

Associated Baptist Press

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Arkansas church fields criticism for shutting down day-care center

By Trennis Henderson

BERRYVILLE, Ark. (ABP) -- The pastor of an Arkansas Baptist church that closed its day-care center to discourage mothers from working outside of the home says there was more to the story than was reported in the media.

News of the decision by First Baptist Church in Berryville, Ark., to shut down its 11-year-old day-care operation was reported by Associated Press, "Good Morning America," Religion News Service and numerous other media outlets throughout the state and nation.

It is accurate, said Pastor Clyde Gray, that the day-care board notified parents in February that the church planned to close the center in May due to philosophical concerns over enabling mothers to work outside the home.

Gray added, however, that the church's unanimous decision in March to immediately shut down the center was due to "an unmanageably volatile situation" sparked by disgruntled day-care workers and parents.

After notifying staff members and parents in February of the initial plan to close the center, the church began to receive "ugly phone calls and letters," Gray said. That was followed by a series of "deliberate abuses of the resources of the church."

Noting that the uproar "was giving us a real black eye in the community," Gray added, "The situation was creating a bad environment in the community and a bad environment for the children in the day care." After deliberating in business meeting for an hour and a half and determining that "we couldn't keep the day-care center open any longer," church members voted unanimously to immediately close the operation.

Acknowledging the hardship on parents caused by the timing of the church's action, Gray said church members agreed to refund a week's tuition to each family and to provide \$50 per family to compensate for a day's lost wages.

One primary concern raised by media reports is that the day-care board initially mailed parents a 10-point statement published by Bill Gothard, a conservative Christian family expert, that called the practice of mothers working outside the home unbiblical. The February letter from the day-care board also claimed that many mothers work outside the home not out of need but to provide "two vehicles, a big TV, a microwave, new clothes, eating out, nice vacations, etc."

Insisting that he and the congregation "don't have an axe to grind with day care, per se," Gray said church members decided that "operating a day care was sending a mixed signal with home and family values. We want to be conscientious about the message that we're sending out."

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Pastor joining seminary faculty after church renews SBC ties

By Mark Wingfield

LEXINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- The pastor of a Kentucky church that this year renewed its ties to the Southern Baptist Convention after a 27-year lapse will become an associate professor of preaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Hershael York, pastor of Ashland Avenue Baptist Church in Lexington since 1990, told the congregation of his resignation April 6. He will move to Louisville and begin work at the seminary June 1.

York, 37, has been appointed to the faculty by seminary President Albert Mohler. Mohler is expected to announce the appointment to the seminary's trustees when they meet April 21-22. Mohler is authorized to appoint some faculty positions, while others must be voted on by trustees.

A seminary official said no further comment could be made until trustees are officially informed of the appointment.

Ashland Avenue Baptist Church withdrew from Elkhorn Baptist Association in 1970 because of perceived liberalism in the association, state convention and national convention. The church did not technically withdraw from the SBC or Kentucky Baptist Convention, although it ceased giving to the state and national convention's unified budget.

A letter from Pastor Ross Range published in the Nov. 28, 1970, issue of the Western Recorder explained the church had voted unanimously to withdraw from the association "to take a public stand against the liberal trends among the churches of Elkhorn Association, Kentucky State Convention and Southern Baptist Convention."

Among concerns cited in the letter were churches receiving members baptized in non-Baptist churches and fraternization with other denominations that "do not believe Bible doctrine."

The letter also explained: "We cannot fellowship with churches which openly deny that the Bible is the very word of God. We cannot fellowship with churches which believe that one denomination is as good as another"

York said the members of Ashland Avenue have been "thrilled" by the more conservative direction the SBC has taken in recent years and last year "voted to re-enter Southern Baptist life."

The church has begun making "substantial" contributions to the SBC Foreign Mission Board and smaller contributions to the Cooperative Program, the convention's unified budget, he said. Such contributions qualify the church as a bona fide member of the SBC. York and his wife attended the SBC annual meeting in New Orleans last summer.

Ashland Avenue has become well-known in the Lexington region and across Kentucky for its conservative stands on theological and social issues. At one time the church had an extensive publishing ministry, including a weekly newspaper mailed to 100,000 homes.

The church also has been the major publisher of a booklet by the late Texas pastor J.M. Carroll titled "The Trail of Blood." This booklet, linked to a theological system called Landmarkism, has sold more than 2 million copies, York said. The church still publishes it, although the weekly newspaper and other publications have ceased.

The book purports to trace an unbroken succession of Baptist churches from New Testament times, linking dissident groups through history by a "trail of blood," or martyrdom, suffered by churches exhibiting a "true" faith.

Landmarkism fueled a major controversy among Southern Baptists in the 19th century. While Landmark views are still popular in pockets of Southern Baptist life, most scholars today trace Baptist beginnings to the early 17th century.

York said both he and the Ashland Avenue congregation still subscribe to the teachings in the "Trail of Blood" although they believe what it teaches has been misconstrued.

"The church subscribes to the belief in the perpetuity of the church," he said. "I don't believe the 'Trail of Blood' teaches chain-link successionism. I do believe there has always been a true church on the earth at all times, and that is outside of Catholicism."

Ironically, Southern Seminary is no stranger to controversy over "The Trail of Blood" and differing viewpoints on Baptist origins. It was 100 years ago this spring that seminary trustees first investigated the writings of seminary President William Whitsitt. Whitsitt challenged the successionist view represented in the "Trail of Blood," to the chagrin of many Baptists of that era.

Seminary trustees met May 7, 1897, to investigate concerns about Whitsitt's writings on Baptist origins and ultimately found no reason for dismissing him. However, two years later, with the controversy consuming much more attention among Southern Baptists, the trustees relented and dismissed Whitsitt.

After his dismissal, Whitsitt taught in Virginia at Richmond College, precursor to the University of Richmond.

York is only the third pastor Ashland Avenue has had. The founding pastor, Clarence Walker, served 50 years and was succeeded by Range. York, a Christian County native, first came to the church under Range's leadership as an associate pastor in 1980.

He served there until 1987, when he moved to Memphis, Tenn., to obtain the master of divinity and doctor of philosophy degrees from Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary.

He then returned to Ashland Avenue as senior pastor in 1990. After a period of decline in the 1980s, the church has rebuilt to a body of about 1,600 people.

LaVerne Butler, who will retire as president of Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College this spring, will serve Ashland Avenue as interim pastor. Butler and his wife are moving to Lexington from Mayfield.

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People For the American Way, NAACP join forces to fight vouchers

By Kenny Byrd

BALTIMORE (ABP) -- The nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization and a leading constitutional liberties group have kicked off a campaign to oppose tax-supported vouchers for private schools.

"Vouchers are a serious threat to education," said Kweisi Mfume, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, at the April 3 launch of "Partners for Public Education," a campaign sponsored by the NAACP and People For the American Way.

The service at Baltimore's New Shiloh Baptist Church concluded a day of workshops examining proposals to provide tax money to help low-income parents send their children to private and parochial schools. The campaign opposes vouchers and promotes "free and open access to quality education for every child."

Speakers at the three-hour service criticized the religious right for pushing voucher proposals and demanded that public funds be used to improve public schools.

A Baptist church-state specialist said the so-called "school choice" proposals are aptly named because "it is the school that has the choice, not the parents or the pupils."

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said that 80 percent of parochial schools belong to one church. "That's fine," he said. "These schools have done much good but all Americans should not be taxed to support them."

Dunn said voucher plans will grow "segregation academies," creating two separate but unequal school systems in the country -- a "private" system and a "pauper" system.

Several voucher proposals are pending in Congress. The Christian Coalition is also touting vouchers in its "Samaritan Project," which promotes "hope and opportunity scholarships."

Mfume, a former Congressman, criticized the proposals and cautioned against quick-fix solutions to education problems.

The Christian Coalition was "not there during the great civil-rights movement of this country," Mfume said. "They were not there in the '70s and '80s when there was turmoil and upheaval. They have not been there recently when the great debates have occurred in our society. They were never around but they parade themselves up now with this project, the Good Samaritan Project."

Mfume said his understanding of Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan was "not to take from the poor and give to the rich: that's Robin Hood in reverse."

He challenged the crowd to support fully funded programs such as Head Start, preschool and "everything else that puts in place that bridge over troubled waters."

A spokesman said the NAACP became involved in the voucher debate partly because voucher supporters are targeting the African-American community and claiming that vouchers will provide a solution for parents with children in troubled public schools.

Carole Shields, president of PFAW, said Baltimore was chosen to launch the campaign because the Christian Coalition will soon be holding a racial reconciliation conference here. "The Christian Coalition may sound like a religious organization, but it is not. It is a political organization," she said.

"Vouchers take a small slice of our kids and give them more opportunity and leave the huge mass of kids that are left way behind," Shields said. "At a time when we need to be investing more in public education, vouchers take money out of public education."

"This campaign of theirs is not about hope and opportunity, it's about money and power. The religious right wants our tax money to build their industry, their network of private, church-sponsored schools. These particular schools were founded for the purpose of communicating a fundamentalist exclusionary kind of faith. And they want to use this network to further their political objectives to do more of the same," Shields charged.

A Christian Coalition spokesman said vouchers would hopefully open the door for the creation of more private schools but denied that the group seeks to promote Christian schools with a fundamentalist agenda. He said the May 10 racial reconciliation meeting in Baltimore "will actually be promoting the Samaritan Project, as a means of racial reconciliation."

He acknowledged that a lot of the evangelical Christian community "sat on the sidelines" during the civil-rights movement. He said the coalition hopes to change that with the Samaritan Project.

The spokesman said voucher opponents are "sadly out of touch with the people who are trapped in the schools and trying to get out."

Timothy McDonald, pastor of First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta, told the church audience that "there's a lot of things that happen in the name of God that God ain't had nothing to do with."

McDonald, a PFAW board member, continued, "Now I don't recall anywhere in the Bible where Jesus had a big problem with the Mayor of Jerusalem. ... The folk who Jesus had a problem with was religious folk. And for some reason we are afraid to stand up to bigoted, racist, tyrannical, extremist, radical religious folk who are trying to destroy democracy and destroy what some of us have given our whole lifetime to build, but I ain't scared of 'em. I'm not afraid of them. Because God is on my side."

Mercer administrator takes post at Baylor

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Mercer University administrator Larry Brumley has been chosen to lead Baylor University's communications program.

Brumley, a 1982 Baylor graduate, will become associate vice president for communications for the school in Waco, Texas. He assumes the post May 1.

Brumley has been associate vice president for university relations at Mercer, a Baptist school in Macon, Ga., since 1991. Previously he was director of communications at Oklahoma Baptist University.

Brumley has a masters' degree from the University of Oklahoma. He will report to Stan Madden, Baylor's vice president for university marketing.

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-- By ABP staff

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