

Nashville, Tennessee MAY 12 2004

Tennessee convention ousts church with lesbian minister

By Lonnie Wilkey and Greg Warner

Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com

June 3, 2003

Volume: 03-50-3618

BRENTWOOD, Tenn. (ABP) – Glendale Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., which last year hired a lesbian as associate pastor, was removed from membership in the Tennessee Baptist Convention May 30.

In a special meeting of the convention's Executive Board, members voted unanimously to "dissolve" the convention's relationship with the church.

Unlike other similar church ousters, however, the action came with little public rancor or debate. Glendale Baptist reportedly agreed to the wording of the recommendation approved by the board.

The recommendation read: "In light of our different visions of faith and practice, and after much prayer and dialogue with the leadership of Glendale Baptist Church, the Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention acts to dissolve its relationship with Glendale Baptist Church."

The church faces similar ouster from the Nashville Baptist Association in September unless it terminates April Baker, who was hired in May 2002 to work primarily with children and families. Since the March 2003 retirement of Pastor Mark Caldwell, she has been the lead minister on staff and the only full-time staff member.

Glendale Baptist expects to be expelled from the Southern Baptist Convention as well. The congregation, founded in 1951, is also affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The church released a statement prior to the Tennessee board's vote: "We at Glendale Baptist Church appreciate the prayer and dialogue with representatives of the Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention and accept the decision of the Executive Board to dissolve our relationship. May God's blessing be with us all as we continue to see God's work in the world and join in that work."

Baker was not available June 3 for comment to Associated Baptist Press. But Stewart Clifton, a spokesman for the church, said the congregation "was not interested in a big public fight" or instigating a theological debate. "We're not trying to be defensive about this at all," he said.

The controversy surfaced last January when reports of Baker's hiring appeared in a local newspaper and the Baptist and Reflector, the convention's news journal. At the time, the convention's executive director, James Porch, said for a church "to employ a staff member whose sexual orientation is contrary to biblical teaching would not be in harmony with the principles of the Tennessee Baptist Convention."

A special seven-member committee was appointed to address the matter, which led to the May 30 recommendation and vote by the Executive Board. As a result, Glendale will no longer be able to send messengers to the annual state convention and will no longer be represented among member churches.

Executive Board president Laurann Whetham of Corryton, Tenn., said the special committee and board struggled to "communicate love to the church and at the same time communicate disagreement with their actions."

"Done incorrectly, any action we took could damage the witness of Tennessee Baptist churches to these [gay and lesbian] people and families," she said. "If we took no action, and allowed the debate to become part of our [annual] convention in November, the resultant bad press would be harmful to all concerned."

Whetham said the best-case scenario for the Executive Board would have been for Glendale to leave the convention.

"They had a dilemma with that scenario," said Whetham, who with other committee members met May 23 with Baker and other representatives of the church. "In reality, most of their members who did not agree with the church's action had already left the church. There were some, however, who supported the action but would find it impossible to vote to leave the convention."

"Their best-case scenario was for us to vote them out, and they would go quietly," she continued. "Where once they had appreciated the attention of the press, they now found it not to be positive and wanted to avoid it if possible."

As a result, both sides agreed on a separation, Whetham said.

Clifton, the church spokesman, said Glendale chose not to withdraw because "we think the state convention and SBC should be broad enough to include a variety of viewpoints."

"Obviously, we don't consider ourselves in the mainstream [of those conventions], but we were willing to go on as a somewhat eccentric member of both," he said.

Technically, Glendale remains a member of the Southern Baptist Convention, since a few church members still designate contributions to the SBC, Clifton said. But he added, "Most current members don't see the Southern Baptist Convention as our primary affiliation."

The SBC has expelled other churches for affirming homosexuality and is likely to do the same to Glendale.

"We are not planning to withdraw," Clifton said, "but we don't expect to be in it very long."

Clifton said the church was not trying to make a statement by hiring Baker as associate pastor. "We didn't seek out a gay or lesbian, but in our final interview she told us she is a lesbian." Despite that revelation, he said, the church voted "overwhelmingly" to hire her on the strength of her qualifications. Few members have left as a result, he said, and the church has been "energized" under Baker's leadership.



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Religious-freedom watchdogs nervous about Iraq's future

By Robert Marus

Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com

June 3, 2003

Volume: 03-50-3619

WASHINGTON (ABP) – As Washington officials announce a new approach to setting post-war Iraq on the road to a permanent government, human-rights watchdogs fear that religious freedom will become yet another example of the war's "collateral damage."

Several news sources reported June 3 that Iraqi groups are angry about a new American plan that calls for Iraq's current civil administrator, Paul Bremer, to hand pick an advisory council of Iraqis to help him run the country.

Earlier, United States officials said they would begin set-up of an interim Iraqi administration by convening a national meeting of representatives from various ethnic, tribal and religious groups this summer. United States officials reportedly have now scrapped that plan.

Many of those upset with U.S. management of Iraq are fundamentalist Shiite Muslim political parties and civic groups. Religious-freedom watchers have long feared that such groups – in some cases influenced and funded by their counterparts in neighboring Iran – would attempt to establish an Iranian-style "Islamic republic" that severely limits the freedoms of religious minorities as well as more moderate Muslims.

Under Saddam Hussein's largely secularist Ba'ath Party regime, Christians and some other religious minorities had enjoyed far more freedom of worship than their brethren in other majority-Muslim nations. However, Hussein, who was raised in the Sunni tradition of Islam, severely repressed the nation's Shiite Muslim majority.

In May, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom released its annual report on religious-liberty conditions around the world. They said that, while the fall of Hussein had meant the end to repression of the Shiites, the once-repressed majority was now being tempted to institute repression themselves.

"[S]ome segments of the Shi'a community have been vociferously demanding the implementation of Islamic law in a manner that reportedly threatens to preclude respect for freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for others," the commission report said.

Iraq is reportedly 60 percent Shiite, while only 600,000-750,000 of the country's 22 million citizens are Christians.

The chaos and lawlessness that continues in Iraq has opened doors of opportunity through which Shiite clerics have already stepped, observers note.

The Washington Post reported in May that some religious leaders had set up Islamic courts in some areas of the country to settle legal disputes. The paper also reported businesses that raised the moral ire of fundamentalist Muslims – such as movie theaters and alcoholic-beverage distilleries – were being harassed and sometimes attacked by self-appointed religious police.

Despite that, Bob Edgar, president of the National Council of Churches, expressed hope for the religious-freedom situation for the nation's Christian community as well as smaller minority groups. Edgar recently returned to the U.S. from Jordan, where he helped a group of more than 20 Iraqi religious leaders craft a joint statement calling for religious freedom to be a priority in postwar Iraq.

The statement, issued May 28 and endorsed by 40 other international religious leaders, diplomats and human-rights activists, asked that "the permanent Iraqi government be built on the basis of direct, free, democratic elections, a constitution and the rule of law that protects equally all religious, ethnic and national groupings, while maintaining Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity." The World Conference on Religion and Peace sponsored the meeting.

The Iraqi leaders who signed the statement included representatives from Shiite, Sunni and Christian organizations.

In a phone interview shortly after his return to the U.S., Edgar told Associated Baptist Press it is possible to have true democracy as well as religious toleration in a majority-Muslim nation. "Christians and Muslims have lived for centuries

together in Lebanon, in Syria and in other countries in the region, so it's not unheard of that a new government in Iraq might be more along the lines of the Lebanese form of government," that has constitutional guarantees for minority representation in governing bodies, he noted.

But, Edgar warned, his Middle East contacts have made clear to him that the continuing chaos in Iraq is making it harder for such messages of moderation to seem more appealing than zealotry. "They reported that there's quite a bit of chaos in Iraq – particularly in Baghdad – and that the coalition forces did a better job of conducting the war than they have in winning the peace," Edgar said.

Like Edgar, a June 2 Christianity Today magazine editorial used the situation in Afghanistan as a warning to U.S. officials in charge of rebuilding Iraq. The magazine's editors took the Bush administration to task for its still-incomplete establishment of law, order and human rights in post-war Afghanistan. "We are worried about religious freedom in Iraq on several fronts," the editors said. "The Bush administration's track record on religious freedom has been weak, especially in Afghanistan.... About 18 months after the U.S.-led coalition liberated Afghanistan, Christians and other religious minorities are facing new threats."

For example, Afghanistan's chief justice – whose salary is paid by the United States – has implemented Islamic law in several cases and has charged a prominent critic with blasphemy. Drafts of that country's new constitution reportedly do not contain sufficient religious-freedom protections for non-Muslims. And there have been reported attempts to resurrect the old Afghan Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice that acted as a "morals police" under the old Taliban regime, harshly enforcing fundamentalist Islamic norms in dress and public behavior of women.

"The next step should be for Iraq's new government to reaffirm a commitment that Christians and others may operate openly and without fear that radicals or officials will harass or attack them," the magazine's editors said.

Nina Shea, director of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom, said religious liberty should be an integral part of U.S. policy in Iraq – because it is essential to democracy and because it's good for both Muslims and minorities.

"I'm very concerned that individual Muslims, above all, have religious freedom to dissent and to criticize the application of any kind of Islamic regime in either parts of Iraq or all of Iraq," Shea, a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said in a phone interview with ABP. "It's essential for the development, the emergence of a moderate Islam, that there be dissent and reform coming from within. Democracy is not going to take root – at least not a liberal democracy – without that kind of dissent and reformist views.

"As we see in Iran and Saudi Arabia, where there are Islamic regimes and Islamic law required across the board, dissenters to the regime are accused of blasphemy and have their heads chopped off."

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Mysterious Nigerian 'donor' part of Internet scam, FBI says

By Mark Wingfield

Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com

June 3, 2003

Volume: 03-50-3620

(ABP) – Mrs. Sikiratu Seki Adams of Nigeria doesn't really want to donate \$6 million to your church.

In fact, the e-mail that says she does probably wasn't sent by anyone with that name. It's just another variation on one of the most prevalent frauds perpetrated over the Internet, according to the FBI, Secret Service and a host of other scam-watcher groups.

Last year, Nigeria ranked first among all countries beyond the United States as the source of Internet scams, according to the Internet Fraud Complaint Center, a joint effort between the FBI and the National White Collar Crime Center. Most were variations on what law-enforcement officials call a "419 scam," a reference to the section of Nigerian law that covers advance-fee fraud.

One of the latest variations begins by offering "Calvary greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." The writer then claims to be a new Christian convert dying of breast cancer and the widow of a former military official killed in the Gulf War. She wants to donate \$6 million of her late husband's money to your church or ministry to further evangelism and ministry to the poor.

Another new version claims to be from the legal adviser to a Nigerian Christian couple who died in a plane crash last year and left him \$20 million to distribute to Christian ministries. If you will use these funds "honestly for things that will glorify God's name," then he would like to give you the money.

Previous versions of the Nigerian scams have outlined a person's urgent need to get money out of the country before it is seized. The writer wants to deposit millions of dollars in the recipient's bank account for safekeeping and pledges to pay 10-to-15 percent to the recipient.

The scam-busting website Urban Legend Zeitgeist (www.urbanlegends.com) explains the set-up: "If you take the bait, you'll be contacted by the perpetrators, who'll attempt to establish their credibility as government officials, businessmen or bankers. They will offer you apparently valid bank accounts and documentation. But before you can collect your money, some problem arises. A bribe must be paid to an official or a fee or tax must be paid so the money can be transferred. And you as the victim will be asked to pay up in order to receive the promised big payoff. There is no end to the fees, bribes, even outright blackmail, that will be extorted from you."

In some cases, those caught up in the scam have traveled to Nigeria or other African or European countries to try to collect their money and have met with violence, the website reports.

The Internet Fraud Complaint Center says that Nigerian scams like this produced the highest median dollar losses among all Internet fraud last year. The median loss of all reported cases was \$3,864, higher than reported cases of identity theft (\$2,000) and check fraud (\$1,100).

The FBI warns Internet users to "be skeptical of individuals representing themselves as Nigerian or other foreign government officials asking for your help in placing large sums of money in overseas bank accounts. Do not believe the promise of large sums of money for your cooperation."

Further, the FBI warns Internet users not to give personal information about savings, checking, credit or other financial accounts to people who solicit you by e-mail. Information from the Internet Fraud Complaint Center is available at <http://ifccfbi.gov/strategy/nls.asp>.

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Chaplains to oppose endorsement of non-ordained women by SBC
By Craig Bird and Greg Warner
Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com
June 3, 2003
Volume: 03-50-3621

ATLANTA (ABP) – Southern Baptist endorsement of female military chaplains who are not ordained seriously undermines the spiritual effectiveness of all ordained military chaplains, according to one of the Navy's top chaplains.

Capt. Al Hill, a life-long Southern Baptist and a 25-year veteran chaplain, said June 3 that a motion will be presented at the June 17-18 Southern Baptist Convention to reverse the policy now practiced by the North American Mission Board, the SBC's chaplain-endorsing agency.

The policy, approved by NAMB trustees in February, permits women to be endorsed as chaplains – in the military and elsewhere – but not if they are ordained. The policy is aimed at appeasing conservative critics who oppose the ordination of women. Rather than not appointing any female chaplains, as some would prefer, NAMB contends ordination is not necessary for chaplains.

"Regardless of Capt. Hill's views of ordination, most Southern Baptists do not consider ordination necessary for ministry," said NAMB spokesman Martin King.

Hill, director of the training and education division in the Navy Chief of Chaplains Office, met for two hours May 28 with John Yarbrough, NAMB vice president for evangelization – a meeting the chaplain said was conducted in "a spirit of graciousness and openness." Hill said he left the meeting optimistic NAMB trustees would reconsider their February action, which he said is opposed by most Baptist chaplains in the Navy.

Instead, Hill said June 3, the trustees' chaplains commission declined a recommendation from Yarbrough to place the issue on the agenda of the full trustee board meeting in October. Members of the commission said they would discuss the issue further at their August meeting and decide if it would be placed on the October agenda, Hill said, but that is too long to wait.

"I am surprised and disappointed," Hill told Associated Baptist Press. "They may or may not choose to recommend full board action, but waiting to find out is an unacceptable option. Their decision makes it necessary to present a motion on the floor of the [SBC] convention in two weeks that will force the trustees to address the issue before the next convention."

King, the NAMB spokesman, said the agency's policy was designed to honor the SBC's opposition to women pastors while not eliminating appropriate ministry by women.

"The North American Mission Board supports women in chaplaincy in positions that are not the equivalent of a senior pastor," King said June 3. "We renew our pledge to stand with any female Southern Baptist chaplain who is discriminated against because she is not ordained."

But Hill and others say the NAMB policy is impractical. In the armed services, you cannot separate the position of chaplain from the role of pastor, Hill said, and neither can female chaplains minister exclusively to female soldiers and families, as one NAMB trustee suggested. The military can make no such distinctions, Hill said.

Moreover, denominational endorsement "is never the spiritual or pastoral credential individual soldiers, sailors, airmen or marines look for in a chaplain," Hill said. "That young Southern Baptist in need is expecting the exact same thing he gets when he goes to his pastor at home – an ordained pastoral leader. He's never had to ask before, 'Are you a "real" minister?' With this policy in effect, he will now have to ask."

"To endorse anyone who has not been ordained is to proclaim the ordination of all Southern Baptist military chaplains as unnecessary and irrelevant," Hill added. "It is to strip all of us — in one stroke — of the sign and seal of our spiritual authority as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to do this to us while we labor in a vineyard more difficult to harvest than any local Southern Baptist church, where the infrastructure acknowledges and enhances the spiritual authority of the pastor."

Hill affirms that the NAMB decision was made "with the best intentions" by leaders facing "many complex and competing dynamics," and that the policy is "clearly directed toward women with the laudable goal of providing Southern Baptist women ministry opportunities that do not violate SBC opposition to women serving in senior pastoral leadership positions."

Nonetheless, not enough consideration was given to the military culture, Hill said.

By law, there are no positions of senior pastoral leadership that are "off-limits" to women military chaplains, he pointed out. "A woman, ordained or unordained, is expected to fulfill the same pastoral role as her male counterpart, from the first day in the military to her last."

All military chaplains, "preach the gospel, perform baptisms, provide communion, lead worship, teach the Word, conduct weddings and funerals, visit in hospitals and jails, around the world, at sea and in the field, in peacetime and in war," Hill pointed out.

Additionally rank, not gender, determines who is "in authority" in the military, he said. For example, he noted, a woman is the current Air Force Chief of Chaplains.

Hill also warned that the NAMB policy "removes Southern Baptist chaplains from the ranks of all other mainstream Christian denominations and aligns us squarely alongside Christian Scientists and Mormons, two religious groups that do not require ordination for endorsement for military chaplancy."

The two groups do not have ordained clergy at any level of their organizations. The U.S. Armed Forces do not dictate the criteria religious groups use in conferring endorsement.

Three months ago, Hill e-mailed 134 active-duty Navy chaplains endorsed by NAMB. Through May 27 he had received 40 replies and "had talked with another 12-15 in person." Though specific objections vary, Hill says, "none supports the policy in any way."

The Feb. 6 NAMB trustee action was in response to a motion at the 2001 Southern Baptist Convention meeting directing the agency "to stop endorsing women to the chaplaincy and adhere to both the scriptural requirements and the requirements of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message involving the pastorate, the exercise of spiritual authority and ordination."

The NAMB response affirmed women as chaplains who are "called and gifted to serve in many caring roles and have a tremendous role in evangelism and spiritual care as they minister in the midst of crises." Additionally, the trustees distinguished between ordination "as a local church action" and endorsement as "the action of a national agency."

NAMB trustee Barry Holcomb, writing in the Alabama Baptist newspaper in March, said the policy expressed "a fair understanding of Baptist polity and exercised appropriate doctrinal accountability to the SBC" while voicing "support for women in various roles of ministry with the exception of roles entailing ordination."

Hill, a Sunday school teacher at First Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va., is hopeful that, once the NAMB leadership recognizes the validity of the issues he is raising, there will be an effort to resolve them. But he is determined not to let the discussion die.

"I have spent 25 years as a faithful representative of the Southern Baptist Convention in the Sea Services of the United States," he told Associated Baptist Press. "I will continue to represent the Southern Baptist Convention as a NAMB-endorsed Navy chaplain until the NAMB removes my endorsement or until I have done everything I could morally do to get this policy changed and it remains in force."

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