

NATION

Southern Baptists expel churches for allowing homosexual weddings

MACON, Ga. (AP) — Georgia's Southern Baptists voted overwhelmingly yesterday to expel two churches that let homosexuals serve as leaders and allowed a gay wedding. The ouster of Oakhurst Baptist of Ocala and Virginia Highland Baptist of Atlanta marked the first time in the 177-year history of the Georgia Baptist Convention that it has taken such action. The convention changed its constitution last year to exclude congregations that "affirm, approve and endorse homosexual behavior."

"It's a heartbreaking thing to be in a situation where you have to make a decision like this," the Rev. Gerald Harris, president of the Georgia Baptist Convention, said. "We just decided to draw the line."

Texas is the only other Southern Baptist state convention to expel a church over the issue of homosexuality, the Rev. Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's ethics and religious liberty mission, said. The national convention expelled two North Carolina churches in the early '90s for similar reasons.

Elsewhere yesterday, a split between conservative and liberal factions within California's Southern Baptists was clear as delegates gathered in Sacramento to decide whether to drop "Southern" from their name.

"We just decided to draw the line."

— The Rev. Gerald Harris
Georgia Baptist Convention

In Georgia, about 20 percent to 30 percent of Oakhurst Baptist's congregation is gay or lesbian, the Rev. Mary Sue Brookshire said. In addition, Oakhurst's assistant pastor, the Rev. Chris Copeland, is openly gay. Oakhurst and Virginia Highland Baptist also have gay deacons.

Also, Virginia Highland allowed an outside pastor to use its church for a gay wedding, although its own clergy did not participate.

The Rev. Tim Shirley of Virginia Highland said his church believes

"its ministry and mission is to serve all who come."

"We just disagree about the nature of sexuality," Shirley said. "We do not believe that sexuality is a choice. It's an orientation. That's how you were born."

The Georgia Baptist Convention said it could no longer tolerate churches that ordained homosexual people as deacons or performed same-sex marriage ceremonies.

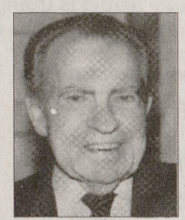
"We know that they do not value the Holy Scriptures as a great majority of Southern Baptists do," Harris said.

The vote to oust Oakhurst was 2,086 to 262, and the vote on Virginia Highland was 2,111 to 228. In California, opponents of the proposed name change said it shows a softening of a conservative movement within the church. Supporters said it was simply a way to attract more members.

Terry Barone, a spokesperson for the California Southern Baptist Convention, said it was intended to prevent confusion because the word "Southern" was used "to distinguish ourselves from the American Baptists at one time."

Lawyers argue monetary value of Nixon's items

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thousands of dollars for President Nixon's handwritten self-critiques. Several hundred thousand for his "I am not a quitter" resignation speech. Millions more for his secret tape recordings. Add it all up, lawyers representing the former president's estate told a court yesterday, and it is worth \$35.5 million plus millions more in compounded interest.



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Not so, the government said. The Nixon estate lawyers' estimated values of Nixon items are based on a "mythical, magical, make-believe world of their dreams," Neil Koslowe, a justice Department lawyer, told U.S. District Judge John Barrett Penn.

Yesterday was the finale of a lengthy trial to determine how much — if anything — the government should pay Nixon's heirs for the more than 40 million pages of documents, 3,700 hours of tape recordings, photos and other items it confiscated when Nixon resigned.

Former White House Counsel John Dean and Alexander Butterfield, the Nixon aide who spilled the beans about Nixon's secret tape-recording system, testified at the trial, as did scores of historians and archivists.

The estate says it wants \$35.5 million, plus millions in interest.

If the judge placed a \$30 million value on the materials, for example, the total compensation, including interest, compounded annually, would be roughly \$210 million, according to Nixon estate lawyer R. Stan Mortenson.

Justice Department lawyers remain opposed to any compensation. But they say if something must be paid, a fair value would be no more than \$2.2 million.

"The court should put an end to this attempt by the Nixon estate to obtain a windfall from the taxpayers," the government said in its post-trial brief.

To underscore the material's historical value, Mortenson replayed a video of Nixon making his resignation speech. The teary-eyed president's words to the nation on Aug. 8, 1974, broke the silence in the courtroom: "I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is complete is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. ... Therefore I shall resign the presidency effective at noon tomorrow."

Drafts and the actual copy of the speech in Nixon's hand as he announced his resignation would have sold for \$200,000 to \$300,000, according to appraisers hired by the estate. Even tapes containing Nixon's embarrassing ethnic slurs would have been valuable, he said.

Koslowe, the government's lawyer, argued Nixon intended his materials to be preserved as a historical archive for researchers.

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