



Associated Baptist Press

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May 30, 2002

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Nashville, Tennessee

JUN 07 2002

(02-46)

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Panel pondering role of Baptist newspaper

By Lacy Elwood

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (ABP) -- Is the Baptist state paper a newspaper, or is it primarily for promotion?

That's the question before an ad hoc panel studying the future role of the Illinois Baptist, the journal of the Illinois Baptist State Association.

The committee, consisting of five pastors, formed after the newspaper reported in January that a former Southern Illinois pastor had been charged with two counts of criminal sexual assault involving teenage girls.

The article, carried on page one, prompted numerous letters to the editor both criticizing the paper for running the story and defending the editor's decision.

Calling the article a "very sensitive issue," panel chair Richard VanCleave said the committee's goal is to "set up guidelines so it doesn't happen again."

"We are trying to decide on what the Illinois Baptist is supposed to be; a strict, free press where the editor has free reign, or a newspaper that deals more with IBSA's missions and goals," VanCleave, the pastor of Lynwood Baptist Church in Oswego, said.

Larry Richmond, IBSA president, said he believes the paper needs to become more of a communication tool for the state association.

"It would be great if the newspaper could handle both substantive news of the IBSA and articles that would encourage churches and promote our mission," Richmond said. "In the past year or two, it seems the paper has gotten away from that."

Richmond said the purpose statement of IBSA focuses on starting new churches and supporting the churches already in existence.

The IBSA constitution contains a statement that says, "The Illinois Baptist shall be the official newspaper of the association and as such, shall never be construed as the exclusive instrument of any special group, individual, body or committee within the association."

The committee has completed a tentative mission statement for the newspaper and is currently working to create guidelines for the paper. VanCleave said the committee will discuss these guidelines and the possible creation of an advisory board to the paper in an upcoming conference call in June.

VanCleave said the committee does not want to "micromanage" the paper, but does want to set up

some rules for the editor, who works under the IBSA's executive director.

"There is no defining policy that gives direction to the editor of what the Illinois Baptist should be," Richmond said. "The content has been determined by the editor in the past because of a lack of guiding policy. We want to give him some direction as to what we [IBSA] think will most benefit churches."

In a May 15 Illinois Baptist article, the committee said the role of an advisory board would be to give feedback to the editor about published articles. The committee also said the advisory board would not have any veto power over what articles should be printed.

Richmond said the intent of an advisory board would be to give the editor a place to go to for advice.

"Right now, we have one person making the decisions," Richmond said. "He doesn't have any group to bounce ideas off of or seek advice from on relevant issues."

The new mission statement of the paper includes supporting IBSA's mission and publishing "timely, objective and accurate accounts of news and events of interest to Southern Baptists, with emphasis on Illinois Baptist concerns."

VanCleave said the committee read other state Baptist newspapers and researched their policies. He said he found the Illinois Baptist to "be one of the best."

The committee includes VanCleave; Bruce Cullers, pastor of First Baptist of Eldorado; Brian Fuller, pastor of Towerview Baptist of Belleville; Dwight McDaniel, pastor of Shiloh Baptist in Bridgeport; and Allen Speers, pastor of First Baptist of Golconda.

Michael Leathers, who currently serves as editor of the Illinois Baptist, declined to comment on the record, referring questions to members of the study committee.

The committee is scheduled to bring its recommendations about the future role of the 95-year-old paper at the IBSA board meeting in September. VanCleave said the board would in turn present the panel's proposal to IBSA members at their annual meeting in November.

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-- Lacy Elwood, a student at Baylor University, is ABP's summer intern.-30-

Supreme Court accepts cross-burning case

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that symbolic burning of the American flag is free speech that is protected by the Constitution. But what about burning the cross?

The high court is about to take on that question. Justices agreed May 28 to review a ruling by Virginia's top court finding unconstitutional the state's 50-year-old ban on cross burning intended to frighten or intimidate.

The Virginia court cited a 1992 U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down a law in Minnesota that banned cross burning carried out "on the basis of race, color, creed, religion or gender."

State Supreme Courts in Maryland, New Jersey and South Carolina have also struck down laws banning cross burning, saying they limit speech on the basis of its content, which violates the free-speech clause in the First Amendment.

But other laws banning speech that intimidates, terrorizes or causes other harm have been upheld. Virginia's lawyers argue that since the state's ban doesn't make specific reference to religion or race, the 1992 ruling doesn't apply.

Three men were convicted in two separate 1998 incidents under the Virginia law. In one, Pennsylvania Ku Klux Klansman Barry Elton Black presided over the burning of a 30-foot cross in a field -- visible to neighbors and a state highway -- in Carroll County, Va. In the other case, Richard Elliott and Jonathan O'Mara burned a cross on a part of Elliott's Virginia Beach property located 20 feet from the home of an African-American neighbor.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Virginia supported the men who were convicted under the cross-burning law. An ACLU representative told the Washington Post that he considered the burning of a cross "an act with a message, and because it has a message it is protected under the First Amendment."

A decision in the case, Virginia vs. Black, isn't expected before next year.

Courts in Florida, Washington and California have upheld anti-cross-burning laws. Virginia's attorney general and attorneys general from several other states -- including Georgia, Missouri, and Oklahoma -- asked the Supreme Court to rectify the discrepancy between the various states.

The high court often agrees to hear cases where courts in different states have ruled oppositely on similar laws, in order to clarify the issue. However, the justices rarely use such cases to break new ground on First Amendment questions.

In the event that the Supreme Court rules against Virginia, the state's legislature and governor have already passed and signed into law a back-up provision that bans the burning of any object with the intent to intimidate or threaten. The ACLU has said it probably wouldn't oppose that law.

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Pastors top \$40,000 in annual pay, Barna says

By Bob Allen

VENTURA, Calif. (ABP) -- For the first time, the average compensation for Protestant pastors is above \$40,000 a year, according to a survey by the Barna Research Group of Ventura, Calif.

Median pastoral incomes have grown 25 percent over the last decade, to \$40,077, about keeping pace with inflation, Barna said. The pastoral compensation package represents 31 percent of the average Protestant church's annual operating budget, a proportion that has remained relatively constant since the mid-1990s.

Seminary-educated pastors on the average receive 38 percent more than senior pastors without seminary. Three out of five senior pastors have seminary degrees.

Baptist churches -- which include more than 20 different sects and constitute about a fourth of all U.S. Protestants -- pay their pastors \$300 a year more than the national average.

Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, meanwhile, pay their churches the least, about 16 percent below the national norm.

The largest gap exists between pastors of urban and suburban churches and those in rural congregations. City and suburban pastors earn \$45,000 annually, compared to \$33,000 for their rural peers.

Church size is another factor. Churches with average weekly attendance under 100 -- the group that represents most Protestant congregations -- pay their pastors \$31,613 annually. Pastors of churches attracting between 100 and 250 adults get 50 percent more, \$47,368. Churches with 251 or more in attendance pay an average of \$58,333.

Barna said pastors are paid less than other well-educated professionals. "Like most professionals, pastors work long hours, carry heavy responsibility and have extensive education," he said. "It's nice to see the average wage finally break the \$40,000 ceiling. Given the compensation levels received by other

professionals, we owe pastors a special word of gratitude for their sacrificial lifestyle."

The data comes from telephone interviews with 601 randomly selected senior pastors or Protestant churches in May. Margin of error is 3 percent.

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