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Church survives challenge over woman's ordination

By Bob Allen

GAINESVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- A Florida Baptist association voted not to suspend a member church for ordaining a female staff member to the gospel ministry.

Parkview Baptist Church in Gainesville remains in full fellowship with Santa Fe River Baptist Association after a 133-121 vote rejecting a committee's recommendation for discipline at the association's annual meeting Oct. 14.

The credentials committee had earlier voted unanimously to recommend suspension of Parkview, a step short of dismissal, saying the congregation violated the Bible and the association's bylaws by ordaining Lynn Williams as a minister.

Williams, minister of education at Parkview, has worked in the association since 1985.

The association's bylaws reserve the right to withdraw fellowship from any church found to be "out of fellowship" with the association, Florida Baptist Convention or Southern Baptist Convention.

According to the credentials committee, Parkview broke fellowship on three counts by ordaining a woman.

First, the report said, it degraded ministerial ordination by applying it to a "subordinate" church office. The Bible, the committee said, speaks of only two offices, pastor and deacon.

Second, the ordination of women is "without biblical command, apostolic precedent or support in Southern Baptist confessions and is contrary to the overwhelming weight of Southern Baptist history and established norms of Southern Baptist practice," the report continued.

The third "and greatest" concern, the report said, is that women's ordination served to further identify Parkview with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a breakaway moderate group spawned by conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention in 1991.

"The committee does not think this was the motive" for Williams' ordination, said credential committee chairman Eric Benson, but it "further identifies Parkview with the well-documented, liberal agenda of the CBF."

That identification, according to the credentials committee, "disrupts the harmony of our association and brings into question well-founded and long established Southern Baptist doctrine and practice."

Williams responded, however, that she has said repeatedly that her ordination had nothing to do with CBF. "I sought ordination because that is where God led me," she told an overflow crowd in an afternoon meeting at Parker Road Baptist Church.

Gary Crawford, pastor of Westside Baptist Church in Gainesville, argued against singling out Parkview for discipline. The church for several years has divided its denominational giving to national causes 30 percent to CBF and 70 percent to SBC.

"There are churches across the SBC that fund CBF by percentages," Crawford said, meaning "many other churches would need to be disciplined for supporting CBF."

Similarly, with regard to the concern about ordaining to a "subordinate" office, Crawford observed, "There are churches across the SBC that ordain persons to other forms of service" than senior pastor.

Sebby Volpe, an evangelist, read a Bible passage from First Timothy describing qualifications for a "bishop" -- which Baptists take as a reference to pastor -- including being the "husband of one wife." Another passage from the same book, written by the apostle Paul, says, "I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man."

On the other hand, Thomas Wright, pastor of Mount Carmel Baptist Church, said he had listed 10 references to a "prophetess" from the Bible. "What is the difference between a female prophetess and a prophet?" he asked. "What is the difference between a prophet and a preacher?"

Williams said she believes the Bible is "without error," but "we have two different interpretations of Scripture."

"As Baptists, it is our historical stand that we are free to interpret the Scripture and not have a man-made document," or creed, to establish matters of faith.

After the meeting, Williams said she had "mixed feelings" about the outcome of the vote. "I think this was an affirmation of our church and my ministry," she said. However, she said she worries about division over the issue. "We have never been a divided association," she said. "We have always been unified."

During discussion, Lynwood Walters of First Baptist Church in Gainesville said his congregation ordained women to the ministry in the 1980s and 1990s and "nothing was said" by the association. Had Parkview been suspended, he said, First Baptist would voluntarily leave, noting that between them the two churches contribute about \$20,000 a year, or 10 percent of the association's budget.

That comment brought groans of protest from around the auditorium.

Later, the association's vice moderator, who presided over the debate, said he was disappointed to hear "threats" during debate. "I'd like to see the association win," said Herman Bowers, of Waldo. "If you did not vote the way the majority went ... I pray you would fall in line."

In an earlier vote Oct. 14, the association rejected on one vote 127-126, a motion to adopt the 2000 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message" as a freestanding document to be used in hiring and firing of association staff.

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