunications industry. It would permit customers to get long-distance service from their local phone company or local phone service from their long-distance company.

Some consumer groups say it will deregulate industries before competition in the market arrives. All agree, however, it is the most sweeping communications reform in 60 years.

-30-

Arkansas Baptist leader dies

JONESBORO, Ark. (ABP) -- Prominent Arkansas Baptist lay leader Frank Lady died Jan. 30 of an apparent heart attack.

Lady, 66, a Jonesboro attorney, was the current second-vice president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. Previously, he represented Arkansas Baptists on the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee.

He was a long-time member of Central Baptist Church in Jonesboro who served in the Arkansas legislature in 1975-76 and ran for governor in 1976 and 1978.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

Richmond-area church forges a new covenant

By Julie Jenkins

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- There are no burning bushes or stone tablets this time around, but the people of Community of Grace Church in Richmond, Va., feel something like the ancient Israelites who camped at the foot of Mount Sinai.

In the Old Testament, God's people settled 11 months in the shadow of the holy mountain awaiting a covenant with God. "Camped" each Sunday morning at a Holiday Inn, Community of Grace Church has waited about the same length of time and is now ready to develop its own church covenant.

The church's people believe the time has come for a serious change in today's church identity, especially in terms of cultural and spiritual diversity.

Community of Grace began as an in-home prayer fellowship among families in metropolitan Richmond. Ben Wagener, a leader in the fellowship, shared his dream of starting a congregation patterned after the Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., an urban church which organized small mission teams that grew together spiritually while doing ministry.

Lively discussions about faith and urban ministry led to fervent prayer and the group called Wagener as pastor and began public worship in January 1995. Now with 65 participants of various Christian traditions (85 percent are Baptist), Community of Grace is attempting to revisit the ancient biblical tradition of covenant-making.

"Not only have we learned to respect each other's questions and diversity," said Wagener, "but we also have been forced to raise challenging and perplexing questions about what it means to be a Christian church today."

Community of Grace said the church of the future will cooperate with and learn from other faith traditions. It will face diversity rather than fear, still claim Christ as Lord, but will not promote blind acceptance or moral compromise to achieve solidarity.

Throughout 1995, every Community of Grace participant contributed ideas to develop the church's mission and values. Wagener held off a call for membership while a covenant committee met to write these ideas into spiritual disciplines.

Dec. 17, just about 11 months after formal worship began at the Holiday Inn in South Richmond, the congregation celebrated its Covenant Sunday.

"Every Baptist church is a covenant church," said David Burhans, chaplain at the University of Richmond, "but Community of Grace has distinguished itself by taking seriously its inclusive-covenant identity."

Burhans and other community leaders participated in the early development of the church, supporting its strong commitment to urban missions. The covenant idea, a strong theme in much of the Old Testament, is largely neglected in modern churches, founders say.

"If we're really going to understand New Testament Christianity, we must cut through the way we have been doing church for the past 2,000 years," Burhans said.

Building community in today's culture, said Burhans, "requires small groups of people who have time to talk and get to know one another -- people who are willing to share openly and honestly."

Community of Grace's covenant will be more than a mission statement printed in the back of a hymnal, leaders say. It will represent the church's daily response to God's call.

The covenant holds three core values addressing church membership, spiritual discipline, and cultural diversity:

-- Church membership must be a carefully considered commitment.

"The entry level in many traditional churches can be a relatively casual decision and there are few ongoing expectations for membership," Wagener said. "However, I also have observed that too little challenge often leads to a lukewarm and haphazard practice of our faith. Community of Grace is just attempting a new approach."

One new member of the church had never committed herself to regular prayer. In past church involvement, she had missed many worship experiences while managing church programs during the Sunday worship hour. At the beginning of the Community of Grace journey, she viewed herself as a somewhat needy person. But as she served on the covenant committee, she discovered, "I am indeed in a caring role at Community of Grace. I have more leadership capability in me than I ever would have thought." She views every participant in the church as a leader.

"It is really special to be part of a community that is praying for me on a regular basis," she explained. "I'm at a reflective point in my life where I have to look at myself and see what changes I want to make." The Community of Grace covenant offers a standard of accountability while she deals with separation from her husband, she said. "I've received tremendous support without judgment from members of the church."

-- The Christian walk should be a pilgrimage of discipleship, not a label.

The covenant outlines four levels of participation in the church -- new Christian, friend, member and member-in-covenant. While all are welcomed to worship, members must make public profession of faith in Christ, and members-in-covenant adopt six life disciplines in the areas of prayer, Bible study, physical health, worship,

stewardship, and servant/leadership. Participants then form shepherding groups which hold one another accountable to these disciplines within the church and local community.

"The core of our church so far has been our vision of being a Christian community that expresses caring to others," said Wagener, "reaching out to others regardless of age, gender, race, geographical location, prior religious affiliation, ethnic background, marital status, or any other factors that often separate people from each other."

Mark Steil, stewardship committee chairman, said he appreciates the church's openness. "The complete ability to speak your mind without being branded a heretic -- the ability to agree to disagree -- is very refreshing in a church. We are bringing all different levels of faith into the same room."

"Anybody who wants to praise God and be in a loving, helping community should be allowed in with open arms," Bertie Steil said. "That's what I see happening at Community of Grace with the covenant as our guide."

"Community of Grace is providing me with a new vision of what a church is, which is dealing with people, neighborhoods, and families," she explained. "After 27 years, it's so easy to become isolated if you let yourself -- particularly now in the transient times we live in, where families move away from one another."

According to Wagener, the covenant commitment protects against an "anything goes" mentality because it calls members to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Only members in covenant are obliged to uphold the six spiritual disciplines, while other church participants may commit to certain disciplines, or join shepherding groups as they feel ready.

-- The time has come for a new kind of church, ready to meet a multicultural age.

Rashmi Wilson felt extremely isolated two years ago when her family moved back to India while she stayed behind in the U.S. American culture did not hold the sense of family unity she enjoyed at home, where her extended family lived together. Community of Grace became her family.

"It's just like a family should be," she said. "They're always there for me, not asking questions or making me feel like I'm imposing on them."

Community of Grace financially supports the Baptist General Association of Virginia, the Middle District and Richmond Baptist associations, Richmond Hill retreat center and a local housing association.

A team from the church works with Cambodian, Vietnamese, Haitian and Bosnian refugees in Richmond, while another mission team visits AIDS patients regularly. Both teams focus on building relationships and learning from Richmond's various cultures and sub-cultures.

Mobility and flexibility make Community of Grace an open door to diversity, said Wagener. With no plans to build a facility, the church meets in homes for mid-week services, and rents space for preschool, children, youth and adult Sunday worship.

-30-

-- Julie Jenkins is public relations specialist for the Virginia Baptist General Board.

CORRECTIONS: In the Feb. 6 ABP "'Call to Renewal' coalition offers 'new vision' for religion, politics" and "'Call to Renewal' planners announce aims for 1996," please correct dates of the conference to Feb. 2-3.

END