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# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Middle-school shootings shock Arkansas town**

By Trennis Henderson

JONESBORO, Ark. (ABP) -- Following a shooting rampage that left four middle-school students and one teacher dead, residents of Jonesboro, Ark., grappled to cope with a scene that felt eerily familiar.

Curt Hodge, a reporter for the Jonesboro Sun, was the first journalist to arrive on the scene. He said his first reaction was disbelief when he heard a shooting had taken place at Westside Middle School.

"I said that's not possible," he remarked. "Most people consider Jonesboro the center of the Bible Belt, and you would think that wouldn't happen here," said Hodge, a member of Central Baptist Church in Jonesboro.

Held as suspects in the March 24 shootings were 11-year-old and 13-year-old cousins who attend the school. The two boys were immediately apprehended by police officers and appeared before a juvenile-court judge March 25. The killings follow other fatal shootings in recent months at schools in Kentucky and Mississippi.

The victims were identified as 11-year-old Brittany Varner; 12-year olds Natalie Brooks, Paige Herring and Stephanie Johnson; and teacher Shannon Wright, 32. Ten other students and one other teacher were wounded in the attack. Six victims were hospitalized, one in critical condition. Four were treated and released. An 11th person, unidentified, received a wound that did not require hospital treatment.

Gov. Mike Huckabee offered "collective sympathy to every one of the victims, their families, their friends, but perhaps most significantly to all of those children who will for the rest of their lives have the indelible images imbedded into their psyches ... on the tragedy they witnessed today."

Urging prayer for the victims and their families, Huckabee, a former Arkansas Baptist pastor, emphasized that "the activities of a few young people are not the activities of all young people."

Charlotte Seats, a sixth grade Sunday school teacher at Nettleton Baptist Church, said several children who attend the Jonesboro congregation were among the students who witnessed the attack.

Seventh grader Crystal Barnes, a member of the church, was one of the shooting victims initially listed in critical condition at St. Bernards Regional Medical Center. Seats said one of the attending physicians called the church the morning of March 25 to report that Barnes' condition "was looking better."

"We had several children who were traumatized but not physically hurt," Seats said. "They were just open targets. We appreciate everyone's prayers and concern. It's going to be a healing process."

"I can't imagine the trauma on these children," she added. "It's really hard to believe and hasn't started to sink in yet." Seats said prayer vigils were scheduled Wednesday night at Nettleton Church and other area congregations.

Bruce Tippit, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jonesboro, was among area ministers who rushed to the hospital to offer counseling assistance.

"One of the most chaotic things that happened was there were two students who were dead who had not been identified," noted Tippit, who is trained in hospital-crisis management. "It got really tough when we had to ask people who didn't know the status of their children for pictures to identify them."

Reflecting on the carnage and chaos, Tippit insisted, "This shouldn't happen to children."

Recalling that "the hospital halls were full last night," Hodge said the tragedy has produced numerous ministry opportunities for local congregations.

"This is an opportunity in the whole community," he pointed out. "More people will look inside themselves and ask questions and hopefully will look toward the Lord more. I hope that will be one thing to come out of it."

Media reports presented differing pictures of the two boys charged with five counts of murder and 10 counts each of first-degree battery in the incident. Mitchell Johnson, 13, had until recently attended church at Revival Tabernacle in nearby Bono, Ark., where he was remembered as well-behaved and polite. His cousin, Andrew Golden, 11, was a gun enthusiast but always emphasized weapons safety, according to his grandfather.

Classmates, however, said both boys showed another side when they were away from adults. Johnson, who had moved from Minnesota in the last couple of years, boasted of being in a gang and had threatened revenge after being dumped by a girlfriend, sources said. Sources described Golden as an "evil-acting" thug who spoke of wanting to hurt fellows students with his hunting rifle.

Chris Perry, the youth minister at Central Baptist Church in Jonesboro, knew Mitchell, reported Associated Press. Perry was counseling students at the school Wednesday.

"Talking to students here who know him," Perry said, "they said he was kind of getting an attitude the past month or two. Talking big and bad. You know -- adolescent boys have little cold wars and little competitive scrapes all the time."

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## **R.G. Puckett, North Carolina editor, announces retirement plans**

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- After four decades in Baptist journalism, R.G. Puckett has announced plans to retire Dec. 31 as editor of North Carolina's Biblical Recorder, the job he has held the last 16 years.

In a letter mailed to the paper's board of directors, Puckett said he based his decision on his age, years in ministry and careful consideration of his family.

"It has been the highest honor of my 50-year ministry in the gospel and four decades in working with state Baptist papers to serve as editor of the Biblical Recorder," Puckett said in his letter.

Puckett said he had advised the board's chairman and vice chairman of his plans in a private meeting last fall, shortly after he turned 65.

With 60,000 subscribers, the 165-year-old Biblical Recorder is the sixth largest of the 39 Baptist state papers.

A native of Kentucky, Puckett was editor of the Ohio Baptist Messenger and the Maryland Baptist and was associate editor of the (Ky.) Western Recorder before coming to North Carolina in 1982. While editor in Maryland, he assisted in the birth of two papers -- the New England Baptist and the Penn/Jersey Baptist -- by serving without salary as managing editor for the two new state conventions.

He was a founding director of Associated Baptist Press, serving five years on the Jacksonville, Fla.,-based news service's board of directors before rotating off in 1995. He was the board chairman in 1993 and 1994.

Puckett earned degrees at Campbellsville (Ky.) University, Western Kentucky University and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Wake Forest University awarded him an honorary doctorate in 1990.

He and his wife, Robbie, have been married 43 years. They have two daughters -- Janet Wade of Charlotte, N.C., and Jeanne Fishwick of Roanoke, Va., and three grandchildren.

The Pucketts plan to continue to make their home in Raleigh during retirement.

"The role of editor of a state Baptist paper is most demanding," Puckett wrote in an editorial in the paper's current edition. "That is not a criticism or a complaint; it is the opinion of one who has analyzed the function and ministry of an editor for 40 years."

"To meet the demands of the office, some sacrifices must be made, not necessarily all by the editor," he continued. "There is a wife who has been home alone entirely too much. There are two daughters who are what they are because of their mother; their father was absent too often. But now there are three grandchildren, and hopefully, by the grace of God, this 'Grandy' will not fail them, just as my grandfather did not fail me when I needed him most."

"Some things have waited long enough," he concluded.

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-- By ABP staff

## **House measure would restrict nonprofit, church lobbying**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious leaders complained a nonprofit provision in campaign-finance legislation approved March 18 by a House committee would "muzzle" religious groups seeking to influence public policy.

In a March 20 letter, Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., said the provision in the Campaign Reform and Election Integrity Act would "severely limit public advocacy by nonprofit and religious institutions."

The House Oversight Committee approved the campaign-reform package 5-3 on a party-line vote, with Republicans supporting it.

According to a summary of the bill, corporations and nonprofit organizations would have to notify their shareholders or members of proposed expenditures for political activities. The legislation would permit members or shareholders to object to the use of funds for certain activities.

The summary also says that the organizations would be required to reduce the amount spent on political activities based on the number of shareholders or members who object. Churches are not exempted from the nonprofit regulations.

The bill defines political activities broadly. It would include activities such as influencing federal elections and legislation as well as educating individuals about candidates for federal office "or any federal legislation, law or regulations."

Rep. William Thomas, R-Calif., sponsored the amended version of the campaign-reform bill that included the nonprofit provision.

An aide to a House Republican said the act "is designed to fail" by members of both parties. Some members want to be able to return to their districts and say they support campaign-finance reform, the aide said, but ultimately neither party wants it to pass. The aide suggested that the nonprofit provision would give members an excuse to vote against the bill.

"If this legislation stands, every one of us will be muzzled on public policy," Campbell said, adding the nonprofit provision is "cleverly attached to an issue we care about, campaign-finance reform."

Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, complained the nonprofit provision "would excessively entangle church and state and chill the churches' prophetic critique of government."

"Caesar has no business regulating churches in this way," said Walker, an ordained Baptist minister.

In a letter to Thomas, Walker said the measure would be less problematic if it were limited to electioneering.

"Most religious organizations take seriously the ban on electioneering already in the tax code," he said. "However, the terms [in the nonprofit provision] go much further to include lobbying activities, work in the federal agencies and educational endeavors."

Walker asked Thomas to either eliminate the provision or amend it to exempt churches.

Will Dodson, director of government relations at the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said the provision may have been added to "kill" the campaign-finance reform package.

"We would join our voice to a large chorus of individuals and organizations, particularly Christian organizations, who are adamantly opposed to these provisions," Dodson said. "They constitute a clear violation of the free-exercise clause of the First Amendment by interfering with the right of Christian organizations to address issues with moral and theological authority."

The bill was expected to be taken up by the House within a week, with a vote on final passage anticipated as early as March 30.

In addition, the full reform bill would also restrict the political activities of unions, ban soft money contributions to national political parties and candidates, ban noncitizen contributions and spending on political campaigns, give states the right to ask the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Social Security Administration to verify citizenship status of voters and double the limit on individual contributions to candidates from \$1,000 to \$2,000.

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## **Robertson network pays IRS fine, keeps tax exemption**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network must make a "significant payment" to the Internal Revenue Service for violating rules which bar tax-exempt groups from engaging in political campaigns.

The dispute stemmed from activities during 1986 and 1987 by three former CBN affiliates -- The Freedom Council, National Perspective Institute and National Freedom Institute. The groups were under investigation by the IRS and the Federal Election Commission for supporting Robertson's 1988 presidential bid.

Under an agreement with the IRS reached March 16, CBN keeps its current tax-exempt status but loses it for 1986 and 1987.

The agreement also requires CBN to increase the number of outside directors on its board and to make other modifications to ensure the organization complies with tax laws.

In a CBN news release announcing the agreement, Robertson, said he is "very pleased to conclude this audit with an agreement that permits CBN to get on with its worldwide Christian ministry while satisfying the legitimate concerns of the IRS to ensure compliance with the tax laws."

Neither the IRS nor CBN revealed the amount of the penalty paid by CBN under the agreement.

Critics of Robertson said the ruling is a warning to religious ministries which engage in partisan politics. "You are risking your tax exemption," said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Lynn called on the IRS to take similar action on the tax status of Robertson's Christian Coalition. The coalition has been filing returns as a nonprofit social-welfare organization but the IRS has yet to rule on that status. The coalition's application has been pending for nine years.

"This action shows that even millionaire TV preachers have to obey federal tax laws," Lynn said. "I say hallelujah." He added: "This is an important first step, but now the IRS needs to take action against Robertson's political arm, the Christian Coalition."

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-- By Kenny Byrd

## **U.S. Supreme Court rejects challenge to generic prayers, moments of silence**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court refused March 23 to hear a professor's challenge to "generic" prayers and moments of silence at Tennessee State University functions.

Left standing was a ruling by the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that generic, nonsectarian prayers and moments of silence at university events do not violate the constitutional principle of church-state separation.

The Nashville university's policies were challenged by Dilip Chaudhuri, a tenured mechanical-engineering professor and a Hindu. Chaudhuri objected to a custom of prayers being offered at graduation exercises, faculty meetings, dedication ceremonies and guest lectures.

Following complaints by Chaudhuri, TSU officials decided that all such prayers at university events would be "generic" and nonsectarian. Their decision was based on an opinion from the state university system's general counsel.

In January 1991 Chaudhuri took his complaint to a federal district court, where he asserted that the prayer policy violated the First Amendment's ban on governmental establishment of religion and its guarantee of free exercise of religion.

After the lawsuit was filed, TSU changed its policy to include a moment of silence, rather than a verbal prayer, at graduation exercises.

Two years later the district court dismissed Chaudhuri's First Amendment claims.

In upholding that decision, the appeals court said generic prayers had a secular purpose of dignifying or memorializing a public event, that they did not entangle church and state and did not impermissibly advance or inhibit religion.

The appeals court also brushed aside Chaudhuri's free-exercise claim.

"Having found that Dr. Chaudhuri was not required to participate in any religious exercise, we conclude that his free-exercise claim is without merit," the court said. "There has been no showing that his practice of Hinduism was constrained or abridged in any way."

The appeals court distinguished the university's practices from clergy-led prayers at middle school and high school graduation exercises, which were ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1992. In that ruling, the high court said clergy-led prayers at Rhode Island middle school graduation ceremonies were coercive.

In contrast, the practices at TSU involved "no coercion -- real or otherwise -- to participate in nonsectarian prayers," the appeals court said.

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