



# Associated Baptist Press

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## Missouri Baptists ask court to settle leadership dispute

By Bob Allen

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- The Missouri Baptist Convention took five of its agencies to court Aug. 13, filing a 51-page petition for declaratory judgment in Cole County Circuit Court.

The petition asks the court to review corporate charters of the agencies and determine if trustees acted within their legal rights when they voted to remove themselves from convention control.

The petition names as defendants The Baptist Home in Ironton, Missouri Baptist College in St. Louis, Windermere Baptist Conference Center in Camden County, and, the Missouri Baptist Foundation and Word and Way in Jefferson City. It claims all five entities "broke trust with Missouri Baptists" by filing amended charters and declaring themselves autonomous, self-electing boards, all without approval of the convention or its executive board.

The petition also names Secretary of State Matt Blunt, who turned down a request by MBC officials to strike down the amended charters.

Joining the Missouri Baptist executive board in the petition are the Missouri Baptist Convention, which is unincorporated, and five representative Missouri churches: First Baptist churches of Arnold, Bethany and Branson; Concord Baptist Church of Jefferson City; Oakwood Baptist Church of Kansas City and Springhill Baptist Church of Springfield.

The petition does not seek monetary reward from any individuals, but asks for declaratory judgment, alleges breach of contract petitions for temporary, preliminary and permanent injunction against the defendants.

The petition says the agencies, with assets totaling \$200 million, "amended their charters in order to steal themselves away from convention governance." It cites the Missouri Baptist Convention constitution, which says that all charter changes for convention agencies must be approved by the convention upon recommendation by the executive board and that the convention shall elect all agency trustees.

"This is not a lawsuit seeking money for personal injury or personal wrongdoing," MBC president Bob Curtis wrote in a letter to Missouri Baptist pastors announcing the court action. "We are asking a judge

to read the corporate documents and to declare what the law is: were the amendments lawful or unlawful? Do Missouri Baptists still have the right to elect trustees, based on former charters, or not?"

Representatives of the five convention agencies have defended their actions, saying they were taken in part to shield the respective organizations, but mainly for fiduciary and liability concerns.

The Missouri Baptist Convention voted last fall to hold about \$1.2 million in convention funding earmarked for the five agencies in escrow, pending settlement of the leadership dispute. Messengers also approved a separate motion authorizing the convention's executive board "to take any and all steps necessary" to restore the agencies to their former relationship with the state convention.

In a prepared question-and-answer fact sheet, Curtis said MBC leaders have tried for nearly a year to persuade the five corporate boards to rescind their actions or to submit to binding arbitration.

Curtis said he doesn't believe the petition violates the Bible's teaching that Christians ought not to take one another to court, citing author Larry Burkett, who writes that Christian corporations have a responsibility to obey civil authorities.

Dwight Cole, an attorney for a St. Louis law firm representing three of the five plaintiff agencies, said he hadn't seen the petition and declined to comment before reviewing it.

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## **CBF leader offered to resign over plagiarism controversy**

By Bob Allen

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- An official of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship says she offered to resign after unknowingly plagiarizing a sermon at a national meeting this summer.

Reba Cobb, the second-highest-ranking executive at the Atlanta-based CBF, has said previously that she relied on a research assistant and didn't know that a sermon she preached at a Baptist Women in Ministry meeting June 27 had been copied, without attribution, from a published sermon by a United Methodist minister.

According to an Aug. 10 column in the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Cobb recently told religion writer Jim Jones she offered to resign from her position as resource-center coordinator but received strong backing from Daniel Vestal, the organization's coordinator.

"I'm so disappointed with myself," Cobb told Jones. "My love and my heart is the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist Women in Ministry. For me to do anything to hurt those two organizations is painful to me."

Cobb, a founding member of Baptist Women in Ministry, was the featured preacher at the group's annual breakfast, held in conjunction with the CBF General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas.

Baptist Press first reported similarities between Cobb's sermon and a message with the same title and text written in 1979 by David Owen, a Methodist minister in Indianapolis.

Cobb told the Star-Telegram that she normally writes her own sermons, but pressure from planning the CBF annual gathering caused her to seek help from a research assistant.

"I accept full responsibility for it," Cobb said. "I stood up there and preached it."

Cobb said she called and apologized to the minister who wrote the sermon. "He is a very gracious man," she said.

Vestal confirmed in an interview that Cobb offered to step down "as soon as she discovered what had happened." He said she remained "persistent" in that offer until leaving for a three-week vacation after the General Assembly.

Vestal issued a statement in July acknowledging that Cobb made a "mistake" but had "accepted her responsibility and admitted an error in judgment."

"I have every confidence in Reba," Vestal said. "She is a person of impeccable integrity with a great gift of leadership. She is a valued asset and I look forward to her continued ministry in CBF."

Asked why he didn't include in his initial statement the fact that Cobb had offered to resign, Vestal said he considered the relationship between a worker and her supervisor confidential.

"I didn't feel it was necessary to tell everything -- all the dynamics -- that was going on," he said.

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## **BGCT gains approval as chaplain-endorsing body**

By Ferrell Foster

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Armed Forces Chaplaincy Board has approved the Baptist General Convention of Texas as a "recognized endorsing agency" for military chaplains. As a result, BGCT is poised to begin endorsing chaplains for the first time.

The board unanimously approved the state Baptist convention in its regular July 24 meeting, said Bobby Smith, director of the BGCT's Office of Chaplaincy Relations.

Since other federal agencies and non-government entities typically follow the Department of Defense's lead, Smith said they are expected to recognize BGCT as an endorsing agency, as well.

Thirty-one people already have completed the necessary paperwork in order to be considered for endorsement by the BGCT when its Chaplaincy Endorsement Board meets in August or September, Smith said. Other applications are in process.

Smith said the BGCT would accept chaplains already endorsed by a "sister Baptist body" [the Southern Baptist Convention] and not require them to go through a new application process.

Smith listed three reasons why the BGCT desired to begin endorsing chaplains.

"We want to offer people an up-close and personal, relationship-based endorsement," he said, the kind of relationship that doesn't exist with large endorsement agencies. "We want to develop a pastoral ministry for chaplains based on time together."

Second, there are chaplains "who do not wish to sign" the 2000 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, which is now required by SBC North American Mission Board.

Third, NAMB will not endorse women chaplains who have been ordained. That is important, Smith said, because, "No person can serve as a chaplain for a United States government organization without being ordained."

Three federal agencies utilize ordained chaplains -- the Department of Defense, the Federal Bureau of Prisons and the Veterans Administration, Smith said. Many other institutions have the same ordination requirement.

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## Shorter College, state convention divided over trustee selection

By John Pierce

ROME, Ga. (ABP) -- Leaders of the Georgia Baptist Convention and Shorter College are at odds over who controls the selection of trustees at the small liberal-arts college in Rome, Ga.

College trustees adopted a bylaw change May 31 requiring all future trustees to be approved by the current board prior to election by GBC messengers. Convention leaders say that is unacceptable and that the action should be rescinded.

Georgia Baptist funds budgeted for the college have been held in escrow since January, when convention leaders learned that trustees had quietly shifted control of the college to a self-perpetuating board last fall. Trustees later reversed that decision and agreed to dialogue with convention leaders.

Those talks have now stalled, however, over sharp disagreement about the trustee-selection process. The \$1.3 million annual budget allocation and an additional \$8 million in capital-improvement funds designated for the college are still being withheld.

Shorter President Ed Schrader insists that the college desires a close relationship with Georgia Baptists but must have more control over trustee selection to prevent accreditation problems. GBC Executive Director Robert White disagrees.

"Since 1959, Shorter's charter has specifically declared that all of Shorter's trustees will be elected by the Georgia Baptist Convention," White wrote in a lengthy letter mailed to pastors in July and reprinted in the Aug. 1 issue of *The Christian Index*.

Shorter's vice president for development countered. "We've not taken that away," said Ron Dempsey. "Shorter just feels like it needs a pretty significant say in who serves on our trustee board."

White said that he and other convention leaders spoke with representatives from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and were assured the accrediting agency does not "become involved in internal affairs such as how trustees are selected."

But Schrader, in a written statement released to *Baptists Today*, said trustees amended the bylaws "in response to direct communication from the SACS Accreditation Reaffirmation Committee regarding specific accreditation criteria."

Schrader said the review committee specifically asked Shorter to "demonstrate that its bylaws and other legal documents ensure the independence of the board."

White told *Baptists Today* that GBC leaders don't believe the action taken by the college is required by SACS. "We think behind the whole thing is a desire among some leadership at Shorter to separate from the convention," he said.

Seminaries owned by the Southern Baptist Convention and some Baptist-related colleges underwent significant change in recent years after critics who perceived the schools as "too liberal" gained operational control through political processes governing the selection of trustees.

Schrader has avoided talk of Baptist politics in his public statements, keeping the focus on accreditation issues.

In his open letter, however, White described a conversation with Schrader last winter about those concerns. White recalled the college president's account of being visited by a Baptist minister last fall who, according to White, suggested some names as possible trustees and "talked about other matters that concerned him regarding the faithfulness of Shorter College's leadership and faculty to Baptist heritage, faith and practice."

White said Schrader has used that isolated incident to imply that the GBC is "engaged in undue pressure, attempting to improperly influence the board of trustees of Shorter."

Dempsey said the college is indeed concerned about the SACS requirement that trustees be free from undue pressure from outside the board. He said GBC leaders broke a long tradition last November by electing trustees to the Shorter board that had not been discussed with college officials.

"Our concern is that the trustees serve in the best interest of Shorter," said Dempsey. "When the convention appoints people we have not had the opportunity to talk with or cultivate -- where do their loyalties lie?"

Dempsey added that the minister's visit to Schrader is not as isolated as White has suggested. He said the minister serves on the GBC nominating committee and some of the names he mentioned to the president were placed on the trustee board last fall without consultation with school officials.

White said it is the "prerogative of the chairman of the nominating committee" as to whether to discuss with the institution's leaders those being recommended to the convention as trustees.

In Shorter's case, White said four of the seven trustees last year came from a list of candidates recommended by the college. The other three were not, he added, but they "were not new names" that Shorter officials had not heard mentioned before.

"It is not true to say [Georgia Baptist] institutions have always had relationships with trustees before they serve," White said. He added that the committee on nominations has long nominated and the convention elected trustees without relationship to a particular agency or institution but are persons who "have demonstrated that they are good Georgia Baptists."

Dempsey said the real issue for Shorter and SACS is whether pressure is being brought on the college by an external body. The minister's visit and the ensuing trustee appointments are just part of the evidence, he said, showing that pressure is indeed coming from the GBC.

He listed the convention's decision to withhold funds designated for the college and White's attempts to influence trustee decisions as other examples of "undue pressure."

"Every time an issue would come up," Dempsey said, "Bob White would shoot off a letter to our trustees asking them to vote the GBC way."

White said he communicated with Shorter's trustees only after the crisis began earlier this year and that he did so out of concern that they had "received one side of the issue and should be informed."

He also denied the convention has attempted to interfere with the freedom of elected trustee boards.

"The (GBC) has strictly adhered to the practice of electing good and qualified trustees and then allowing them to serve on the board of trustees without any interference or pressure from the convention," White said in his letter to pastors.

White said the GBC constitution calls for trustees to be nominated by the committee on nominations and elected by messengers to the annual convention meeting. He said that process has not changed, regardless of actions by the Shorter trustees.

"We are not going to act outside of our governing body just because Shorter has changed a bylaw," said White.

Come November, White said, Shorter's trustees "will be elected just as they have for 43 years."

The growing divide over trustee selection makes it unlikely that the relationship between the college and the convention will remain as close as it has been since Shorter, founded as a Baptist college in 1873, turned to the convention for financial help in 1959.

Dempsey said the convention's withholding of funds already "puts us in a revised relationship with them." He said the college has structured its current budget "without any expectation of receiving GBC money" which previously comprised about 5 percent of the budget.

Dempsey said the convention should "either give us the money or revise the relationship formally, which means changing the charter."

White said the convention does not plan any legal challenge to the college's actions. However, he said the convention's position is that "just because Shorter changed their bylaws doesn't change the way the GBC does business."

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## **Chris Rice writes songs for 'the other' listener**

By Greg Warner

FRANKLIN, Tenn. (ABP) -- Chris Rice is the Christian songwriter for the other guy -- the guy who questions God and cringes at the casual way religious people talk about holy things.

"I write a lot of times as if I'm not a believer, because I want to free people to ask questions," he explained in a rare interview with FaithWorks magazine. "I want my music to make sense to those who doubt it and draw them toward faith."

"When I was growing up in high school, almost every youth speaker ... would say things like 'If you didn't feel the presence of God here tonight, there's something wrong with you.' That's a common phrase in Christian circles. I hear those phrases, and I want to set people free who don't experience it that way."

Rice, Dove's Male Vocalist of the Year in 1999, has learned to live with a questioning heart.

"David says in Psalm 59 that you can't always find him when you want him. Sure, you can see him in creation. ... But as far as that connection with him, what is that? I've never felt his presence. If you mean goose bumps, I get that at a movie or hearing a great song, and it doesn't have to be about God."

"People say, 'I got goose bumps. God was really here.' I say, 'People, be real and look at what you're saying!'"

"Maybe they use [those phrases] poetically. But maybe because they use them so much, people hear them literally, as if they really did hear God, when maybe they just heard their burrito from the day before."

Rice might be the most unlikely star in Christian music. He's a recording artist who shuns publicity, a songwriter who doesn't listen to music, an amateur theologian who doesn't read much.

Each summer he chooses to lead music at youth camps rather than tour Christian music's big venues. He's more comfortable around children or in front of a group of secular college students than he is around adults, particularly Christians who expect him to behave and perform a certain way.

As a songwriter, Chris Rice is part poet, part prophet, part evangelist. He teaches about God's time in "The Power of a Moment," pricks the Christian conscience with "The Face of Christ," and comforts skeptics with "Smell the Color 9," the title cut from his last vocal album (2000).

Rice records for Rocketown Records, the label started by Michael W. Smith to cultivate songwriters. He and Rocketown worked out an arrangement that allows Rice to place top priority on his ministry to youth and college students, even though it means he is unavailable for promotional appearances and media interviews.

Rice's popularity with children was sealed forever -- to his perpetual chagrin -- with "The Cartoon Song," in which he ponders the profound theological question, "What if cartoons got saved?" He then impersonates cartoon characters singing "Alleluia!" -- or in the case of Fred Flintstone, "Yabadabadooya!"

His reputation as serious songwriter has survived "The Cartoon Song," although it still haunts him. At church concerts, he is hounded by his youngest fans until he gives in and sings it.

Rice endears himself to his older fans by voicing not only their deepest love for God but also their toughest questions. In "Big Enough," he confronts the problem of evil:

None of us knows, and this makes it a mystery,  
If life is a comedy, then why all this tragedy?  
Three and a half pounds of brain to try to figure out  
What this world is all about.  
And is there an eternity? Is there an eternity?  
God if you're there I wish you'd show me.  
God if you care then I need you to know me.  
I hope you don't mind me asking the questions.  
But I figure you're big enough.

Questioning God is a sure way to irk some Christian music fans who expect their stars to defend the faith. And performing those songs in public gives those fans an opportunity to confront Rice. Whenever he performs, inevitably someone comes up to ask why he parades his doubts for all to see.

His response: "There are millions of people in this world who wonder, 'Is God there?' I can't write just for you, sir. I have to think about all these people. And it doesn't mean that my faith is slipping or I'm questioning or doubting. I want to include the whole spectrum of faith in what I do, which is hard to do when you're on a Christian label, distributed in Christian stores."

Rice says pushing the envelope is rewarded when he sings in front of non-Christians. "I see them nod. I see them thinking, maybe for the first time, about this important stuff."

"I feel like some of the most important places and some of the most rewarding places where I sing are for unbelieving audiences. Maybe [I'm singing] for a fraternity party and I know maybe 5 percent are believers. ... I'm singing my songs in front of these guys and I'm thinking this is what my music is for. And I get really excited about it."

"Some 20-year-old kid will say, 'Dude, I'm the worst pagan you know. But something about how you write really makes me think hard.' OK, that's what I'm supposed to be doing. So I say, 'Keep thinking hard because there's a lot to think about.' Even with that, though, I haven't given him 'The Four Spiritual Laws' or whatever, but maybe he's a little further on the journey toward understanding God."

"So, yes, I do think I write for the other guy a lot of times, and even for the unbeliever."

A native of Washington, D.C., Rice moved to Nashville to pursue a songwriting career in the early 1980s. He won the coveted Dove Award for Male Vocalist of the Year just three years after signing a record contract in 1996.

Now 40 and single, Rice grew up around the Christian subculture he often challenges. His parents owned a religious bookstore in Maryland and took him to annual meetings of the Christian Booksellers Association.

He is the middle of three sons. "Everybody in my family loves music more than I do. I always wondered why I was the one doing this [for a living]. I love music. I love what it does. [But] I don't listen to music that much. I can drive for 15 hours and never turn on the radio."

Although he plays guitar in most of his concerts, the piano was his first instrument -- and still is his best. He recently recorded two instrumental albums on piano.

Rice's parents encouraged his songwriting and used some bookstore connections to introduce him to music publishers. One contact set it up for Rice to spend a day in Nashville in 1982 with now-legendary songwriter Rich Mullins. "I don't even remember much about the day except that he bought me a Goo-Goo Cluster."

He went back home and, though encouraged by music insiders to move to Nashville, he put it off for three more years. Finally in 1985 he took the plunge. "I was at a standstill with school. I didn't really know what I was going to do. And I said, 'I'm just going to move to Nashville, whether I'm going to do music or not.'"

He moved in with a friend. Their other roommate was young songwriter and producer Monroe Jones, with whom Rice developed a close friendship that later became a prolific musical partnership. Jones has produced each of Rice's albums and the two have found a remarkable musical chemistry.

Rice had a few of his songs recorded by other artists in those early years. He also continued his camp and retreat work. It was a decade before he signed a contract to record his own songs -- the first artist on the new Rocketown label.

"I had been approached a couple of times by others," he says, but his insistence that his youth work remain his top priority "chased them off."

"Because Rocketown was a new label they could try some things. They said, 'We understand who you are and what you're doing. Give us a shot at getting your music out to more people.'"

It has proved a fruitful arrangement. Rice has had five successful albums and is working on another due out later this year. He said the new album will be "fun" and celebrative, with some of the quirky touches that distinguished Smell the Color 9.

"There's one song called 'The Other Side of the Radio.' It's just a picture of me on the other side of the radio, wondering why does anybody care what I have to say? I imagine you on the other side of the radio, driving with the windows down, tapping the wheel. And I realize we're singing the same song right now."

What you likely won't hear from Chris Rice is a worship album. He says the current trend of Christian artists recording worship music is too limiting.

"We've adopted a very narrow definition of worship, if you think that worship means you have a record full of songs that have the words 'holy,' 'mercy,' 'grace' and 'worthy,' and you mix them up and put out 10 songs that have all those words in them. Well, that's great when you're sitting in church, talking to your buddies and singing their songs. But that's only 1 percent of the time of your life. How are you relating to God the other 99 percent of your life? That's where your true worship is."

Rice's approach to songwriting is more intentional than confessional.

"I don't think I'm so much saying 'here's my heart' and spell it out for you. I'm always thinking more in terms of connecting people to God. ... I write volitionally. I write for people, not just how I feel today and write a song about it."

"I'm trying to think with people. If it's an unbeliever, I write from the standpoint of things they might be asking or wondering or frustrated with. I find some agreement and then I nudge them toward faith. I say 'consider this' or 'what if?' to get them to think. I look for commonality and then stretch them. But some people don't want to stretch. Some people want to stay safe."

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