

CHURCH TAKEOVERS: A TRUE VIRGINIA BAPTIST STORY *from the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV) and Virginia Baptists Committed (VBC)*

(You can find this material plus more at <http://www.virginiabaptistscommitted.org/docs/TruthfullySpeaking.pdf>.)

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Listen to the pain of some Virginia Baptist church members who have experienced attempts, some successful and some unsuccessful, by ultraconservatives to take over their churches and move them out of the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV.) They are first-hand observers who expose things that are really happening in Virginia, but wish to remain anonymous so they won't create more pain among family, friends and church members who have found themselves in conflict. Invariably, when one of the interviewees heard what had happened in other churches, he or she said something like: "That's what happened to us! How did they know that?"*

"This thing [Fundamentalist takeovers of churches] has split families and friends; some won't even talk to each other anymore," the Virginia Baptist layperson said with obvious pain. "It's taking us a long time to heal."

If this Virginia Baptist, one of several interviewed from different churches, had been standing in a literal war zone, he would have described the smell of scorched earth and the sight of destroyed buildings, bomb craters and battered bodies.

Instead, he stood in a fractured church and spoke of the "spiritual stench" created by scorched lives, lost trust, deep grief, great anger, overwhelming bitterness, wounded spirits, and much disgust all rolled into one.

This Virginia Baptist and others interviewed did not speak about a shooting war but of a no-holds-barred political battle waged by ultraconservatives to take over her or his church and move it out of the Baptist General Association of Virginia (BGAV) into another state Baptist group. (See "**Church Stealing Charged in States With Competing Conventions**" on p. 12 at <http://www.virginiabaptistscommitted.org/docs/TruthfullySpeaking.pdf>.)

People who have experienced a takeover describe it as an effort to gain victory at any cost – no matter how many people may get hurt or discredited or how many untruths and half-truths must be told.

One person said takeover tactics remind him of the neutron bomb developed in earlier years – a weapon that kills people with radiation but leaves most buildings intact. Takeover tactics explode lives, reputations and relationships in an attempt to discredit and disfellowship any opposition that stands in the way. They pit people against each other, creating fear, anger and discord.

"My Bible says that God is not the author of anger, fear, discord and confusion," said one person, whose church survived the takeover attempt but went through a long healing process. "They sowed those unholy seeds in my church."

Correct Information – an Important Element

The above church survived because correct information got into the hands of enough people to head off the process, but it left no less pain. In many situations, information is spread too little, too late, or not at all.

Why Is That?

“Hindsight is 20-20, but it’s easy to see that there’s enough blame to go around,” said one former member of a church that was taken over. “Our previous pastor sheltered us from the denominational controversy, our messengers don’t attend the sessions at Baptist meetings, our people don’t read about what is happening and get upset when anyone tries to tell them the truth.”

A Fundamentalist pastor publicly told one teacher, who talked about the controversial *2000 Baptist Faith and Message* in her Sunday School class, that she had “desecrated” the class by discussing such issues.

A Lesson Learned

“One of the most important lessons learned,” one church member said, “was that a great deal of effort and time must go into providing information on both sides of the issues so everyone may make a decision based on correct information.

“We need to know where we have been as Baptists,” this church member continued, “where we are now, and in which direction we need to go to protect the autonomy of the local church congregation, which in turn protects our basic beliefs of individual religious freedom and responsibility.

“We will lose our individual religious freedom if we allow a pastor who believes strongly in pastoral authority to make decisions for us.

“People need to know this is happening – that the pastor sometimes acts as if he believes that he serves in the role of the Holy Spirit – to dwell with us (John 14:17), to inspire the Scriptures and speak through them (Acts 1:16) according to his understanding of what the Scriptures mean to him.

“We are not supposed to read our Bible and seek understanding through the Holy Spirit that dwells within us. This is why the *Baptist Faith and Message* recently had deleted from its content that ‘Jesus Christ is the criterion for interpretation of the Scriptures,’” the church member concluded.

How Takeovers Happen

Takeovers happen in different ways in different locations: Sometimes, as one pastor relates, they begin slowly and move along subtly. For example, a Fundamentalist with a strong personality comes into the church and starts sowing seeds of discord. He may hold private meetings to convince individuals that the truth is not being proclaimed in that church.

He gives liberally and offers to serve. People trust him. He becomes a Sunday School teacher, a deacon, and chairman of committees. He may quietly assemble followers. He or others may secretly tape-record Sunday School classes to ferret out dissent.

Other new members may join the church with the hidden agenda to align with him. Some church members may see through this scheme early-on, but others won’t believe them and will criticize

them, even as he and his group begin to sow discontent and manipulate the nomination and election processes for church positions.

Then the pastor leaves to go to another church, and the group of crusaders begins to manipulate the replacement process and to stack the pastor search committee with people who will vote to bring in a like-minded pastor.

Search Committee Deceit

First-hand observers tell of cases in which résumés and recommendation letters were doctored to conceal the Fundamentalist background of a candidate in previous churches. The rationale? “We can’t let the people see that type of information.”

And they tell of search committees where a chairman eliminates résumés and letters of recommendation from any source other than a Fundamentalist one. They tell of pastor search committees who become so secretive about the process that no one in the church is told anything until a candidate is brought forward.

Pastoral Deceit

In another scenario, a pastor leaves, and a pastor search committee begins the search in good faith. They may ask a potential pastor whether he has any political agenda, where he stands on certain issues, and whether he supports the BGAV.

In too many cases, they are told “a lie – that’s the only thing you can call it,” one church member said. He will tell them what they want to hear and that he is 100 percent behind the BGAV. Then, at some point, he begins the drumbeat to persuade the church to ignore the BGAV and its programs and publications and, eventually, to abandon affiliation with the BGAV to join the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia (SBCV).

He begins to inundate the church with outside speakers and publications that advocate a Fundamentalist point of view that contradicts what he told the pastor search committee and what he himself is now preaching.

Asked what he would do differently in the future, a former pastor search committee member said, “I’d insist on giving the prospective pastor a lie detector test.”

“My new pastor took off his ‘sheep’s clothing’ fairly soon,” another person related, “and began to run down the BGAV with what turned out to be lies about such issues as homosexuality, abortion, Bible belief, Cooperative Program support, relations with the SBC, etc.” For example, many Baptists are falsely led to believe that the BGAV supports homosexual behavior, employs known homosexuals, and condones same-sex marriages.

Congregational Deceit

New members, often bearing a hidden agenda, join the church and quickly voice their support of the pastor’s viewpoint, while helping him to browbeat and intimidate people who raise any objection.

People who object will be publicly embarrassed, backstabbed with gossip, pitted against each other, or told they are unspiritual when they object because God talks directly to the pastor and not to them. They are told to leave the church or stay home if they disagree. Often, conspirators call committee meetings and fail to invite those who might disagree.

Disgusted and disillusioned members begin to leave the church, “and new ones come in as fast as the older ones leave,” said one former member of a taken-over church.

Women Targeted and Browbeaten

Women become a special target. They are intimidated, embarrassed, silenced rudely, condescended to, or lectured. Even long-time faithful women Sunday School teachers may be told that they are no longer allowed to teach any class in which there are any males – “even down to the fourth-grade level,” one woman said.

According to those interviewed, only the pastor’s view of what the Bible says about the role of women in marriage and in the church is allowed – and only part of what the Bible says about women is preached.

Members of Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU), who tend to be the church members most well-informed about the denomination, are marginalized even more. Mailed materials related to WMU may be thrown in the trash. The pastor may adamantly refuse to allow WMU promotions or speakers.

The pastor may try to change the church’s pre-selected patterns of giving through the BGAV so that its money won’t have to mix with any money considered “tainted” – money, that is, that goes to groups with which he disagrees.

“Our pastor said if your dollar lies in the offering plate with a dollar someone gave to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, that makes you sinful,” one member said.

Church members report that people involved in takeovers try to convince them that the BGAV opposes, and will not cooperate with, the Southern Baptist Convention.

“We have to get the word out that that is untrue,” one said. The BGAV cooperates with all willing Baptists in missions, and it allows churches to give through different tracks to support different causes.

“That’s called the autonomy of the local church – the very thing the people taking over want to destroy.”