

Associated Baptist Press

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

September 2, 1997

(97-77)

In this issue:

- **Kentucky association bans churches with ordained women**
- **Arkansas Baptists Committed elects part-time coordinator**
- **Boyce Bible School dean to retire after this year**
- **Religious persecution tops Christian Coalition agenda**
- **'Celebrate Life' still strong after 25 years**
- **Skepticism nearly kept musical from making it to retail shelf**
- **Simplicity, timeless subject key to musical's success**
- **'Good News' was bad news for music traditionalists**

Kentucky association bans churches with ordained women

By Mark Wingfield

MUHLENBERG COUNTY, Ky. (ABP) -- A Kentucky Baptist association has voted to remove a woman's name from its official listing of ministers and given the church where she is a member one year to come in line with "the position of the association" against women's ordination or be removed from membership.

The Aug. 28 vote marked the second time this year for Muhlenberg County Baptist Association to deal with concerns about Angie Flack, an ordained pastoral counselor. She is a member of First Baptist Church in Drakesboro, Ky., where her husband, David, is pastor.

In January, a motion to oust the church fell short of a required two-thirds vote by the association's executive board.

Flack was ordained by a North Carolina church several years before she and her husband moved to Kentucky. The Drakesboro congregation knew of her ordination and has supported her ministry as a pastoral counselor, although she holds no official position with the church.

When the association gathered information for its 1996 Book of Reports, the Drakesboro church listed Angie Flack under the category of "ordained ministers other than pastors." David Flack said not to list his wife's name there would have been untruthful.

After the book was distributed at last year's annual meeting, however, several pastors objected to a woman's name being included in the ministers' listing and sought to have the Drakesboro church kicked out of the association.

Although the church has never ordained a woman, critics say the congregation should have denied membership to Flack because she is ordained.

The matter continued to simmer during the next seven months, with churches on both sides of the issue withholding contributions to the association and one church leaving the association in protest of the way women are treated. Muhlenberg Association does not allow women to serve as messengers.

Prior to this year's annual meeting, several pastors mailed out letters pledging to raise the issue again.

In the opening session of the Aug. 28 meeting, a motion was presented by Carl Nelson, pastor of Roland Memorial Baptist Church of Greenville. His three-part motion asked that: (1) the association "affirm its stand against the ordination of women;" (2) the name of Angie Flack "be stricken from the minutes of the 1996 annual meeting and all churches be notified to amend their copies;" and (3) that no name of an ordained woman be listed in the minutes of an annual meeting in the future.

Nelson said his motion was "not directed to any one church" but was an attempt to help the association "make a strong stand against women's ordination."

Immediately after Nelson's motion was made, Tony McCall, pastor of Nelson Creek Baptist Church in Central City, offered an amendment. The amendment had two parts: (1) that any church that "goes against the position of the association in the future on the ordination of women" automatically lose membership in the association; (2) that First Baptist Church of Drakesboro be placed under watchcare status for one year, and then be removed from the association if the church has not "met the position of the association."

McCall urged messengers to "stand for the word of the Lord" and not tolerate the ordination of women. "This is not that I may bully or push my personal convictions on you, but to bring healing to this episode that has divided us," he said.

The amendment passed with 126 votes in favor and 100 against. The amended motion then passed 136-93.

During debate on the motion, Bob Lowery, pastor of First Baptist Church of Central City, said while he never would support the ordination of women in his own church, the association should allow churches to make up their own minds on the issue.

"I fear we strain at gnats," he said. "We're talking about striking somebody's name out of a book of reports. I thought our job was to make sure names are written in the Book of Life."

Bob Kubasch, pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church, spoke in favor of McCall's amendment, explaining that the association has "no right to dictate to that church" but that the church has no right to "force on this association" tolerance for the ordination of women.

Tolerating a church with an ordained woman could lead to other problems such as acceptance of homosexuals and divorced pastors, Kubasch said.

David Flack, pastor of the Drakesboro church, spoke against the motion. "Certain men are attempting to control churches in Muhlenberg County Baptist Association," he warned. "This vote decides whether to allow a few pastors in the association to control your church."

Flack noted that Muhlenberg Association is one of "only four or five" among the 78 associations that relate to the Kentucky Baptist Convention which will not allow women to serve as messengers. "Are we really proud of that?" he asked.

Loud shouts of "Amen!" erupted from many of the male pastors and messengers.

Messengers from four churches asked that the minutes record their votes in opposition to the motion.

About 20 members of the Drakesboro church were present. Many lined up to speak to and hug Angie Flack, who could not speak in her own defense at the meeting because of the association's rule banning women messengers.

Arkansas Baptists Committed elects part-time coordinator

By Russ Dilday

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- An organization aimed at increasing moderate influence among Arkansas Baptists has established an office in Little Rock and hired an administrator.

The executive board of Arkansas Baptists Committed elected former minister Tony Woodell as the group's president, effective Aug. 1.

Woodell, working out of offices at Pulaski Heights Baptist Church in Little Rock, said he will "coordinate activities" for a "wide variety" of people associated with Arkansas Baptists Committed around the state.

He described the organization's aims as "education and healing" for moderate Baptists who have been excluded from leadership in the Arkansas Baptist State Convention and Southern Baptist Convention.

"Number one, we are about education -- educating people to what traditional Baptist beliefs are, what the Arkansas Baptist convention has been in the past and what it is now," he said.

"The Southern Baptist Convention and the ABSC, at times, have only allowed one kind of Baptist in leadership positions," he continued. "What we hope to do is bring about a healing of that rift and allow the wide variety of Baptists that existed before 1979 come back into leadership positions."

That year marks the start of a movement by conservative forces to wrest control of the SBC from moderates who had controlled the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group. Gradually, conservative leadership has trickled down to most state conventions.

"Hear me say that we are not out to eliminate fundamentalism inside of Arkansas Baptists," Woodell emphasized. "What we are out to do is to broaden that spectrum of what Arkansas Baptists represent."

Woodell said there is "very little connection" between his group and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, another moderate group with a chapter in Arkansas, but that many people would likely support both groups.

The Fellowship, born in the death throes of moderates' failed effort to retain control of the SBC, has distanced itself from convention politics, instead concentrating on starting and maintaining its own alternative programs.

Arkansas Baptists Committed board chairman Ted Snider, a member of Pulaski Heights Baptist Church in Little Rock, said his group would seek a more direct involvement in the state convention.

"While CBF has seen their goal as a separate entity, we see our primary responsibility as working inside," he said. "That would be the primary distinction. Our other distinction would be that we're not a mission organization in any way, shape or form. We are not designed as a mission organization."

"We are designed to get out the understanding of what basic Baptist principles were and what they are now," he explained, "to show where different parties have shifted away from basic Baptist principles and how we can bring those Baptist principles back into focus."

The Arkansas Baptists Committed budget is being funded through private donations and a \$25,000 matching gift from Texas Baptists Committed, a similar group in Texas that served as a model organization for the Arkansas group.

Arkansas leaders said they considered the Texas funds as start-up money and a "loan" that would eventually be passed on to help another state organization get off the ground.

Budget items include Woodell's salary, travel and quarterly newsletter.

Woodell said the group has no current plans to field candidates in upcoming state convention elections, but he added that the group "would support any candidate, regardless of their theology, if they were open to bringing about healing inside the ABSC and broadening their appointments."

Boyce Bible School dean to retire after this year

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Boyce Bible School Dean Bob Johnson has announced plans to retire at the end of the current academic year.

Johnson, who will turn 65 this year, said the decision was his alone and is not related to a new emphasis by the administration of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to check more vigorously the theological beliefs of Boyce faculty.

Boyce Bible School is a division of Southern Seminary that provides theological education for individuals without college degrees. In addition to work on the seminary's Louisville campus, Boyce operates 26 extension centers across the country.

Danny Akin, Southern's vice president for academic administration, said Johnson will continue to work for the seminary as a consultant in the 1998-99 academic year. This will help a new dean in a year of transition, he said.

"I am very pleased with the administration's willingness to allow me to serve in this way," Johnson said. "I'm very happy. I'm excited. I want this to be the best year I've ever had at Boyce."

Johnson recently denied rumors that he had been ousted in an effort by seminary administrators to require adjunct faculty members at Boyce to hold the same conservative views required of the seminary's regular faculty.

Johnson has worked at Southern Seminary since 1990. He previously taught for 11 years at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

Seminary President Albert Mohler praised Johnson's contributions. "Bob has provided loving care and a heart-felt vision for the Boyce Bible School program, and especially for its students," he said. "He has been a minister, as well as a teacher and dean, to the Boyce family."

-30-

-- By Mark Wingfield

Religious persecution tops Christian Coalition agenda

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- "Fighting the persecution of Christians and other religious people" worldwide will become the Christian Coalition's top priority, the group's new leader said recently.

In one of his first public appearances as Christian Coalition president, Don Hodel unveiled the Christian Coalition's agenda Aug. 26 at a forum sponsored by Human Events, a conservative Washington publication.

Hodel, former Secretary of the Interior under former President Ronald Reagan, criticized the Clinton administration's policies on religious persecution, particularly the extension of Most Favored Nation trading status to China, a country regularly accused of human-rights abuses.

Hodel urged President Clinton to use the powers of the presidency to address religious persecution "as have two of his predecessors -- Jimmy Carter on the subject of human rights and Ronald Reagan when he took on the evil empire."

Hodel said he had not read a recent State Department report detailing the administration's efforts to curb religious persecution, but based on what he had read and heard about the report it tended to "whitewash the activities of governments with which we desire to have strong trade relations."

Joining the forum was 1996 Republican presidential candidate Steve Forbes. He is on a growing list of possible candidates for the 2000 presidential campaign.

Reporters asked if the forum signaled an attempt by Forbes to mend the sensitive relationship that developed between the millionaire publisher and members of the Religious Right and other social conservatives during the 1996 campaign.

Forbes was criticized for not taking a tougher conservative stand on social issues such as abortion during the fight for the GOP presidential nomination.

At the forum, Forbes criticized the recent budget deal negotiated by congressional leaders and President Clinton. He also challenged Clinton to sign a ban on a late-term abortion procedure called "partial-birth abortion" and called on lawmakers to provide aid for parents to send children to private and parochial schools.

He also supported a proposal to reinstate school prayer but would not require students from minority faiths to participate. By interpreting the Constitution to forbid school prayer, judges have issued "judicial decrees" that go against the wishes of the American people and "the practices that we've had in this country for several generations," Forbes said.

Forbes said he would support provisions that "have protection for minority people but also, too, [are] very clear that people ultimately dictate our own policy in America, not judges."

Asked if the Christian Coalition engages in partisan politics, Hodel insisted the organization is "firmly nonpartisan."

The coalition is currently defending a lawsuit filed by the Federal Election Commission charging that the group's voter guides amounted to an in-kind contribution to several Republican candidates for public office, a violation of rules for tax-exempt organizations. The coalition has also been subpoenaed by a Senate committee investigating campaign-finance abuses.

"Our goal is not to retain any particular party in control of the Congress, but we do believe that it's important that people who share our views are in control of the Congress," Hodel said.

Hodel said it would be wrong "for the Republican majority to make the mistake of assuming that the Christian Coalition voter guides are going to somehow favor Republicans because they are Republicans instead of conservatives because they are conservative."

Initiatives listed on the Christian Coalition's legislative priorities include:

- Passage of the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act, which would create a White House office for reporting on global religious persecution.

- Passage of the American Community Renewal Act, which would create a voucher system for lower income parents to send their children to private and parochial schools. It would also provide government aid to faith-based services.

- Passage of the Religious Freedom Amendment to the Constitution, a measure sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., that would allow some forms of school-sponsored prayer and government-endorsed religious speech.

Hodel said the group's issues will become the focus for grassroots action as well as voter guides and educational efforts. The Christian Coalition took in \$26.5 million in revenue last year, according to reports filed with the Internal Revenue Service. It spent \$27 million, with nearly \$12 million on legislative affairs and \$2.6 million on voter guides and "get-out-the-vote" calls.

Critics of the Christian Coalition fired away at the coalition's agenda.

"There's a great irony here," said Carole Shields, president of People for the American Way. "The Christian Coalition today proclaims its desire to fight for religious liberty abroad," she said. "But with the same breath, it renews its assault on religious liberty here at home."

She said the coalition runs the risk of supporting religious discrimination at home by supporting the Istook proposal to amend the Constitution.

Barry Lynn, executive director for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, called the Christian Coalition's claim to support religious freedom "utterly phony." He said, "They want to repeal church-state separation and move the United States as close as possible to being an officially Christian nation."

-30-

'Celebrate Life' still strong after 25 years

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- After seven or eight years of seeking fame and fortune as an actor in New York City, Ragan Courtney wrote and starred in a play that opened on Broadway. One week later, the play closed, and he was devastated.

He immediately went to the Caribbean island of Antigua to rest and collect his thoughts. While there, he became so depressed he decided to kill himself.

"I thought I would swim out into the Caribbean as far as I could and that would be it," he recalled. "But as I started to step out into the ocean, I remembered all the childhood songs I had been taught -- even 'Jesus Loves Me' -- and realized I was about to throw away something God thought was so worthwhile he gave his Son to save."

It had been a dark, gray day, but at that moment the clouds broke and the young actor looked up to see a brilliant sunset.

"I began to weep," he recalled. "I had been a nominal Christian. I knew there was a Jesus and a God and a devil. I knew about Jesus, but somehow I didn't know him. I became a Christian at that point in my life, by myself, praying out loud to God."

Courtney, who had been raised as a Baptist in Louisiana, walked out of the water a "newborn creature," he said. "I realized that what had happened to me was I had been born again."

He immediately sat down and wrote the following words: "He's the wind I soar on; he's the grass I run through; he's the one I turn to when I have to laugh or cry. He's the light of my world; he's my priceless pearl; he's my answer to why, he's my friend even after I die. He's the sun I sing in; he's the sea I swim in; he's the mountain I climb to when I want to reach a new high. Jesus my Lord."

Courtney returned to New York and a short time later was asked by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board to write the drama and lyrics for a new youth musical to be called "Celebrate Life." He was to collaborate with Buryl Red, a composer transplanted from Arkansas to New York City.

The words Courtney had penned with water-soaked hands became the opening lines of a song called "The Truth Shall Make You Free," one of 15 songs in the new musical.

It's been 25 years since "Celebrate Life's" contemporary retelling of the life of Christ was published with Courtney's words and Red's music. Virtually any baby boomer who grew up attending a Southern Baptist church has either sung or heard the music.

Courtney recalls several years ago performing at a Sunday School Board-sponsored event at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn., to introduce the new Baptist Hymnal. Someone suggested he ask anyone in the vast audience who ever had sung in "Celebrate Life" to raise their hands.

"Everybody raised their hands," he recalled with astonishment.

"It is probably the strongest Christian musical for church usage in this century," said Mark Blankenship, director of the Nashville-based Sunday School Board's music ministries department.

Although exact sales figures were not available from the board, Blankenship said "Celebrate Life" has sold thousands more copies than any other church musical in history. And it still sells well today, he added.

By some estimates, "Celebrate Life" may have sold nearly half a million copies. That compares to church musicals today that are considered successful if they sell 30,000 copies.

From the day of its premiere, "Celebrate Life" met with "wild acclaim," explained Elwyn Raymer, who in 1972 was music editor at the Sunday School Board and today is an executive with BMG Music.

Neither Courtney nor Red had any idea their work would become classic in the church music world.

"I remember when I gave [the lyrics] to Buryl, I was sort of embarrassed," Courtney recalled. "I was afraid 'In Remembrance' was just a little ditty he would laugh at."

Those fears were unfounded. "In Remembrance" has become the most popular song of the musical and now appears in several hymnals.

Red recalled that when Courtney first suggested they make "Celebrate Life" a retelling of the life of Christ, he thought such a project too ambitious.

"I thought it was pretty bold that we would do a life of Christ," he said. "My thought was, 'I hope we're up to this.'"

Courtney said his objective in writing "Celebrate Life" was to make the gospel plain and simple.

"Somehow we as Christians 2,000 years later have sanctified and sterilized every bit of the Scripture, so that it has become like stained glass," he said. "I've been trying to point out that the incarnation is God becoming human. So I tried to make the story human and not so stiff."

Telling the life of Christ was the most natural thing he could think to use as material for the musical, Courtney said. "Because my faith was so new, I didn't have anything else but that. I thought, if I've missed the gospel all these years, maybe other people have as well. I didn't think about saving the world or increasing the ranks of Southern Baptists. I was just telling as best I could the story of Jesus."

The result was a life-changing experience for thousands of people.

"There were lots of decisions for Christ," said Raymer, the former music editor. "Churches would always report rededications and conversions in the use of 'Celebrate Life.' For our church music department, it was like we had grabbed hold of the reins of a runaway stallion."

At the time the musical premiered during a student missions event at Glorieta, N.M., in December 1971, Linda Lawson had just graduated from college and started work at the Sunday School Board. Today she heads the board's communications department.

"'Celebrate Life' changed my life," she recalled. "Because of 'Celebrate Life,' I understood the Resurrection in a whole new way."

Lawson's experience and memory of "Celebrate Life" could be reported many thousand times over.

That came home again to Red and Courtney just a few weeks ago when they participated in a 25th anniversary production of "Celebrate Life" at Second Baptist Church in Houston. The church invited anyone who ever had sung the musical to participate in a weekend of rehearsals and two performances.

About 6,500 people attended the performances, and singers from across South Texas joined the chorus.

Courtney said he realized in that setting what a standard repertoire "Celebrate Life" has become. "I would look around and see people silently voicing the parts of the actors as they were spoken."

Both he and Red heard stories from many in the choir and congregation of how the musical had influenced their lives.

"I guess I still am thrilled every time an adult says they sang it when they were a youth and that it was a major influence on their life, personally and even professionally," Red said. "The most satisfaction is that I still hear it day in and day out from adults."

Skepticism nearly kept musical from making it to retail shelf

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The best-selling church musical of all time nearly didn't get published 25 years ago because an executive with Broadman Press didn't think it would break even.

"In retrospect it's kind of funny. But at the time we were very upset," explained Elwyn Raymer, one of the key players in bringing "Celebrate Life" to Southern Baptist churches.

In 1972, Raymer was music editor in the church music department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville, Tenn. He and others in that department had been working with Buryl Red and Ragan Courtney to create the new youth musical.

The musical had been approved in concept as a 48-page piece. What Red and Courtney finally turned in was 148 pages in printed form. At the time, Broadman Press had a policy that anything published had to break even on the first printing.

Raymer recalls that when he and William Reynolds, who then was editorial director in the church music department, took the manuscript to Broadman, it was rejected. Broadman at the time was the Sunday School Board's publishing division. Although the church music department had responsibility for developing products, Broadman had responsibility for determining what got published.

Because the final product was three times the size of what had been projected and because recording it would take two records rather than one, the Broadman official feared the numbers just wouldn't add up.

Yet Raymer and Reynolds were convinced they had a winner in "Celebrate Life."

"I remember Bill finally throwing down the gauntlet," Raymer said. "He said, 'If you won't publish it, Raymer here will send it to his colleagues at Word and they'll publish it on our recommendation alone.'"

With that, the Broadman executive recalculated the numbers, added \$1 to the sales price and declared it could break even, Raymer said.

Reynolds, who later became head of the church music department and now teaches at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, wouldn't talk on the record about Broadman's near-miss, but he did say he knew "Celebrate Life" would be a big seller with big results.

When it was presented in the summer of 1971 during church music week at Ridgecrest, N.C., and Glorieta, N.M., there was "great excitement," he said.

And any doubts about whether the musical would break even were put to rest immediately, he added. "It has outsold everything the board has done. It has gone like wildfire."

Although exact sales totals for "Celebrate Life" are not available from the board, estimates range from 400,000 to half a million copies.

Another historical irony is that the Sunday School Board first got into the business of publishing youth musicals not through the initiative of the church music department but of the church recreation department.

The board's first youth musical -- and the first major youth musical published among evangelicals in the United States -- was called "Good News."

Published in 1967, "Good News" was written by Bob Oldenburg and was created through the board's church-recreation department. Since that department had no authority to publish music, the cooperation of the church music department was sought and acquired.

By the time "Celebrate Life" was published, the church music department was cooperating with both the church recreation department and church training department on the project.

The growth of this new market for youth musicals was evidenced by the fact that the first printing of "Good News" was only 1,000 copies, explained Phillip Landgrave, professor of church music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A year later, when the board published Landgrave's first youth musical, "Purpose," 15,000 copies had been sold prior to publication.

Throughout the 1970s, youth musicals became increasingly common products not only for the Sunday School Board but for other publishers as well.

-30-

Simplicity, timeless subject key to musical's success

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Retelling the simple gospel story in the style of a classic Greek drama accompanied by timeless music is the secret to the success of "Celebrate Life," according to a number of music professionals and the musical's own authors.

"Simplicity" is the key, according to Mark Blankenship, director of music ministries for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, which first published the musical 25 years ago. "It's not complicated to do. Four characters carry the whole drama. The music is easily learned and sung."

But the most important thing, Blankenship said, is the musical is based on the life of Christ. With that context, it is usable at Easter, Christmas or any time of year, he added.

Kentucky composer Phillip Landgrave agrees with that assessment.

"It was a timeless subject. It was not centered on the latest fad text-wise," said Landgrave, professor of church music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and the composer of numerous songs and musicals himself. "A presentation of the gospel with the four Gospel writers being the four narrators certainly has a timeless quality to it."

Buryl Red, who wrote the music for "Celebrate Life" to accompany lyrics and drama by Ragan Courtney, believes the musical has been so successful because it "connected with people."

"The story is told beautifully by Ragan's language. The way he put it together, it connects in a very personal way, in a way that makes you feel like you understand it individually, that you were there personally. But it also still is very respectful, so that you don't hold it so much in awe. You do come away with a renewed respect and sense of wonder."

Musically, Red said he tried to write solid songs that felt contemporary but would not feel old-fashioned a year later.

"When I wrote the music, I wanted it to have a connection with the past. My intention was not to break with the past and be revolutionary. My intention was to honor the past but at the same time be in the present. Then I also hoped it would sort of be connected to the future."

While "Celebrate Life" may be remembered by many as an early form of contemporary Christian music, its music actually spanned a variety of styles, Landgrave explained. "The music was a blend of popular and traditional idioms, many of which are still around and were around before we ever got there."

For example, the opening processional is a modified chant followed by "The Truth Shall Make You Free," which is a breezy pop-style song. "The Song of Mary" is a ballad, and "The Three Kings" is a zany pop piece. Other musical styles used reflect the influence of choral anthems, as in "Prayer for Peace," and soft rock, as in the climactic "He Is Alive."

In addition to the quality of the music and drama, the two elements are woven seamlessly together, Landgrave and others pointed out.

Many youth musicals published before and after "Celebrate Life" are nothing more than "an odd collection of songs knitted together by a few lines of dialogue," said Elwyn Raymer, who was the Sunday School Board's music editor in the 1970s and a guiding force in getting "Celebrate Life" published.

The difference with "Celebrate Life" is that it was written as an entity to have a "togetherness, a tight linkage" between all elements, he explained.

Raymer said both Courtney and Red drew upon the influence of New York theater as well. "They were in that world, and yet they were solid Southern Baptist Christians."

Courtney said he approached "Celebrate Life" from his theater background and realized the way to make it work was to imitate Greek theater. "Church is basically Greek theater," he explained.

Thus to do a life of Christ story, he set up the four Gospel writers as narrators, with the story expanded by a chorus.

Red said people often ask him why he and Courtney don't write another musical like "Celebrate Life."

His response: "Write another one? There's not another story. This is it. You don't write another one."

-30-

'Good News' was bad news for music traditionalists

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The day of the big youth musical may seem as far away to some Southern Baptists as bell-bottom pants and leisure suits, but the influence of that genre on church music is heard even more loudly today.

"Celebrate Life," which marks its 25th anniversary of publication this year, wasn't the first major youth musical, but it is the best-known and most-used.

By most accounts the first youth musical published for use in churches was "Good News," which premiered in 1967.

To many traditional church musicians, "Good News" was bad news because it brought influences of secular music to bear on church music.

"Good News" and its predecessors did for church music what Elvis did for the blues: Many more people were interested, especially many more young people, but the product never was the same again once it met up with rock and roll.

"This was the beginning of kind of catering to youth in the churches," explained Jim Cordell, director of the Kentucky Baptist Convention's church music department. "To me the downside is it has separated them into almost a para-church organization. Before this, they were integrated into the life of the church."

As a result, baby boomers who were raised on youth musicals have not gained an appreciation for the standard choral repertoire of the church, he said. "Some youth choirs went down the road of doing nothing but musicals. The danger in that is you don't build good choral tones. You've got to do a variety; there's got to be a balance."

Others see the drive for churches to offer "seeker" services and contemporary worship styles today as natural outgrowths of the earlier youth musical movement. And adults who grew up in youth choirs that sang musicals often don't want to join adult choirs that primarily sing traditional anthems.

On the flip side, however, youth musicals opened the door for many more young people to remain active in the church and find a place where they could identify, according to Phillip Landgrave, professor of church music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The youth musicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s were a "positive effort not only to reach youth but to identify with youth," Landgrave said. "It gave them a voice."

To understand the cultural context in which church youth musicals developed, Landgrave and others said, take into account the influence of popular youth touring groups called "Up With People" and similar groups that popularized a kind of wholesome youth folk music.

Some religious youth musicals were written as specific antidotes to contemporary threats to the youth culture. For example, Ralph Carmichael's "Natural High," published in 1970, was a response to the drug culture.

But making the transition into the church with even wholesome contemporary music did not happen without conflict, Landgrave recalled. "There was a problem for some people who held on to tradition at all costs," he noted.

Also, the guitar "had gained some reputation with rock music," he added. "To see a guitar in the sanctuary was tantamount to some people thinking they were going to do rock music, which by definition was considered by some to be anti-Christian."

"Many people at the time were very upset if you brought an acoustic guitar into a church," confirmed Elwyn Raymer, who in the 1970s was music editor for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board. "It wouldn't matter if you sang a nice rendition of 'Silent Night.' They thought it said in Scripture that you couldn't do that with a guitar."

William Reynolds, former head of the Sunday School Board's church music department and now a professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, recalled a youth group from Houston that learned this lesson the hard way.

The youth group traveled across town to another Southern Baptist church to present the musical "Good News." After the third song, the pastor of the host church stood up and kindly asked the choir to leave, explaining, "We don't sing that kind of music in our church."

Yet today, the music of "Good News" and "Celebrate Life" looks tame in comparison to contemporary worship trends, noted Raymer, who now heads the contemporary Christian division of BMG Music in Nashville, Tenn.

"At the time it was very trend-setting. But you look at the music now and you think, really?"

-30-

END