

Retired Georgia Baptist editor Jack Harwell dies

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MORROW, Ga. (BP)—Jack Harwell, editor of *The Christian Index* for 21 years during his 30 years with Georgia Baptists' newsjournal, died Jan. 18 at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta.

A family obituary described Harwell, 86, as “a respected editor, but a controversial one, serving during a time of division in Baptist life over both theological and social issues.”

The family obituary also stated: “Perhaps his greatest editorial was written after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Harwell called him ‘a noble Baptist leader’ who ‘did more to help his race and to combat the evil oppression of racism and inequality than any other person in modern times.’ He called on Georgia Baptists to be in the forefront in seeking ‘human equality for all our citizens.’”

That editorial was reprinted on the front page of *The Atlanta Constitution*, and Harwell received obscene phone calls and death threats as a result, the family noted.



Jack Harwell

Born in Mobile, Ala., Harwell made a profession of faith in Christ at age 13; earned an undergraduate journalism degree from Samford University in Birmingham; and served as a public relations specialist for the U.S. Army from 1953 to 1956 and the U.S. Air Force in 1957.

He was associate editor of *The Christian Index* from 1957 until he was named editor in 1966 at age 34. He was the 1977 president of the Southern Baptist Press Association.

After the election of Adrian Rogers as Southern Baptist Convention president in 1979, theological controversy at the state level became “most evident in Georgia,” wrote Jesse Fletcher in his book, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History*. Fletcher cited Harwell as a major point of controversy for Southern Baptists who supported what they called the “conservative resurgence” in the SBC.

At the Georgia Baptist Convention’s annual meeting in November 1979, Harwell received a vote of confidence from messengers, with 2,500 standing to vote for a motion to express “full confidence in the personal and professional integrity of the editor” and 500 voting against.

In August 1986, *The Christian Index* board of directors created an editorial review board to “reflect the spirit and theological position of Georgia and Southern Baptists” in response to a 32-page document of complaints after Harwell had editorialized against conservative nominees elected to the SBC’s boards, commissions and committees at that year’s SBC annual meeting.

In October of the following year, Harwell announced his resignation, stating that he “could not continue with the restrictions or the pressures that have been created by the review board analyzing everything we do.”

At that year’s annual meeting in November, Harwell’s supporters prevailed in a vote that he return to the paper. But the following month, the

convention's executive committee, vested with final hiring authority, narrowly voted that Harwell's resignation remain in effect.

Harwell retired on Dec. 31, 1987, at age 55. Among tributes printed in *The Index*, Presnall Wood, president of the Southern Baptist Press Association and editor of the *Baptist Standard*, wrote that Harwell "believed and practiced 'trust the Lord and tell the people' as he sounded a strong note for responsible editorial freedom in Baptist life."

Harwell subsequently served 10 years as editor of *SBC Today*, a publication of Baptist moderates subsequently named *Baptists Today*. He later served 10 years as minister of pastoral care at First Baptist Church in Morrow, Ga., where he was ordained to the ministry and his wife Teliea served as minister to senior adults.

In addition to his wife, Harwell is survived by a son, Ron; three grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.