

A clear voice
for Christian
freedom,
distinctively
Baptist and
intentionally
ecumenical in an
interfaith world.

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connections

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We Have This Ministry — Reconciliation

40 years to reconciliation

“It was just a natural thing. It was the most unheroic thing. We had no choice; we just did what we had to do.”

These are the words Denny Spear uses to describe his decision to resign.

The church had just voted to prohibit the seating of any black worshipers, and between the church and the parsonage which was only two doors down, Denny looked at his wife Varion and together they said, “That’s it.” Denny would have to resign as pastor. They had four children and no other job prospects.

It was 1963, and when a deacon and chair of the ushers declared that he would allow a black worshiper to enter “over his dead body,” Spear asked the church to vote on the matter. He hoped and believed that they might vote to allow black worshipers.

But “people came out of the woodwork,” and the congregation voted decisively to prohibit any black worshipers, the deacon chair insisting that there would be no more conversation. Spear says they left without bitterness, hoping that their absence might allow the conversation to continue.

It did. Last year, 40 years later, they were asked to lead a retreat for their former church. Among the attendees was one black

woman. Spear knows that this ministry requires a vision for the long haul.



This short testimony was written by Mel Williams, pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, NC, and Stan Wilson, pastor of Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, MS, and co-chair of the 2006 Convocation Task Group. Their epilogue:

“Today, we are writing this together because we recognize another fruit of the long and faithful ministry of Denny Spear. One of us, Mel, was a member of that church which voted to close its doors. Mel was in college, his brother was in the midst of the church struggle as a youth, and his father was forced to vote against that majority.

“The other of us was just a child when Spear found his next pulpit at Dunwoody Baptist Church outside of Atlanta, a position he accepted only after that church assured him they had an open membership policy. Each of us knows that we were deeply formed by the quiet, funny, gentle and gracious witness of Denny Spear. Thanks be to God for faithful pastors. May we be found faithful also.”

A Call for Stories

The Alliance is seeking stories of simple acts of faithfulness in confronting racism. Whether they occurred 40 years ago or are more recent, we plan to gather names and stories at our upcoming Convocation in Birmingham. Some of these stories will be woven into a narrative to be presented at each gathering. Others will be displayed in the halls. Please make your own commendations as soon as possible by sending stories and, if possible, photographs, to Beverly Rodgers, 2930 Auburn Falls Lane, Houston, TX 77084, email: bevjon@sbcglobal.net, 713.995.8320 (fax). The story presented on this page is just one example of an act of faithfulness.

2006 Alliance Convocation: April 21-23
Southside Baptist Church, Birmingham, AL

Confirmed speakers include
Willie Jennings, Duke Divinity School
James Abbington, Candler School of Theology
Joyce Hollyday, Circle of Mercy, Asheville

Join
convocation 2006
US

Lambeth Cross awarded to Malkhaz Songulashvili

By Alliance member Roger Crook
Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, Raleigh

Malkhaz Songulashvili, Bishop of the Evangelical Baptist Union of the Republic of Georgia and pastor of Central Baptist Church of Tbilisi, was awarded the Lambeth Cross by the Archbishop of Canterbury in recognition of his ecumenical activity.

The Baptist Union is a recipient of Alliance Mission Offering funds.

During his visit to Lambeth Palace, Malkhaz spoke about "Religion and Politics in Georgia," addressing some of the problems faced recently by non-Orthodox churches.

Malkhaz was also installed as an "Ecumenical Canon." That honorary designation recognized his work for reconciliation between the Baptists and the Orthodox in Georgia, and between Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

Ecumenicity has been a career-long emphasis of Malkhaz. While he was a graduate student at the University of Tbilisi, he had been appointed by the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church to a three-person committee which produced a modern translation of the Bible into Georgian. He has consistently maintained friendly contact with leaders of all the religious groups in Georgia.



The Missions Committee at work in Raleigh.

Missions committee has special session to plan work

The Missions Committee of the Alliance board met for a day-long work session in Raleigh, NC, in early November.

The committee worked on the specifics of the new part-time Missions Coordinator position that has been filled by former board member Bonnie Dixon of Raleigh.

It also spent time discussing partnership development, especially with the Baptist Fellowship of Brazil, a new missions partner in 2006; and talked about the promotion and funding of the mission offering and appropriate communication with the recipients.

The committee heard a report from executive director Stan Hasteley about the emerging multi-Baptist group

called Baptist Builders, organized to help with Hurricane Katrina relief. (See the November issue of *connections* for more about this effort.)

"We talked about how we could help channel work teams to coordinate with this group," said Missions Committee chair Joann Davis. "We were not prepared to consider financial contributions since the board had voted at its meeting in Houston to send hurricane relief funds to Alliance-endorsed chaplains affected by the hurricane."

"With the knowledge this is a long term effort, we felt that we could grow into partnership," Joann said.

Missions Coordinator responsibilities

- 1) Manage and coordinate *Face to Face Fund* in dialogue with Missions Committee. *Face to Face* is the line item in the Mission Offering budget that helps fund travel for Alliance mission partners while they are in the US.
- 2) Coordinate US itineraries of visiting representatives of international partners. This involves church organizations and individual hosting.
- 3) Communicate with Convocation Committee about program participation of visiting partners.
- 4) To the extent possible, assist in the development and nurture of international and domestic partners.

ALLIANCE FINANCES

Through October 30, 2005

Budget needs	\$312,040
Receipts	\$257,715
Mission Offering Goal	\$115,000
Mission Offering Receipts	\$80,725

Churches interested in hosting international partners who are visiting the US around the time of the 2006 Convocation should contact Bonnie Dixon, bjadixon@earthlink.net.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” (First Amendment to the Constitution)

As a citizen of the United States, the first of my reasons for thanksgiving is the freedom of religion contained in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Notwithstanding the nonsense put out by the National Rifle Association and Charlton Heston, the Second Amendment’s purported guarantee of an absolute right to keep and bear arms emphatically is not our first freedom. That hallowed place in our constitutional construct belongs to the first of our enumerated liberties, as quoted above.

Together with the declaration at the end of Article VI of the body of the Constitution (“... no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States”), the religion clauses of the First Amendment constitute the bulwark of our defense against the tyranny of state-imposed religion. Make no mistake about it: The great danger facing our country at a time of historic transition at the U.S. Supreme Court is that religion will be used as a test of orthodoxy or even a weapon of repression by the state.

Is this the assessment of an alarmist? Hardly, given the publicly declared war on the institutional separation of church and state mandated by the religion clauses of the First Amendment. Among the holy warriors are to be counted D. James Kennedy, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and an entire host of spokesmen for the Southern Baptist Convention that includes virtually every one of the presidents of that body over the past quarter of a century. Perhaps more significant than any of these is the influence on the current administration of Richard Land, head of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. According to Time magazine, he is one of the 25 most influential persons on the Bush administration.

All these seek a radical reinterpretation of the history of church-state relations both in this country and elsewhere. Either they do not know that history or they are intentionally distorting it to make the case that Christianity – and especially their brand of Christianity – should receive preferential treatment from the state. Their constant moaning about state persecution of Christianity amounts to nothing more than a smokescreen as they lobby for such preference.

Were the case for such radicalism being made only by religionists, it would be easier to dismiss than it actually is. The sad and dangerous truth is that such views already have standing within the Supreme Court, principally in the written opinions of Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas and in those of the late Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist.

Of Mr. Rehnquist it must be noted simply that in an infamous dissenting opinion in the case known as *Wallace v. Jaffree*, he launched an all-out attack on Thomas Jefferson’s image of a wall of separation, declaring it “a metaphor based on bad history” that “should be frankly and explicitly abandoned.” Rehnquist’s opinion itself is riddled with historical inaccuracies and misrepresentations.

As for the two sitting justices repeatedly cited by President Bush as his models for appointments to the high court, it should be noted that Mr. Thomas’s stated view is that the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause does not forbid anything other than the enshrinement of a national religion. The 50 states, he has famously declared, are free under the Establishment Clause to enshrine state religions to their hearts’ delight. As on so many other constitutional issues, Justice Thomas’s views are so rigid that one wonders why he believes appellate courts are needed at all if their only task is to restate what the Constitution literally says.

The views of Justice Scalia, in contrast, are harder to dismiss. Not only does he rule consistently against a strict interpretation of the Establishment Clause, he has demonstrated open hostility to the evolution of the interpretation of the Free Exercise Clause. For those who under the guise of strict construction dismiss the inevitability of such an evolution, one must begin with a reminder that as early as 1879 a unanimous court supported the federal government’s effort by statute to stamp out polygamy as then practiced by Mormons. This was the first instance in which the high court limited the scope of the Free Exercise Clause.

Building on that exception in the 1990 case of *Employment Division v. Smith*, Justice Scalia amplified the principle that the Supreme Court may limit claims of free exercise. In a precedent-shattering 5-4 ruling, Scalia did not limit himself to the particular facts in the case at hand but instead ruled sweepingly that governmental agencies no longer must demonstrate a “compelling” interest in order to limit free exercise of religion, but only a “reasonable basis” for doing so. The “compelling interest” standard as previously applied in a long line of cases, he chose to add, is a “luxury we can no longer afford.” So much for respecting settled law or contending for strict construction of the very words enshrined in the Constitution.

Thus the present danger to religious liberty in this country has to do with a stunning new approach to First Amendment interpretation by the Rehnquist court. This is not a conservative approach to jurisprudence, as there is nothing conserving about it. It should be seen for what it is – a radical judicial reinterpretation of both religion clauses. It is the continuation and potential expansion of such radicalism that should concern senators as they interrogate Judge Samuel A. Alito about his judicial philosophy.



By Stan Hasteley
Executive Director



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ALLIANCE BOARD MEMBER PROFILE

BROOKS WICKER

Brooks Wicker has been a member of the Alliance since its inception and has missed only two Convocations during that time, the first one at Meredith College and the one in Greenville, SC, that gave birth to BTSR.

This year, she began serving her second term on the board.

“The years of the 1980s were so difficult for me,” Brooks said. “Mother Church left me in the dust and it was so maddening and confusing and hurtful,” she said.

“I was particularly incensed over the SBC’s stance on women in ministry. A good friend of mine was attempting to respond to her call to ministry during those years. She was a preacher’s kid, went to a Baptist college and a Baptist seminary, was so gifted. But the SBC slammed the door in her face repeatedly. Someone at the seminary told her to stay in seminary, marry someone going to the mission field and ride his coattails. ‘After all, you are working for God, not yourself? Right?’ she was told. Incredible.”

“I see the Alliance as an organization that

continues to cry out even into the wilderness about women in ministry and so many other equality and justice issues. I want to be part of that movement.”

Brooks has been a member of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church since she moved to Raleigh from Florida in 1991. “Pullen has been life-giving to me and I am heavily invested in its work and ministry,” she said.

Brooks is a native of Red Springs, NC, She began a career in banking after graduating from UNC-Chapel Hill in 1982. She started her own bank consulting business in 2000. Her area of expertise is in loan accounting software and she is frequently asked to assist with bank mergers as two banks are working to combine loan software systems.

She and her partner Pat Hielscher are in the process of designing plans for a new house. “Pat has just retired so she is adjusting to a different rhythm now. We enjoy our garden, sports and travel. We are both heavily invested at Pullen so spend quite a bit of our time there,” she said.

