



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: **Bob Allen**
Executive editor: **Greg Warner**

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

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Baseball player's second chance chronicled in hit movie

By Cliff Vaughn

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- "God brought everything back around full circle, and when I was least expecting it is when everything happened," Jim Morris, the oldest rookie pitcher to play major league baseball in 40 years, told EthicsDaily.com, an e-newsletter published by the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn.

A movie about his life, "The Rookie," opened March 29 in theaters across the country. Starring Dennis Quaid, the movie follows Morris' path from high school science teacher to the big leagues. That journey began when Morris, also the high school's baseball coach, made a bet with his team: if they could win the district championship, he would try out for the majors.

That bet sets the movie in motion. In real life, it sparked Morris' second attempt to play major league baseball.

The first came when the Milwaukee Brewers drafted Morris in 1983. He spent roughly six years in the minor leagues, though much of it passed by on the operating table. Arm injuries plagued the lefty's career, and by the time he hung up his cleats in 1989, he'd already had two elbow surgeries. But it was a shoulder injury that forced him out.

Married and out of baseball, Morris went back to college, where he discovered his affinity for the sciences. He and his wife, Lorri, had three children -- Hunter, Jessica and Jaimee. And he wound up teaching chemistry and physics and coaching baseball at the high school in Big Lake, Texas.

That's when he and his team, which knew of his lingering dream, cut the deal.

"I wanted to pull them up" by making the bet, Morris said. He figured if the team did win the district, he would just find a tryout, throw a few pitches, go home and be done with it.

But the team won, and Morris found himself taking his three kids, stroller and all, to the tryout. He told his wife he was taking the kids to see their grandfather. "Which is true," he said. "I just tried out on the way."

Amazingly, the team hadn't leaked a word of the bet. But Lorri found out about it when, after Morris threw pitches close to 100 miles per hour at the tryouts, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays organization filled his answering machine. She heard the messages before Jim and the kids got home from the tryouts.

The Morris family faced a tough decision. Jim would have to leave his family and go to Florida. He would also have to start in the minor leagues again.

"I was chasing down a dream at that point," he said. "If you turn down a second chance, what are you teaching your kids?" he remembered thinking.

He set off for Florida, and within three months had moved from AA to AAA minor league ball. He finally got the call from the majors, and joined the Devil Rays on the road ... at The Ballpark in Arlington, where they were facing the Texas Rangers.

Morris actually pitched in that game and struck out the first batter he faced: all-star Royce Clayton. That trip also marked the first time he'd seen his family in three months. Morris' father, with whom he'd always had a fractured relationship, also attended the game, a sign of their improving relationship.

Morris' father had been a military man. His disciplinarian nature, coupled with the fact that the family was always moving when Morris was a boy, strained their connection.

When Morris was in the ninth grade, his family finally settled in Texas. By that time, he had lived in California, Connecticut, Florida and Virginia.

Morris said he lost friends with every move, but he always had his ball and glove -- his treasures since age three. He also remembered wearing his ball uniform under his acolyte's robe. After extinguishing candles at church, he'd head for the ballpark.

Fast-forward several decades, and Morris was heading out to the ballpark again, but this time in the big leagues. After two seasons, however, he left baseball for the second time.

He gave two reasons for his exit. One was tendonitis. The other was family.

His son called him one evening and asked him how much longer he had to be away. "And that kind of got me," Morris said. "I wanted to go home and see them achieve their dreams."

Morris had a dream, and he had lived it. Now he had a family too. "Priorities change as you get older," he said.

Living that dream changed his faith, too.

During his first push for the majors, Morris characterized his pitching-mound prayers as, "Please don't let him hit it out of the park." But the second time around, they changed to, "Show me the way. Whatever happens happens."

Morris said he learned that "life was bigger than myself" and that he was "a vessel being used for something."

"There's no explanation for throwing 85-88 miles per hour the first time around, then laying around for 10 years and coming back throwing 98," he said.

It was tough on the family when Morris went back to the majors, but he was chasing a childhood dream, and he believed that second chance had been given to him for a reason.

"It was tough doing it, but worth getting it done," he said.

"It" turned out to be an inspirational story suited for both a book and a movie. His book, *The Oldest Rookie: Big-League Dreams from a Small-Town Guy*, was published in spring 2001.

As for the movie, "I wanted to keep it true and keep it a family movie," he said. Like his dream, those wishes came true.

"The Rookie" is rated G -- a rarity for live-action features -- and the movie is "90 percent" true, according to Morris. The main divergence from the facts is that Morris lived in one town and worked in another, whereas the movie combines the towns.

Morris also never used an automobile speed-checking device to clock his pitches, though he said he passed one every day and wished that idea had occurred to him.

Morris now lives in Dallas, where he volunteers with local baseball teams when he's not taking inspirational speaking engagements.

When he speaks to groups, he speaks from experience. His mantra:
"Never give up on your dreams."

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-- Cliff Vaughn is associate director of the Baptist Center for Ethics.

Campolo criticizes war on terrorism

By Biblical Recorder staff

CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- The United States' war on terrorism could set missions back 1,000 years, according to popular author and speaker Tony Campolo.

Campolo, professor of sociology at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pa., told a North Carolina Baptist Men's conference in Charlotte that Jesus called Christians to be peacemakers.

Since Sept. 11, Campolo said, it has become taboo to quote Jesus even in church.

"I'm not sure we want to hear about this Jesus who says 'Those who live by the sword die by the sword' as we engage in a military buildup," he said. "I'm not sure we want to hear of a Jesus who says 'Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.'"

The American government has said it won't negotiate in the war on terrorism, Campolo said.

"What's our answer to terrorism?" he asked. "It's going to set missions back a thousand years. We're going to kill them. We're going to root them out and kill them."

Campolo said that response is like trying to get rid of malaria by killing mosquitoes.

"You get rid of malaria by destroying the swamps in which the malaria mosquitoes are bred," he said. "There's a swamp out there called poverty and injustice."

Campolo said he is tired of "big-time evangelists" calling Islam an evil religion.

"You say, 'But they quote it right out of the Quran,'" he said. "I can quote out of the New Testament and the Old Testament and make our faith a violent religion. I would not want you to take those passages and make my God into a violent destructive God who goes around calling his people to murder others."

Campolo told of how St. Francis of Assisi left the Christian army during the Crusades, went to the tent of a sultan leading the Muslim army and tried to win him to Christ.

"He didn't succeed, but the sultan said, 'If all of you Christians were like you, Mr. Francis, we wouldn't be here today.'"

Campolo said Jesus called Christians to work for justice.

"If we're going to win that Muslim world to Christ we cannot make stupid statements about their religion and we cannot, in fact, engage in a holy war against them," he said.

Campolo said he is worried because American Christians have taken off WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets and replaced them with American flags.

"People, I love this country," he said. "It's the best Babylon on the face of this earth, but it's still Babylon. This is not the kingdom of God, and my ultimate allegiance belongs to Jesus and so does yours."

Campolo described himself as a "pro-Israel evangelical," but spoke against some of Israel's actions in its conflict with the Palestinians. He said the fact that the people of Israel are "the chosen of God" does not make them immune from injustice.

"When they send tanks into the West Bank and level 70 houses in retaliation to some madman setting off a bomb in Tel-Aviv, they're using Hitler-like tactics," Campolo said. "I am suggesting that those who do

not speak out for justice for the Palestinians have no right to talk about freedom and justice for the Jews, because I've got to tell you that God loves the Palestinians every bit as much as he loves the Jews."

Campolo also spoke out against the federal government's plan to fund "faith-based" social programs.

"Don't allow yourself to get sucked into all this faith-based stuff that they're talking about," he said. "I mean, you put government together with church programs (and it) is like mixing ice cream with horse manure. It's not going to hurt the manure but it's going to raise havoc with the ice cream."

Campolo said some people have suggested separating evangelical promotion from social action.

"I've got news for you - all of my social action is evangelical," he said. "I don't think you can separate the two. That's what's been wrong with the church, we have been separating evangelism from social action, and now we're going to really make it a doctrine of the church with the help of the U.S. government."

"For what? We'll sell our soul for a bowl of pottage. When will you realize that the reason faith-based programs work is because they're faith-based? And if you separate the faith from the rest of the program it'll go down the tubes."

To critics who say there's money in the government, Campolo said there is money in the church.

"We don't need their lousy money," he said. "We really don't."

Campolo said Jesus calls Christians to surrender their all to the work of the kingdom.

"Responding to the needs of the poor is a socially transforming experience," he said. "It's a psychologically transforming experience and most important it is a spiritually transforming experience."

Campolo alluded to Southern Baptists' well-documented fight over the inerrancy of Scripture.

"Are you going to do what it tells you now that it's inerrant?" he asked.

He also said the Southern Baptist Convention makes sure people believe all the right things.

"Jesus never said go into all the world and make believers out of everyone," he said. "Is there a difference between a disciple and a believer? You bet your life there is. A disciple is someone who follows the directives of the master and lives them out."

Campolo said American churches spend too much money on themselves.

"Billions of dollars to build buildings to honor somebody who says I don't dwell in temples made with hands," he said. "I don't know how your theology works, but if Jesus has a choice between stained glass windows and feeding starving kids in Haiti, I have a feeling he'd choose the starving kids in Haiti."

"So we need to begin to ask as we make up our church budgets what our missionary commitments are. What are our missionary commitments to the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden?"

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Proposed law would remove ban on electioneering by churches

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A longstanding IRS rule that churches and other non-profit organizations that are exempt from paying taxes may not engage in partisan politics, such as endorsing candidates, would be removed from the tax code if a bill pending in Congress becomes law.

A bill now in a U.S. House committee would allow churches to spend as much as 20 percent of their budget on partisan politics without risking loss of their tax-exempt status.

Supporters of the change say the current law infringes churches' right to freedom of speech. Opponents say removing the limits would unnecessarily politicize America's pulpits.

Meanwhile, a new poll shows that Americans overwhelmingly believe clergy should refrain from endorsing political candidates.

House Resolution 2357 is called the "Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act". Sponsored by Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.), it would remove a prohibition -- in place since 1954 -- that prevents churches and other non-profit groups organized under section 501(c)3 of the Internal Revenue Service code from engaging in partisan politics while maintaining their freedom from being taxed.

"For me, its a First Amendment issue," Jones told the Raleigh, N.C., News and Observer newspaper. "Prior to 1954, a rabbi, priest, or minister could say anything they wanted to say. This is simply trying to return free speech to churches and synagogues."

Opponents of the bill say current laws don't prevent tax-exempt charities from speaking out on political issues. Churches and ministers can already address social and moral issues -- such as opposition to lotteries, gay rights and abortion -- as long as they don't endorse candidates.

"This bill isn't about free speech; it's about hardball politics," said Barry Lynn, director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "Pat Robertson and his friends are desperately trying to forge churches into a political machine, and this bill allows them to get away with it."

Currently, if a church endorses a political party or a particular candidate, then it risks losing its tax-exempt status. The only known case of that happening came in 1995, however. That's when the IRS revoked the tax-exempt status of The Church at Pierce Creek, near Binghamton, N.Y., as the result of a 1992 newspaper advertisement the church purchased. The ad told voters it was wrong to vote for Bill Clinton for president.

In recent years, the IRS has conducted several investigations into other churches and religious organizations that appeared to endorse candidates or political parties.

The Washington Post quoted Jones as saying conservative churches are most likely to be investigated, producing what he termed a "chilling effect" on their freedom of political speech.

Americans United, however, claims the IRS is enforcing the tax code fairly. "I know of no evidence whatsoever that the IRS has singled out conservative churches for penalties," Lynn said.

Lynn noted that prominent African-American pastor Floyd Flake got into hot water after endorsing Al Gore's presidential campaign from a New York pulpit in 2000.

"IRS agents came to the church for a visit," Lynn said. "To avoid penalties, Flake signed a document promising to follow federal tax law more carefully in the future."

Lynn said the only reason the Pierce Creek congregation lost its tax exemption for electioneering is that the pastor told the IRS that he had used church funds to take out candidate advertisements in the newspaper and he intended to continue to do so. Federal courts later upheld the revocation.

Language of the new bill was drafted by Colby May, a lawyer for the American Center for Law and Justice. The ACLJ was founded by Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson.

The coalition recently lost its own battle to maintain its tax-exempt status with the IRS, meaning donations to the group are no longer tax-deductible. In Jan., Rep. Jones appeared on Robertson's "700 Club" television program to promote the bill. Robertson urged viewers to contact House Ways and Means Committee chair Bill Thomas (R-Calif.) and ask him to schedule a hearing for the bill as soon as possible.

Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Conventions Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, supports the Jones legislation. "We don't think the government should be telling churches what to do," he told the Raleigh newspaper. "It's for us to decide, not the government."

While he believes churches should have the right to endorse candidates, however, Land added, "We will continue to urge our churches not to do it." Overt partisan politicking is "not an appropriate role for the church," he said.

Former Southern Baptist Convention president Ed Young, whose Second Baptist Church of Houston endured its own four-year investigation by the IRS, also endorsed the change in comments reported by the New York Times. "

"I just think the religious entities of America need to keep their prophetic voice," Young said. "And you lose that if you send money to politicians or openly support them during an election season."

Jones' bill has 113 co-sponsors in the House -- all but four of them are Republicans. Though Jones has said he hopes the proposal will receive a hearing in May, sources say it has not yet been scheduled for any hearing.

The bill comes at a time when a major new poll shows that Americans, by a three-to-one majority, oppose religious groups involving themselves directly in partisan politics.

On March 20, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life announced the results of a poll on the attitudes of Americans toward religion and politics. The poll found that 70 percent of respondents were opposed to clergy endorsing political candidates, while 22 percent supported the idea. In addition, majorities of all of the demographic groups polled opposed the idea -- white mainline Protestants, African-American Protestants, Catholics, and those of other faiths or no faith at all. Even white evangelicals -- the most supportive group of church endorsements of political candidates -- still opposed the idea 61 percent to 31 percent.

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