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**Former SBC president
announces divorce**

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Former Southern Baptist Convention president Charles Stanley stunned the congregation of First Baptist Church in Atlanta May 21 by announcing that he and his wife of 44 years have divorced.

Church members stood and applauded following an announcement that Stanley, 67, would stay on as pastor, according to a report May 23 in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Lingering marital problems have haunted Stanley's ministry at the Georgia mega-church for years.

Stanley, who became pastor of the church in 1972, has been separated from his wife, Anna, since 1992. She first filed for divorce in 1993. Some church members said Stanley should step down because of the congregation's unwritten policy of not allowing divorced men to serve as deacons or ministers.

Stanley refused to resign, arguing that separation isn't the same as divorce, but said in 1995 he would leave the church immediately should the divorce ever become final.

Stanley's son, Andy, quit his job as an associate pastor and led a number of former members to start a new church, reportedly over disagreements about his father's continued leadership.

Anna Stanley dropped the divorce in 1996 in a negotiated settlement and said she and her husband were seeking to reconcile.

However, according to the Atlanta newspaper, Anna Stanley quietly filed a new petition Feb. 16 in DeKalb County Superior Court, using initials instead of names. In the petition, "A.J. Stanley" requests a divorce from "C.F. Stanley" on grounds that their marriage of 44 years was "irretrievably broken." Judge Michael Hancock signed the final decree May 11. According to Hancock's order, the couple executed a property agreement April 5.

Stanley, who is well known for his "In Touch" television preaching program that is seen around the world, was SBC president in 1985 and 1986. His divorce occurs as the nation's largest Protestant faith group is strengthening calls for family values.

A 2-year-old amendment to the convention's official "Baptist Faith and Message" statement defines marriage as "the uniting of one man and one woman in covenant commitment for a lifetime." Richard Land,

president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and a member of the committee that drafted the article, has said it rejects "the modern concept of divorce as a routine solution to marital difficulties."

A 1998 SBC resolution also urged legislatures to abandon so-called "no-fault" divorce laws that messengers said contribute to the breakdown of families.

The convention's North American Mission Board recently tightened requirements allowing divorced persons to be endorsed as SBC chaplains rarely and only "under unusual circumstances."

The new policy said that in the future, both chaplains and mission pastors who have been divorced would be approved for service only if their previous marriages ended by "biblical" standards of sexual unfaithfulness or desertion by a spouse.

NAMB President Robert Reccord said the change was intended to "make sure what we do is biblical and that we're consistent."

"Although our society has abandoned biblical standards, we are committed to holding to those standards," Reccord said.

SBC president Paige Patterson told the Journal-Constitution he is "deeply sympathetic with the sorrow I know all of the Stanley family must feel over this."

"It ought to be a wakeup call for America that if something like this can happen to the Stanley family, it shows how much society has lost its bearings," said Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

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-- By ABP staff

Reaction to proposed statement focuses on women's ordination

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- Reaction came quickly to revisions in Southern Baptists' "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement proposed by a special committee May 18.

Associated Press, which obtained an embargoed copy of the proposed changes prior to their announced noon release, broke the story, emphasizing the revised 1963 statement's pronouncement that the Bible prohibits women from being pastors of local churches.

Other news outlets quickly followed suit. National Public Radio, network television and national newspapers led news stories with the proposed statement's view that "the office of pastor is limited to men."

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and a member of the committee proposing the changes, told the New York Times the statement on women pastors is "not culturally driven" but "a matter of biblical conviction."

USA Today quoted James Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga., who this year is running unopposed as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, as saying that while some churches have ordained women in the past, the practice is "unbiblical."

"This is a statement from Southern Baptists that our positions and our perspectives are not going to be dictated by the culture," current SBC president Paige Patterson said in an interview with the Los Angeles Times. "They're going to be dictated by Scripture. If we stand alone, we'll stand alone," said Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

The statement, which is consistent with previous SBC stances including a 1984 resolution against women pastors and an amendment to the "Baptist Faith and Message" in 1998 calling for wifely submission, also drew criticism.

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., said the new document "pulls up a drawbridge into the 21st century and padlocks Southern Baptists into a 19th century cultural castle."

Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Atlanta, told the New York Times the proposed revision "is based on a bad interpretation of Scripture, an insensitivity to the Holy Spirit and an unwillingness to see what God is doing in the world today."

Another member of the "Baptist Faith and Message" study committee, however, SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission head Richard Land, told the Orlando Sentinel that the change is "what the vast majority" of Southern Baptists believe.

Julie Pennington-Russell, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, however, told the Florida newspaper, "It would come as a surprise to Jesus that the office of pastor should be limited to men."

While the prohibition of female pastors drew most of the initial attention, some Baptist leaders criticized another article that softens language from "refraining from worldly amusement" on Sunday to making Sabbath activities subject to individual conscience.

The Lord's Day Alliance of the United States opposes any "weakening ... of the importance of the Lord's Day as a day of rest and worship," said Timothy Norton, the group's executive director.

"It would be our hope that all people of the Christian faith would be encouraged by their respective denominations to set aside the Lord's Day as a day of worship of God, spiritual renewal, physical rest and family enrichment," Norton said.

Others pointed out that the new statement omits reference to "priesthood of the believer," which has been described as Southern Baptists' key tenet.

It also narrows the denomination's view on the Bible and theological issues including the atonement. Language in the 1963 statement allowed more diversity.

The proposed new statement "makes the theological tent much smaller," Parham said.

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Couple provides presence for needy in Dallas

By Alison Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- "Being there" is an important key to a Dallas ministry to city dwellers who are down on their luck, hooked on drugs, homeless or needing help with finding work or tutoring.

Katie and Jason Besly, husband and wife co-directors of Crossover Ministries, are "there," along with volunteers from area churches, for a diverse population mix in the Maple Avenue area just north of downtown Dallas, where people often don't see eye to eye.

"The community is very split and polarized," said Katie Besly.

The ministry is based in North Dallas Baptist Church. The area near the church has a large homeless population, a number of immigrants and refugees out of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, as well as whites, African Americans, Hispanics and Asians.

Part of the community also suffers from high unemployment, lack of education, drug and alcohol abuse and prostitution. In sharp contrast, another segment, Oak Lawn, is affluent and home to many well-educated young professionals.

Crossover Ministries offers a food pantry, English-as-a-Second-Language classes, a prayer network and an after-school tutoring program to address some of the diverse ministry needs.

The food pantry is unique in that those who need the food are given a credit each month and allowed to "shop" in the pantry, giving them more control over their choices. Crossover requires a minimum of paperwork and only a brief intake interview.

"Even though some take advantage, we also get the people who fall through the cracks," said Jason Besly.

In addition to the lifeline of food, Crossover offers another "Lifeline" to those who come to them in need -- prayer. The Beslys offer to pray for and with the individuals who come through their doors. Although some refuse to pray with the couple, the Beslys let them know that someone will be praying for them every day.

Lifeline is a prayer network recently started at Crossover Ministries and involves assigning prayer cards for each individual served at Crossover to prayer partners from local churches. Volunteers commit to pray daily for that person for the next four months.

"When we assign (a card), we tell them someone is praying for you every day," said Katie. As the ministry grows, ideally there will be three partners for each card. The prayer cards are updated every four months, with Scripture references and current information on the individual in need.

"We are seeing the power of prayer working in people's lives," noted Jason. "Some who haven't had work in eight months or a couple of years are getting jobs."

The Beslys also have referred a number of people to a rehabilitation center outside the inner city. One individual asked them to drive him to the bus station so he wouldn't be tempted to buy drugs before he got there.

Jason recently was able to provide for a man in a tangible way. After coming to the food pantry, the man told Jason all he needed to get a job was a hardhat. A hardhat had been sitting unused in the back of Jason's truck for six months. He gave it to the man, and the man went to work.

An after-school tutoring program is the newest ministry for Crossover. Located in a recreation center next to the "Little Mexico" housing project on Harry Hines Boulevard, the program helps about 35 children from the apartments on Monday and Wednesday afternoons.

The children who attend range in age from kindergarten through sixth grade. Sullen and skeptical at first, the children slowly have warmed up to Jason and Katie and their volunteers.

"At first, they wouldn't talk to us, and now they come up to us and tell us everything," said Katie. The 20-something couple also provides an important example of a good marriage for the children.

"The girls were appalled that Jason was my husband," explained Katie. Since most of the children live with their mothers or some other female caregiver, they don't have good role models for fathers and husbands. Apparently the girls were worried about Katie. "Jason is a good male role model for the girls and boys," she said.

Katie and Jason came to Crossover Ministries last August, when Katie accepted the director's position. Jason volunteered at the ministry until funding could be found to support another position. He joined Katie as a co-director in October. Both are Cooperative Baptist Fellowship envoys under a new program where they receive CBF support but no funding. As envoys, the Beslys have access to CBF resources and serve as a resource to others as well.

Katie came to Crossover from Bakersfield Rescue Mission in Bakersfield, Calif., where she served as youth and children's coordinator. No stranger to CBF, Katie served for two years as a Global Service Corps

volunteer -- as a home-school teacher for missionary children in Albania and as an international student minister and volunteer coordinator in Miami.

Jason was a surveillance operations engineer for AERA Energy in Bakersfield prior to answering the call to serve in a ministry position. He is currently attending Brite Divinity School in Forth Worth, Texas.

Created by Dallas Baptist Association in conjunction with North Dallas Baptist Church, Crossover Ministries is a non-profit organization supported by local churches, the association and several foundations. Volunteers from local churches also work with the various ministries.

The Beslys hope to involve more churches as they expand the scope of the ministry. "We are ecumenical in nature," said Katie. "We want to work with all the churches in the area."

"We would like to be a place where volunteers can come and do what they are called to do," noted Katie.

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