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Renewed charges filed against foundation officers

By Bob Allen

PHOENIX (ABP) -- Officials announced the filing of new charges of white-collar crime against five former officials of the Baptist Foundation of Arizona Oct. 28.

A grand jury returned a 32-count indictment against William Pierre Crotts, the foundation's former president, and four other leaders charged with fraud, racketeering and theft in the \$570 million collapse of the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention agency in 1999.

Also charged are Thomas Dale Grabinski, former general counsel, and former directors Lawrence Dwain Hoover and Harold DeWayne Friend. Richard Lee Rolfes, a consultant, faces nine charges. Arraignment on the renewed charges is scheduled Nov. 6.

The men are accused of masterminding a Ponzi scheme in which 11,000 people lost money after being led to believe their investments would be safe and would help promote Baptist work in the state.

"We will not rest until the people responsible for these financial losses meet justice," Arizona Attorney General Janet Napolitano said in a statement announcing the charges.

A judge threw out original criminal charges on a technicality in September.

According to the indictments, foundation officials in the early 1990s began selling different kinds of investment accounts to individuals and hid losses from investors through on-paper transfers of assets to "bad banks," subsidiaries that provided IOUs for loans they couldn't afford to repay.

After an alternative Phoenix newspaper ran a series of investigative stories alleging a scam, state officials investigated, eventually ordering the foundation to stop selling securities in 1999. The foundation's subsequent bankruptcy was the largest failure of a non-profit charity in history.

Arthur Andersen and a legal firm that represented the foundation recently settled separate civil action related to the collapse, agreeing to pay investors about \$230 million, before legal fees. A hearing is scheduled Nov. 25 on allocation of those funds.

A judge in Phoenix on Sept. 12 ordered original charges filed in May 2001 to be sent back to a grand jury, saying a letter from Andersen blaming the collapse on foundation officers should not have been allowed as evidence.

Investors also have received about \$70 million to date from the sale of foundation assets. A trust overseeing a court-ordered bankruptcy liquidation predicts investors will eventually recover as much as 72 cents on the dollar of their original investment.

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Pioneer Christian educator Findley Edge dead at 86

By Bob Allen

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Findley Edge, 86, a pioneer in Southern Baptist religious education, died Oct. 28 in Orlando, Fla.

Edge began a 35-year career at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1947, teaching courses in religious education in an era when the demand for professionally trained educators in Baptist churches and institutions was beginning to rise.

As a popular author in Christian education circles, Edge advocated church renewal and involving laity in ministry in numerous books.

His 1971 book, "The Greening of the Church," contained the oft-quoted phrase: "The call to salvation and the call to ministry is one and the same call. That is, when one is called by God to be a part of his people, he/she is also called into the ministry."

Another bestseller, "A Quest for Vitality in Religion," in 1963, offered suggestions for reviving churches from the clutches of "institutionalism" and making church membership more meaningful.

His 1956 "Teaching for Results" is described as a classic resource for ministers of education and Sunday school teachers. In it, Edge said any Bible teacher's success lies in his or her ability to establish and achieve goals.

In "The Doctrine of the Laity" in 1985, Edge contended that Baptists' notion of the priesthood of the believer places primary responsibility for ministry on the laity and not clergy. "A lay person cannot pay someone else to fulfill his or her ministry to God," Edge wrote. "God has called his people to ministry, and the ministry belongs to the laity whether they know it or not, and the ministry belongs to the laity whether they fulfill it or not."

Edge had lived more recently in Orlando, Fla., where he and his wife, Louvenia, were members of College Park Baptist Church. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Florida honored the couple by naming an award after them to honor outstanding service in a local church. Another Baptist institution, Baptist Theological Seminary and Richmond, also honored Edge by naming an endowed professorship after him.

Edge was a graduate of Stetson University, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Yale University. He was instrumental in establishing the Vineyard Conference Center at Southern Seminary.

Edge is survived by his widow, two sons and two grandchildren. Funeral services are scheduled Nov. 1 at College Park Baptist Church. The family suggests that donations to the church be made in lieu of flowers. Carey Hand Cox-Parker Funeral Home in Winter Park, Fla., is directing funeral arrangements.

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Conference highlights differences over 'faith-based' initiative

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The head of President Bush's office for faith-based initiatives blasted critics of the plan, while a newly released study suggested that religious programs providing social services tend to become more secular when they accept government funds, at a first-ever conference of an organization monitoring "charitable-choice" programs.

The Oct. 23 conference, hosted by the Roundtable on Religion and Social Welfare Policy, featured sharp differences between defenders and critics of programs that provide government funds to religiously based charities.

The goal of the organization -- funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and operated by the Rockefeller Institute -- is to track the status of such programs and serve as a clearinghouse for legal information, regulatory status and research.

Speaking at the conference, Jim Towey, head of the White House office on faith-based initiatives, reiterated his often-expressed disdain for critics of the policy. "After nine months on the job, I'm at a loss to understand some of the criticism of the initiative," he said.

Noting that charitable choice has been around since 1996, he said, "I don't think you can find a record of abuse here," although he acknowledged there had been a "a lawsuit here and there, I think."

Towey repeated a charge he has made in other public statements over charitable-choice controversies -- that critics of government funding for religious organizations would "like to see the public square have all religious influence removed from it."

At least four high-profile court cases over government funding for religious charities have cropped up in the past year, but none has yet come to a final decision.

Meanwhile, the Texas Freedom Network -- an organization opposed to charitable choice -- recently released a catalogue of documented abuses by religious social-service providers that it said resulted from implementation of the concept.

The state's faith-based initiative "has proven to be a treacherous enterprise for houses of worship, taxpayers and people in need alike," the report charged. Deregulation of faith-based providers allowed some to ignore health and safety rules required of secular providers, the study said. In some cases the abuses led to the revoking of contracts, and in one the shutting down of a children's home.

Another new study, by the Roundtable organization, compared the effectiveness of religious-versus-governmental providers of social services. It found that users of faith-based charities "perceive frontline workers at most, if not all, faith-based organizations as more caring than those who work for the government agency." The faith-based clients also tended to have more positive views of the care they received.

But the study also found that that the more government funding a religious organization received, the less it tended to exhibit those "caring" characteristics that clients found most appealing.

Other studies support the case that the more a religious charity depends on government funding, its services become less distinguishable from those provided by secular agencies. One argument frequently waged against charitable choice is that when religious organizations become dependent on government funding, they run the risk of compromising their religious nature.

Charitable choice first gained national attention as a part of welfare reform in 1996, when Congress authorized the provision of federal funds to some social-service providers.

President Bush announced in 2000 that expansion of charitable choice would be a major emphasis of his presidency. That effort quickly bogged down in Congress, however.

Some oppose the concept over concern that it allows government funding of churches and other pervasively religious organizations with little or no public accounting of how tax dollars are spent. Others object to government funding of organizations that are exempt from laws against employment discrimination.

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Pastor says 'post-congregational' leaving church, but not their faith

By Craig Bird

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- People who leave the church aren't necessarily abandoning God, according to a pastor and sociologist studying what he calls "post-congregational" Christians.

Rather than being marginal churchgoers, Alan Jamieson found in research for his book, "A Churchless Faith," that 94 percent had been leaders -- such as deacons, elders or Sunday school teachers -- and 32 percent had been full-time ministers.

To Jamieson's surprise, he also found that for many the break came not because they lost their faith, but because they wanted to save it.

Rather than writing off those who leave the church due to burnout, spiritual abuse or frustration at not being allowed to ask hard questions, Jamieson believes congregations should listen to those who opt to go their faith journey alone. Ironically, he says, they might be the Christians best equipped to reach postmoderns.

Twice a month, 30 or more people gather at Jamieson's church, First Baptist Church in Wellington, New Zealand. Seated at cafe-like tables and sipping tea in the subdued light of the basement, they talk freely. No topic is off limits -- the nature of God, homosexuality, spiritual abuse, the role of women.

The focus, Jamieson told FaithWorks magazine, is "on where we are going instead of what we have left."

"Spirited Exchanges is not designed to be church," Jamieson says. "It is a place where people can talk about anything they want to talk about, without any sense of being 'out of line' or being told their thoughts are inappropriate."

Jamieson says he is aware of about 50 other groups like Spirited Exchanges.

Not surprisingly, the three-year-old program has brought Jamieson criticism from all directions. "Some people insist I am encouraging people to leave the church, and others are just as indignant that I am scheming to lure people back into the church."

But Jamieson is unshaken in his commitment to teach churches to become "leaver sensitive." The reasons: (1) Leavers need the church, (2) the church needs leavers, (3) leavers take their time, skills, efforts and wallets with them, (4) leavers tell their stories to others, and (5) leavers take their children with them.

Other researchers back up Jamieson's findings that many of the unchurched are still spiritually inclined.

"Relatively few unchurched people are atheists. Most of them call themselves Christian and have had a serious dose of church life in the past," pollster George Barna said in "Re-Churching the Unchurched."

David Barrett, author of the World Christian Encyclopedia, estimates there are about 112 million "churchless Christians" worldwide, about 5 percent of all adherents, and he projects that number will double by 2025.

Jamieson isn't the only recent author to focus on reaching out to these churchless pilgrims.

American pastor and student worker Mary Tuomi Hammond, in "The Church and the Dechurched," turns her attention to those battling emotional, spiritual or mental scars they associate with their church experience.

Included among that population, she identifies "rabid atheists, silent agnostics, committed humanists, practitioners of distinctly non-Christian spiritualities." But she also finds believers who still cling weakly to a faith they carried with them when they fled.

Hammond's wounded souls "are among the church's strongest critics, because they are outsiders who were once insiders."

Hammond has been chastised for "attacking the faith" by recounting stories of spiritual abuse, but she denies that charge.

"My love for the church compels me to challenge the church to hear and attend to the cries of its own wounded," Hammond replies. "I love the church and I wrestle with it. I love the Lord and I wrestle with my faith as well. In that visceral relationship between loving and wrestling, I find strength, hope and life that cannot be extinguished."

She challenges congregations to become "church for the dechurched." She points out that Jesus spent most of his ministry reaching out to the "de-synagogued." But she warns it can be a long and difficult effort, as her own journey attests.

When her husband, Steve, was called to be pastor of a Baptist church in Oberlin, Ohio, in 1979, it had 12 members. Mary and Steve, who eventually became co-pastors, prayed for the church to grow but with little success. Then one morning in 1998, Mary said, she felt a definite call of God: "I have sent you to the one and not the 99."

They have since rearranged their ministry to address needs of the dechurched. Mary admits that ministering to the "one" is time-consuming and filled with contradictions. The "one" is "off the beaten trail, perhaps too unorthodox for the 99, too needy, too confused or even too cynical."

But, she insists, "As Christians we must face the issues we would rather not address, ask the questions we cannot always clearly answer, and listen to the voices that are most difficult to hear."

Jamieson, meanwhile, asks the larger question of why so many people with a deep longing for God are coming to the conclusion that they must abandon their congregational homes in order to continue growing spiritually.

Adapting the work of sociologist James Fowler's landmark "Stages of Faith," Jamieson divides "leavers" into four types: disillusioned followers, reflexive exiles, transitional explorers and integrated wayfinders.

Jamieson says many churches are unaware -- and unconcerned -- about those who have left. The overwhelming majority of 108 leavers he interviewed in his study said no one from their church ever talked with them about why they left.

Jamieson recalls one successful pastor's declaration that Jesus' parable of the lost sheep doesn't apply to those "who know where the paddock is and intentionally wander away."

Jamieson feels differently, and he uses a different analogy to make his point. He envisions a non-swimmer attracted to the beach. Befriended by a swimming club, he enters the water and takes lessons. A quick study, he soon is going to the beach at every opportunity and inviting his non-swimming friends to do likewise.

But eventually, perhaps after years, he senses a faint inner stirring to swim beyond the flags that mark the "safe" area. His old coach advises him such thoughts are dangerous. Gradually he becomes uncomfortable at the beach and begins staying at home. But the call of the deep haunts him. Eventually he plunges back into the ocean, this time to swim beyond the flags, totally alone if necessary.

Rather than abandon such swimmers, Jamieson says, the church should accompany them.

Recently someone sent Jamieson a copy of a water-safety poster that pictured a fish swimming toward the left as the rest of the school swam to the right. The caption read: "Don't swim alone."

Although he works with a lot of lone swimmers, Jamieson admits the poster is "a pretty good reflection of my feelings. That's why we need to go out beyond the flags ourselves. It's dangerous for anyone to swim dark spiritual waters alone."

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