

Associated Baptist Press

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Baptists Today editor to step down Dec. 31

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Jack Harwell has announced he will retire as editor of Baptists Today "on or before" Dec. 31, citing plans by directors to move the moderate Baptist paper in a new direction.

"Our board of directors plans to move the paper in another direction for the coming millennium," Harwell said in a written statement published in the paper's May 22 issue. "I will sincerely pray for them and for whomever my successor might be, as they seek to chart new directions and new supporters"

The board will look for ways to attract younger readers and will also "seek funding from several new sources," according to a news report in the paper's current issue. The paper's current income sources include subscriptions, advertising, development efforts and grants from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Harwell, who turns 65 Oct. 18, had previously told the board he intended to work until age 70. "The board and I did not agree on my desire to continue for five more years," Harwell said in an interview. "They wanted the paper to go in a different direction."

Board chairman Layne Smith declined to discuss the circumstances that prompted Harwell's retirement, except to say it took place in the context of a board discussion about the newspaper's future.

Charting a first step in that new direction, the paper's directors adopted a new mission statement at an April 29 meeting in Atlanta: "Discovering and telling the Baptist story."

"We believe we, as Baptists, have a story which needs to be told," said Smith. "As the board moves to evaluate the future of Baptists Today in light of Jack's impending retirement at the end of this year, we want to assure the readers of our commitment to play a pivotal role in continuing to maintain and improve our methods of living out our mission ... ," he said in a published statement.

Baptists Today directors voted to convene a national consortium of Baptist leaders to "brainstorm what we might do together as an evolving entity or a new entity in communications."

Two officers will represent the board at the consortium, planned tentatively for this summer: Smith, pastor of Rolling Hills Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Ark., and Gayla Sherman, an administrator at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kan., first vice chair.

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Baptists Today directors also approved a 1997-98 budget of \$382,000, a 4 percent reduction from the current year's spending plan.

Before becoming editor of Baptists Today, Harwell worked for the Christian Index, newsjournal of the Georgia Baptist Convention, for 30 years -- nine years as associate editor and 21 years as editor. He was forced to retire in 1987 over what he called censorship by conservative critics.

He became Baptist Today's second editor in 1988, succeeding Walker Knight, who founded the paper in 1983. Originally called SBC Today, the paper was the flagship publication for moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention in their unsuccessful fight to prevent a conservative SBC takeover in the 1980s.

In 1991, directors voted to change the paper's name to Baptists Today to reflect a broader focus and closer ties to the newly formed Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Under Harwell's leadership, the paper increased its frequency from monthly to 20 times a year. Circulation grew from 4,500 to more than 11,000, Smith said.

"On behalf of the board of directors of Baptists Today, I want to express our appreciation for the hard work and dedication Jack Harwell has brought to his nine-plus years as editor of our paper," said Smith.

"Jack, following the example of other excellent Baptist journalists, has sought to tell the truth and trust the people."

Smith also expressed appreciation to Harwell's wife, Telia, who has volunteered as a photographer and development worker for the paper.

Harwell's decision to step down comes on the heels of conflict with a staff member.

In February, associate editor Steve Wright resigned abruptly after questioning Harwell's use of travel funds. Harwell said an independent auditor reviewed Wright's concerns and found nothing inappropriate.

Harwell said Wright's charges "had nothing whatsoever to do with my retirement," which he termed a "normal, age-65 retirement."

Wright responded by saying: "I wish Jack well in his retirement. I wish him every happiness."

He said he would take Harwell's word that his questions did not prompt the retirement. "If he says that has nothing to do with that, I'll just have to say I believe Jack," Wright said.

Wright was replaced as associate editor by Jeff Hatcher. The paper also employs Dawn Homan as advertising and office manager.

Wright's resignation marked the second staff shakeup at Baptists Today in three years. Three part-time staff members resigned in 1994, citing philosophical differences with Harwell.

In his statement in Baptists Today, Harwell said he is grateful for "nine wonderful years of friendships and relationships via Baptists Today."

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Ministers oppose judge's display of 10 Commandments in court

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A group of Alabama Baptist ministers has asked the state's top court to stop a fellow Baptist, Judge Roy Moore, from displaying the Ten Commandments and praying in court.

A Montgomery County judge has ordered Moore to refrain from religious practices in his Etowah County courtroom. The Alabama Supreme Court has been asked to reverse that ruling.

Calling the separation of church and state a "cornerstone principle" of constitutional democracy, nine Baptist ministers and one layperson joined with 42 clergy from other faiths in a friend-of-the-court brief that asks the Alabama Supreme Court to uphold the ruling.

Also joining the interfaith brief were the Baptist Joint Committee, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), the Interfaith Alliance and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

"Church-state separation is not an anti-religious concept but instead protects religious diversity and equality by ensuring that government remain neutral on religious matters, neither favoring nor inhibiting religion," the interfaith brief states.

Judge Moore's practice of displaying the Ten Commandments on the courtroom wall and opening court sessions with prayer violates the First Amendment, the brief argues, by indicating "official preference for and favoritism of Christianity, if not Protestantism, over all other faiths."

"Official use of prayer and the Ten Commandments depreciates religion and offends the religious sensibilities of devout people, especially when publicly elected officials assume the role of 'defenders of the faith,'" argues the brief written by Steven Green, attorney for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, along with Birmingham, Ala., attorney Jerome Cooper and Baptist Joint Committee attorneys Brent Walker and Melissa Rogers.

Walker said the religious groups joined the brief because "we wanted the Supreme Court of Alabama to know that separation of church and state is good, not bad, for religion.

"We also wanted the court to be aware of the profound theological qualms that people of faith have about using the Ten Commandments as a civil icon," Walker added.

Moore, a member of First Baptist Church of Gallant, Ala., has received the backing of numerous conservative religious groups for his stubborn insistence on maintaining courtroom practices which he says are intended to honor God.

The Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission declined to take a position on the controversy when its directors met in March. A resolution supporting Moore was tabled in favor of a motion to study the situation further.

Gov. Fob James has said he would call out the National Guard and state troopers if anyone tried to remove the Ten Commandments plaque from Moore's courtroom in Gadsden.

One member of the clergy group signing on to oppose Moore -- Howard Roberts, pastor of First Baptist Church of Auburn -- told Associated Press he is certain that some of the 600 members of his church would disagree with him.

"I speak only for myself," Roberts said. "I speak from a long history of separating church and state and religious liberty."

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Prisoners should be protected under RFRA, Colson argues

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson has spoken out against a bill that would deny prisoners benefits of the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

If religious liberty "is not secure for prisoners, it is not secure for anyone," said Colson, former aide to President Richard Nixon who spent time in jail following Watergate.

Colson spoke at a press conference sponsored by Justice Fellowship, the public-policy arm of Prison Fellowship, on the steps of the U.S. Capitol to oppose a bill sponsored by Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev.

Reid's bill would exempt prisoners from the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a law restricting the government's right to infringe on the free exercise of religion.

Reid said prisoners are "using RFRA to do an end-run around current prison policies and clog up our courts." Since the act was signed into law in 1993, the number of lawsuits filed by prisoners making religious claims has tripled, he said.

"I am a strong believer in a religion as a means of redemption, but I can't stomach allowing people like Charles Manson to use RFRA to practice Satan worship in prison," Reid said.

Colson acknowledged some "absurd" cases but accused supporters of the Reid amendment of attempting to "dismantle RFRA with a Willie Horton campaign."

Sen. Dan Coats, R-Ind., joined Colson. In addition to abuses, there are "legitimate" RFRA claims that address "legitimate" prisoner rights, he said.

Pat Nolan, president of Justice Fellowship, said faith-based programs are most effective in rehabilitating prisoners and that the Reid bill "would make it harder to teach about God where he is needed most -- prisons."

Justice Fellowship presented 30,000 signed petitions to Congress opposing the Reid measure. The group released numbers that indicated that RFRA-related cases filed by inmates account for one tenth of 1 percent of all U.S. civil cases.

Colson said if prisoners' religious liberties are restricted today, "it will be school children tomorrow."

In a press statement, Reid said examples of special requests made by prisoners under RFRA include:

- candles made from the fat of unbaptized babies;
- religious medallions for gang identification;
- Bible-burning ceremonies;
- co-ed cohabitation and "group celebrations;"
- the right to smoke drugs and tobacco products;
- animal sacrifice;
- hate materials and pornography; and
- segregated jails and cells.

A decision on the constitutionality of the RFRA is expected by July. Colson said if it is overturned, the country will face the most serious confrontation between Congress and the Supreme Court in its history on church-state affairs.

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Foskett, Tupper joining Wake Forest faculty

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- A female biblical scholar and a veteran seminary professor have joined the religion faculty of Wake Forest University.

Mary Foskett, a New Testament scholar who is completing her doctorate at Emory University, has been named assistant professor of biblical studies.

Also joining the faculty is Frank Tupper, longtime theology professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, as visiting professor of religion.

Tupper is currently a research professor at the seminary in Louisville, Ky., after being removed from classroom teaching last summer over conflict with the seminary's president, Albert Mohler.

The new faculty members come as a long-time teacher, Ralph Wood, leaves Wake Forest to become distinguished professor of religion at Samford University this summer.

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-- By ABP staff

**Florida church planter
to be nominated as VP**

WINTER PARK, Fla. (ABP) -- Retired Florida pastor and church planter J.C. Mitchell will be nominated for second vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention, which meets June 17-19 in Dallas.

He will be nominated by Steve Cloud of Columbia, S.C., according to a news release.

Mitchell was pastor of First Baptist Church in Winter Park, Fla., for 20 years before becoming executive director of the Pembroke Foundation, a church-planting ministry based in Florida. He has since retired from that position and has residences in Winter Park and in Black Mountain, N.C.

He recently completed two terms on the SBC Executive Committee and is a former president of the Florida Baptist Convention.

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