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Woman's 1993 ordination sparks conflict in Kentucky

By Mark Wingfield

DRAKESBORO, Ky. (ABP) -- A woman's 1993 ordination as a minister has sparked conflict in two Baptist associations in western Kentucky.

Little Bethel Baptist Association in Madisonville, Ky., voted Nov. 4 to sever ties with Cornerstone Counseling, where Angie Flack works as a part-time counselor. The ministry of Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children had been based in the association's office. It has moved to a new location.

Meanwhile, nearby Muhlenberg Baptist Association has taken action against Drakesboro Baptist Church, where Flack's husband, David, became pastor last spring.

Angie Flack was ordained to the gospel ministry by a church in North Carolina in 1993. Though she holds no office in the Drakesboro church and does not consider herself to be a pastor, an opponent has charged her presence in Muhlenberg Association could "open the door to other problems," such as encouraging other women to be ordained as ministers or deacons.

A credentials committee appointed last fall reported Jan. 21 with a recommendation that the association take no action against the church. The association's executive board rejected the committee's report, however, and entertained a motion on the floor to expel the church from the association. The motion received a majority vote in favor but fell seven votes shy of a required two-thirds margin.

As a result of the dispute, congregations on both sides are questioning whether they should remain in the association or leave in protest.

Two of the association's largest churches -- First Baptist and Second Baptist churches of Greenville -- opposed the effort to oust the church. Both have scheduled February votes on whether to remain in the association.

On the other side, James Shutt, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Central City and leader of the effort to oust the Drakesboro church, confirmed that his church has voted no longer to recognize the Drakesboro church as being of "like faith and order." That means the Calvary Baptist Church will not receive or grant transfers of membership from or to the Drakesboro church.

Shutt said he does not know what further action his church or others opposed to the ordination of women will take. However, he predicted the association "in all probability is going to lose some finances and perhaps some churches."

If the association does not address the "problem" of Angie Flack's presence, "it will open the door for other problems, like the ordination of women as deacons," Shutt said in an earlier executive board meeting where he called for the appointment of the credentials committee. "We need to speak on this subject loud and clear. Our voice needs to be heard saying that we will not accept the ordination of women for any reason."

Angie Flack was present at the Nov. 19 executive board meeting but was not permitted to speak. Only males may serve as executive board members or messengers to the association's annual meetings and visitors are not allowed to speak.

David Flack read a statement from his wife, however, in which she illustrated her call to ministry by using the children's song "This Little Light of Mine."

"When I first answered God's call to ministry, I believed I was letting God's light shine," she said. "To ignore this call would have been like hiding it under a bushel."

Her statement noted that some had suggested she should send her ordination papers back to Florence Baptist Church in Forest City, N.C., the church which ordained her.

"This is not an option for me, nor is it an option for Florence Baptist Church," she responded. "I could not and will not extinguish the light God has given me to carry. I will not hide it under a bushel as some have proposed, and I would not ask anyone to do the same.

"God has led me into the ministry of pastoral counseling to help people whose hearts are hurting," she said. "This is what I do. This is what I will continue to do until God tells me to do otherwise."

Opponents of her ordination have focused criticism on the church that called her husband as pastor.

"This problem was created by Drakesboro Baptist Church. They chose to go against what is the commonly held belief among Baptists on ordination of women," said Charles Gresham, pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Central City.

That the Bible teaches that ordination is for males only is "just as clear as the teaching on salvation," Gresham said.

"This is not about the right of individuals to believe as they choose," he said. "This is not about the right of churches to believe and practice as they choose. This is an issue of what we believe and stand for as an association."

But David Flack said the Drakesboro church did not call him as pastor with an agenda of introducing women's ordination into the association. The church has not made an issue out of Angie Flack's ordination, he added.

He explained that the dispute in both associations erupted after he truthfully answered a request for information for Muhlenberg Association's 1996 annual. Churches are asked to list all ordained ministers in their congregations. So he submitted Angie Flack's name under the heading "ordained ministers other than pastors."

"When I went to Muhlenberg County, I did not go there with the banner of the ordination of women," David Flack said. "I happened to be married to a woman who is ordained."

Although Drakesboro First Baptist Church never has ordained a woman, the church was fully aware of Angie Flack's ordination and has been supportive in every way, the couple said.

Allen Black, pastor of Martwick Baptist Church in Central City and a former director of missions for the association, called the issue "the most divisive thing I've ever seen in this or any other association."

Black told the executive board he did not want to defend the doctrinal position of ordaining women but to speak in defense of the association's constitution, which is silent on the subject.

The executive board is "attempting to exercise authority we don't possess," Black asserted. "When we pull out and stop abiding by our constitution, then we are in deep, dark trouble."

Tim Adcock, pastor of New Paradise Baptist Church in Powderly, Ky., countered Black's appeal to the association's constitution.

"Constitutions are good. Bylaws are good. But the best constitution I know is the word of God," Adcock declared while holding up his Bible. He then read a passage from 1 Timothy 3 -- often cited as giving requirements for pastors and deacons -- giving emphasis to every male pronoun.

"Anything that goes against the word is wrong," Adcock concluded.

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State Baptist Men leaders organize association

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- An association of state-convention directors of Baptist men's ministries formed last spring recently held its organizational meeting in Texas.

At the meeting, the Association of State Brotherhood Leadership elected officers and adopted a purpose statement and core values.

Baptist Men leaders voted in April to establish the association to guard that disaster-relief, volunteer missions and other ministries coordinated by the Southern Baptist Convention's Brotherhood Commission continue when the agency is dissolved this year in a massive denominational restructuring. SBC leaders issued a statement in May calling the action "unilateral" and "not necessary."

In the restructuring plan adopted last summer, three agencies -- the Brotherhood Commission in Memphis, Tenn., the Radio and Television Commission in Fort Worth, Texas, and the Home Mission Board in suburban Atlanta -- will be replaced by a new North American Mission Board. The new board will be based in Alpharetta, Ga., in offices currently occupied by the HMB. Production facilities for the Radio and Television Commission will remain in Fort Worth.

The plan calls for current Brotherhood Commission ministries to be divided between the North American Mission Board and the Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville, Tenn.

Bob Dixon, a convener of the association's organizational meeting, reported a constructive meeting with officials at the Sunday School Board.

One official said the Sunday School Board "wants to walk with the state leaders in men's ministry and build it together, to reach men as never before, to help them grow spiritually as husbands, fathers (and) employees," Dixon reported.

Another official said the Sunday School Board views Baptist men's ministries not as a new program, but as a strengthening of work already going on in Baptist churches, Dixon said.

No meeting has been scheduled with the North American Mission Board, Dixon said. He said a meeting is planned in March with leaders of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, which is being renamed the International Mission Board in the new structure.

The two dozen leaders adopted as a purpose statement for the Association of State Brotherhood Leadership: "We exist to encourage mission action and education among Southern Baptist churches through an autonomous and cooperative environment for the sharing of ideas, concepts, projects and concerns. We seek to accomplish this task through networking with state and national bodies."

The group defined four core values: the discernment and pursuit of God's activity; every Christian a missionary; personal ministry involvement; and primacy of the local congregation.

Officers of the new association are: chairman, Tommy Puckett, director of Alabama Baptist Men; vice chairman, Richard Brunson, director of North Carolina Baptist Men; and recording secretary, Gary Floyd, director of Baptist Men for the Northwest Baptist Convention.

Dixon said the group will recommend that national ministry fellowships in the North American Mission Board be modeled after the existing disaster-relief system. Under that model, day-to-day coordination, enlistment, training and mobilization of volunteers are left to state Brotherhood organizations, whose elected leaders provide coordination with other states.

The groups plans to meet again Dec. 4-6 in Kentucky.

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Articles of incorporation filed for new Kentucky seminary

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Articles of incorporation have been filed for a new Baptist seminary in Kentucky, but details of the new venture apparently have not been finalized.

The Kentucky school would join a number of alternative theological schools springing up in recent years for moderates disenfranchised by a conservative swing in seminaries owned by the Southern Baptist Convention.

A January newsletter from the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group, features a brief column by Paul Simmons, chair of the group's theological-education committee. Simmons is a former professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

"The Baptist Seminary of Kentucky is now a reality," Simmons wrote in the newsletter. "Articles of incorporation have been filed toward full recognition as a non-profit organization."

Simmons outlined two immediate goals: (1) creating a seminary "that will appeal to and be supported by the vast majority of Kentucky Baptists" and (2) locating the seminary on a college or university campus.

"The seminary will be autonomous, governed by its own board of trustees," he wrote.

A seminar on "The Future of Theological Education," to be held in early 1997 at Faith Baptist Church in Georgetown, Ky., will provide more information about the venture, Simmons said.

Greg Earwood, pastor of Faith Baptist Church, is listed as treasurer of the new corporation. Simmons also issued an appeal for tax-deductible contributions.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

Jester to lead Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College

MAYFIELD, Ky. (ABP) -- Former missionary and Wayland Baptist University president David Jester has been named president-elect of Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College in Mayfield, Ky.

Jester, 66, will become the sixth president of the college May 9, upon the retirement of current president LaVerne Butler.

The college, which enrolls about 140 students, is owned by 15 Baptist associations in four states: Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri and Tennessee. Although not directly affiliated with any state Baptist convention, the college has been formally recognized by the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

Jester comes to Mid-Continent from McAllen, Texas, where he has been director of the adult continuing education division of South Texas Community College since 1991.

From 1981-87, Jester served as president of Wayland Baptist University, a school affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Prior to that, he served two Kentucky Baptist schools: Georgetown College as professor of education and director of the graduate program and Campbellsville College as vice president for advancement and professor of education and as academic vice president.

Jester and his wife, Marie, were Southern Baptist missionaries to Africa from 1957 to 1970. There, he helped launch Baptist education efforts in Nigeria.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

Texas Baptists oppose gambling measures

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptists will weigh in against gambling when the state's 75th legislature convenes.

The Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission has joined Texans Against Gambling in calling for a moratorium on any expansion of gambling in this legislative session, including the introduction of new forms of gambling such as "amusement machines" under existing lottery laws.

"Riverboat casinos, gambling ships, off-track betting, Keno and most expansion of charitable gambling are all efforts by gambling investors to legalize full-scale gambling in Texas and must be vigorously opposed," said Weston Ware, citizenship associate for the Texas Baptist agency.

In a public-policy agenda adopted Jan. 24 in Dallas, the commission also went on record as opposing public funding for parochial schools through vouchers, supporting sex-education programs with stress abstinence and supporting restrictions on abortions.

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-- By Ken Camp

Americans more sympathetic with Israelis than with Palestinians

By Marv Knox

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- While Israelis and Palestinians pursue their treacherous trek toward peace, the largest bloc of Americans cast their sympathies with Israelis, Gallup Poll discovered.

More than twice as many Americans said they sympathize with the Israelis over against the Palestinians, according to the January edition of "Emerging Trends," a newsletter produced by the Gallup organization's Princeton Religion Research Center.

The Israelis receive sympathy from 38 percent of Americans, the Gallup survey revealed. That compares to only 15 percent sympathetic support for the Palestinians.

In addition, 6 percent claimed they sympathize with both sides, 14 percent do not sympathize with either group and 27 percent expressed no opinion.

The latest feelings toward the Middle Eastern groups mirror U.S. public opinion in 1988, when 37 percent were sympathetic with the Israelis, and 15 percent favored the Palestinians.

That 15 percent sympathy ranking is the best the Palestinians ever have received, the pollsters reported.

The Persian Gulf War in 1991 caused U.S. opinion to be the most sharply divided on the Israelis and the Palestinians, they added.

That winter, when Israel was threatened by Iraqi's Scud missiles, 64 percent of Americans said they felt sympathy for the Israelis. Conversely, only 7 percent expressed sympathy for the Palestinians that year.

The latest Gallup survey found that adherents of the Religious Right "in some respects show a stronger support for Jewish traditions than do many other Americans," the newsletter reported.

For example, almost three out of four (72 percent) people identified with the Religious Right think Jews have a right to the land occupied by Israel, "since it was promised to them by God."

Asked directly about their sympathies in the Middle East, 61 percent of the Religious Right respondents said they favor Israel, compared to just 5 percent for Palestinians.

And people involved with the Religious Right are almost twice as likely as other Americans (53 percent to 28 percent) to think Jews are "God's chosen people."

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SBC strife hinders evangelists, says president of Texas group

By Ken Camp

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- A loss of trust in the Southern Baptist Convention has contributed to lean times for evangelists who depend on invitations to preach revivals at local churches, laments evangelist Frank Harber.

"There are more evangelists today than ever before. There are more revivals being preached than ever before. But there are also more churches, and many of them never invite an evangelist to preach," said Harber, new president of the Conference of Texas Baptist Evangelists.

Pastors yield their pulpits only to people they trust, said Harber,

"The evangelist who is going to last will learn to be a bridge builder," Harber said, noting that pastors will black-ball an evangelist who fosters division or undermines the pastor.

Controversy between conservatives and moderates in the SBC has further eroded trust in evangelists, Harber said.

Many vocational evangelists identify with the "conservative resurgence" in the SBC both out of personal convictions about biblical inerrancy and practical considerations about where they are most welcome, Harber said.

"Often, the more conservative churches are more likely to use the evangelists," he said.

Harber said he believes that some churches that are labeled "moderate" -- including those which align with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- would be open to inviting evangelists if they trusted them.

The evangelist's role is to point people to Jesus, not dwell on divisive denominational issues, Harber said.

"I'm an equal-opportunity preacher," he said. "I'll preach in CBF churches. I'll preach in Southern-Baptists-of-Texas churches. I would preach in a Muslim mosque if they would let me. I'll preach anywhere that I'm allowed to preach Christ crucified."

What's true for denominational politics is equally true in regard to secular politics, according to Harber.

"Learn from Billy Graham. Politics is better left to others. The evangelist's job is not politics."

Other pressures facing evangelists, he said, are trends away from scheduling protracted revival meetings, juggling travel with family life and money.

"The number one reason young men who feel called say they are not going into vocational evangelism is financial," Harber said.

Still, Harber commends vocational evangelism as a career choice.

"It's not glamorous, but it's extremely rewarding, seeing all the people who come to Jesus Christ. It's not the most lucrative profession, but it's full of quality people who love the Lord," Harber said.

"You starve. You're poor. But you're happy."

In an increasingly secular and pluralistic culture, churches must emphasize the basics of Christianity, Harber said.

"Christianity has lost its home-field advantage," he said. "We must get back to sharing Jesus Christ, the very basic historicity of his life, death and resurrection."

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Daniel Vestal's Tallowood past foreshadows his CBF future

By Robert O'Brien

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Five years ago, Daniel Vestal spent his first Monday night as pastor of Houston's Tallowood Baptist Church in a rundown apartment complex with a church visitation team preparing to survey prospects.

It sent the church a strong message about Vestal's missions commitment -- a commitment that coworkers predict will carry over into his role as coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a post he assumed Dec. 1.

Bud Hudgens, who volunteers full time to direct the church's mission ministries, said he "wouldn't have dreamed" of asking his new pastor to come to the briefing for missions volunteers.

"Here was a new pastor with a full schedule -- a well-known man who had run for president of the Southern Baptist Convention the year before and had called the first meeting that launched CBF," Hudgens recalled.

But Vestal surprised the team, Hudgens said, by showing up at the apartments, sitting down with the group, listening and then asking what he could do.

"How many pastors would have even been there?" Hudgens asked, let alone ask "what they could do for you."

Hudgens assigned Vestal some apartments to call on. "He did it, and that night became one of us," Hudgens recalled. "He walks the talk. He showed us where his heart is."

Vestal spelled out his missions vision in a sermon three years ago, calling Tallowood "a metropolitan church with a world vision" and a "gift-based" ministry that seeks to help members and staffers "discover their spiritual gifts and serve God" accordingly.

Those ideas have become Tallowood hallmarks, observers say. So are other challenges issued by the man who, after 27 years as a pastor, will lead the Fellowship into the 21st century.

Behind Vestal's leadership, Tallowood redoubled its emphasis on ethnic ministries to respond to his vision of a "multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-social" church.

Vestal envisioned a church content not just to give -- no matter how generously -- or pray -- no matter how much. He wanted a church that would get personally involved and "go out in the Holy Spirit's power."

Vestal distinguishes between "centrifugal" and "centripetal" forces in Jesus' Great Commission. Jesus commanded Christians to be an outward-moving force-- a centrifugal force -- to reach the world, not an inward-moving centripetal force that results in the self-absorbed life characteristic of so many churches, he said.

Drawing on that concept, Vestal urged Tallowood to commit to "an urban strategy that's centrifugal," that pushes out into the community. As a result, the church ministers to as many people each week outside the church --more than 2,000 -- as it does inside its walls.

"He saw a new paradigm for us -- the going and doing, as well as the giving and sending," Hudgens said. "It revolutionized our work."

Tallowood sponsors ministries in nursing homes, apartments and mission centers, along with projects including urban alliances, inner city ethnic youth rehab and scholarship aid, mission projects, English-language training, neighborhood witnessing, Bible clubs, prayer walks and retreats, and many others.

"Our goal ought not to be for everybody to come to our building," Vestal told his people. "We must go where the people are."

Church growth will result, Vestal said, "but our responsibility is far greater than the growth of (our) church. Our responsibility is to those who will never reach (our) membership roles.

"That's what I call missions," he said.

Observers say Vestal's vision and hands-on approach make him a rare commodity -- a leader with a servant spirit.

"Daniel is focused on God's leadership, not himself," Hudgens said. "He expects others to remember that, too. When he sees me getting the big head over some success, he says, 'Bud, remember that God has done this.'"

"He's not jealous of or threatened by people's ideas," Hudgens added. "He doesn't have to initiate them to accept them. In fact, much of what we do grew out of the ideas of others. He expects us to have ideas. And his eyes sparkle when he hears good ones. Don't wait for him to tell you to take initiative."

Co-workers and church members use words like "supporter," "listener," "innovator," "enabler," "peacemaker," and "integrator." They say they respect Vestal's integrity, spirituality, personal security, openness to ideas, intelligence and willingness to roll up his sleeves and work alongside them.

Those characteristics, they say, have opened doors for ministries to soar, such as the Japanese, Chinese, Korean and Hispanic congregations that meet at the church. Tallowood colleagues predict Vestal's commitment to a multi-ethnic church will remain a priority for CBF.

Speaking to a group of missions staff and missionaries soon after his election as CBF coordinator, Vestal commented: "I don't see many ethnic faces (here). That's got to change. Now that I've had a taste of cultural diversity at Tallowood, I don't want it any other way."

At Tallowood, Vestal urged the church to move to a new level in relating to its international congregations. He removed what one observer called the "invisible pressure" on them to spin off as soon as possible. That should come, Vestal said, only if they choose. Meanwhile, they should be incorporated fully into Tallowood's activities and ministry.

And he removed any hint that ethnic ministries were second class by declaring and treating each international pastor as his "colleague and equal."

"Daniel took a risk doing that in an Anglo church," said a long-time international member. "But it made us feel like part of the whole church. It was a big change, but it's blessed us -- Anglos and internationals."

Each congregation worships voluntarily in its own "heart language" in services and adult Sunday school classes. But youngsters of all ages from the English and international congregations participate jointly in Sunday school and other activities.

"That way, we build bridges between groups," said Roberto Armendariz, associate director of missions ministries. "They grow up together, playing, studying the Bible, going on mission trips and retreats, visiting each other's homes, and loving each other."

The five symbiotic congregations have already begun or are projecting partnership ministries with churches and other Baptist organizations in Mexico, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Thailand and in locations in Houston and around the U.S. They also focus on a major emphasis for both Vestal and the Atlanta-based Fellowship -- missions to "World A," the part of the world with little or no exposure to the gospel.

Internationals look at Tallowood and recognize "these 'Gringos' are different," Armendariz said. "They give of themselves to help without asking anything in return."

He pointed to a rest room and an oven as tangible symbols of that spirit.

Standing proudly in the men's rest room of an international congregation, he gestured toward floor tiles and fixtures and exclaimed: "See, there! Tallowood renovated this area. They didn't treat us like second-class citizens. This is as good and maybe better than rest rooms the Anglo congregation uses."

Then he broke into a huge smile. He'd thought about the oven Tallowood members sent to a small congregation in Mexico after a mission trip.

"Tallowood bought a new one of the same quality as the 10-year-old one in its own kitchen," he explains. "Then they sent the new one to Mexico."

For Armendariz, former pastor of Tallowood's Hispanic congregation, it's not the value of a rest room or an oven that counts. It's the message they send.

"Little things like that make you realize love comes before race and color here," he said.

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-- Photos available by request.

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