



# Associated Baptist Press

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## IN THIS ISSUE:

- Vines doesn't speak for all Baptists, Alliance leader tells Muslim group
- Baptist Peace Fellowship gears up for annual camp
- Illinois Baptist editor steps down suddenly
- Missouri Baptist budget proposal cuts funding for five agencies

## Vines doesn't speak for all Baptists, Alliance leader tells Muslim group

By ABP staff

BALTIMORE (ABP) -- Not all Baptists share Jerry Vines' dim view of the Muslim faith, Alliance of Baptists leader Stan Hastey told an interfaith gathering sponsored by an Islamic organization July 5.

Vines, a past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, made headlines in June when he preached a sermon describing Mohammed as a "demon-possessed pedophile" and proclaiming that "Allah is not Jehovah."

"Jehovah's not going to turn you into a terrorist that'll try to bomb people and takes the lives of thousands and thousands of people," Vines told a supportive crowd at the SBC pastors' conference June 10.

In greetings to an interfaith dinner in Baltimore sponsored by the Islamic Circle of North America, Hastey labeled Vines' comments "vile" and said they "demean you and disgrace us."

"Tonight I come to offer the unequivocal assurance that many Baptists in this nation and beyond repudiate without qualifications what Jerry Vines said, that we are ashamed at what he said, and that we humbly apologize," Hastey said.

Hastey thanked Islamic leaders for the invitation to bring greetings, terming it a "gracious acknowledgment" that not all Baptists share Vines' views.

Hastey accepted the invitation on behalf of Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America and represented both organizations at the Baltimore event.

Sehested said the invitation came after a leader of the Muslim organization saw a newly published resource titled "Peace Primer: Quotes from Christian and Islamic Scripture and Tradition," published jointly by the Charlotte, N.C., -based BPFNA and the Muslim Peace Fellowship.

The 44-page pamphlet is a collection of quotes on justice and peace from the Koran and the Bible, as well as other Christian and Islamic sources. The publication's goal is "to allow Christians and Muslims to listen to each other's scripture and tradition," said LeDayne McLeese Polaski, the Baptist Peace Fellowship's managing director.

The primer is just one of a series of projects involving the BPFNA and the Muslim Peace Fellowship. Most were initiated before last September's terrorist attacks killed Americans in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.

In May the two groups co-sponsored a workshop in Dearborn, Mich., on "Christians and Muslims exploring conflict transformation." Participants examined models of nonviolence within Islam and difficulties Islamic cultures have in dealings with the West.

"The military engages in war games to train soldiers in how to analyze and think on the battlefield," said Dan Buttry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dearborn, who helped organize the event. "We utilize peace games to train people how to analyze and think and act for peace amid conflict situations."

Workshops examined teachings on peacemaking in the Bible and Koran, complexities of conflicts involving Muslims and Christians and the importance of defining terms like "crusade," "jihad" and "terrorism."

The two groups plan to expand training not only in North America, but also in other places where Muslims and Christians are in conflict.

"There are over a dozen places around the world where either Muslims or Christians were killed in the last month in some form of Muslim-Christian conflict," said Mas'ood Cajee, a Muslim Peace Fellowship workshop facilitator. "That is a sobering fact of our world and a challenge to our conscience."

A second workshop is scheduled for October. In each location, local Baptist churches and mosques serve as co-hosts.

In his comments to the Islamic Circle of North America, Hastey said such efforts are "an antidote to the poison some blasphemously spew out in God's name in our time."

Despite their differences, Hastey said, Muslims and Christians share both a "common humanity" and a "common destiny, a destiny we are called to shape together with God's help."

"That destiny calls us to wage peace, not violence, be such violence in word or deed," Hastey said.

He closed with a quote by Martin Luther King: "The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy. Instead of diminishing evil, it multiplies it. ... Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already void of stars."

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## **Baptist Peace Fellowship gears up for annual camp**

By Lacy Elwood

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (ABP) -- Many Christians go to summer church camps to share in worship, study the Bible and to sing and listen to songs. But one such gathering adds a special twist.

In its 17th year, this year's Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America Summer Conference will bring children and adults together in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, July 22-27 for a week of Bible study, preaching and workshops, all devoted to peace and justice.

Founded in 1984, the BPFNA has both Southern Baptist and American Baptist roots, said LeDayne McLeese Polaski, managing director of the organization now based in Charlotte, N.C. A group of Southern Baptists that was publishing the "Baptist Peacemaker" journal decided to merge with the American Baptist Peace Fellowship, she said. "Now we have representatives from Baptist conventions throughout Canada, the United States, Mexico and Puerto Rico," Polaski said.

With a membership of 1,700 and a newsletter readership of 7,000, the BPFNA exists to network individuals and churches interested in peacemaking and to teach people how to address peace-and-justice issues locally, nationally and around the world.

"We want to let people know that if they're concerned with peace and justice, they're not the only ones," Polaski said. "Peacemaking is an essential part of being Christian. It's part of what we're all called to do."

The Fellowship sponsors a number of initiatives throughout the year, but the largest by far is the annual gathering commonly described by attendees simply as "peace camp."

This year's summer conference -- described on a Web page as "part conference, part revival" -- is scheduled on the campus of Acadia University in the Canadian Atlantic Province of Nova Scotia. The featured preacher is Barry Morrison, a teacher of preaching and worship at Acadia Divinity College. Jerene Broadway, an artist and minister from San Francisco, will lead Bible studies. Michael Hawn, associate professor of church music at Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology, is the featured musician.

Steve Hammond, co-pastor of Peace Community Church in Oberlin, Ohio, said peace camp brings together people "from all walks of life," especially by mixing children and adults in activities.

Polaski said the conference became an intergenerational event after participants at the first conference brought their children along.

Hammond's children are some of those attending the annual event with their parents.

"Our kids have really appreciated the contact with the older members of the fellowship," Hammond said. "They've been able to form good relationships with people of all ages and have learned that there is a wider group of people out there working for peace."

An extra bonus is added into this year's conference, Polaski said, in the form of a history lesson.

"We try to focus on the peace and justice history of the place we hold the conference," Polaski said. "This year we're focusing on displaced people. Nova Scotia is the place where the Acadians were pushed out of Canada, where the British loyalists came after the American Revolution and where slaves escaping the United States fled. It's an interesting history of welcoming people and people not being welcomed elsewhere."

For some participants, Polaski said, the camp is a learning experience. For others, it provides sustenance to get through another year of promoting peace.

Hammond said the fellowship has given him and his church opportunities to grow.

"The network of people has been invaluable," Hammond said. "It's important for our church to be involved with something bigger. The people are inspiring and resonate with my own spirituality."

For Polaski, her involvement in the camp has helped her to focus her efforts.

"It can be so overwhelming to look at the world and see everything that goes wrong," Polaski said. "This reminds me of all the people who do things that help change the world. Peace camp is just a great time to be with people who can teach me, give me ideas and inspire me."

## Illinois Baptist editor steps down suddenly

By Bob Allen

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. (ABP) -- A Baptist state newspaper editor in Illinois has resigned in what his supervisor describes as a mutual agreement that it's time for him to "move on in his ministry and career."

Michael Leathers had been editor of the Illinois Baptist newspaper since November 1999. Glen Akins, interim executive director of the Illinois Baptist State Association, announced that Leathers had stepped down June 12. The biweekly newspaper ran a story about the decision in its June 26 issue.

Leathers won awards for both design and writing during his 19-month tenure, but became embroiled in controversy early this year after running a front-page story about a former Illinois pastor being charged with criminal sex assault for allegedly molesting two teenage girls.

Reaction to the story prompted formation of a five-member ad hoc committee of the state association's board of directors to study the role of the Baptist newspaper. The committee, which is still active, has drafted a working mission statement for the Illinois Baptist and considered drawing up guidelines for the editor.

The committee has also suggested the establishment of an advisory board to give the editor feedback about the paper's content, but not to have veto power over articles prior to publication. The committee's chairman, however, has been quoted as saying a goal of the process is to ensure that reporting like the sex-abuse story "doesn't happen again."

Leathers wrote a story in the Jan. 9 issue reporting the arrest of Leslie M. Mason, 34, former pastor of Olney Southern Baptist Church in southern Illinois. Court documents charged Mason with having sexual intercourse with two minor girls, both at least 13 years old at the time the acts occurred, at the church parsonage on a series of occasions between 1994 and 1999.

Mason has pleaded not guilty to the charges and at last word was awaiting trial.

The story, which had been previously reported in secular news media, prompted a barrage of letters to the editor both critical and supportive of Leathers' editorial judgment. Critics said the story had no place in a religious newspaper. Some compared the Illinois Baptist to the National Enquirer and said that Leathers should resign. Other letters, however, defended Leathers, saying that a Baptist newspaper has a responsibility to report the bad news as well as the good.

Even those critical of the sex-crime story complimented Leathers for his overall work. A former lifestyle editor at a daily newspaper, Leathers traveled to all corners of Illinois to cover and write news and feature stories. The Baptist Communicators Association recognized his work in 2001 for best newspaper redesign and this year for two writing awards in its annual Wilmer C. Fields competition.

"There's no question that the Illinois Baptist is a better news journal because Michael was here, but it is time to build on the changes and improvements that came during Michael's tenure as editor," Akins said in his statement to the Illinois Baptist. "This is one of those situations where God's will and calling was for a man with certain skills and gifts to serve in a specific position for a specific term rather than permanently."

The article said Akins believes Leathers will be happier in a position "reflective of Leathers' professional journalism style of being hard hitting and direct, and one that doesn't require the same high degree of spiritual sensitivity."

"The Lord has a place of service for Michael where he can be more fulfilled and challenged while also making a big spiritual difference," Akins said, citing reports of anti-Christian bias in the secular media.

"Obviously, the secular press and media need the impact and influence of Christians like Michael Leathers," Akins said. "We know he can have a godly impact serving the Lord in the secular press. We speak for all Illinois Baptist in wishing him the best and praying for him as he serves the Lord in a new direction."

Contacted at his home by a reporter, Leathers confirmed the decision was mutual. "I enjoyed my time at the Illinois Baptist," he said. "I was proud of what we were able to achieve, but I'm looking forward to exploring some new possibilities."

Leathers declined further comment.

The ad hoc committee studying the Illinois Baptist's role is scheduled to meet again in September. A tentative mission statement unveiled in May said the paper should remain a news publication rather than be devoted to just public relations.

"The Illinois Baptist will support IBSA's mission -- to assist in establishing and developing effective Baptist churches in their context -- by applying the highest degree of professional journalistic ethics, and using truth and justice as a minimum standard. This work shall not be frustrated, inhibited nor restrained by anything except a sense of Christian responsibility," the statement said in part.

The newspaper is a member of the Association of State Baptist Papers, which also has a statement of principles that says in part: "Our publications exist to provide Baptists with accurate, timely and relevant information, balanced interpretation, and insightful and courageous editorials, thereby inspiring them and involving them in Baptist life."

"Integrity is a guiding principle for Baptist journalists," another section of the ASBP principle statement says. "We strive to seek and report the truth. We strive to be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information. Accuracy and balance will characterize our work. We will guard against bias and distortion. We will clearly label opinion and commentary. We will champion the right of free speech. As part of our commitment to these ideals, we will strive to secure the resources necessary to accomplish our work."

The Illinois Baptist will continue production under a yet-unnamed interim editor, according to the June 26 article.

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## **Missouri Baptist budget proposal cuts funding for five agencies**

By Vicki Brown

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- After voting last year to escrow funds to punish five agencies for moving to self-perpetuating trustee boards, the Missouri Baptist Convention this fall will consider a budget that removes the embattled entities entirely.

The MBC executive board voted 30-16 on July 9 to amend a draft budget by eliminating funding from both the Cooperative Program unified budget and a supplementary state missions offering for The Baptist Home, Missouri Baptist Foundation, Missouri Baptist College, Windermere conference center and the newspaper Word&Way.

Kevin Smith, pastor of Highview Baptist Church of Chillicothe, Mo., proposed the amendment, he said, for three reasons.

One was to address the concern over escrowed funds. "Churches want the money they give to be put to work in ministry," he said.

Second, he said, reallocating the escrowed funds would "reward" other agencies that have stayed under convention control. Finally, he said, transferring money earmarked for Word&Way would help The Pathway, a new "official" journal of the MBC approved by the executive board in April, to get off the ground.

One board member opposing the change, however, said it would undermine efforts to reconcile with the five agencies. While reporting little progress in those efforts, Robert Collins predicted that removing the funding altogether "will sever those relationships, and that will be the end of that."

As amended, next year's MBC budget would shift funding for The Baptist Home to the Missouri Baptist Children's Home. Funds for the Foundation and Windermere would be channeled to a Strategic Initiatives Fund and earmarked for church planting.

With the amendment, the executive board voted 31-15 to adopt the budget.

By common consent, the board added an asterisk beside the changed line items referring to a notation at the bottom "until such time as they return to us."

Collins, a director of missions in West Central Baptist Association, said removing allocations for The Baptist Home and Missouri Baptist College from the Rheubin L. South Missouri Mission Offering would send "mixed signals" in promoting state missions.

Kenny Qualls, first vice president of the convention, responded, "It sent mixed signals when the five institutions chose to be become self-perpetuating." He said the board was "not acting, just reacting" to those actions.

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-- Vicki Brown is a news writer for Word&Way.

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