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LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee**

Georgia newspaper names interim, announces 'soul-winning' focus
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Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com
January 27, 2003
Volume: 03-07-3423

MAR 24 2003

ATLANTA (ABP) —One week after Editor Bill Neal was forced into early retirement, the board of directors of Georgia's Christian Index met to ratify his retirement plans, hire an interim editor and cast a new vision for the nation's oldest Baptist newspaper.

According to a news release published by the Index Jan. 27, the board held a Jan. 25 meeting at which Neal's retirement plans were finalized and the dismissal of three other Index employees was affirmed.

The dismissals cut the newspaper's staff in half. No reasons were given for Neal's early retirement or the other dismissals. Neal could not be reached for comment.

The board named Associate Editor Joe Westbury interim editor. Westbury is a five-year employee of the Index with previous writing and editing roles at the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board and Brotherhood Commission. He also twice was public relations director at Union University in Jackson, Tenn.

A news release from the board outlined a plan to "revamp" the paper and "redirect the resources of the Index to enable it to be more effective, more responsive, in telling the story of how God is working through our churches."

The board's new vision for the paper is to be "Georgia-centric," the release said.

"The Index clearly has an imbalance of news which occurs outside of our state. While there is nothing wrong with reporting what is happening around the world, I feel the paper could be more effective by providing more news unique to Georgia Baptists," board member Becky Watters of Douglasville, Ga., said in the release.

Watters said the Index "must focus its energy on providing original content that challenges laity to take a closer look at their faith and their role in being soul winners."

Under Neal's leadership, the Index already had taken a softer approach to news than many state Baptist newspapers traditionally have used. Board members had placed restrictions on what news content the paper could carry and on what Neal could write about editorially.

In 2001, the board 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.

The revamped Index will continue to include some news, the board said, but priority will be given to stories that "directly affect ministry and evangelism in the state." Board member Darrell Henry of Chickamauga, Ga., said the objective is to transform the newspaper from "a passive teller of what has already happened to being a pro-active force" for evangelizing Georgians.

The board's news release also hinted at a restructuring of staff positions and a reallocation of staff resources in producing the paper. Personnel will be refocused to "concentrate on meeting the needs of churches, associations and state convention ministries," the release said.

In addition to the editor's post, vacancies created by the recent dismissals include a managing editor, a media coordinator and an administrative assistant.

A story to be published in the Index portrayed Neal's retirement as occurring at his "request." Multiple sources close to the situation, however, confirmed that Neal was pressured to take early retirement by Bob White, executive director of

the Georgia Baptist Convention.

Although located in a separate facility, the Index receives major funding from the state convention. The newspaper's editor historically has been elected by the convention's Executive Committee. All Index staff members are considered employees of the state convention. A reorganization of the state convention in the mid-1990s gave the executive director broad powers to hire and fire convention staff without prior action by the Executive Committee.

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

On Jan. 20, White terminated three other Index employees: Managing Editor Greg Brett, Media Coordinator Melea Goode and Administrative Assistant Laura Boltin.

Neal, a 28-year employee of the state convention, had been under increasing pressure from conservative Baptist leaders in Georgia 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.

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

No details were released about terms of Neal's retirement or the dismissal of the other three employees.

The board indicated no time frame for hiring a new editor. A search committee was elected and will be chaired by Allen Hughes of Hebron Baptist Church in Dacula, Ga.

Once a new editor is elected, the board intends to adopt a new mission statement, according to the board's release.

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