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

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Baptists Today hires editor, among other recent changes

By Bob Allen

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- Texas pastor Bob Ballance has been elected executive editor of Baptists Today, directors of the moderate Baptist newspaper have announced.

Ballance, 40, is resigning as pastor of Highland Park Baptist Church in Austin to take the job. He officially assumed duties with Baptists Today Oct. 1 but plans to remain in Austin a few weeks before moving to the newspaper's new offices in Macon, Ga.

Ballance has been pastor at the Austin congregation since 1997. Before that, he was pastor of three Baptist churches in North Carolina and taught the Old and New Testaments as an adjunct professor at Gardner-Webb University.

He is a graduate of Mars Hill College and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary with doctorates from North Carolina State University and Drew University.

"I'm excited about this new opportunity," Ballance said. "And while it's humbling to follow the likes of [previous editors] Walker Knight and Jack Harwell, I look forward to building on what they have achieved."

The newspaper also recently hired a new managing editor. Oby Brown, 42, is a 19-year newspaper veteran and former metro editor at the Macon Telegraph. He is a journalism graduate of the University of Georgia.

Ballance's hiring followed a national search by Baptists Today's directors, who also have taken steps in recent months to restore financial stability for the paper, which has suffered from declining circulation, and to reposition the news-and-opinion journal to attract new subscribers.

With the retirement of former editor Jack Harwell last year, Baptists Today restructured its board of directors, electing Atlanta businessman and philanthropist James McAfee as chairman and treasurer.

"We are delighted that Bob Ballance has accepted the position as executive editor," said McAfee, chief executive officer of ValueMark Healthcare Systems. "With his compassion and energy for Baptists, we know he will continue to lead this publication to a high standard of Christian, journalistic integrity that we need for all Baptists."

The previous board of directors, chaired by Layne Smith, now pastor of Viewmont Baptist Church in Hickory, N.C., resigned but will continue to function as an advisory committee, according to a press release.

Smith, the only member of the former board to move onto the current board of directors, said members of what is now the advisory committee "enthusiastically endorsed" the changes and are "excited about the future" of Baptists Today.

Baptists Today has kicked off a marketing effort to help the paper become self-sufficient within three years through aggressive promotion of circulation and advertising and "careful and sound fiscal management," McAfee wrote in a statement published in the newspaper's July 23 issue. Board members have contacted churches and individuals seeking donations to underwrite the newspaper's budget during those three years.

The board has also contracted parts of the newspaper's production, including design and distribution, with Smyth and Helwys Publishing, a publisher of books and Christian education resources. As part of the arrangement, the Baptists Today's offices have moved to Macon, where Smyth and Helwys is based. The paper had been based in Atlanta since it was started in 1983.

A spokesman for the company said the arrangement does not imply that Smyth and Helwys will own or control Baptists Today.

"Baptists Today continues to be an autonomous, non-profit organization functioning under the ownership, control and direction of the board of directors for Baptists Today," said David Cassady, executive vice president at Smyth and Helwys.

The newspaper is being redesigned from a newsprint tabloid with spot color, to a heavier, whiter paper with more color, photography and graphics. It will also be a different size, according to a "preview" description of the October issue which ran on page one of the Sept. 24 issue.

It also will begin a web site, which is under construction at www.baptiststoday.org, as part of an effort to help the paper appeal to new and younger readers.

The newspaper will "build ... on its heritage" as a journal of news and opinion for moderate and progressive Baptists to focus "even more on meeting the needs of Baptists and their churches across the country," according to the news release announcing Ballance's hiring.

It will have sections devoted to "news, faith, resources and opinions, helping Baptists deal with day-to-day problems and pointing them to available resources," according to the news release. "Baptists Today will pay particular attention to church life and activities, helping Baptists connect with and learn from each other," it said.

"The board had decided Baptists Today, if it was going to survive, was going to have to change with the times," Ballance said in a telephone interview Sept. 30. He said the board chose an executive editor who was a pastor rather than a journalist, in part, so "somebody could come in without having it already figured out."

Ballance said he plans to make the paper more useful to laity and to move beyond its heavy focus on the Southern Baptist Convention controversy which spawned its beginning.

"It has served a great prophetic purpose, and I want it to continue that prophetic purpose," Ballance said, "but ... I think the board is ready for the paper to move beyond the Southern Baptist Convention and reaction to everything that happens and be a little more proactive."

"In the past, and this is not a criticism, in the past it has been primarily a preacher's paper and for people who have had a dog in this denominational fight," Ballance said. "We also want it to begin to be picked up by lay people, and we want young adults to read it."

Ballance acknowledged older readers may have trouble adjusting to changes in format and content necessary to reach younger readers.

Circulation for the paper currently is about 9,000, Ballance said, too small to sustain the paper over the long haul, making some changes necessary.

"There's going to be a fine line between making it attractive, so people will subscribe, and still keeping it an instrument of truth," he said.

"This is really a risky venture," he said.

Ballance said he plans to continue recent efforts for the paper to cover news about not only Southern Baptists but other Baptist and non-Baptist groups as well.

"There are a lot of Baptists out there besides us disgruntled Southern Baptists," Ballance said. "Not only do I hope we can reach out to more Baptists -- American Baptists and Progressive Baptists -- but I think moderate Baptists and moderate Methodists and moderate Presbyterians in particular have lots in common."

Baptists Today, originally called SBC Today, was founded in 1983 by Walker Knight, who took early retirement from an editorial job with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board to start the paper.

Knight retired as editor in 1988, staying on another five years as part-time publisher. Knight was succeeded as editor by Jack Harwell, a longtime Baptist journalist who had been forced by conservative critics into early retirement as editor of the Christian Index, a newspaper for Georgia Baptists.

Under Knight and Harwell, the paper became 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.

Harwell announced his retirement last May, citing plans by Baptists Today's board of directors to "move the paper in another direction for the coming millennium."

Since Harwell's retirement, Knight, now 74, has come out of retirement to serve as interim editor of the paper, assisted by Gary Leazer, an interfaith-witness expert who lives in Atlanta. Knight and Leazer completed their work with the paper's Sept. 24 issue.

Dawn Homan, the newspaper's remaining staff member, will continue to work as circulation and marketing director, according to a press release.

Members of Baptists Today's new board of directors, in addition to McAfee and Smith, are Jimmy Allen, a pastor in Big Canoe, Ga.; retired bank executive Tommy Boland of Atlanta; and Smyth and Helwys publisher Cecil Staton of Macon.

Members of the advisory committee are Mercer University President Kirby Godsey of Macon, Ga.; David Greenfield of Bloomington, Ill.; Craig Henry of Monroe, La.; Sue McSwain of Rome, Ga.; Rodney Parrish of Knoxville, Tenn.; Janie Peacock of Rome, Ga.; Kate Harvey of Valley Forge, Pa.; Howard Roberts of Annandale, Va.; Gayla Sherman of Leawood, Kan.; and Scott Walker of Waco, Texas.

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Kentucky editor Mark Wingfield to join Baptist Standard staff

DALLAS (ABP) -- Mark Wingfield, editor of the Kentucky Baptist Convention's weekly newspaper, the Western Recorder, has been elected managing editor of the Baptist Standard, weekly newspaper of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Wingfield, 36, was elected unanimously by the Baptist Standard board of directors Sept. 29. He will begin his duties Nov. 1.

Wingfield will succeed Editor-elect Marv Knox, who becomes the paper's editor Jan. 1.

"Mark Wingfield is an immensely talented journalist, a deeply committed Baptist Christian and a role-model husband and father," said Knox, who recommended Wingfield for the position.

Knox said Wingfield "has led the Western Recorder to the top echelon of Baptist journalism."

In addition to editing the award-winning Kentucky newspaper, Wingfield has led the Western Recorder organization to publish Real Life, a general-interest monthly magazine for Baptist families. The Recorder also publishes several monthly newspapers in partnership with smaller "new work" Baptist state conventions.

"I could not be happier about the election of Mark Wingfield as managing editor of the Baptist Standard," said current Editor Toby Druin, who retires at the end of the year. "I feel it is an answer to prayer."

"The pairing of Marv Knox and Mark Wingfield brings to Texas Baptists an absolutely superb team of journalists who also are exemplary Baptist Christians and churchmen. I feel that under their leadership the future of the Standard is assured as the bellwether publication of Texas Baptists and Baptists around the world," Druin said.

Wingfield and Knox have worked together before. Knox was editor of the Kentucky newspaper when Wingfield came as its news director in 1991. Wingfield was named editor after Knox left Kentucky to become the Baptist Standard's associate editor in December 1995.

Knox, 42, was tapped to become the Standard's 13th editor June 1, two weeks after Druin announced he was retiring after 22 years at the paper, including 19 years as associate editor and the last three years as editor.

An Oklahoma native, Wingfield earned a journalism degree from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and studied at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Prior to joining the Western Recorder, he was associate director of news and information at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta, director of news and information at Southwestern Seminary and assistant editor of the Baptist New Mexican in Albuquerque.

He and his wife, Alison, are parents of 6-year-old twin sons, Garrett and Luke. The Wingfields are members of St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

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-- By ABP staff

Memphis church calls second woman pastor

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., which 11 years ago sparked a controversy by calling a woman as senior pastor, has hired another woman as her successor.

The church voted Aug. 22 to hire Texas native Sue Henson Enoch as its new pastor.

Enoch, 49, comes to the Memphis church from Austin, Texas, where she was associate pastor of Highland Park Baptist Church. She previously was on the staff of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

Enoch preached her first sermon at her new church Sept. 20. Her official installation is scheduled Oct. 25.

"As a congregation, you've had tough days, taken unpopular stands and lost members over it because you believe every person has worth and value and deserves a place in God's kingdom," she said in her first sermon at Prescott, quoted in a report first published in the Memphis Commercial Appeal. "God's measure is not about earthly success but about faithfulness and love."

Enoch's election ends a three-year pastoral search begun with the 1995 resignation of Nancy Hastings Sehested. Sehested was the first woman to lead a Southern Baptist church in Tennessee. Her hiring led to the church's expulsion from Shelby Baptist Association.

The church later left the Southern Baptist Convention and Tennessee Baptist Convention and now is affiliated with the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. The church also supports the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists, moderate splinter groups which disagree with the SBC's conservative stances on women in ministry and other issues.

Hastings, who was thought to be one of only four female Southern Baptist pastors when she went to

Prescott in 1987, is now pastor of Sweet Fellowship Baptist Church in Clyde, N.C.

Today, according to estimates compiled for Baptist Women in Ministry in Kansas City, Kan., there are 91 Southern Baptist women who now serve as senior pastors, 100 who are associate pastors, 270 in other church-staff positions and 310 female Baptist chaplains.

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-- By Bob Allen

Female Texas Baptist pastor stepped through 'open doors'

By Ashlee Ross

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Julie Pennington-Russell is in the business of opening doors. She's also good at picking the right ones to walk through.

Not only was she the first person in her family to go to seminary, she is also one of the few women anywhere to be hired as a senior pastor at two Southern Baptist churches.

A pastor in California since 1993, the 37-year-old Florida native recently moved to Waco, Texas, to become pastor of Calvary Baptist Church.

"My call to ministry happened really by degrees," Pennington-Russell said in an interview with the Baylor Lariat, campus newspaper for Baylor University in Waco. "It happened progressively. For me, it was a series of doors opening one by one. I would walk through a door never knowing if another door was going to open but just sensing that this was the right door God wanted me to walk through."

Pennington-Russell grew up in Orlando, Fla., before moving to San Francisco to attend Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. There she encountered for the first time women who felt they had been called to the pastorate.

"My first semester I would get up every morning very, very early, walk down the hall of my dormitory to the prayer room and pray for all of those poor, misguided women who thought that God was calling them to be pastors," she said. "I just thought, 'he will convict them eventually.'"

But Pennington-Russell said she soon sensed that she, too, was called to be a pastor.

"As it turned out, because of some very wonderful professors in seminary and having the opportunity to study the Bible in some new ways, deeper ways than I ever had in Sunday school, I began to read the scriptures for myself," she said. "It didn't seem to me that God was prohibiting women from serving in that way as pastors. Once I felt free in myself to be open to that notion, then I was able to see doors as they would open up in that direction. They did, and I walked through them."

"Anytime anyone chooses a path, whether it's a path that's going to meet resistance or a more conventional path, I think it's really important to know inside of you that it's the right call for you, the right step for you to take," Pennington-Russell said.

In 1984, she became associate pastor at Nineteenth Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco. She was hired as the church's pastor in 1993.

This summer, members at Calvary Baptist Church in Waco voted 190-73 to hire her as their senior pastor. She was not only the first woman to serve the congregation in that role but is thought to be the first woman to become senior pastor of a Baptist church anywhere in Texas.

Linda Livingstone, associate dean for the Hankamer School of Business at Baylor, was a member of the pastor-search committee at Calvary. She said Pennington-Russell was the only female candidate out of 120 names and resumes considered.

Livingstone said the search committee didn't set out to hire a woman but also didn't "want to close the doors on anywhere God might be."

"Let's be open to what God is doing," the committee reasoned, she said. "We felt such a clear sense that God was calling Julie."

The 11-member committee voted unanimously to recommend that the church hire Pennington-Russell as pastor.

"I think there were a lot of signs along the way that God was really in this because Calvary is not the church that many people would have expected to be the first to call a woman pastor," she said. "And I think it surprised Calvary. I think it surprised even the pastor-search committee along the way, but when God is in it, it's hard to deny."

Barry Harvey, a religion lecturer at Baylor, said he was surprised the search committee brought a woman's name forward.

But after meeting Pennington-Russell and hearing her preach, "it was just really obvious that this wasn't just a woman pastor but an excellent pastor who was a woman," Harvey said.

Charles Davis, interim organist and choir director at Calvary, has been a member of the church seven years. He said his family is supportive of Pennington-Russell as pastor.

"I don't know that her being a woman makes a difference," Davis said. "She exhibits a genuine care and concern for others in the church."

On her first Sunday at Calvary, Pennington-Russell was greeted by protesters challenging her appointment as senior pastor.

"For me, the picketers were not a big deal at all," she said. "I'm coming from San Francisco, where people demonstrate over everything. If their coffee's not hot enough, they're demonstrating. I told somebody that I thought someone had staged a picket just to make me feel at home. That didn't bother me."

What does bother Pennington-Russell are attempts to undermine her call and question her direction.

"It bothers me most when people will assume that I have not been listening to God, that I am disobeying God by doing what I'm doing," she said. "When I encounter people who pretty arrogantly assume that they know what God is wanting for my life, that bothers me."

"I think we all need to have humility enough to give each other the benefit of the doubt that we are listening to God," she said. "That is not to say that I would not defend to my dying breath somebody's right to disagree with what I'm doing."

In addition to demonstrators at the church, some people in Calvary's congregation questioned Pennington-Russell's appointment.

"Some people at Calvary Baptist Church left the church this summer when the church decided to call me because they felt it would be a violation of their conscience to stay," she said. "And I absolutely defend that. We never want anyone to violate their conscience. We've got to do what God calls us to do."

"By the same token, I think that we really have to walk a fine line between following our conscience and arrogantly assuming that we hold all of the truth, that we know all of the truth, that we have the final interpretation of what scripture says."

Interpretation is a big issue with Southern Baptists. The Southern Baptist Convention has denounced the idea of women serving in the pastorate and has banned from its seminaries professors and theologians who do not agree with the convention's position.

This is just another hurdle for Pennington-Russell and women like her who feel they are called to the ministry. And although she was the first Baptist female senior pastor to come to Texas, Pennington-Russell doesn't think she has broken the mold.

"I don't see my coming as the great shattering of the stain-glass window by any means," Pennington-Russell said. "It will still be that for probably several years to come, there will be obstacles for women who want to follow this course."

Pennington-Russell said she hopes her presence in Waco will encourage women students at Baylor to

consider the ministry as a vocation. "I hope there are women here at Baylor who will see my coming to Calvary as a sign that the times, they are a-changin' for Baptists too," she said. "There are churches who are willing to listen to God's leading and to affirm people in their calling, whether they're women or men, and to take what are sometimes risky steps of listening to the spirit. Those churches are out there."

Since Calvary hired Pennington-Russell as senior pastor, two other Texas Baptist churches have followed suit.

Pennington-Russell isn't waiting for or expecting an apology from the Southern Baptist Convention regarding its stance on women in the ministry.

"I would think that in the Southern Baptist Convention, that would be almost unheard of," she said. "For me, I'd much rather have lots of open doors for women everywhere than just a formal apology."

As doors open, she said, children who see women in leadership roles in church will be more open to the idea. Eventually, the mold will be broken.

"Children just model what they see," Pennington-Russell said. "In the nursery in San Francisco they were playing church one Sunday, and it was funny because the little girls were always being the pastors. We had to remind them that little boys can be pastors too."

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Former slot machine addict paid dearly for his habit

By Rob Marus

HORSESHOE BEND, Mo. (ABP) -- As a Christian believer, a respectable businessman, a husband and a father, David Rinehart thought an occasional dalliance with the slot machines in the Kansas City casinos couldn't hurt. He was wrong -- nearly dead wrong.

Rinehart is a recovering gambling addict who now lives in Horseshoe Bend, Mo. In his previous life in Kansas City, he lost his family, his home and his livelihood in a little less than two years. They all spun away like the whirling symbols on the riverboat slots into which he poured his money.

He never would have expected it. "My wife and I both thought we were born again, and we both had been baptized," Rinehart said. He was a member of an independent Baptist church in Kansas City.

He had tried a little gambling before, on business trips to Las Vegas. No problem.

But, in 1996, Rinehart paid a visit to one of the Kansas City casinos, played one time, and got hooked. "I lost \$250,000 in 1996," he said. "I siphoned all the money off my business. ... I lost my wife, my children."

Rinehart said he never played anything but \$5 slot machines. He didn't even know how to play poker or blackjack. Nevertheless, he estimates his total financial losses from gambling at \$300,000 to \$400,000.

"I just got addicted. My bank ATM was on the way from my house to the casinos."

By March 1997, with his marriage in ruins and his assets down to \$1,800, Rinehart paid one last visit to a riverboat to see if his luck would change. It didn't happen.

"I stood there in the middle of Harrah's, and it hit me that it had to end that night," he said. He went home and sat in his study. He put a revolver to his head and considered pulling the trigger.

Finally he decided he couldn't do it. Finding his body would be too much trauma to his wife and children, who were upstairs.

Rinehart wrote what amounted to a suicide note to his wife, then he left by car to find a more suitable place to do himself in. He felt led to Lake of the Ozarks in southern Missouri, where he had spent happier times with his family.

"I stopped in Osage Beach and bought a Bible," Rinehart said. He then drove to a cabin he and his oldest son had used on fishing trips. "I sat down in the cabin, put the gun in my left hand and the Bible in my right, and

said, 'Show me which to choose; here I am.'

The Bible won out. Rinehart said he had an intense experience of repentance and reconciliation with God, and he hasn't gambled since. He never received professional counseling for his addiction, and he attributes his healing entirely to the Lord's power.

Regardless, he suffered major consequences. His wife divorced him. His business was ruined. And he now gets to see his three children, who range in age from 3 to 10, only on weekends.

Embarrassed by his failures, he decided to move to the Lake of the Ozarks area to build a new life. "I was ashamed of this, and I hid from it," he said. "I didn't want anybody to know I was a gambler and have to admit that I was stupid and weak."

But now he wants to warn others who think they're immune from the dangers of gambling. "I wasn't living a fast, loose life," he said. "I was just a guy trying to provide for my family. My mistake was, I went to the boats."

Rinehart now runs a successful home-audio business in his new hometown, and he is active in a non-denominational church in Camdenton. He has begun a new dating relationship. His new girlfriend and church were the first ones to hear him admit the cause of his problems, months after they had gotten to know him.

Rinehart voluntarily bears a personal scarlet letter to remind him how much his mistake cost. He keeps with him an envelope containing hundreds of the "boarding passes" he used to board riverboat casinos.

"I carry this envelope around because in this envelope is my family, my life and my business," he explained. "You couldn't get me to flip a coin to see who goes first now."

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