

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Politicking complaint leveled against Houston Baptist church**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Washington-based religious liberty group has made a large Southern Baptist congregation in Texas the first target of a new campaign to force churches to comply with Internal Revenue Service rules that limit political activity by non-profit organizations.

In a March 19 letter, Americans United for Separation of Church and State Executive Director Barry Lynn urged the IRS to investigate activities of the "Nehemiah Project," a ministry of Second Baptist Church in Houston that encourages political involvement by church members. Lynn's letter said printed materials distributed at the church encouraged individuals to vote for particular candidates at Republican Party precinct conventions, a violation of federal law.

Federal law enforced by the IRS permits churches and other non-profit organizations to seek to influence legislation as long as their lobbying efforts represent less than a "substantial" allocation of their resources. But the law contains a flat ban against engaging in election activities.

AU also announced the formation of Project Fair Play, an election-year effort to bring churches into compliance with the IRS prohibition on campaigning.

"Most American churches responsibly comply with IRS rules barring partisan politicking," Lynn said at a March 19 news conference in Washington. "But those who don't should give up their tax-exempt status."

Ed Young, pastor of Houston's Second Baptist Church and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, said the church has done nothing wrong and that Americans United singled out the 22,000-member megachurch noted for its pro-family stance in an effort to gain publicity.

"This is an attempt by the left wing of our society to attack those of us who are trying simply -- certainly to stay inside the laws of this land -- but also to make a difference," Young told the Houston Chronicle.

"It's about headlines," Young continued. "I guess they pick a church that they think they can come after, but we have our attorneys dealing with the IRS."

One lawyer that has agreed to help the church is Jay Sekulow, legal counsel for Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice. Sekulow is also representing the Church at Pierce Creek in Vestal, N.Y., which lost its tax-exempt status in 1995 for running a full-page ad in USA Today attacking then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton.

"What's happening is Barry Lynn is picking on churches that he doesn't like," Sekulow said. "I know of churches -- Episcopal, Methodist and others -- who told people from their pulpits in Louisiana not to vote for David Duke."

Lynn denied keeping tabs on only conservative congregations. He said AU's project is non-partisan and will target violations of the politicking ban all along the ideological spectrum.

Lynn said he agreed with IRS warnings issued to several African-American churches in the Norfolk, Va., area against "close-to-the-line political activity" in the 1994 Senate race between Democrat incumbent Chuck Robb and Republican challenger Oliver North.

If pastors "get into the business of setting up a campaign in the church basement to support Bill Clinton, it's every bit as unlawful and every bit as irresponsible as if a church basement were used to direct a Pat Buchanan or Bob Dole campaign," Lynn said.

Lynn said Project Fair Play will rely on input about possible violations from AU members and chapters across the nation. AU is looking primarily for the "more egregious examples of direct involvement in political campaigns," and not so much at distribution of slanted voting records and other less clear-cut violations.

Lynn said AU targeted Second Baptist Church because of materials being distributed in the church's visitors center.

"This is as sophisticated and nitty-gritty a collection of instructions for how to intervene in a political campaign that we have seen to date," Lynn said.

Lynn said the church's activities must be viewed in the context of religious right efforts "to stampede local churches into increasingly partisan political actions."

Materials distributed by Second Baptist Church, Lynn said, directed church members "to identify a party (precinct) convention chairman candidate by the color of his tie and warns that only the specific delegate and alternate slates he endorses should be supported."

Leaders at Second Baptist Church disputed Lynn's allegations.

Judy Craig, Ministry Network director at the church, said the church's Nehemiah Project is used to teach Christian citizenship principles.

"We don't in any way endorse candidates," she said. "We don't endorse political parties."

Craig said the document cited in the AU complaint that provided instructions on voting for specific precinct candidates was prepared by an individual member and was "not approved by the church."

"I had not seen it until it was faxed to me yesterday by a reporter," Craig said.

"We're not Democrats. We're not Republicans," Young told the Houston Chronicle. He called the church "a bipartisan type of congregation" but noted that church members are "mostly conservative."

Young said individuals place brochures for everything from garage sales to counseling programs on a counter in the visitors' center. The counter is cleared periodically, but the church cannot control every notice displayed, he said.

Doug Elliott, a Houston attorney and member of the church, told the Houston newspaper he acted on his own, writing, printing and copying the flier at his office. He said the flier was to promote precinct participation only.

"I don't see how my individual activities relate to what the church is doing," Elliott said.

But Lynn said the church is under a "genuine moral and legal obligation" to ensure that material distributed at the church doesn't link a ministry to "specific electoral results."

Lynn said the materials deserve "the strictest scrutiny" by the IRS.

"Absent some terrifically good explanation, I would think a substantial penalty would be imposed," he said.

Lynn's letter urged IRS to "apply appropriate penalties including revocation of the church's tax-exempt status."

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-- Cecile Holmes contributed to this story.

## **Judge dismisses case against Baptist school**

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- A federal judge has thrown out a lawsuit filed against Samford University by a professor who claimed religious discrimination by the Baptist school in Birmingham, Ala.

Professor John Killinger filed a suit in federal court in 1994 claiming he was barred from teaching in Samford's Beeson Divinity School because his moderate theology clashed with the conservative views of the school's dean. Killinger charged religious discrimination under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Acts.

He also alleged that Samford officials violated terms of the will of Ralph W. Beeson, a philanthropist who left \$23 million to the university to establish a non-sectarian, evangelical Protestant divinity school.

U.S. District Judge William Acker ruled against Killinger's claim in February, noting that religious organizations are exempt from Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. Other aspects of Killinger's suit were "dismissed without prejudice," leaving open the possibility that Killinger could make his claim on other grounds.

"In construing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the court believes it necessary to defer to the particular educational institution as it announces and describes its purposes and missions," Acker wrote in his decision.

"This court lacks the competence to enforce any promise of theological diversity made by Samford," Acker said.

"This is a victory for religious liberty and theological integrity," Timothy George, dean of the Beeson School, told the Birmingham News.

The university issued a statement agreeing with Acker's ruling "that the courts of this country should not be making religious decisions for religious institutions."

Killinger's attorney said he and his client were "disappointed" with the decision and plan to appeal to the 11th U.S. Circuit Court.

Killinger taught at Vanderbilt University 15 years before coming to Samford in 1989 with the understanding, he claims, that his primary assignment would be to teach preaching to graduate students in the divinity school.

Killinger has never taught a required course in the Beeson School, however, and since 1993 has taught no courses in the school. Killinger claims George refused to allow him to teach because Killinger does not share George's fundamentalist Baptist views. Killinger currently teaches undergraduate courses in religion and English.

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-- By ABP staff. Greg Garrison of the Birmingham News and Wes Fulton of the Samford Crimson contributed to this story.

## **Illinois Baptists begin process to seek successor for executive**

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (ABP) -- Illinois Baptists have begun a search for a new executive director to replace Gene Wilson, who was incapacitated by a massive brain hemorrhage last August.

Directors of the Illinois Baptist State Association elected a search committee to seek a new executive March 5. They also named Keith Stanford, director of church development, acting executive director until a successor for Wilson is found.

"It is time for us to take this kind of action," state convention president Roger Ellsworth told the Illinois Baptist newspaper. He said he spoke to a number of current and former leaders before making the decision. "No one said we're moving too fast," he said.

Wilson's wife, Virginia, told the Illinois Baptist "the Lord had already pretty much prepared" her for the decision by Illinois leaders to seek a replacement for her husband. But she said she remains confident that God has "an important work for Gene to do when this is over."

Wilson, 52, had led Illinois Baptists less than two years when he suffered a massive brain hemorrhage on Aug. 30, 1995. He was in a coma for more than two months. He continues to recuperate in a St. Louis hospital.

"It has become evident to me in the past few weeks that Gene has quite a long period yet before he is able to resume even something of a normal lifestyle," Ellsworth told the board of directors.

If Wilson could speak to the board, Ellsworth said, "I think that he would remind us that there is a vast harvest field out here in Illinois and that we need to be pressing on with that harvest."

A recent Illinois Baptist news story reported that Wilson's thoughts were "jumbled," that he was able to carry on only simple conversations and cannot walk. Yet doctors were "very encouraged" by his progress, the paper said.

In an editorial in the paper's March 13 issue, Acting Editor Ferrell Foster noted that some people had commented that stories in the Illinois Baptist could lead readers to think Wilson is on the verge of recovering.

"I will say simply that this newspaper has tried to be sensitive to both the facts and the family," he wrote. "If we erred, it was out of love."

Virginia Wilson has been confident throughout the ordeal that her husband will recover. She told the Illinois Baptist "the Lord told me that first night" that Wilson will eventually regain his abilities. Doctors agree he should eventually recover, she added, but "it's just a matter of time."

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-- By ABP staff

## **SBC president among critics of player refusing to salute flag**

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist Convention president Jim Henry denounced the actions of a professional basketball player who refused to stand for the national anthem because of his Muslim beliefs.

The battle of conscience between Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, a guard for the Denver Nuggets, and the National Basketball Association was brief. After the NBA suspended Abdul-Rauf, the player formerly known as Chris Jackson announced March 14 he would stand and pray during the playing of The Star-Spangled Banner.

Abdul-Rauf claimed he could not stand during the national anthem because his Muslim faith forbids nationalistic ritualism and added that he couldn't salute the flag because he considers it a symbol of tyranny and oppression.

Among critics of Abdul-Rauf's stand was SBC president Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, Fla.

"We join with the great majority of our fellow Americans in expressing disappointment that a young man who has had such remarkable success and opportunity under the freedoms our flag stands for refuses to respect and appreciate those freedoms," Henry said in a written statement to the Miami Herald.

Another Baptist, church-state lawyer Oliver Thomas, disagreed. He said much of the criticism is "about money."

"I think the reaction of the public, and perhaps even some religious leaders, is that it's very difficult to go to bat for a young man who is making millions of dollars a year from a system that he considers oppressive. It hasn't been very oppressive for him, obviously. But we have to resist that temptation."

Thomas said Abdul-Rauf had a clear legal right to sit out the national anthem and the NBA would certainly have lost in court had the ballplayer sued under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The NBA would have been forced to find a reasonable accommodation to Abdul-Rauf's religion by allowing him to sit out the national anthem in the locker room or on the bench, he said.

"It's a pretty easy case," Thomas said.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 50 years ago that children of Jehovah's Witnesses in public schools could not be penalized for refusing for religious reasons to salute the flag.

Abdul-Rauf is also not the first professional athlete to raise religious-liberty objections. Legendary pitcher Sandy Koufax refused to pitch a 1965 World Series game because it fell on a Jewish holiday. Muhammed Ali was banned from boxing for refusing to serve in the Army during the Vietnam War, citing his Muslim faith.

In addition to non-Muslim detractors, some Muslim scholars disputed Abdul-Rauf's interpretation of religious texts. "He must repent," said Syed Hasan, a Muslim leader in South Florida. "His is going against Islam. This is craziness. America is a free country and we Muslims are loyal to it."

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-- By April Witt

## **Louisiana College president announces retirement plans**

PINEVILLE, La. (ABP) -- Louisiana College President Robert Lynn announced March 19 that he plans to retire as soon as a successor is named.

Lynn, 64, has led the Baptist school in Pineville, La., 21 years. While few people knew he was planning to step down, Lynn said, it has been his intention all along to retire at age 65 to allow him time to write.

Lynn said announcing his retirement now will allow the board of trustees to search "expeditiously but without pressure" for his successor.

No timetable has been set for seeking Lynn's replacement but a normal search for a college president spans from eight to 12 months, said trustee chairman Sellers Aycock, a businessman from Rayville, La.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Richmond Seminary receives recent gifts totaling \$300,000**

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond has received recent gifts totaling \$300,000, the Virginia seminary announced March 20.

Retired Richmond businessman Paul Pusey Jr. gave \$150,000 designated for the Theodore F. Adams Chair of Pastoral Care, honoring the former pastor of Richmond's First Baptist Church.

Ken and Irene Hall of Charlotte, N.C., gave stock valued at \$88,000 for the seminary's upcoming capital campaign.

Another anonymous gift of \$62,000 was given by a retired Charlotte businessman and his wife.

Both the Halls and the anonymous donors are members of Providence Baptist Church in Charlotte.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Austin church negotiates agreement with creditors**

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- Great Hills Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, has reached an agreement with bondholders that may prevent the church from having to sell its property.

The Austin American-Statesman reported that an agreement was reached March 19 between the church, which filed for bankruptcy protection in January, and its bondholder creditors on settling its \$15 million debt.

"Basically, the church and the bondholders came up with an agreement to provide for the payment of a reduced amount over a relatively in-between period of time," said Stephen Sather, lawyer for the church.

Asked by the paper if that means Great Hills will get to keep its property, Sather replied, "If we do what we have promised."

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-- By ABP staff

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