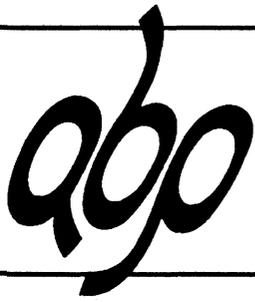


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**Second Georgia Baptist church
faces ouster over ministry to gays**

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Outside, it looks like an ordinary Southern Baptist church -- a brick, Georgian-style auditorium built in the 1920s with the obligatory, vintage-1950s, educational annex.

Inside, it feels more Episcopalian than Baptist. A processional, complete with a crucifer and candle-bearers, opens the service. Ministers in white vestments read lectionary selections for All Saints Sunday. The choir sings an anthem in Latin. About 50 worshippers, three-fourths in their 20s and 30s, participate in a number of litanies. The 70-minute service ends with Communion, which is served every Sunday.

Welcome to Virginia-Highland Baptist Church, one of two congregations expected to be expelled from the Georgia Baptist Convention for violating a new constitutional ban on churches that affirm homosexuals.

The state convention's executive committee voted Sept. 14 to recommend removal of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., under a year-old definition of a "cooperating" church which excludes congregations that "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior." The committee deferred action on Virginia-Highland, pending the Atlanta congregation's response to an inquiry about its views on homosexuality.

The church completed and submitted a lengthy response in late October, saying, among other things, that affirming church members means affirming their sexuality, whether gay or straight.

That means Virginia-Highland will likely join Oakhurst as the first churches in 177 years of history to be thrown out of the state Baptist convention when it gathers for its annual meeting Nov. 15-16 in Macon.

Tim Shirley, senior pastor at Virginia-Highland since 1990, estimates between 30 percent and 40 percent of the church's members are gay. Nobody knows for sure, he adds. While gays and lesbians are included in every segment of the church's life, members aren't asked about their sexual orientation.

And despite attention given to its welcoming-and-affirming stance on gays, Shirley, who is straight and married, insists that is not the issue that defines the congregation. "If you ask who we are, folks -- gay and straight alike -- will say we are a liturgical church, and also an inclusive church, inclusive being for us a lot broader than gay and lesbian," he said.

Vickie Grimes, who grew up as a Baptist but felt alienated because of her propensity for asking "wrong questions" in church, said she had all but given up on being a Baptist until she visited Virginia-Highland. She said Shirley's preaching is what drew her.

Wade Houston, who attends the church with his gay partner, said allowing the congregation to participate in the liturgy makes worship more meaningful. The focus is on God, not the congregation or worship leaders, he said.

Ironically, however, the church would by all accounts not be around today had older members not been willing to change their minds about outreach to homosexuals.

"I don't know what they are making such a big to-do about," said Mildred Rutherford, who has belonged to the church 47 years. "People need to be coming to church, becoming Christians."

Rutherford said she has known people all her life whom were presumed to be homosexuals, but people didn't used to make a big fuss about it. She said she believes most gay people are born that way. "What can they do? I feel sorry for them, myself."

"We have a good many [gay members]," Rutherford said. "I don't know how many. I never really thought about it."

However, she said, a number of openly gay-and-lesbian members who have joined the church over the last nine years have enhanced the congregation, bringing a variety of strengths and talents.

The Virginia-Highland neighborhood, located minutes from downtown Atlanta, was a working-class community when Virginia Avenue Baptist Church (as it was then called) constituted in 1923. The church grew rapidly, becoming an institution in the neighborhood.

When Rutherford joined the church in 1952, everyone in the community knew the pastor, and if they didn't attend a church of another denomination, they were at Virginia Avenue, she said.

That began to change in the '60s, when school integration and mandatory busing prompted the first phase of white flight to the suburbs.

After that, the Department of Transportation began buying and demolishing homes to make way for a massive freeway project, sparking a 20-year battle to save the neighborhood. In the meantime, a number of older residents joined the retreat to the suburbs.

Eventually, the DOT scaled down the freeway project, and overnight Virginia-Highland once again became a fashionable place to live. Young urban professionals began buying and renovating older homes. Property values soared. Shops and restaurants opened or were remodeled, completing the neighborhood's transformation into an eclectic and trendy place.

It also became home to Atlanta's largest gay population. According to estimates, 40 percent or more of Virginia-Highland residents are gay.

Over the years, the Baptist church had declined. Members moved, grew older and began to die off. Denominational leaders gave it up for dead.

The church's relationship with the changing community grew adversarial. Shirley's first act as pastor was to declare a moratorium on confrontational street evangelism. Members were perplexed, believing saving the church would require desperate measures.

He then scrapped the church's blend of traditional and revivalistic worship styles for a "high church" service he believed would be more interesting to people moving into the community.

The next reform was to include women, who were a majority of members, in church leadership. The church ordained its first women deacons in 1992.

A remodeling project included new signs, prompting the name change. Shirley wrote a description for a new marquee describing the church as "an inclusive community of faith where everyone is welcome." Most church members did not know at the time that "inclusive" had become a new buzzword for churches that welcome and affirm gays.

Each change prompted disagreement, and some longtime members left. A few stayed, welcoming the new direction. The church left the fundamentalist-led Southern Baptist Convention in 1992 and affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The congregation took on new civic involvements, including an annual street festival. It rented unused space to a park project. When word got out that rental space was available, the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus asked about moving its offices and rehearsal space to the church.

Shirley, a graduate of Mercer University with two master's degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was surprised when the church said yes. He prepared for what to do when gays and lesbians began to visit and seek to join the church.

After educating himself, he talked to deacons about their views on homosexuality. The diaconate voted twice to affirm the pastor's outreach into the gay and lesbian community.

Gay people began to join, but the church at first practiced a subtle "don't ask, don't tell" policy, Shirley said. He said he never intended for the church to remain ambivalent on the issue. The congregation adopted a statement on sexuality last year, mainly because of confusion resulting from media reports of the congregation's travails with the Georgia Baptist Convention.

The statement says, in part, "Human sexuality is a gift of God to be accepted with gratitude and expressed responsibly." Sexual relations should be expressed in covenant relationships between monogamous adults, "regardless of sexual orientation," it says.

The church remains small but appears to be rebounding. Members are gearing up for a \$200,000 renovation of the sanctuary.

Rutherford said the church "wouldn't be here" but for the changes instigated by Shirley. "I don't think there would have been anyone else who would have done what he's done," she said.

The church held an open forum to finalize a response to the Georgia Baptist executive committee drafted by Shirley and another minister.

The three-page, single-spaced response criticizes the new constitutional membership requirement as "a radical departure" from Baptist tradition and "an intrusive and invasive" violation of local-church autonomy.

"We believe in the goodness of God and in the goodness of all that God creates," the response says. "We, male and female, in all aspects of being human, including sexual orientation, are all created in the image of God."

"Because we understand human sexuality to be a gift from God and not an individual choice, honoring the dignity of God's creation in our church's members means affirming their sexuality."

Another section says that the church reveres the Bible but does not regard it as "infallible or inerrant." It says Bible passages should be studied in light of their historical and cultural context and notes that many issues addressed in Bible times are not considered relevant today.

"Women cut their hair, wear makeup and do not cover their head," the response statement says. "We abhor slavery as an evil institution and would never stone a rebellious child despite scriptural admonitions to do so."

"Reading the Bible prescriptively or selectively uses it in ways that are inappropriate and lack integrity," it continues. "When randomly proof-texting verses of Scripture, the Bible becomes a weapon of judgment, divisiveness and exclusivity rather than an instrument of love, grace, mercy and peace."

Shirley said he was disappointed that the executive committee's investigation did not include attending a worship service at the church. "Nobody's been here. They don't know what we do," he said.

He said he was both "pleased and distressed" by the response of other moderate Baptists in the state, acknowledging that a lot of moderate churches feel "caught in the middle" between the polity and social issues involved. "They are not where we are on the [gay] issue," he said.

Houston said he doubts being expelled from the Georgia convention would have much impact on the church. "What does the Georgia Baptist Convention really do for us?" he asked.

He said he is sorry, however, that the conflict has put pressure on the congregation and its staff.

"There are certainly going to be some surprised people when we get to heaven," he said.

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Lawmakers fail to fund international debt relief, activists criticize Congress

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- House lawmakers failed to fund an agreement made by leading industrial countries to reduce debt facing the poorest economic nations, despite a last-minute plea from religious leaders and a prominent pop-rock singer.

President Clinton had asked Congress for nearly \$1 billion -- about \$320 million this fiscal year -- to contribute to the U.S. portion of a debt-relief package for roughly 36 countries. Leaders from the top industrialized countries, known as the G7, reached an agreement in Cologne, Germany, earlier this year.

But in approving the foreign-operations spending bill, House lawmakers provided only \$110 million for the relief of debt owed to the United States.

Supporters of debt relief argue that even that amount will be useless since House lawmakers failed to approve U.S. involvement in the broader, multilateral effort, which requires changes in the policies of the International Monetary Fund.

Leaders in the international Jubilee 2000 movement criticized the House decision. The movement is inspired by the Old Testament's call to free slaves, cancel debts and return land to its original owners every 50 years -- the "Jubilee" year.

"This decision is an insult to decency," said Jo Marie Griesgraber, chair of Jubilee 2000/USA. "Impoverished countries -- and the hundreds of millions of people living in them -- need just a pittance from the U.S. government to make a real start at addressing the crushing debt burden."

The G7 agreement reached in Cologne, Germany "is not perfect" but "is a good start," she said. "But, sadly, some in Congress feel that providing \$14 billion more in military appropriations is more important."

"It's shameful, it's a disgrace that some in the U.S. Congress can't rise above partisan politics to work with other nations to address a real crisis affecting dozens of countries," Griesgraber said.

Bread For the World President David Beckmann, said debt relief is needed in poor nations "so that they can provide much-needed health care and education to their children. But unfortunately, Congress does not seem to be listening."

"The work of Congress won't be done until they give more than token support to debt cancellation for the world's poorest people," he said. "The lives of millions of children depend on it."

Many religious and human rights leaders have called for debt relief, including Christian Coalition President Pat Robertson. "We should give these people a second chance in the new millennium by relieving their governments of debt they are simply unable to repay," he said in a press release. "The benefit to millions of people suffering worldwide would significantly outweigh the cost to the United States."

Negotiations between lawmakers and Clinton over the foreign-operations bill took place Nov. 4. Earlier that day, religious leaders were joined by two House sponsors of the debt-relief legislation and by Bono, lead singer of rock group U2.

Bono, who visited top lawmakers throughout the day, said providing funds for the Cologne agreement was an "issue of justice to people living in economic slavery."

He said it is immoral for a farmer in the African country of Chad to work all day to service the debt of the world's richest countries "instead of feeding his children." He added, "This is the right time for America to show some heart."

Also at the press conference at St. Peter's church two blocks from the Capitol, was Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Ala. Many supporters have called the Republican lawmaker an unlikely crusader for debt relief, since the GOP-controlled Congress has held up the initiative.

The cost of the debt-relief initiative to each citizen is equal to "the cost of a Baskin Robbins milk shake," Bachus said. He reminded colleagues that the United States spends \$280 billion a year in arms to make America and the world safe. He also pointed out that provisions in the agreement require that debt relief money be spent on education and health care instead of aid to "dictators."

"Today and tomorrow, Congress will determine our legacy," Bachus said.

"I do not want it said of us what T.S. Eliot said of others some years ago: 'Here were decent godless people, their only monument the asphalt road, And a thousand lost golf balls.' What will our legacy be? What will be our monument?" he said.

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Kentuckians rally for support of posting Ten Commandments

By Trennis Henderson

CORBIN, Ky. (ABP) -- More than 3,000 people attended a Nov. 7 "Ten Commandments Rally" at Immanuel Baptist Church in Corbin, Ky.

The three-hour rally featured Alabama Judge Roy Moore, a key figure in a national debate over whether posting the Ten Commandments in public buildings is constitutional. Both state and federal laws have been proposed to allow the Ten Commandments to be posted in schools.

"It's time for all of us to get behind the effort to get God back in our hearts and back in our homes and back in our schools and back in other public places," said rally coordinator Herschel Walker, pastor of Hopewell Missionary Baptist Church in Corbin.

"We've been on defense long enough," Walker said. "It's time we get on offense."

The U.S. Supreme Court struck down a Kentucky law in 1980 that required public schools to post the Ten Commandments. However, several school districts across the state have voted in recent months to allow the religious document to be displayed.

The American Civil Liberties Union has responded by threatening lawsuits against school districts that refuse to take down copies of the Ten Commandments.

Moore, whose posting of the Ten Commandments in his Alabama courtroom sparked a series of lawsuits, described the separation of church and state as "a metaphor based on bad history."

"Our forefathers had no intention of being neutral to God," Moore said at the rally. "We don't have liberty to be outside of God's bonds."

Another speaker, Littleton, Colo., pastor Billy Epperhart, conducted funeral services for four of the victims of the April massacre at Columbine High School.

"When we took the Ten Commandments out of the classroom and out of our hearts, we took respect out of our nation," Epperhart said. "Violence is here because godlessness is here."

"The answer is putting God back in the hearts of men and women and in the hearts of young people," he said. "Where do we go from here? We as Christians must take a stand. I'm standing and I believe Christians all across this country are ready to stand."

Future rallies are planned in Frankfort and Bowling Green, Walker said.

Despite the large and enthusiastic crowd, not everyone in the community supported the event.

Bob Lockhart, a retired Baptist pastor who has served 20 years as a member of the Knox County School Board, said he is disturbed by efforts to post the Ten Commandments.

"These people cannot differentiate between public and parochial schools and are trying to turn our public schools into parochial ones, which is a violation of our constitution," he said.

"You've got this mystical idea you can hang the Commandments on the wall and people will stop fighting," he said. "That's ridiculous. If that worked so good, why don't they hang them in their churches and stop fighting?"

Lockhart said members of the school board who oppose posting the Ten Commandments are not anti-religious. "We're just trying to be a public school," he said.

While he is used to such responses, Walker said he remains committed to "taking back our Christian liberties we have lost."

"If we don't put God's orderly laws back into our hearts and back into our homes and teach them to our children, we are doomed," he said. "As God's people, we have been silent too long. The sleeping giant must wake up."

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Supreme Court reopens Cleveland voucher program to new students

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has temporarily reopened Cleveland's voucher program to new students.

In a 5-4 vote announced Nov. 5, justices granted Ohio Attorney General Betty Montgomery's request to set aside an order by federal District Judge Solomon Oliver Jr. that barred new students from participation in the voucher program until he rules on its constitutionality.

Oliver is overseeing a lawsuit brought by civil-liberties groups and others who contend that the voucher program violates the separation of church and state by providing taxpayer-funded tuition to attend parochial schools. Oliver has set a trial date of Dec. 13 for the lawsuit.

On Aug. 24, Oliver ruled that voucher foes had a "substantial chance" of winning their arguments, that the program violates the U.S. Constitution, and temporarily halted the program until the case is decided. Three days later, however, Oliver amended his order to keep the program in place for past voucher participants while closing it to new enrollees.

The program provides up to \$2,500 in tuition for about 4,000 students attending private schools in Cleveland, most of which are affiliated with religious organizations.

Ohio officials immediately appealed Oliver's order to the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. Not getting a prompt response from the appeals court, Montgomery sought emergency relief from the U.S. Supreme Court last month.

Chief Justice William Rehnquist, along with Associate Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy and Clarence Thomas, voted to stay Oliver's order pending a ruling by the appellate court. Dissenting from the stay were Associate Justices John Paul Stevens, David Souter, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer.

While voucher proponents saw the high court's action as good news, Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State said it has "little significance in the ongoing battle over voucher aid to religious schools."

In the past, the Supreme Court has allowed lower-court rulings both for and against vouchers for religious schools to stand, but it has yet to rule on the issue itself.

"Eventually the justices will have to face the voucher issue squarely, and I believe at that time they will find this kind of tax aid to religious schools unconstitutional," said Lynn, whose organization is among those challenging the Cleveland program.

"Taxpayers must never be forced to pay for religious indoctrination," he said.

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