

**Georgia editor pushed into early retirement**  
**By Mark Wingfield & Tony Cartledge**  
**Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com**  
**January 22, 2003**  
**Volume: 03-05-3418**

**SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL**  
**LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES**  
**Nashville, Tennessee**

**MAR 24 2003**

– EDITORS' NOTE: This is an updated version of the story posted on ABP's website yesterday, Jan.21.

ATLANTA (ABP) – William Neal, editor of the Christian Index for a decade, has taken early retirement, reportedly under pressure from Robert White, executive director of the Georgia Baptist Convention.

Neal, 55, was called to a meeting with White Jan. 16. At the same time, one of White's assistants was dispatched to the Index offices to announce to the staff that the Index offices would be closed until the following Monday, Jan. 20. According to sources, the GBC staff also confiscated computers.

Callers to the Index office the week of Jan. 20 were told that Neal was out of the office for the week.

White's office reported that neither he nor other GBC officials were available for comment to the Biblical Recorder. White released a statement to Baptist Press, however, that he and Neal had discussed Neal's retirement plans and that more news would be forthcoming after a meeting of the Index board on Jan. 25.

Meanwhile, convention sources reported that White terminated three other Index employees Jan. 20. The others dismissed were Managing Editor Greg Brett, Media Coordinator Melea Goode and Administrative Assistant Laura Boltin.

The Index, the nation's oldest Baptist newspaper, is owned by the Georgia Baptist Convention. Although located in a separate facility in Atlanta, the Index receives major funding from the state convention, and the newspaper's editor historically has been elected by the convention's Executive Committee.

A reorganization of the state convention in the mid-1990s, however, gave the executive director broad powers to hire and fire convention staff without prior action by the Executive Committee. All Index staff members are considered employees of the state convention.

Neal, who is a 28-year employee of the state convention, had been under increasing pressure from conservative leadership for several years. The Index, they contended, was not doing enough to advance the cause of the Southern Baptist Convention and of conservatives in Georgia.

In 2001, the paper's board of directors forbade Neal from publishing any announcements, advertisements or editorials relating to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. They also demanded that no mention be made of CBF in the Index except in news items "which the editor believes directly affect Georgia Baptists and/or Southern Baptists." They further required Neal to consult with the convention's executive director or other board members before publishing any item that referenced CBF.

Neal has had no direct involvement with the CBF, a group of moderate Baptists disaffected by the change of leadership in the SBC since 1979. CBF has its headquarters in Atlanta.

Within the last year, Neal also has faced criticism within the Georgia Baptist Convention for a perceived failure to deal satisfactorily with alleged misconduct of some Index staff members. No accusations were made of personal misconduct by Neal.

Neither Neal nor White would comment on what reason or mixture of reasons led to Neal's sudden departure from the Index. Sources said, however, that the alleged misconduct was not mentioned to the other dismissed employees as a reason for termination.

Neal previously worked in campus ministry, both as a local campus minister and as director of the state convention's campus ministry program. He also served as associate editor of the Index with editors Jack Harwell and Al Mohler.

Harwell, who served the paper 21 years, took early retirement in 1987 after an effort to have him fired resulted in the formation of a watchdog "review board." Harwell was threatened with termination if his writing was deemed too critical of conservatives.

Mohler became editor in 1989, leading the paper in a more conservative direction. He left in 1993 to become president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

During his tenure as editor, Neal turned around a declining circulation and expanded coverage to include a broader spectrum of Georgia Baptist life.

Neal and his staff redesigned the publication, which won overall design awards from the Baptist Communicators Association. Neal also received awards for his editorial writing and for producing E Street, a supplemental magazine.

Neal was an active member of the Association of State Baptist Papers, and was currently serving as the organization's president.

In 1997, Neal initiated a project for the Index to acquire and renovate "Pinebloom," a historic Tudor mansion that now serves as publishing offices for the Index and as worship space for two Atlanta congregations.

Neal is a graduate of Columbus College and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he earned both a master's degree and a doctor of ministry degree. He and his wife, Judy, are members of Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga.

Brett, the managing editor, came to the Index in March 2000 from the staff of Truett-McConnell College, where he had been vice president for institutional development. He previously worked for Georgia Baptist Children's Home and Family Ministries. He is a graduate of Georgia Southern University.

Goode came to the Index in 2001 from Truett-McConnell College, where she had been alumni director.

Boltin had been with the Index four months and served as the editor's secretary. She previously worked in the Georgia Baptist Convention's Cooperative Program office.

The four departures removed half the Index's staff. The four remaining staff members are Associate Editor Joe Westbury, Graphic Design Editor Kelly Matthai, Circulation Manager Beverly Tye and Business Manager Donna Ward.

Copyright 2002 Associated Baptist Press. All rights reserved.

Go To: [[ABPNews Home](#)] [[What's ABP?](#)] [[Links](#)] [[Town Hall](#)] [[The Stacks](#)] [[React!](#)]

**Southern Baptist chaplaincy head unexpectedly 'leaves' post****By Mark Wingfield****Associated Baptist Press - [www.abpnews.com](http://www.abpnews.com)****January 22, 2003****Volume: 03-05-3419**

ATLANTA (ABP) – Bob Vickers has "left" his position as director of chaplaincy evangelism at the North American Mission Board, according to a statement issued by NAMB Vice President John Yarbrough.

Others familiar with the situation, however, contend Vickers was forced to resign because he did not enforce stringently enough NAMB's newly tightened doctrines on female chaplains and chaplains with divorce in their backgrounds.

Under terms of a severance agreement, Vickers reportedly cannot speak about his departure. News of the termination had begun to filter out among the chaplains endorsed for service through NAMB, however, particularly among the ranks of military chaplains whom Vickers once served alongside.

Some chaplains, as well as others close to Vickers, are angry about his dismissal, which they contend is an attempt by the Southern Baptist Convention mission board to exert further control of the chaplains they endorse but do not pay.

One chaplain described Vickers' dismissal as "brutal" and akin to "the Taliban taking over." Another person well-connected to the situation asserted that NAMB administrators and trustees "want total control over these people's lives."

NAMB acts as the SBC's agent to endorse chaplains serving in the military, health care, prisons, business and industry. Most chaplains, although paid by the companies or government entities that use their services, must be endorsed by a religious body to be hired.

Last year, NAMB trustees announced they no longer would endorse female chaplains who have been ordained, even though the military and other organizations require all chaplains to be ordained for their roles. NAMB and its Chaplains' Commission also reportedly have been giving more scrutiny to applicants who have experienced divorce, even if the divorce occurred 15 or 20 years earlier.

Those with knowledge of the Vickers termination were reluctant to speak on the record about it, for fear of jeopardizing Vickers' severance agreement with NAMB. However, the story they told was verified by multiple interviews with people knowledgeable about what has occurred.

For its part, NAMB released a brief written statement from Yarbrough, who is vice president for evangelism. About the departure, the statement said, "Robert C. Vickers left his position as director of chaplaincy evangelism at the North American Mission Board, SBC, December 31, 2002." It added: "It is not NAMB's policy or practice to discuss personnel matters with those not directly involved."

While Yarbrough praised Vickers as "a tremendous Christian gentleman" whose "love, support and desire to equip chaplains is without question," he gave no reason for the dismissal.

Vickers had managed NAMB's chaplaincy unit since May 1998. He had been director of military chaplaincy two years prior to that. From 1975 to 1996, he was a chaplain in the United States Army, achieving the rank of colonel.

Vickers, a Lexington, Ky., native, holds degrees from Eastern Kentucky University, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Lexington Theological Seminary and Vanderbilt University. Among his degrees are two master's and two doctorates.

Increased narrowness in NAMB's endorsement process in recent years has led several hundred chaplains to leave the SBC's fold and seek endorsement from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Baptist General Convention of Texas and other religious bodies.

To date, NAMB has not required chaplains to sign or affirm the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message doctrinal statement as some Southern Baptist missionaries have been asked to do.

However, individuals familiar with Vickers' case said they fear that could be the next step.

"The minute they dare require a chaplain to sign something, there's going to be a mass exodus," predicted one person who has worked on the inside of the chaplain-endorsement process at NAMB. "I think there's going to be an exodus anyway."

Chaplains currently endorsed by NAMB "are Southern Baptists wholeheartedly," this insider said, "but they'll give that up in a moment if it gets to the point where we say: 'We're going to control your life. You've got to look like me, act like me, talk like me or you're not one of us.'"

Vickers was described by friends as the kind of person who sought to encourage chaplains, to include rather than exclude, to bridge gaps rather than build walls.

While Vickers sought to follow the endorsement policy set by NAMB, he "never suggested that God can't call women as chaplains," one colleague said. "That got him in trouble."

A NAMB spokesman said he could not answer any further questions about Vickers' departure beyond what was contained in the statement from Yarbrough.

Vickers himself could not be reached for comment, apparently because of the terms of his severance agreement.

The NAMB statement insisted the SBC mission board "continues to be committed to endorsing and assisting Southern Baptist chaplains as a key part of impacting North America with the gospel."

That may be true, Vickers' supporters said, but it likely will be done with fewer chaplains and a less diverse corps of chaplains due to Vickers' dismissal.



Copyright 2002 Associated Baptist Press. All rights reserved.

Go To: [[ABPNews Home](#)] [[What's ABP?](#)] [[Links](#)] [[Town Hall](#)] [[The Stacks](#)] [[React!](#)]