

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Moderate church-planting network splits over leadership dispute**

By Bob Allen

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Church splits have long been a fact of life among Southern Baptists. During the past four years, moderate Baptists who have formed new congregations rather than stay unhappy in fundamentalist-dominated churches have found support and encouragement from an organization called Friends of New Churches.

Now, leaders of the Knoxville, Tenn.,-based network have had their own parting of ways, over differences centering on leadership of the organization's executive director, Will Carter.

At a called meeting Dec. 3, Friends of New Churches' board of directors voted 6-5 against a motion by its executive committee to fire Carter, first executive director of the group which formed in January 1995. In response, five of the 14 board members, including most of the officers, indicated they will resign, along with staff member Susan Burgess Parrish, who quit her job as resource coordinator effective Dec. 10.

The five minority members of the board issued a statement after the meeting reporting they had supported a motion calling for "a change in the present leadership" of Friends of New Churches.

Five other past board members and the organization's former attorney added their signatures to the statement, which charges Carter with "ineffective execution" of the duties of his office and "a pattern of failure to respond to directives of the board."

Sources interviewed for background said several board members have almost from the start believed the organization was spending too much money on administration and travel and not enough on helping churches.

The statement said, "We deeply regret that numerous previous attempts to work through these problems have failed, both with the executive director and with the board of directors as a whole."

"Although we are deeply committed to the mission of Friends of New Churches, we cannot in good conscience continue to support and work with the current leadership," the statement said. "Therefore, it is with regret that those of us who are currently serving on the board of directors will be submitting our resignations before the next board meeting."

Current board members signing the statement included Jim Strickland, Judy Gaddy, Dixie Petrey, Sue Poss and Steve Graham. Former members also endorsing the statement were Guy Sayles, Leona DuVall, Lynn Wardell and Harold and Betty Shirley. The board's former attorney, Willis DuVall, also signed the statement.

Friends of New Churches also issued a statement about the meeting, which was held in executive session, saying it "was called at the request of a minority group of the board to request the discontinuing of the employment of the executive director."

The statement said the board "thoroughly reviewed the allegations and found them without basis." After voting down the motion to fire Carter, the full board then voted to reaffirm his leadership, the board's "commitment to quality service and ministry to new churches and emerging groups, and the continuing partnership with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship."

Carter told Associated Baptist Press he viewed the dispute as a "difference of philosophy and procedure." "I regret that it happened," Carter said.

The attempt to oust Carter followed continuing discussions concerning administration and staff.

Last May, the board asked Dixie Petrey, a member of the personnel committee, to serve as a "local monitor" to observe "how the staff works together." Because of a scheduling conflict, she was not permitted to present a report orally at the board's October meeting, but a motion was passed to "receive" her written report, which was included as part of the minutes of the meeting.

Later, board members were mailed copies of the report, which identified "concerns" including reports of several board actions which Petrey said had not been carried out. The board's officers met by a conference call to discuss the report and approved a motion to remove Carter from leadership.

The committee suggested action on the motion also be taken by conference call, but chairman Ray Graves of St. Petersburg, Fla., instead called a special meeting Dec. 3 in Knoxville. The motion to fire Carter failed 6-5, with one member, Steve Hammond of Jeffersonville, Ind., abstaining. The chairman did not vote. One member, Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler of Cincinnati, was absent.

The statement issued by the minority members said they felt removing Carter from leadership "was necessary because of what we perceive to be ineffective execution of the duties of the office and a pattern of failure to respond to directives from the board."

Carter denied that he ignored board directives. "I responded to those that I was responsible to -- the chairperson or the executive committee," he said. "Sometimes we delayed things. I never did delay or not do something without either the chair or the executive committee being aware of that."

Asked to respond to the charge that he is "ineffective," Carter said: "That's a perception. You always hate for somebody to feel that way about you, but they have the right to do that."

Friends of New Churches is a network of about 100 "free and faithful" congregations, most of which are affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. It was started in 1995 to "birth" new Fellowship-friendly churches but in practice has become a resource to network to support and encourage existing new churches rather than starting them from scratch.

The organization offers retreats for training and fellowship and limited financial assistance to new churches, along with serving as a clearinghouse for other resources, such as sharing used furniture.

According to its October 1998 newsletter, Friends of New Churches currently has \$86,000 budgeted for direct grants ranging from \$2,400 to \$4,800 to help new churches with rent, salary or medical insurance. More than 15 churches were on a waiting list, should additional funds become available.

Board chairman Ray Graves, a hospital chaplain at St. Anthony's Hospital in St. Petersburg who came on the board three years ago, said "there were some real differences and divisions right from the start."

While the minority members advocated spending more money on grants for new churches, the majority believed it is time to move to "a second stage" of adding field resource persons in areas where new churches are being born, he said.

Due in part to the informal manner in which Friends of New Churches began, some earlier board members also leaned toward "micromanagement," Graves added.

"Probably, we are in better shape now to actually go ahead and follow what the board feels is the direction to go," he said.

Carter said he was aware of differences of opinion on the board, but he had not read it as "extreme opposition" to his leadership. "I never felt it was of this caliber," he said.

He said he is disappointed with the resignations. "I regret losing them. They're all good people." He described Parrish as "a tremendous worker" who "has been in it since the beginning and has been invaluable."

But when differences develop, he said, "sometimes we need to part our ways."

Parrish issued a statement saying she resigned "due to continuing problems that the majority of the board chose not to address."

"What FNC has been able to do in the past has been used by God to further the work of the kingdom, but God calls us to strive for excellence and not to settle for mediocrity," she said.

Jim Strickland, pastor of Heritage Baptist Church in Cartersville, Ga., resigned immediately after the vote, becoming the first board member to officially step down. He said he was not angry about losing the vote to remove Carter from office "but there wasn't any need for my sticking around" afterward. "I said goodbye and God bless you," he said.

Strickland, who began informal meetings at Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meetings several years ago that evolved into Friends of New Churches, said he is "sad" about recent developments. "I had great hopes for that organization, and maybe something good will still happen," he said.

Tom Prevost, associate coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's global missions division, said the Atlanta-based Fellowship is contributing about \$222,000 to Friends of New Churches this year.

Prevost, who attends meetings of the Friends of New Churches board as an adviser, said he has been saddened by "dysfunction" in the organization's board and staff the last couple of years, but it has managed to remain effective despite internal turmoil.

He said while the Fellowship does not seek to control the several "partner" organizations it helps fund, those funds are promised only year to year, and continued effectiveness is a consideration in how CBF funds will be divided in next year's budget.

"We've done the best to trust the [Friends of New Churches] board of trustees and its direction," he said. "Up to now, they have not caused us undue alarm."

But he predicted Fellowship leaders would watch closely any changes in the board's makeup or philosophy.

"What the board will do in the future obviously invites greater scrutiny," Prevost said.

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## **Baptist World Alliance head calls for end to Cuba embargo**

McLEAN, Va. (ABP) -- The head of the Baptist World Alliance has said it is time for the United States to lift its 47-year-old trade embargo against Cuba.

Denton Lotz, general secretary of the McLean, Va.,-based BWA, issued a statement recently calling the U.S. embargo a "failed policy which hurts precisely the people we want to help: the children, the poor and the elderly."

Lotz called on President Clinton and Congress to lift the embargo and to ease travel restrictions to Cuba. "If China and other more repressive countries are open to trade why not Cuba?" he asked, noting that U.S. policies hinder American Christians from ministering to the poor.

Lotz also announced that the worldwide fellowship of Baptists will hold a general council meeting in Cuba in July 2000, accepting an invitation from three Baptist groups in Cuba -- the Eastern Baptist Convention, which is affiliated with American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.; the Western Baptist Convention, which relates to the Southern Baptist Convention in the U.S.; and the Freewill Baptist Convention.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Kentucky Baptist agency fires lesbian youth worker**

By David Winfrey

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Following protests over the firing of a lesbian employee, officials at Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children said employees know when they're hired that the childcare organization has lifestyle requirements consistent with its Christian mission.

Alicia Pedreira told the Louisville Courier-Journal newspaper she was fired from KBHC Oct. 23 after a picture of her and her female partner appeared in a Kentucky State Fair photography contest.

Jack Cox, a manager who hired Pedreira, said he and four other employees have since resigned from the agency in protest.

Brenda Gray, the agency's vice president for communications and development, said privacy concerns prohibit discussing specific employees. But she said the agency is up front about its expectations of workers.

"Every employee who comes in to our agency is made aware of our values," Gray said.

The applications potential employees fill out is one way they learn about KBHC policy, she added. "It's pretty clear on that in terms of what our expectations are."

The first section of the application reads: "Employees are expected to exhibit values in their professional conduct and personal lifestyles that are consistent with the Christian mission and purpose of the institution."

In a statement released by the agency, KBHC stated homosexuality is a lifestyle that would prohibit employment.

"Ours is not a ministry of condemnation. We are trying as best we know how to provide the best possible environment for the children in our care," the statement said. "We feel the best way to carry out this mission is to provide these children with teachers, caregivers and role models who embrace traditional family and sexual values."

Pedreira and Cox told the Courier-Journal she acknowledged being a lesbian when she was hired in May as an art therapist and supervisor for the Spring Meadows Children's Home in Middletown.

Cox said he told her that wouldn't be a problem as long as she didn't talk about her private life at work.

Pedreira said the photo of herself, wearing an "Isle of Lesbos" T-shirt, and her partner was taken during a local AIDS walk and entered in the state fair's contest without her permission.

She returned from vacation in August and learned several employees at Spring Meadows had seen the photo, the Courier-Journal reported.

The firing has resulted in Spalding University and the University of Louisville's Kent School of Social Work to withdraw their students from KBHC programs, the Courier-Journal reported.

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## **Pope affirms 'indulgences' in millennium celebration**

By Mark Wingfield

VATICAN CITY (ABP) -- The Roman Catholic Church hopes to make the forgiveness of Christ more easily accessible at the turn of the century through the granting of special indulgences.

In a lengthy statement issued at the Vatican Nov. 29, Pope John Paul II outlined his plan for Catholics to celebrate the millennium rollover with a renewed focus on repentance, contrition, compassionate acts of service and reconciliation.

He also outlined a means by which Catholics may receive special indulgences to forgive sins and reduce time spent in purgatory.

The notion of purgatory as a preliminary stop on the way to heaven long has been a point of disagreement between Catholics and Protestants. And the granting of indulgences was a major factor in causing the Protestant Reformation.

In Catholic theology, individuals confess their sins to a priest, who by divine authority absolves the guilt of the sin. But the individual still owes a penance for the forgiven sin, an act of contrition prescribed by the priest. In this structure, purgatory is necessary because of the likelihood that people may die without having performed all the necessary penance. That penance deficit, Catholics believe, is worked off in purgatory.

The church began granting remission for "temporal" penalties for sins, called indulgences, by the 10th century. Later, indulgences were taught as being available for souls already in purgatory. In the 16th century, indulgences were sold to raise money to build the church of St. Peter in Rome. That particular abuse prompted a German monk, Martin Luther, to post his "95 Theses" on the castle church door in Wittenberg on Oct. 31, 1517, setting off the Protestant Reformation.

Plenary indulgences are especially valuable because they wipe the slate clean, as opposed to other more limited indulgences.

The pope has declared that Catholics may earn plenary indulgences through various means during the millennial celebration: By making pilgrimages to holy sites such as Rome or Jerusalem, visiting the sick and handicapped, abstaining for one day from "unnecessary consumption" of food, alcohol or tobacco or by donating money to the poor or to charity.

In his proclamation, called a "bull," the pope defends the practice of granting indulgences. "When they gain indulgences, the faithful understand that by their own strength they would not be able to make good the evil which by sinning they have done," the pope explains.

The pope's millennial emphasis on granting indulgences will not do anything to further cooperation among Catholics and Protestants, predicted Tim Weber, a church historian and dean of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Chicago.

"This is the very thing that led to the protest of Martin Luther and the 95 theses," Weber said. "The pope had authorized a plenary indulgence in Saxony that people could attain simply by donating money."

The Reformation grew not only out of medieval abuses of the indulgence but also over disagreement about whether purgatory exists, Weber noted.

"The Protestant reformers saw no conclusive biblical evidence that purgatory even existed and saw no evidence that the debt we owe to God can be lifted by these human religious works. That's where the whole doctrine of justification by faith comes in," he added.

Although certain kinds of indulgences always are available, plenary indulgences usually are reserved for special occasions, such as the new millennium. For example, plenary indulgences were offered to those who took part in the Crusades.

A spokesman for Catholic bishops in the United States said non-Catholics should look beyond the issue of indulgences to see the broader scope of the pope's message.

The section about indulgences is "a minor thing" compared to the broad sweep of the pope's message on the incarnation of Christ, evangelism, spiritual renewal and unity, said Jeffrey Gros, associate director of ecumenical and interreligious affairs with the National Council of Catholic Bishops in Washington.

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## **Veggies aim to save Christmas in national television premiere**

By Mark Wingfield

CHICAGO (ABP) -- "Christmas isn't about whining and wanting more toys."

How many parents have gone blue in the face trying to tell their kids that very thing to no avail?

But maybe they'll listen to a tomato, a cucumber and a small sprout of asparagus. At least that's the hope of the folks who use common vegetables to cook up clever morality plays for kids at Big Ideas Productions, home of VeggieTales.

In case you've been hiding in a pantry somewhere, VeggieTales is a series of computer-animated children's videos that are also popular with teenagers, college students and parents. And they're well-seasoned with Christian themes and biblical stories.

This week, Bob the tomato, Larry the cucumber and their farm-fresh friends are getting prepared for their network television premiere. The veggies have their own Christmas special.

The VeggieTales Christmas Spectacular will air nationwide on the PAX TV network Dec. 19 at 8 p.m., Eastern Standard Time. PAX is the new network founded this year by Paxson Communications, offering gentler family fare such as "Touched By an Angel" and "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman."

Most of Bob and Larry's network television debut will be footage from the VeggieTales video "The Toy that Saved Christmas." The network version, however, will include an additional 15 minutes of animation not on the video.

The story line revolves around the children of Dinkletown, who have been brainwashed by the greedy toymaker Wally P. Nezzar to think Christmas is only about getting more toys -- and specifically the new toy Nezzar's factory produces, Buzz-Saw Louie.

Louie's right arm turns into a fully functional buzz saw. But he also has a sharp tongue. Push a button and he spouts one of two lines: "Christmas is when you get stuff" and "You need more toys."

Life changes in Dinkletown, however, when Buzz-Saw Louie learns the true meaning of Christmas and teams up with his veggie pals to spread the news about the baby born in Bethlehem.

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