TAB Editors as Leaders of a Baptist entity

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We as journalists — we are people of stories. We give our lives to stories, both hearing them and sharing them. But honestly, when it comes down to it, that's what we all are — people of stories. It is stories that make up our lives, our years, our photo albums and our Facebook walls. Every photo, every room of our house and every trail we've been down has a story.

We at *The Alabama Baptist* say that about the paper — that it's full of our collective story. That's what we use the newsprint for, to soak those stories up and pass them around. That's what artists say about canvases too — that as they drain a paintbrush out on them, that canvas soaks up the story, to hold it in and save it.

We have four canvases at *The Alabama Baptist* building that collectively tell quite the story. I will always remember the first time I walked in the building and saw them — Julia Cain, the editorial intern at the time, gave me the tour. We ended up in the boardroom, and as we walked through, there's something I couldn't help but notice — the four men looking at me from the wall. Julia called them all by name — L.L. Gwaltney, Leon Macon, Hudson Baggett and Bob Terry. Four men. Four canvases.

I would later find out those four men collectively encompass 100 years of stories. Gwaltney was the first editor after the convention purchased the paper in 1919. A little more than 30 years later, Leon Macon followed him. Fifteen years later, after Macon passed away, Hudson Baggett followed him. Then 28 years later, after Baggett passed away suddenly, Bob Terry followed him. Up until them, editors for the most part came and went frequently at *The Alabama Baptist*. But longevity has not been a problem in the life of *The Alabama Baptist* since the convention bought the paper. The men who have led it have stayed the course and left their mark.

I'm no historian, just a journalist and a storyteller. But I would like to introduce you to these four men and their stories. Here are three things you should know about each editor.

L.L. GWALTNEY

Gwaltney had more than three decades of service as editor, but he was around longer than that. He had served the paper as a columnist known simply as "G" for a while, then as associate editor. When the Alabama Baptist State Convention bought the paper in 1919, they named him as the first editor of the convention-owned paper.

By the time he landed in Birmingham, he had moved his family three times within a couple of years. When they arrived with three children and a dog, his wife said her next move would be to heaven. The paper started with about 3,000 subscribers that year but in just a few months it had grown to more than 15,000. Much of that was because of the skill that encompasses the first aspect of Gwaltney I'd like to point out.

1. He was a four-minute man. Gwaltney had his finger on the pulse of two things — the people of Alabama and finances. Whether he was in a rural church or an urban church, he was well liked. He had things in common with everyone. And one thing everyone had in common in those days was money trouble.

The paper had faced money trouble since the day it first came off the printing press. But it wasn't only that — the whole nation, Alabamians included, were in rocky times now. Even so, the paper was important, and Gwaltney knew he needed money to print it. So he used a skill he had learned during World War I as one of the Four Minute Men — volunteers who gave four-minute speeches in theaters and churches to rally support for the war.

He adapted that skill to help the paper, and as he traveled around he told the churches it was their paper, that it had a clean sheet and that it had no patent medicine advertising. "It will grace your literary table, inform you on denominational matters and enter into the lives of your growing children," he would say, then he would give it to them half off. It worked. But that wouldn't stave off even deeper valleys of financial troubles.

2. He sensed impending stock market problems. All four of these editors have ventured into seasons and crises and turmoil that they never would have predicted when they first took the editor chair. But by the time Gwaltney made it to 1929 — 14 years after he was named editor — he sensed just such a crisis on the horizon. In the Oct. 24 issue that year, he wrote that people investing in the stock market were making an unwise choice. He couldn't figure out why people would risk their hard-earned money.

Five days after that editorial was published, the stock market crashed, heralding in the Great Depression. But because of the hard work of Baptists including Gwaltney, who was burning up the road to churches all over the state for his four-minute speeches to support *The Alabama Baptist*, the Cooperative Program and Woman's Missionary Union, the convention had more than a $2,000 surplus that year.

He didn't stop with making sure convention and newspaper expenses were paid for. He urged a social gospel, a practical Christianity — reaching out to people who needed help the most — the hungry, the unemployed. He said one thing loudly and repeatedly — "take care of the poor."

3. He faced struggles, but he stood tall. Like all leaders — or let's be honest, all people — Gwaltney faced his struggles. His wife became ill. She battled that for years, living at one point in a hospital for four years. The ordeal wrecked Gwaltney's health too. He battled insomnia. He dangled on the edge of a nervous breakdown at times. He took a few months off to rest at one point. At the end of himself, he wandered into a service at a Birmingham mission that revived his faith, where he said he was like a drowning man who had been thrown a life preserver.

Through all of it, he stayed faithful to God and to his mission. He was a complex character with opinions on political issues that sometimes took him outside the bounds of the way most Alabama Baptists felt. But his theology was firm. And Alabama historian Wayne Flynt called him "Mr. Alabama Baptist" and "the premier denominational leader during the three decades after 1920."

At the end of his time, he estimated he had written more than 8 million words as editor. "I do not know where the millions of my words have gone, but I shall die in the hope that God used at least some of what was written to his glory," Gwaltney wrote. He had influenced a whole generation. And he passed the baton to Leon Macon.

LEON MACON

Leon Macon began in 1950 and had the shortest tenure of the four — 15 years. But he had a milestone right away in his tenure.

1. He more than doubled circulation. He was known for his tenacity, and he was in "hyper drive" promoting the paper. Macon wrote that any money that churches spent on subscriptions for their members was "missionary money well spent."

Churches believed him. In 10 years, circulation more than doubled from about 46,000 in 1950 to more than 106,000 in 1960. By the late 1960s, right after Macon's tenure ended, the paper would as high as 144,000, thanks to the elbow grease that he had put into getting churches to believe in the paper. His might have been a short tenure, but it had a big reach.

2. He defended freedom. Macon wrote about the Korean struggle. Then when that was over, he used his pen to defend freedom while McCarthyism and the second Red Scare was going on. He fought hard in his editorials for the separation of church and state. He fought against censorship and for the freedom of the Baptist press — for all Baptists to have the right to choose what to read for themselves. That included the freedom of *The Alabama Baptist*.

But Macon's passion for freedom hit some rough waters when it intersected with his views on freedoms for the African-American community.

3. He was slow to support integration. One part of Macon's story that we can't get around is that it took him a while to come around on integration. He opposed it at first. He didn't see the benefit of forcing the two groups to integrate.

But though he opposed integration, he opposed violence even more. When the tragic Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing happened, killing four young African-American girls, he wrote, "We deplore such violence. The guilty should be brought to justice." He expressed sympathy. And when school integration was finally ordered, he wrote, "We must be law-abiding citizens in every instance."

Macon passed away while serving as editor and Hudson Baggett was named his successor.

HUDSON BAGGETT

Hudson Baggett began in 1966 and was editor for 28 years. And right out of the gate, he was a calming presence in Alabama Baptist life.

1. He had a different view on civil rights. And he backed it up with his life. When he hired Thomas Felder, who is African-American, to be head of maintenance for *The Alabama Baptist*, Felder became like family to Baggett. He spent Christmas with his family. He ate dinner at their house regularly. He even had a key to the Baggetts' house. Felder has been at the paper now for more than 40 years, and he smiles when he talks about the Baggetts. "Mrs. Baggett became like my mom," he says. The whole family became like family. It was a picture of how Baggett felt about racial justice, different from his predecessor. He believed separate but equal wasn't how it should be.

The tide was starting to turn in the denomination, and Baggett was happy to see it happen. But he did it in a peaceful way — it was one of the hottest issues of the time, and he said he wanted to generate light, not heat, on the issue. And he did. He wrote about Martin

Luther King Jr., and he advocated for love and soul searching, not just on that topic but others too.

2. He was a peaceful, uniting voice. When women's rights became a topic, he advocated for women in ministry. He wrote that professionally they shouldn't be marginalized. And as the Southern Baptist Convention raced toward fracture in the 1970s over theological issues, he worked to keep everyone together. He was down to earth, and his words and personality took him a long way. "I've learned that we need each other," he wrote. "No matter how much we disagree, most of us agree on the things that really matter."

3. He built the current TAB building. The paper had moved around a lot over its history, and when Baggett walked through the doors of the newspaper, he knew it needed a better and more permanent home. So he got to work on that. About 10 years after he became editor, on June 25, 1976, *The Alabama Baptist* building on Highway 31 in Homewood was introduced.

That's where the paper still lives today, where those four oil paintings hang. That's where Baggett would do his life's work. The paper's circulation would soar over 155,000 in 1975. And after he passed away suddenly in 1994, the day after giving a heartfelt challenge to Baptists during his report at the state convention, the building would be renamed in his honor.

The paper lost a friend when Baggett passed away. But our fourth editor would soon show up on the scene. An Alabama native and longtime paper editor in Baptist life, he was no stranger to *The Alabama Baptist*. And he was thrilled to be here.

BOB TERRY

Bob Terry became the next editor of *The Alabama Baptist* in 1995, coming to the paper after 20 years at Missouri's *Word and Way*. When the board of directors announced him as their choice, they wrote, "He is widely considered to be one of the top state editors in the Southern Baptist Convention." And "he feels that God has called him to this position for such a time as this."

In the same way that Gwaltney's story unfolded to include the Great Depression and family health troubles, what "for such a time as this" meant to Terry would soon unfold as well.

1. He has navigated difficult waters. Like every single one of his predecessors, he had to work through the paper's financial setbacks. But in addition to that, over the course of his tenure as editor, he would also face two more major issues that no one foresaw — a decline in denominational loyalty, and the rise of technology, which saw papers nationwide began to tumble in subscriptions. Print journalism has been in survival mode for a while.

But Terry would continue to encourage people to see the paper as missions money well spent. That passion for the mission of the paper paid off. For a while, the paper's circulation still rose while others didn't. It held at 115,000 for a decade. But as the Great Recession happened, slowly subscriptions began to fall and he had to lead the paper to find new ways to reach its changing audience. Even so, the paper remained true to its mission, and it continued publishing weekly.

Also like his predecessors, Terry faced tensions and conflict in the SBC, but he fought hard for unity alongside other state leaders. It worked, but it wasn't always easy.

There were some troubled times in the state convention over issues with entities and other things. There were times where reporting was tricky. But he guided the paper through it all.

Another difficult and unexpected trial Terry would face would be the loss of his first wife Eleanor, who passed away in a car accident in South Africa, where the couple had traveled for a Baptist World Alliance general council meeting in 1998. "Our once in a lifetime trip turned into a nightmare," he wrote after the accident. It would be a deep valley for him to walk through. Eleanor was well loved. His story opened up many opportunities for him over the years to comfort others with the comfort he had been given, as 2 Corinthians 1 says. And in 2002, God brought comfort in a new way — Dr. Terry would meet and marry Patricia Creel Hart, a Samford University professor and former missionary. It was God's goodness shining through in a heavy season, he wrote. And he kept on moving forward.

2. He has had a large breadth of influence. In the face of all those variables swirling around, Terry has continued to push for the presence of a state Baptist paper not just in Alabama but Southern Baptist Convention wide. He has been in the editor's chair at *The Alabama Baptist* for more than 23 years, but he's been in state Baptist paper life for 50 years total, 43 of those as editor of a major Baptist paper. That's the longest tenure of an editor in SBC history.

Before he was editor of *TAB*, he began serving as executive secretary of the Association of State Baptist Publications. So he was simultaneously leading one of the largest state Baptist paper by circulation at the time and representing all state Baptist papers in SBC-related discussions as well as coordinating the things the papers did together. He continued this role when he came to *TAB* and added another item to his growing resumé — leading the paper to earn more than 200 national awards.

In 2001, he also was elected president of Associated Church Press, the oldest ecumenical journalism group among Christians. It was the culmination of 10 years on the Board of Directors of ACP.

In addition, in 2001 he became chairman of the communications committee of the Baptist World Alliance, which meant he helped lead BWA communications activities as well as coordinated training events for Baptist communicators in different parts of the globe. He served as chair for 10 years, and when his term is up on the BWA communications committee in 2020, he will have served there for a total of 30 years. He is the only Southern Baptist to have held some of those positions. And the fact that he held them all at one time gave him an opportunity to make a large impact for the things that matter to Alabama Baptists.

3. He has invested in the future. Terry has long been one to invest in younger journalists. Jennifer Davis Rash, editor-elect of the paper, is one of them — she came to the paper more than 20 years ago as a young news writer. I am one of them myself. My story brought me to the paper when I was just out of college and trying to figure out who I needed to be, and he offered me a chance to stay on and work there. I will always be grateful for that.

As we celebrate the paper's 175th birthday and the approaching 100th year as a convention paper, the story of the paper definitely lives on. I know it has impacted my life in a big way. And I know I'm definitely not the only one.