

ABP Executive Editor Greg Warner to step down, citing health reasons

August 27, 2008

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) — Greg Warner, who has led Associated Baptist Press since its infancy 18 years ago, informed the agency's directors and staff Aug. 26 that he would be stepping down for medical reasons.

Warner, 53, has been the independent Baptist news service's executive editor since 1991. On Aug. 28, he was scheduled to undergo his seventh spinal surgery since 2002. Afterward, he said in a letter, he would begin a 90-day sick leave that would, he expected, transition into permanent disability.

"[Y]ou are aware that my chronic back condition is increasingly limiting my ability to work and travel," Warner wrote to directors. "The inevitable day has come when I must tell you I am no longer physically able to do my job. I cannot give ABP the performance that it expects of its chief executive or I require of myself."

The surgery—a fourth lumbar spinal fusion—is the latest of more than a dozen medical procedures Warner has undergone in an effort to relieve back pain that surfaced in 1998.

Despite temporary improvements following some of the procedures, he said, his condition has degenerated to the point where he is in constant and significant pain requiring large doses of prescription pain-killers.

"For more than 10 years, I have continued to do my job despite degenerative-disc disease and failed-back syndrome," Warner wrote.

“Chronic, intractable pain now prevents me from sitting or standing for more than a few minutes at a time. For the past year and a half, your encouragement and cooperation has allowed me to continue in this role while working from home. Despite those accommodations, my health has continued to decline, now resulting in cognitive impairments and depression that only amplify the effects of chronic pain.”

He continued: “The surgery I face may temporarily slow the degeneration of my spine, but my doctors tell me the natural course of this disease will produce only worse symptoms and more limitations. So I am making the tough decisions now that will put me in the best position to manage the pain and give me the best chance to reclaim a healthy lifestyle.”

If his health allows, Warner said, he hopes eventually to work part-time as a consultant or freelance writer, perhaps for ABP.

In e-mail and telephone interviews, ABP leaders, current and former colleagues, and friends expressed both dismay at Warner’s circumstances and admiration for his role in journalism and in the Baptist movement.

“The Associated Baptist Press board of directors is deeply saddened by Greg’s health issues that are forcing him to seek full disability,” said ABP board chair Dan Lattimore, a University of Memphis dean and journalism professor.

“Greg has provided the leadership to give ABP a solid foundation and to prepare the organization to move forward in the ever-changing world of journalism and religious media.... We know he will continue to support our work, and someday we hope he can again write for ABP.”





Marv Knox (left), editor of the Texas Baptist Standard, and Greg Warner in the newsroom at a meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Marv Knox, editor of the *Texas Baptist Standard* and a member of ABP's board, said the announcement was especially difficult for him because Warner is not only a beloved peer and business partner, but a long-time friend.

"This plain hurts," he wrote. "Saying Greg is a respected colleague is only the start of it. For almost our whole adult lives, he's been a traveling companion, confidant, soulmate and fellow baseball fan. I can't imagine doing this work—especially going to big Baptist meetings—without him. I just love the guy."

Knox—whose newspaper has entered into a publishing and Internet partnership with ABP, the *Religious Herald* of Virginia and Missouri's *Word & Way*—noted some of the highlights of Warner's three-decade-long career in Baptist journalism.

"He's always been after the stories that explain faith, and life and doing church," Knox said. "Whether it's covering Baptists' initial response to AIDS—one of his early, ground-breaking news packages—or church

architecture, the 'Baptist battles' or the impact of changing worship styles, Greg has helped all of us understand the context in which we share our faith. We can't repay the debt we owe him."

Warner began work for ABP May 1, 1991, as the agency's first permanent employee. The organization was created July 17, 1990, as a result of bitter fighting between fundamentalists and moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention.

The struggles engulfed the nation's largest Protestant denomination for two decades beginning in 1979. After fundamentalists gained a majority on the SBC Executive Committee in 1990, they ousted the two top editors of the denomination's news service, Baptist Press.

Concerned editors of the most prominent Southern Baptist state-convention newspapers almost immediately joined together to form a news collective that would carry on BP's tradition of independent Baptist journalism, adhering to the same ethical standards as respected secular news sources.

Warner took the helm and built a fledgling organization into one that now has multiple editorial and administrative staff positions and a \$500,000 annual budget; operates news bureaus in Washington, D.C., and Dallas; and enjoys widespread respect among religious and secular journalists.

Warner "helped ABP to emerge at a time when the Southern Baptist Convention's news service was no longer willing or able to provide the kind of reliable news that Baptists expected," said Baptist historian Walter Shurden, a professor at Mercer University. "He has made a difference in religious journalism."

"Greg shaped a press organization that has achieved excellence in detail and thoroughness," said historian Bill Leonard, dean of the divinity school at Wake Forest University. "He exercised great courage in guiding a new organization out of the fragmentation of denominational controversy and

schism.”

ABP remains the only independent, daily news agency that reports on and for Baptists. Others are either periodicals or are controlled and funded by denominational organizations.

Charles Overby, president of the Freedom Forum and Newseum and Pulitzer Prize-winning former editor of the Jackson, Miss., *Clarion-Ledger*, was chairman of the first ABP board, which hired Warner. “Greg has demonstrated what good journalism is all about,” he said. “He is aggressive, fair and—above all—honest. He defines Christian journalism. He showed a Baptist can report about Baptist affairs with credibility. His leadership gave ABP a large national following. He is the reason that ABP has survived and succeeded for all these years.”

Others agreed. “Greg Warner has played a historic role within the Baptist family as the founding editor of Associated Baptist Press,” said Daniel Vestal, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. “His commitment to a free Baptist press and to journalistic integrity has been a valuable and valued contribution.”

Likewise, prominent secular religion editors and reporters praised Warner’s work and character.

“From the time I first started on the religion beat, Greg was a great source and informative guide to the world of Southern Baptists,” said Mark Pinsky, former religion editor for the *Orlando Sentinel* and author of several books on faith and culture. “In his soft-spoken way, he provided insight and humor to what was often a rancorous story. Over time, he became my friend as well.”

Gustav Niebuhr, a professor of religion and media at Syracuse University and former religion reporter for several prominent newspapers including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, said he would miss Warner’s

byline.

“I consider Greg to be a paragon of ethical, enterprising and courageous journalism. He is one of the people who has really stood up for the free flow — and fearless flow — of information about religious affairs in this country at a time when that is oh-so-necessary, as it will continue to be,” he said. “I believe he has made a great contribution to journalism in establishing Associated Baptist Press and that will be an institution that I think will define him for many of us who have had the good, good fortune to know him.”

Adelle Banks, a reporter who covers Baptists for Religion News Service, said she would miss his presence at denominational meetings. “I have learned from his stories and appreciated his professional presence in the newsroom of the annual Southern Baptist Convention,” she said. “I admire his ability to meet the demands and necessary diligence of journalism as he dealt with a most difficult condition, and am sorry he has reached a point where he feels that is not currently possible.”

Although Warner was born in Upstate New York, he was raised in Lakeland, Fla. He graduated from Florida Southern College in Lakeland and earned master’s degrees in divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth and in journalism from the University of North Texas.

He began his journalism career while still in college, with one foot in each of the worlds of secular and Christian journalism. He worked in photography for the Florida United Methodist Conference, but also worked as a sports reporter for the *Lakeland Ledger*, his hometown newspaper.

While in seminary at Southwestern, Warner was a news writer in the school’s public-relations office. In 1980, he became news coordinator for the now-defunct Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission, also in

Fort Worth.

In 1985, he moved back to his home state to become associate editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, based in Jacksonville. Warner held that position until he was hired to head ABP, which is still headquartered in Jacksonville.

His wife, Cheryl, is the rehabilitation manager for Baptist Health Systems, which operates four hospitals in the Jacksonville area. Their two adult children are both students. Dane, 25, lives in Jacksonville, and Shawn, 22, is in Austin, Texas.

The Warners are longtime members of Jacksonville's Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church.

ABP leaders said the organization is already moving forward with creating a new position — executive director — to handle Warner's administrative and development duties while creating a separate managing editor's position to oversee daily operation of the news side of the agency's business.

"As sad as it is to leave this ministry, I truly am excited about the future of ABP," Warner said. "The proposed staff structure and our new partnerships are just what ABP needs to make the most of our opportunities. And I'll do anything I can to ensure that success."