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Atlanta association leaders ask gay-friendly church to leave

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The executive committee of Atlanta Baptist Association has asked Oakhurst Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., to voluntarily leave the association or be removed.

Oakhurst is one of two churches in the association to survive earlier ouster votes for their "welcoming and affirming" stance toward homosexuals.

The other church, Virginia-Highland Baptist Church in Atlanta, voted May 20 to withdraw from the association after deacons met with the association's director of missions, said Pastor Tim Shirley.

Meeting Aug. 26, the executive committee voted 44-20 to ask Oakhurst to comply with a bylaw banning churches that "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior" or withdraw voluntarily. If the church doesn't leave the association by Oct. 31, according to the resolution, it will be dismissed.

The executive committee vote reverses decisions at two associational meetings earlier this year. In January, the association voted 253-164 in favor of a membership-committee recommendation to keep the two churches in membership. The action said the association did not "support or condone homosexual activity," but respected the autonomy of the local church.

In March the association approved a new bylaw against full inclusion of gays, but a subsequent vote to expel the two churches didn't receive a required two-thirds vote.

A staff member at Oakhurst said the church desired to remain a part of the association but hasn't yet met to consider a response to the most recent vote.

"We were saddened by the decision and hoped we would be able to work together," said Melanie Vaughan-West, interim minister at the church. The congregation's senior pastor, Lanny Peters, is scheduled to return from a sabbatical Sept. 18.

Vaughan-West said it would now be up to the congregation to decide how to respond.

The executive committee defeated a motion by Robert Walker, pastor of Peachtree Baptist Church, to table the action.

Shirley said at one time, his church might have considered leaving quietly but others in the association urged them to stay and fight. Those dynamics changed, however, with a change of personnel on two key committees formerly strongly supportive of the churches and intense pressure over the issue.

After the January vote, the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board and Georgia Baptist Convention both announced plans to defund the Atlanta Association for its refusal to expel the gay-friendly churches.

About 50 Atlanta-area Baptists met in early March to begin a new metropolitan association in protest of the vote sustaining the churches.

Another 20 churches were said to be waiting on the sidelines to see how the executive committee vote came out before deciding whether to defect as well.

With the prospect of losing additional churches and financial support, Shirley said even some of the association's more progressive leaders appeared to be losing their resolve. "It's easy to take a stand on Day One," he said. "How easy is it to take a stand on Day 100?"

Atlanta Association Director of Missions Joel Harrison wasn't immediately available for comment.

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Missouri Baptist College adopts self-perpetuating board

By Bill Webb

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- The Missouri Baptist College board of trustees voted Aug. 23 to amend the school's charter to give final approval of trustees to the board itself. The decision was made by a 16-10 vote in a closed session that lasted more than two-and-a-half hours.

The college becomes the third Missouri Baptist Convention agency to switch to a "self-perpetuating" board, taking the decision to elect trustees out of the hands of the state convention through its elected messengers. The Baptist Home took similar action nearly a year ago, and the Windermere trustees did the same recently.

College president Alton Lacey said trustees took three other actions during the closed session. They:

-- Revised the covenant statement the college already has with the state convention, changing language that has to do with trustee election.

-- Re-elected the nine trustees eligible for re-election this year and elected three more to fill vacant seats on the board.

-- Asked Lacey "to convene a committee of the board to work with the appropriate state convention committees, expressing our desire to negotiate alternatives that would assure our continued relationship to the convention" in the wake of the board's decision to become self-perpetuating.

"All of our trustees expressed a strong desire to continue to be a part of and work with the Missouri Baptist Convention," Lacey said after the meeting. "The only change will be in how our trustees are selected."

Prior to the meeting, Lacey gave two reasons for the college executive board's recommendations.

One is concern that the close relationship between the college and state convention could make both liable should either be sued. "The only way to limit this ascending or descending liability is to make these changes in the trustee selection process," he wrote in a letter to the Missouri Baptist newspaper Word and Way.

The second is uncertainty about political activity in the state convention. Some fear the climate could affect the college's ability to "continue to serve all Missouri Baptists and remain responsive to the convention's wishes that the college be sound academically, fully accredited and aware of the need to place Christian emphasis at the center of educational life."

After the called meeting, board chairman Randy Fullerton said the trustees had been dealing with the concerns for more than a year and looked "at how this would affect Missouri Baptist College."

"The executive committee ... became concerned when the [state convention] nominating committee came out with their guidelines," Fullerton said. Those guidelines disqualified some current trustees who would have otherwise been eligible to serve another term.

Fullerton characterized the discussion that preceded a vote on the issues as "honest and open."

"Everybody really, really wants what's best for the college," he said. "That was evident, and that was how we got to the last motion."

Following the 16-10 vote to change the way trustees are elected, trustee David Sheppard resigned. "It's not a statement, and it's not an act of protest," Sheppard said. "It's a matter of conviction" based on his belief that the trustees took an unethical and illegal action by taking the election of trustees out of the hands of the convention.

Lacey said the closeness of the vote indicates the college has a "very balanced" board.

The president cited his record to say he is committed to broad representation on the board in the future. "Every person who voted against it was recommended by me," he said. "Our trustees are pretty concerned that no one group be in control of our board."

Lacey said the board had discussed the possibility that the college could lose \$950,000 annually in funding through the state convention's Cooperative Program unified budget as a result of the action.

If that happens, the college will have to go directly to the churches to make up the loss, he said. "We desire the Cooperative Program method, though."

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Religious involvement linked to self-esteem, youth study says

By Bob Allen

SAN FRANCISCO (ABP) -- Eighth graders who participate in religious activities tend to have higher self-esteem than their peers, according to a national survey.

Religious involvement appears to be one of the largest factors influencing a young adolescent's self-esteem, according to a study by three psychologists.

A survey asked 1,261 eighth graders to react to positive statements like "I take a positive attitude toward myself" and negative questions like "I feel I do not have much to be proud of" to measure their self-esteem.

The adolescents were also asked how involved they were in religious activities.

The study found that those who were active in church viewed themselves more positively than other youth. Non-religious youth, meanwhile, were more likely to identify with negative assessments of themselves.

Researchers found "a consistent pattern that the more the respondents were religiously involved, the more likely they were to agree with the positive items concerning self-esteem."

"The more the respondents were religiously involved, the less likely they were to agree with the negative items concerning self-esteem," they also reported.

The study "revealed a statistically very significant overall effect of religious involvement on self-esteem," according to a report to the American Psychological Association.

Researchers said the results might indicate that churches and other religious institutions teach people how to have positive self-images.

"Adolescents who are not involved in religious activities are less likely than those who are religiously involved to evaluate themselves in a positive way and more likely than those who are religiously involved to evaluate themselves in a negative way," the study reports. "This finding seems to indicate that most churches teach people to have positive images of themselves, and thus positive teaching may be able to influence early adolescents' self-evaluations in a positive way."

They also surmised that religious activities are something that a family does together, which may also play a role in self-esteem.

"Relationship with parents is still strong in the younger adolescent's life in spite of increasing importance of peer relationships," the authors wrote. "Family influence may also have an effect on an adolescent's religious involvement, which leads to more chances to receive positive teaching."

Race and gender also influenced self-esteem, according to the study. African-American girls had the most positive opinion of themselves, while African-American boys had the lowest.

African-American females were more likely to view themselves positively than Caucasian girls, but white male eighth graders evaluated themselves more positively than African-American males. Researchers said that might reflect a cultural difference in how parents teach their sons and daughters about self-esteem.

The study, conducted by psychologists Yong Dai and Rebecca Nolan of Louisiana State University and Qing Zeng of Wells College, was based on results of a 1999 survey by the University of Michigan titled, "Monitoring the Future, a Continuing Study of American Youth."

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Study finds spanking doesn't harm children

SAN FRANCISCO (ABP) -- The old-fashioned philosophy of "spare the rod and spoil the child" found a rare ally in modern psychology in a controversial study that says occasional spanking doesn't cause children lasting harm.

Diana Baumrind, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, reported findings Aug. 24 at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association in San Francisco.

While she doesn't personally support spanking, Baumrind said there is no proof that it causes psychological harm. She said there is no association between infrequent spanking and problems in social or emotional development, at least through early adolescence.

"A blanket injunction against disciplinary spanking is not warranted by the evidence," she said, according to a report by NBC News.

A fellow psychologist who opposes all spanking didn't dispute Baumrind's research but said it isn't the final word on the subject. Murray Straus, co-author of the 1993 book "Beating the Devil Out of Them: Corporal Punishment in American Families," said at least seven other studies have linked spanking with detrimental effects.

"One study doesn't tell the whole story," said Straus, a professor at the University of New Hampshire in Durham.

Most child psychologists discourage spanking, saying non-corporal punishment, such as time out, is just as effective in getting kids to behave and doesn't have negative side effects.

Baumrind said just 4 percent of 100 middle-class families in the study refrained from physical punishment when their children were toddlers, but most ceased by adolescence.

Baumrind defined spanking as striking a child on the buttocks, hands or legs with an open hand. Across age groups, 4 percent to 7 percent of families used physical punishment often and with some intensity -- including using paddles, hitting in the face or torso or lifting and throwing or shaking a child.

Such aggressive discipline has obvious ill effects on children, Baumrind said. But when those "red zone" families are removed from the study analysis, results show that children who were spanked occasionally and mildly were no more likely to have psychological difficulties than other children.

What is more important, she said, is that parents are loving and firm and communicate well with their children.

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--By ABP staff

College examines role of prayer in healing

By Susan Welch

BUIES CREEK, N.C. (ABP) -- Suzan Maddox says the prayers of friends and colleagues played an important role in her treatment for breast cancer found in 1990.

Maddox, the wife of Ronald Maddox, dean of the Campbell University School of Pharmacy, discussed the role of spirituality in healing at the pharmacy school's annual convocation. The service was held Aug. 29 on the campus of the Baptist-affiliated school in Buies Creek, N.C.

Also addressing the topic was Michael Krucoff, senior cardiologist at Duke University Medical Center.

"You may be wondering why a cardiologist would be standing up here talking to you about prayer," Krucoff said. "But if you've ever experienced a crushing pain in your chest and been forced to surrender your life to medical professionals, you realize how important a compassionate, spiritually inclined caregiver can be."

Krucoff and his assistant, Suzanne Crater, a certified nurse practitioner, conducted a study on prayer and healing titled the MANTRA Project, Phase I. Of 150 patients, those who received intercessory prayer as part of their treatment plan had a greater number of positive outcomes than those who did not. Krucoff and Crater are currently working on a second study phase involving 1,500 patients.

Maddox, who was diagnosed with cancer 11 years ago, added a personal perspective on Krucoff's discussion. "I learned a lot about what it's like to be on the other side of the syringe," she said. "I had an aggressive kind of cancer, and my prognosis wasn't great."

A stay-at-home mother of four who had never experienced a catastrophic illness, Maddox said her diagnosis came as a total shock. But while she endured a ravaging round of treatments, including two surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation, Maddox received over 200 "get well" cards that contained messages indicating prayer had been offered for her.

"It made all the difference in my health and in my attitude," Maddox said. "Both my husband and I were literally uplifted by these prayers."

She later decided to start her own business, Maddox Oncology Products, Inc., which manufactures attractive head coverings and other products for cancer patients. The company also makes prayer quilts to comfort and support patients who are fighting the disease. Her products are sold in 60 locations throughout the United States.

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-- Susan Welch is a staff writer in Campbell University's office of public information.

News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Original faculty member leaves Richmond seminary

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. -- An original faculty member at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond has departed the moderate Virginia school.

Linda McKinnish Bridges is now an associate dean of the College at Wake Forest University. She also will teach at Wake Forest Divinity School during the 2001-2002 academic year.

Bridges was the first faculty member to be offered a job at the Richmond seminary, which opened in 1991. She taught New Testament, Greek and women's study until moving to Wake Forest in July.

Bridges is scheduled to teach "New Testament Foundations" this year at the divinity school in Winston-Salem, N.C.

A native of North Carolina, she is a graduate of Meredith College with a master's and doctor's degree from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

She taught previously at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia and at Randolph-Macon College. (ABP)

Baptist author wins Christy Award

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. -- Missouri Baptist author Catherine Palmer took the top Christy Award for romance fiction at a recent ceremony.

Palmer won the award, which recognizes Christian novels, for "A Touch of Betrayal," one of her 28 published novels and novellas.

The second annual Christy Awards were presented in conjunction with the annual convention of CBA, formerly known as the Christian Booksellers Association. They are named after a pioneer work in Christian fiction written by Catherine Marshall.

Palmer is a graduate of Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., and Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Her publisher is Tyndale House.

She is married to Tim Palmer, managing editor of the Missouri Baptist newspaper Word and Way. They have two sons. Her parents are retired missionaries, Harold and Betty Cummins of Springfield, Mo. (ABP)

Mississippi CBF names coordinator

JACKSON, Miss. -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Mississippi has hired its first full-time coordinator.

Steve Street, co-pastor of Rivercrest Baptist Fellowship in Jackson, Miss., for the past eight years, takes the post effective Sept. 1.

Street, 40, will succeed Bradley Pope of Clinton, Miss., who plans to retire after serving as part-time coordinator the past four years.

Street and his wife, Carla, are among the few husband-wife co-pastors of a Southern Baptist church. They started Rivercrest Baptist Church to reach "generation-X" young adults who were not attending traditional churches. Carla will become Rivercrest's senior pastor in January after a medical leave of absence.

A native of Columbus, Miss., Street previously was minister to single adults at First Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., and youth minister at three churches in Mississippi. He recently earned his doctorate from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif.

Mississippi CBF is one of 20 state and regional organizations affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and was organized in 1992. (ABP)

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-- By ABP staff

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