

# Baptist leader bears all to press

By Judy Candis and Iris B. Holton  
Special to Sentinel-Voice  
From the Florida Sentinel  
(Reporters sat down for an interview with the Rev. Henry Lyons Friday, Aug. 15 at his church, Bethel Metropolitan Missionary Baptist Church in St. Petersburg, Fla.)

## The incident that led to the scandal

On July 6, Deborah Lyons, wife of Rev. Henry J. Lyons was arrested by St. Petersburg police and charged with burglary of a dwelling and with arson. However, nearly a month later, the States Attorney's Office elected to only officially charge Deborah Lyons with arson. If convicted she would face a maximum of 33 years in prison.

Upon her arrest, Mrs. Lyons initially told investigators that she had set fires inside a \$700,000 home in the exclusive Tierra Verde neighborhood, after discovering papers showing that the property belonged to her husband and an employee of the National Baptist Convention USA Inc., Bernice Edwards.

Both the reverend and Edwards were in Nigeria at the time of the incident. Deborah Lyons later recanted her initial statement.

Upon his return, Henry Lyons spoke with the media. Since the arrest of his wife, and that first press conference, the media has portrayed the church leader as a flamboyant, womanizing, glamour-craving Mercedes Benz-driving minister.

### The interview

Q: Why did you speak at the initial press conference?

A: It took me four days to get back to the country and I acted on the best advice I was given at the time. I was told that I needed to say something, but not to answer any questions.

Q: If you could relive that time period what would you do differently?

A: I would not have a press conference at all. Instead, I would have just gathered my family together and remained silent.

Q: Why did Mrs. Lyons recant her initial statement?

A: As you know, my wife has been charged and is still facing a trial. I cannot comment on that because of legal reasons.

Q: You have been accused of playing the "race card." How do you respond?

A: Racism is still real. Race with me is no game to play. It is not a card I'm holding to toss out at anytime. Nothing like this has ever happened to any white American in this country. Over 100 articles on me have been printed in six weeks. The *St. Petersburg Times* or someone has some sort of personal vendetta against me. This character assassination is all about race. The Savings and Loan scandal brought this country to its knees, but you never heard the men involved having their lives exposed and their background researched to this degree.

Q: Have you hired legal eagle Willie Gary to represent you?

A: No, but I have talked to Attorney Tony Battaglia.

Q: What role has Brenda Harris played in [all] this? Why does she have a membership at an exclusive country club in

## State, feds probing pastor's bank records

MOBILE, Ala. - Thanks to an appeals court ruling, state investigators now have the bank records of the leader of the nation's largest black church.

Attorneys for the church leader had tried to block the release of the bank records, citing privacy concerns, but an appeals court and that there was no reason to keep the records secret.

Investigators picked up Friday the bank records of the Rev. Henry Lyons, head of the Nashville, Tenn.-based Nation Baptist USA Convention, an 8.5 million member denomination.

Both state and federal prosecutors are probing Lyon's financial dealings.

The pastor was pushed into the spotlight after his wife Deborah Lyons was arrested for setting fires to a \$700,000 Florida waterfront she found deeded to her husband and Bernice Edwards, the convention's former public relations director.

Deborah Lyons has since recanted her initial police statement. Lyons and Edwards were in Nigeria when the house was set afire, prompting questions of marital infidelity.

Suspensions of infidelity grew even stronger when it was revealed that Lyons had given some of the convention's money to Edwards to buy a ring.

Nashville that was reportedly paid for by a check from the National Baptist Convention's account?

A: I met Brenda Harris in 1994. She was working to get the convention to come to San Diego in June 1995. Ninety percent of what we do is meet. We needed a professional meeting planner. We are preachers but not necessarily planners. I hired Harris, Dr. E. L. Thomas as director of the Sunday School Publishing Board and Dr. Walter Cade, who now directs the World Center in Nashville.

We try to give them whatever perks we can - cars, housing etc. The membership

club for as long as I can remember.

Q: Who is Bre Jones? Are she and Bernice Edwards the same person?

A: Yes. Her name is Bernice Jones Edwards and Bre is her nickname. She is a friend of both me and my wife. She and my wife work together and we are all good friends. My wife and I agreed that if something were to happen to her that we would take custody of her three kids. She is widowed. And I am beneficiary on many of her business deals because of her agreement. We are very good friends but have never been lovers.

Q: What role does she play in the National Baptist Convention?

A: I met her in 1993 while I was campaigning for office. She offered her help and was a great help in my campaign. After my campaign was over, she wanted a job. Before I hired her for the job of Director of Public Relations for the Convention, I checked with both Dr. Donnie Sims and Fred Caruthers. Both gave her a clean bill of health.

Q: Did you check everyone before you hired them?

A: No. That was the first time.

Q: What about the check drawn on the Baptist Builder's Fund that paid for Edwards' ring.

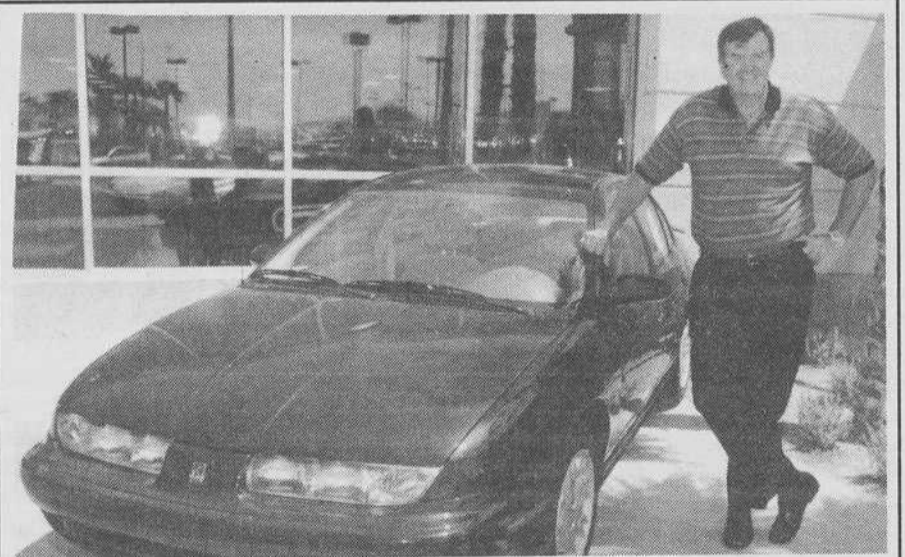
A: When I became president I changed the Baptist Builder's Fund to the Standard Barrier Program which means our convention needed a fund to transact day to day financial business. But I never changed the memo of the account at the bank. The Board of Directors know that I have to have a discretionary account. Although, it was never officially declared as a discretionary account, there was no harm intended and no harm done.

In December, 1996, Edwards had given me two checks totaling \$50,000 to hold for her. I deposited the money into the Baptist Builder's account. I admit that I should not have put the money into that account. I acknowledge that mistake. I was trying to get ready to leave town for a convention at the time.

We had a convention coming up and I asked her if I could borrow some of her (See Lyons, Page 19)

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