

# ABP celebrates 20th birthday marked by growing pains

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) — July 17 marked the 20th birthday of Associated Baptist Press, an independent news service created by and for Baptists interested in a free press during a tumultuous time within the Southern Baptist Convention.

W.C. Fields (right) and Patricia Ayres, both longtime friends of ABP, mingle with ABP Executive Director David Wilkinson.

On July 17, 1990, the SBC Executive Committee voted in executive session to fire the two top editors of Baptist Press. The committee chairman said it was because members believed coverage was biased against conservatives that over the course of a decade had gained majorities on most of the convention's boards of trustees.

Upon learning he had lost his job as news editor, Dan Martin, 51, told a crowd of about 200 supporters at the Executive Committee headquarters in Nashville, Tenn., that leaders of the denomination wanted to replace the journalists at the convention's official news service with "their own minister of information."

"They want someone who will be a 'spin doctor,' who's going to put the spin on stories the way they want them," Martin predicted.

R.G. Puckett, editor of Biblical Recorder, news journal of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, called it "a day to live in Baptist infamy." He wrote about it on its anniversary every year until his retirement in 1998.

"Never in my many years in Baptist life have I witnessed something so unchristian and non-Baptistic," Puckett recalled.

Jeff Mobley, a Nashville attorney and member of the city's First Baptist Church, followed the firings with announcement of a new autonomous news service "guided by the highest tenet of professional journalism and the standard of Christian ethics."

Mobley, who at the time had been practicing law for fewer than 10 years, said he was asked out of the blue to help a new Baptist entity that needed to be incorporated in Tennessee. He met with a small group of Baptist state paper editors and others who had set into motion weeks earlier the idea for an alternative Baptist press.



David Wilkinson blows out candles on a birthday cake celebrating the news services 20th anniversary at a reception during the recent CBF General Assembly in Charlotte.

"I can't tell you why, but they decided that I would read the Declaration of Independence on behalf of the organization there in the auditorium of the Executive Committee building," said Mobley, who joined the founding board of directors as legal counsel and was elected as chair in 1994.

### **Editors defend 'free religious press'**

The Southern Baptist Press Association, an organization of Baptists

newspapers in state conventions affiliated with the SBC that 44 years earlier had been instrumental in establishing Baptist Press, immediately endorsed the concept.

A month before, at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in New Orleans, Martin and his boss, Baptist Press director Al Shackleford, were told their services would no longer be required. The men were advised to resign quietly — with severance benefits — or be fired. They chose to announce the threat June 26, 1990, in an article in Baptist Press.

The Executive Committee announced a special called meeting — the first in a quarter-century — to "consider the termination" of the editors. The state paper editors convened an emergency meeting July 6-7 in Dallas, where they adopted a resolution decrying the attempt "to suppress a free religious press."

Later a smaller group met informally to discuss the need for an alternative to Baptist Press. Bob Terry, at the time editor of Missouri's Word and Way and now at the Alabama Baptist, secured Floyd Craig, who owned a communications and marketing business with his wife, Anne, to begin producing Associated Baptist Press issues beginning that fall.

Craig said he was interested because of his longtime friendship with and admiration of W.C. Fields, the longtime director of Baptist Press who built a reputation among the secular journalists establishing the Southern Baptist news service as the nation's best in modeling openness, integrity and professional journalism.

"It really was a no-brainer for us to deal with ABP," Craig recalled. "It was a moment that the integrity of BP was destroyed after years."

### **A news service is born**

The inaugural issue, dated Sept. 26, 1990, announced that the first issue of

ABP was being sent to about 50 outlets mostly by fax. Craig, a veteran communicator who had worked for the SBC Christian Life Commission from 1967 to 1979 and for the governor of North Carolina before moving back to Nashville to start his own business, selected Martin as interim news director.

"For 10 years I have had the best journalism job in the Southern Baptist Convention," Martin said after being fired July 17 by Baptist Press. "Even if I had known the outcome, I would have come, because it has been a wonderful ride."

The emotional high was short-lived. By December Craig wrote directors reporting that the results of his fund-raising efforts fell short of the amount he had billed them for hourly fees. That set off a discussion that eventually ended ABP's relationship with Craig and Associates.

"Several of the board members felt the bills we submitted were excessive," said Anne Craig, who worked alongside her husband as ABP's copy editor.

"Nobody believes you when you say it took 'X hours' to do so-and-so," Floyd Craig added.

Directors began looking for a full-time executive editor. They removed "interim" from Martin's news director title, leading him to believe he was being considered for the job.

Even though he had violated their gag order, the Executive Committee gave Martin six months of severance pay, anyway. It was about to run out, so Martin needed a job. After being told he was told he had been too political and vocal in the SBC controversy to be editor, Martin wrote a letter to directors describing the experience as more painful than his firing the previous summer from Baptist Press.

## **The Warner years**

The board turned to Greg Warner, electing the 36-year-old associate editor of the Florida Baptist Witness and award-winning writer as ABP's first full-time employee effective May 1, 1991.

"I am excited about the future of ABP with a journalist such as Greg Warner on board, Charles Overby, the news organization's founding board chair, said at the time. "I am impressed by his ability and attitude."

Under Warner, ABP achieved financial stability, expanded staff and earned a good reputation among secular journalists following the SBC controversy, one of the top religion stories of the 1990s.

Warner [left](#) the job in 2008, when chronic back problems forced him into disability retirement at age 53. Last fall the organization [honored](#) Warner by naming him first recipient of a lifetime achievement award established in his name.

### **Changing times, changing audience**

"ABP's board of directors has tried over the past 10 years to find the appropriate outlet for its objective news coverage of Baptists," said Dan Lattimore, the current chair of the ABP board. "The state Baptist papers had been the initial users of our content. However, most state Baptist papers have become controlled by fundamentalists of their conventions. It has become a much less viable outlet for ABP."

Desiring to expand a reader base beyond its original audience of Baptist and secular newspapers, ABP launched FaithWorks, a lifestyle magazine aimed at young Christians in 1998.

While "a good quality product," Lattimore said ABP lacked resources to market and distribute the magazine widely enough to make it financially feasible. Directors [suspended](#) publication in 2004.

## **Present and future**

In 2007 Associated Baptist Press [entered](#) into a strategic partnership three historic Baptist state newspapers in an initiative called New Voice Media. Currently the partners — ABP, the Baptist Standard of Texas, Religious Herald in Virginia and Word and Way in Missouri — collaborate on news coverage and design.

Long-term [goals](#) include a state-of-the-art multi-media platform including web, print and other media — an "online gathering place for historic and progressive Baptists and other global Christians to share ideas."

"With the increasing use of electronic media by our constituents, we feel this will provide the best outlet for the future," Lattimore said.

In 2008 ABP [hired](#) David Wilkinson, a veteran Baptist communicator of 30 years, as executive director, separating the administration and day-to-day news operation that had been combined in Warner's job.

## **Looking back**

Floyd Craig said his original vision for ABP was that it would be a much larger and more influential organization than it has become, on par with Baptist Press during the W.C. Fields era as the news service of record for the secular press. With so many secular newspapers downsizing or eliminating their own religion reporting, however, Craig said a reputable Baptist news service is needed as much today as ever.

"I guess the story is sort of the day the world came tumbling down and they fired [the Baptist Press editors], there were people who rose up and did the right thing and carried on," said Anne Craig. "That was the intent."

*-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.*

