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The Fire, the State, and Henry Lyons: The Downfall of the National Baptist Convention President

Kathleen Hayes Gibson

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Has been approved by the Examining Committee
on December 11, 2000
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for the University Honors Program

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The Fire, the State, and Henry Lyons:

The Downfall of the National Baptist Convention President

Kathleen Hayes Gibson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the University Honors Program
St. Petersburg Campus
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The conflicts of working full time and attending school at night are never easy, and my schedule intensified in 1998 when I gave birth to my daughter, Haydyn. The prospect of completing my degree was daunting and would not have been possible without the help of my two cohorts, Anita Cutting and Loretta Pippin, who made extra copies of all the reserve reading to save me a trip to the library. My daughter and I will always be grateful for their efforts.

Mostly, I owe a debt of gratitude to my family who all took turns helping in ways too numerous to mention so that I might be the first one in our family to graduate with a four-year degree. My mother-in-law, Patt, babysat and assisted more than should be required of any grandma. I never could have completed this program without the immeasurable assistance of “Mimi.” My husband, Gary, never failed to provide support and reassurance when the goal seemed unattainable. I hope that I have convinced my older children, Brittany and Bryant, that it is much easier to attend college immediately following high school. But, most of all, I hope they now realize that if you set your mind to something, you can achieve it.
Chapter One

Where There's Smoke...
Deborah Lyons suspected her husband Henry of infidelity, yet possessed no irrefutable evidence to confirm her mistrust. In June 1997, while traveling to Houston with her spouse—a prominent minister and president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (NBC)—the forty-nine-year-old Mrs. Lyons discovered the requisite proof. A deed retrieved from his briefcase listed her husband of twenty-five years and a fellow convention employee as co-owners of a $700,000 residence. Although the reverend dismissed the paperwork as convention business that should not concern her, she later followed her husband to the clandestine location in exclusive Tierra Verde, Florida.\footnote{Sergeant Terry Sterling, Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, Interview by author, 6 September 2000.}

Later, on July 6, 1997, while her husband traveled on business without her, Mrs. Lyons revisited the property. That night, an irate and possibly intoxicated Deborah Lyons entered the waterfront home her husband owned without her for the first time.\footnote{Craig Pittman, "Mrs. Lyons Pleads Guilty to Arson, Gets Probation," *St. Petersburg Times*, 21 October 1997.}

Far superior to the $285,000 home Mrs. Lyons shared with her husband, the ten-thousand-square-foot house boasted an expansive living room replete with elongated windows providing a view of the Gulf of Mexico. Gold-trimmed mirrors and designer furniture decorated the residence.\footnote{David Barstow, Davey, Monica, Wilson, Mike, "Lyons' House Put up for Sale," *St. Petersburg Times*, 14 May 1998.} The contrast between the two properties incensed Mrs. Lyons. "I'm doing the dirty work, the cleaning and the cooking, and she gets the big house," she later sobbed to the police. She wandered though the four-bedroom house, enraged at its opulence. Items inside closets and drawers included ladies’ and men’s shoes and lingerie. Located in the master bedroom closet, Mrs. Lyons recognized several
suits that belonged to her husband, verifying her suspicions. She later told police officers that the clothing served as validation of her husband's adultery, knowledge that infuriated her.4

In testimony given to the police, Mrs. Lyons indicated she became unable to control her emotions any longer and pulled open drawers, scattered plants and artwork, broke vases and pottery, and destroyed furniture. She related that she used scissors to slash open pillows and then yanked the stuffing out.5 Investigators later found two burnt matches on top of the stuffing suggesting an unsuccessful attempt to ignite the flame-retardant material. Four other locations, however, including furniture and the closet, provided points of origin for the blaze that soon engulfed the bedroom and the hallway. The emotions that burned within Mrs. Lyons manifested into reality. According to the police report, only the expeditious response of the fire department forestalled complete destruction of the custom wood-frame structure.6 Detective Terry Sterling, an experienced arson investigator from the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office, described the devastation created by her acts: "There were broken vases. There was a CD player that had been pulled out of the entertainment center. CD's (were) strewn all about. (There was) a lot of broken stuff that had absolutely nothing to do with the fire. It looked more like a domestic (quarrel)."7

Realizing the gravity of her actions, Mrs. Lyons sped from the area. Witnesses recalled seeing a black Mercedes driving away from the house shortly after noon. Simultaneously, neighbors of the house on Sixth Avenue noticed smoke billowing from

4 "State of Florida V. Deborah Lyons," (Pinellas County Circuit Court, 1997), police report.  
5 Ibid.  
6 D. Lyons file, investigation synopsis, State Attorney's Office, Clearwater, Florida.  
7 Sterling Interview.
An alarmed Candace Cordella entered the residence crawling on her hands and knees. Cordella, who lived diagonally across the street from the property, observed a car in the garage that she recognized as belonging to her neighbors and feared the house contained occupants. John McNie, another neighbor also concerned about the well-being of potential occupants, began pounding on doors. As the smoke thickened and danger became imminent, Cordella’s husband shouted for her to get out. Cordella escaped without physical injury, but she later testified to investigators that the event had a lasting emotional effect on her family, especially her young son who thereafter feared fires occurring at their house. Even so, she maintains she would react similarly again if she believed the house contained occupants whose lives were at stake.  

Deputy John Fitzgerald of the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office, who patrolled Tierra Verde on a routine basis, followed fire department vehicles to the scene. He had driven by the residence, now in flames, moments earlier. In his neighborhood canvass, Fitzgerald had waved at a black female he had seen entering the house. She had not returned his greeting. In the driveway, he had noticed a large black Mercedes sedan. Both the vehicle and the female no longer remained at the location. Convinced that the woman and the automobile could provide critical information regarding the arson, Fitzgerald radioed a “be on the look out” report for the two. Moments later, the St. Petersburg Police Department reported a one-car accident involving an African American female and a black Mercedes. Fitzgerald had his leads.  

Only miles away from the Tierra Verde residence, Officer Michael Morgan of the St. Petersburg Police Department arrived at the scene of an accident and witnessed a
vehicle with severe front-end damage resulting from its impact with a large palm tree. Morgan, an eleven-year veteran of the force, recognized the pungent smell of alcohol near the automobile. Immediately upon exiting the car, the female driver blurted out, “My husband’s cheating on me.” Although crying and visibly upset, Morgan did not believe the woman appeared intoxicated. He reasoned that the alcoholic odor that permeated the air came from liquor bottles strewn throughout the car, now broken because of the impact. Morgan speculated that only careless driving by the emotional driver contributed to the accident. In retrospect, Morgan wonders: “She was so upset with him and the car was his. Maybe she crashed his car on purpose.” Morgan allowed the distraught woman to return to her nearby residence, but officers from the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office arrived to question Mrs. Lyons shortly thereafter.  

Detective Sterling had a viable suspect whose failure to acknowledge Fitzgerald at the crime scene added credence to the idea that she did not reside at the property. At the Lyons’s residence in St. Petersburg the two police officers planned for Fitzgerald to nod at Sterling if the identification proved positive. Moments after Mrs. Lyons entered the room Fitzgerald provided the signal. Sterling remembers the entry by Mrs. Lyons: “The first image that came into my mind when she entered the room was royalty. She carried herself very proudly, very erect. She moved so gracefully.” She initially denied being at the Tierra Verde residence or having any knowledge regarding a fire at the property. But, after being confronted with Fitzgerald’s incontestable identification and

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10 Officer Michael Morgan, St. Petersburg Police Department, Telephone interview by author, 28 August 2000.
the statements she had given Officer Morgan, Mrs. Lyons could no longer uphold the façade. She broke down and wept. 11

For approximately an hour, Mrs. Lyons unleashed years of pent-up frustrations to the two officers. Sterling described Mrs. Lyons as a woman in obvious emotional torment. Between tears and pleas of "Oh, Jesus, Jesus help me," Mrs. Lyons provided an intimate glimpse into her marriage. The distraught woman pummeled her legs with her fists and questioned how her partner could be unfaithful after the unwavering support she had given him for the past twenty-five years. 12 Mrs. Lyons’s daughter, Stephanie, described her mother as a good wife involved in everything at the church, an exemplary “First Lady” to the president of the NBC. 13

Mrs. Lyons explained, however, that she could no longer rise to the standards her husband set. He had complained about her weight on numerous occasions and had refused to go out with her in public until she trimmed down, saying she embarrassed him. Mrs. Lyons sobbed as she spoke about the constant domination and belittlement to which he had subjected her. He further insisted that she call him “Doc” consistent with his honorary doctorate, rather than by his first name. This and other insults cut deeper with the knowledge that the reverend had lavished gifts on another woman while she strove so hard to please him. “It was the fact that she realized [that] here she is living in a nice home but that there’s somebody else her husband is seeing that is living in an even nicer home,” Sterling explained. 14 Throughout the interview, Sterling realized that Mrs. Lyons’s hysteria came not from remorse for the arson but from the anguish she felt after

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11 Sterling interview.
12 Ibid.
13 Deborah Lyons file, Stephanie Lyons interview transcript.
14 Sterling interview.
discovering her husband’s indiscretions. When Sterling placed the despondent woman under arrest for burglary and arson, she posed only one question: “I have to be arrested for what my husband did?”

As part of his criminal investigation, Sterling needed to ascertain the legal owner of the Tierra Verde property. He located two deeds pertaining to the residence. An indenture dated March 1, 1996, listed “Henry J. Lyons” as the sole owner. A subsequent quit claim deed dated the same date included “Bernice V. Edwards” as a joint tenant with survivorship rights. Both deeds listed Lyons as “an unmarried man.” Later, when questioned regarding the classification, Lyons expressed shock and explained the classification as an inscription error.

On August 1, 1997, during questioning at a State Attorney’s Office investigation regarding the potential criminal charges against his wife for Burglary and Arson, Lyons repeatedly failed to answer questions regarding ownership, explaining he could not recall the closing. He stated, “I was trying to get out of there. I was either trying to go to the hospital or some appointment. I remember being really pressed. Okay. I also remember insisting that it would be a guesthouse. And I didn’t want any mistake about that because I was concerned about that for appearance sake, and public consumption sake. So I’m trying to recall. I’m just so foggy on it.”

If the residence had indeed been purchased for use as a guesthouse, the monies for the purchase could be traced back to the NBC. But such was not the case. Records indicated ninety thousand dollars of the down payment came from the “Baptist Builder’s Fund,” an account Lyons claimed held NBC funds. Every NBC official except Lyons,

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15 D. Lyons file, police report.
16 Ibid.
however, denied knowledge of the corporation. Lyons offered an explanation. He admitted that he had not advised his associates of the account to date, yet he had intended to do so in the near future. He further clarified that although the check had been written on the account, the funds had not belonged to the convention. Lyons reported that the down payment had been provided by Edwards’s personal funds. He explained that he had simply channeled the money via convention accounts, albeit without approval, to assist the dedicated employee who possessed enough money but poor credit. Lyons further explained that in return for the assistance, the convention could use the home for convention guests and delegates. Yet he acknowledged that, to date, only one person except Edwards had stayed at the house. Lyons alluded to the idea that the clothing his wife identified as his belonged to a guest, Revered Odem, a fellow minister on which Lyons could provide few details. Lyons adamantly denied the house contained any of his belongings, stating: “The one thing I recall is that I’ve never actually taken my suit off and put on anything else and put it back on.”18 The memory that miserably failed regarding the details of the closing remembered these details intimately.

The prosecutors contacted Edwards as a potential victim of the burglary and arson charges at the Tierra Verde residence. She declined to prosecute Mrs. Lyons for entering the residence. As president of the NBC Lyons had full authority to speak for the convention and he indicated that the convention did not desire to prosecute Mrs. Lyons either. Without the essential element of burglary that includes a willing victim to say that

17 D. Lyons file, Henry Lyons interview transcript, 14
18 D. Lyons file, H. Lyons interview, 19
Deborah Lyons did not have permission to enter the residence, the State had no alternative but to decline prosecution on the burglary charge.¹⁹

The State refused, however, to drop the arson charges, citing the potential consequences of Mrs. Lyons’s actions. The act had endangered many lives. In spite of the severity of the charges and the approximately thirty thousand dollars in restitution for damages, Edwards and Lyons—both as an individual and the NBC authority—adamantly refused to prosecute.²⁰ Sterling explains, “I think he was upset not by the arson but by the publicity because it was casting a dark shadow over what was otherwise a very prominent leader not only in black America but in the American religious circles.”²¹ Mrs. Lyons, too, now told a vastly different story.

Once her husband returned from a business trip to Nigeria the day after the arson, Deborah immediately recanted the damaging statements she had made only hours earlier. The woman who had wept openly about her husband’s dominance now stood devotedly at his side at a news conference. Henry Lyons claimed the interest in his affairs stemmed from the inability of the white-owned media to comprehend the success of a black male. He dismissed the media and instead asked for prayers for him and his family. He gave no further interviews.²²

For her part, Mrs. Lyons returned to the submissive role she had played for the past twenty-five years, clinging to a husband and minister once described by a former church member as intimidating.²³ Mrs. Lyons assumed full responsibility for the fire at

¹⁹ D. Lyons file, synopsis.
²⁰ “Ibid.”
²¹ Sterling interview.
²³ Michelle and Reddick Tracie Bearden, "Pastor’s Lifestyle Throws Church into Quandary," The Tampa Tribune, 10 July 1997.
the Tierra Verde home and claimed that she had had full knowledge of the house prior to July 6. She insisted that the blaze started accidentally when she dropped a match while attempting to light a cigarette—even though she could not identify the brand she smoked.24

On September 4, 1997, at the NBC convention in Denver, Colorado, Mrs. Lyons once again took responsibility for the scandal that had befallen her husband and asked for forgiveness. According to C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, authors of The Black Church in the African American Experience, women in the NBC have had little involvement in the politics of the entirely male-run organization.25 Normally in the background, Mrs. Lyons took the microphone to defend her husband: “Yes, (my husband has) made mistakes. We’ve all made mistakes. Let me stop right here and pause and tell you about my mistake. I have never told this to a body and nobody but my family knows this, but I’m a recovering alcoholic. And through all of that, when my husband was preaching all over the United States and the world, he had to come get that phone and say ‘How is your mother doing?’ and ‘How is she holding up?’” She credited her husband with helping her overcome her problem with alcohol. Henry Lyons also asked for forgiveness.26 And to the amazement of many—both within the convention and within the community—the convention not only forgave him, but reelected him as president of the NBC.

On October 20, 1997, with her husband at her side, a soft-spoke Mrs. Lyons reiterated her plea for mercy. She confessed to the Court that her own alcoholism, not the

distress inflicted by her husband, led to the crime. Apologizing for her actions, she asked the judge for forgiveness: "I have always taught and believed that individuals must assume responsibilities for their actions. I accept responsibility for mine, and now hope compassion and understanding on the part of the Court will permit me to continue with the work in the community which is so important to me." The Court accepted Mrs. Lyons’ guilty plea, and defense attorneys provided mitigating circumstances in their request for a sentence below the time required by law. Accordingly, she received a sentence of five years probation with the possibility of early termination.

With this judgment, Deborah Lyons’s ordeal achieved a degree of closure. But her husband’s tribulations were just beginning. While investigating the ownership of the burned residence, media and law enforcement uncovered financial transactions that demanded further consideration. Thus, as the agencies closed the files on Deborah Lyons, the scrutiny regarding Henry Lyons intensified.

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27 D. Lyons file, change of plea transcript.
28 Ibid.
Chapter Two

The Preacher and the Paper
On July 11, 1997, five days after a distraught Deborah Lyons tearfully confided to two officers that her husband had been unfaithful, she stood united with him as they addressed the media for the first time since her arrest for arson and burglary charges.

Both the Reverend and Mrs. Lyons insisted a negligently dropped match began the blaze that had brought the president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (NBC) under such intense scrutiny. Court records retrieved as part of the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office investigation indicated Henry Lyons owned the Tierre Verde residence with Bernice Edwards, a fellow convention employee. On the date of the fire, Mrs. Lyons testified to officers that she intentionally started the fire after witnessing personal items belonging to her husband inside the property jointly owned by her spouse and Edwards. Days later, after her husband returned from a business trip with Edwards, Mrs. Lyons recanted the majority of the statements she had made to Detective Terry Sterling on July 6, the day of the fire. Mrs. Lyons maintained that although she had not entered the house prior to July 6, she did have previous knowledge of its existence. Further, Mrs. Lyons dismissed the notion that her husband's ownership of the house with another woman was evidence of his infidelity.1

During the press conference, the minister defended his relationship with Edwards as strictly platonic, prompting many members of the convention and community to rally round him. Reverend John Chaplin, first vice president of the NBC speculated racial differences accounted for some of the misunderstanding. Chaplin complained, "It's hard for people outside to believe two black people can have a business relationship without

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something going on. In addition, according to ministers within the NBC, the cost of the $700,000 residence presented no appearance of impropriety. As president of the NBC, Lyons possessed “virtually unbridled authority” over the finances. Grady Irvin, an African-American attorney retained by Lyons shortly after the scrutiny into his financial affairs began, contended that Lyons had done nothing improper. “As best I can tell, the president of the Baptist convention has no written limitations in the constitution or bylaws of that organization which limit his spending authority,” Irvin stated. Even convention members who did not support Lyons, such as the Reverend N. L. Powe, who had adamantly opposed the election of Lyons to president in 1994, denied that Lyons had violated convention rules with his purchases. Powe remarked that “it’s not unusual” for the president to enjoy monetary status.

Still, many NBC members questioned the allocation of convention funds. Board member Reverend J. J. Barfield of Philadelphia explained, “People still want to know what’s going on, and they want to know if they’ve been given a true and honest accounting of the receipt and disbursement of funds.” At the press conference, Lyons failed to address these issues. After reading a prepared speech, Lyons ignored questions from reporters concerning the property and the financial status of the NBC and instead leveled accusations of racism against the media. He continued his attack on the newspapers, blaming the “white-owned media” for his troubles. Lyons told the crowd that had assembled for the news conference: “The problem is, and African Americans need to understand this, and all poor people, that problem is, that you, like me, do not

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own television stations. We don't own big-time newspapers like the *St. Petersburg Times*. And none of us in here have the ability to buy newspapers by the column. They are in the business of selling papers. And they think nothing about throwing me and my wife and family under the bus.”

In a September 19, 2000 interview, *St. Petersburg Times* reporter and former religion editor Mike Wilson denied Lyons's accusations, contending race had no bearing on the investigation. “To say that we’re (the reporters) doing it for racial reasons, he (Lyons) really missed the point,” Wilson stated. Wilson maintained that the duty of the newspaper to inform the public provided the only motive to conduct extensive research on the minister's life. Lyons's status as a national religious figure and, thus, the arrest of his wife constituted news, according to Wilson. Questions raised during the arson investigation focused media speculation on the minister and his lifestyle, including how Lyons could afford the house. “We wanted to know who Bernice Edwards was and why his wife was so angry about it. This is clearly news. This is of great public interest and let’s find out what’s going on,” Wilson explained. Lyons refused to answer questions, however, and dismissed the reporters, stating, “As far as the media is concerned, I’m through with that.” With this, Lyons left the room, ending the first press conference regarding the inquiry into his financial affairs eleven minutes after it began.

Lyons blatantly refused to address the critical issues and instead defended his actions as integral to the Black Baptist community. Mozella G. Mitchell, an ordained

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5 Moore, "Lyons: It's not true. Support and Doubt Remains after Statement."
8 Howard and Thompson, "The Rev. Henry J. Lyons Goes on the Offensive in His First Response to Questions About His Personal and Business Dealings."
minister and University of South Florida religion professor, characterized this decision as an intelligent strategy. According to Mitchell, many African Americans believe, "when you destroy anything in the church you are attacking black society as a whole. If Lyons had admitted he had done something wrong or even let himself get caught dodging questions, he would have embarrassed the whole black church."  

Although this tactic was effective with some supporters, many blacks in the community disagreed and felt angered that the opinions of the NBC president would be misconstrued as the consensus of all black Baptists. They did not condone Lyons's behavior and resented his portrayal of the media as racially motivated. NBC board member Barfield also disagreed with Lyons's approach, commenting: "The newspaper didn't join in buying the house with Bernice Edwards. And the newspaper didn't pay down on a car for Bernice Edwards. And the newspaper didn't pay restitution for her criminal activities in Milwaukee. You can't really blame the newspaper for what he did because the newspapers just reported on what he did."  

Elijah Gosier, an African-American reporter for the St. Petersburg Times, used his August 2, 1997 column to clarify that the misuse of the convention funds, not racial prejudice, had brought about Lyons's difficulties. Gosier resented Lyons's attempt to depict his behavior as representative of the black community. According to Gosier, "immoral, criminal behavior" offends both black and white persons. Gosier added, "I am disgusted and angered by false claims of racial persecution. Most people are. Black and white."  

Wilson believes that the attempt to discredit the media backfired in some instances and

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9 Moore, "Lyons: It's not true. Support and Doubt Remains after Statement."
10 "Ibid."
created an alliance between disgruntled black ministers and the *St. Petersburg Times*.

"There were a lot of people inside the National Baptist Convention who were on our phones every morning outraged at this," he stated.\(^{12}\)

In an effort to present a broader perspective of black Baptists, the *St. Petersburg Times* featured an article spotlighting five churches, their daily operations, and the impact of the Lyons scandal on their religion. The pastors of all five churches claimed affiliation with the NBC, although none could specify what convention services they had received in return for the approximately twelve-thousand dollars they had contributed the previous year (Concord Baptist - $5,000; Third Baptist - $5,000; Mount Bethel - $2,000; Enon Baptist - $150; Providence Missionary - $275). The controversy surrounding Lyons prompted at least one church, Concord Baptist of Baltimore, to withhold its annual five thousand-dollar donation. But few congregants expressed much concern about the Lyons's scandal. Most agreed that the personal problems of the convention president had little effect on their faith and believed that Lyons's punishment would come from a higher authority than man, though some members expressed concern that the public perception of the black Baptist church had been compromised by Lyons's behavior. Marion McCann-Hickson, a black Baptist interviewed for the *Times* article, voiced her worry: "I would hope that the world would not see the black church guilty for what one man maybe has done."\(^{13}\)

Although the article provided insight into the five selected churches, the *St. Petersburg Times* reported very little regarding the NBC that did not focus on the recent scandal with Lyons. In fact, prior to Deborah Lyons’s arrest, the newspaper had

\(^{12}\) Wilson interview.
published only a handful of articles related to the NBC. Wilson acknowledged, "I knew quite a bit less about the NBC than I’d like to admit. In hindsight, I think that’s true of the St. Petersburg Times in general." Wilson conceded that given the number of derogatory articles published regarding Lyons and the NBC it could have been difficult for the average reader to differentiate between the man and the religion. "I’m sure it was overwhelming for a lot of people," Wilson remarks.  

According to Wilson, the newspaper upheld its duty to report the events—albeit negative events—of a national story located within its community. Reporters continually attempted to produce unbiased reporting. "I think we gave a lot of thought and a lot of care to every story. ‘Do we have the other side of this story? Have we done everything we can to reach everybody involved for comment? Have we sat down with Dr. Lyons and offered him extensive opportunities to explain?’ Absolutely," Wilson explained. Gosier also sat through numerous pre-publication meetings at the Times. In his July 16, 1997 column, Gosier acknowledged that he attended the meetings to ensure a balanced article. He wrote, "This is not an easy admission to make, but I sit uneasily through those meetings because I am black. I am black, Lyons is black, and most of the editors and reporters digging up all of that information, much of it negative, are white." Although Gosier acknowledged discomfort, he implored the black community not to overlook Lyons’s unacceptable behavior in the name of racial unity. He explained, "We must

14 Wilson interview.
15 Ibid.
learn to weigh the harm a problem can do within our community against the harm exposing it can bring from without.”

As the newspaper discovered more negative information about Lyons, reporters consistently offered the preacher the opportunity to respond. Lyons frequently declined to comment, however. Wilson recalled one occasion when Lyons submitted an impromptu interview under a streetlight in front of the home he shared with his wife. Although Lyons answered reporters’ questions, according to Wilson, ‘some of the things he said were demonstrably untrue and we demonstrated it in the very next day’s [news]paper.’ As part of the continuing duty to report to the public, the St. Petersburg Times exposed the lies. Three reporters worked full time on the Lyons’s case. Since much of the information came from the immediate area, the St. Petersburg Times had easier access to the sources than the media outlets located farther away. This allowed the newspaper to break numerous stories regarding the disbursement of convention money.

Following a Times inquiry into money purportedly given to black colleges, Lyons gave one of his rare interviews. He advised the newspaper that the donation figures previously reported by the NBC had been overstated by $345,000. After contacting the colleges, the St. Petersburg Times reported a figure of an additional shortfall of $190,000. Lyons defended his position, stating the amount he had reported represented “what we’d like to do, if we had the money.” Because of the private nature of the donation process, an accurate accounting proved impossible. The College and Seminary Education Commission that Lyons appointed after his 1994 election had never seen accounting

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17 Wilson interview.
Soon after the *St. Petersburg Times* began its investigation, the commission established guidelines for the disbursement of funds. Lyons complained that the controversy surrounding his business ventures had forced him to discontinue practices that had increased income diverted to the black colleges. “That won’t be good for the schools,” Lyons stated. He speculated that donations “will be greatly reduced.”

In his position as president of the largest black organization in the world, Lyons retained responsibility for the disbursement of funds not only from the convention itself but also by outside sources. In late 1996, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) sought to distribute almost $350,000 that had been raised for African American churches destroyed by a rash of race-related arsons in early 1996. In June 1996, the ADL and the Urban League solicited donations via newspaper advertisements for money to assist the churches damaged by the racially motivated crimes. In an effort to efficiently deliver approximately $350,000 raised by the “Rebuild the Churches Fund,” the ADL turned the money over to two other agencies for distribution. Almost $250,000 of the money went to Lyons and the remainder was funneled through the Congress of National Black Churches. In a November 3, 1998 deposition, ADL Director Abraham Foxman clarified that the money given to Lyons did not constitute a general donation. “It was for a specific purpose. It wasn’t just a ‘Here take money for whatever you need.’ We’re not in the business of giving unless it is for a specific purpose. My understanding was that the

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18 David Barstow, Monica Davey, and Mike Wilson, "Lyons Overstated Gifts to Colleges by $345,000," *St. Petersburg Times*, 19 September 1997.
money was to be distributed to churches for the purpose of helping them rebuild burned churches. 20

A September 12, 1997 article in the *St. Petersburg Times* questioned the manner in which Lyons distributed the funds, citing several churches that had received no money in spite of Lyons’s documentation showing appropriation of all the funds. In response, attorney Irvin claimed that the letter listing the payments was a rough draft that should not have been mailed. 21 On September 16, 1997, Lyons admitted withholding $189,000 and claimed that the churches that had not received funds did not need the money. He again focused his anger on the media in defending his decisions: “Are these churches destitute as the media says? I don’t think so. I know they’re not.” 22 When contacted by reporters, John Hodge, a deacon at Rising Star Baptist Church, claimed he had received no money from the NBC, despite Lyons’s claim that $35,000 had been contributed to the church. At the time the story broke, the church still needed landscaping, new windows, and paint. 23 In light of the controversy, Lyons returned the remaining money to the ADL. The ADL questioned why Lyons had failed to distribute the money, or as an alternative, inform them that the churches did not need the donations. “Why didn’t he send back the money to us and suggest that we apply it elsewhere, to other needs? Or call us back? Every day, there’s a different story,” Foxman remarked. 24

On November 22, 1998, the *St. Petersburg Times* published a cumulative article entitled, “The Struggle for the Soul of Henry Lyons.” Written by Wilson, the series

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23 Barstow, "League Asks Lyons What Became of Its Donation."
detailed personal information about Lyons, beginning with his childhood. Wilson cited the influence of Lyons’s biological father—“a smooth-talking rogue”—on his son’s development. Wilson wrote, “Lyons carries the genetic material of two markedly different men: his Daddy and his father. Gene Lyons (his biological father) couldn’t interpret scripture and Booker (his grandfather who raised him) wouldn’t have dreamed of pulling a scam, but Henry, versatile Henry, could do both. All his life he straddled the line between con man and confessor, between scoundrel and saint.”

Wilson’s research revealed that by the time Lyons became president of the NBC in September 1994, he had been involved in several failed business ventures including the Cooperative Housing for Urban and Rural Community Homes, Inc. (CHURCH, Inc.). Begun in 1990, the cooperative intended to purchase dilapidated houses, make the repairs with borrowed city money, and then sell the property to low-income residents. But only one job came to fruition, and the city eventually sold the other five homes purchased by the convention at a $16,000 loss.

Wilson also delved into Lyons’s relationships with women. The articles contained allegations that Lyons fathered two children out of wedlock, his first marriage ended because of “physical cruelty,” and that Lyons later omitted several elements of his past, including a previous charge of misuse of funds, to further his career.25 Wilson later admitted that the St. Petersburg Times had used extensive resources to follow the Lyons story, noting “There is no question it was incredibly uncomfortable for him.” But he did not apologize for his expose of Lyons’s personal life which he considered relevant to the

24 Barstow, "Lyons Says Churches Did Not Need Money."
broader interpretation of the scandal: "I wanted to know what the themes were in Dr. Lyons’s life that made him the person he was. All of that was relevant to the man he became."  

In the years prior to the scandal, the *St. Petersburg Times* had published only a few articles on Lyons. When Lyons won the 1994 election to the post as president of the NBC, the newspaper lauded its national leader and the newspaper highlighted Lyons’s achievements as peacemaker during the October 1996 when racial unrest in St. Petersburg sparked days of rioting. As a leader in the black community, Lyons’s plea for calm carried great weight. But, in general, the *St. Petersburg Times* made very few references to Lyons until his ownership of the Tierra Verde residence came under suspicion. Only then did the *Times* begin to probe deeper into Lyons’s past. Wilson justified the interest in Lyons as integral to good reporting. He stated much of the information the reporters uncovered brought about further questions requiring additional research. Wilson maintained that given the geographic proximity of Lyons’s affairs, the burden to conduct a thorough investigation fell the *St. Petersburg Times.*

Following the questions that came to light after the Tierra Verde arson, the *St. Petersburg Times*, along with numerous other media outlets, the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office, and the State Attorney’s Office spent considerable time researching the activities of the president of the largest black organization in the world. This organization—the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated—was a big part of the story, one that deserves careful attention from anyone trying to comprehend the meaning of the Henry Lyons saga.

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26 Wilson interview.
27 Ibid.
Chapter Three

Black, White, and the National Baptist Convention
Henry Lyons presided over a national organization with a long history. Born in the days of racial separation in the 19th century, the NBC has played an important and influential role in the lives of American blacks for over a century. Blacks organized the NBC to free themselves of the manipulative power of whites, but ironically Lyons used the organization to exercise power for self-gain at the expense of African-American trust and resources. Lyons was not the first to bring autocratic rule to the NBC. Like any large organization—black or white—the convention had experienced its share of power struggles and dissension.

In the antebellum South, white masters brought their black slaves to church believing that a “saved” slave made for a “better” slave. By incorporating social mores into the worship service and by making the failure to adhere to these doctrines a sin, whites created a form of social control over their slaves. Although many slaves originally attended worship services with their white masters, African-Americans later created separate, secretive services. These covert gatherings provided the beginnings for the first all-black societies. In The Black Church in the African-American Experience, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya reason that the black church allowed slaves the freedom that did not exist in their daily lives. Deep within the teaching of the black church is the idea that God intended for all men to be free. Many slaves believed that if one could not obtain freedom in this life, one could do so in the afterlife. Words taken from a renowned black spiritual explain:

Before I’ll be a slave
I’ll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Father
And be free... 

According to historian Paul Harvey, the author of *Redeeming the South*, the new-found faith provided slaves with the strength to overcome some of the psychological abuses associated with slavery. Baptist conversion soared, and by 1813 blacks accounted for almost a quarter of the 720,000 congregants, double that of the previous decade.

After worshipping together, blacks and whites in the South returned to their prescribed roles as slave and master. This posed a dilemma for the reverent organizations. How could a religious entity condone an institution that disagreed with the tenet that all men are equal in God’s eyes? Although slavery caused some white congregants to at least pause to question their conscious, few took action to prevent the practice. The issue of slavery caused a rift great enough among white Baptists to provoke Southerners to break away in 1845 and create the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which defended slavery.

Both Northern and Southern blacks opposed the religious underpinnings of slavery. In the North, free blacks organized their own churches, while their enslaved counterparts in the South and in border states continued clandestine worships. Both afforded African-Americans with a forum to express their discontent with the practice of slavery. According to James Melvin Washington in *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power*, black religion provided the impetus for the revolution.

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4 Washington, 3-22.
5 Harvey, 6.
against white control. Both slaves and free blacks, who could have worshipped with their white brethren, opted to worship in the all black churches.  

By 1830, the debate regarding the sinfulness of slavery involved many churches. Unlike their white counterparts who did little to stop the practice, however, black ministries focused on antislavery campaigns. Black Baptist associations formed and professed their opposition to slavery. In 1859, the Wood River Association presided over by a free black named John Livingston, passed a resolution against slavery. It read:

\[\text{Whereas, We believe the institution of American slavery to be a sin in the sight of God and man, therefore, Resolved, That we recommend to the Churches composing this Association to do their utmost to withhold their fellowship from any and every pro-slavery Church, and not to commune with them at the table of the Lord.}\]

The formation of two separate organizations with conflicting ideologies effectively segregated the religion.

Following the Civil War, the Black Baptist organizations concerned themselves with the evangelical and educational needs of the recently freed slaves. Disputes erupted between blacks seeking cooperation with their white brethren and those endorsing the separatist approach. Separatists formed the National Baptist Convention in 1895, and elected Elias Camp (E. C.) Morris as its first president. For the next twenty-five years, President Morris preached that cooperation and patronage strictly within the black community provided the only chance for upward mobility. Following Morris’s lead, at the September 14, 1897 meeting of the NBC, Reverend Harvey Johnson implored the colored Baptists to “establish and maintain our own denominational institutions.” Johnson reasoned that “because the white man’s pride and race prejudice so entirely and completely unfits him to accord to us in his organizations those offices and positions that

\[6 \text{ Washington, 27-28.} \\
7 \text{ Washington, 34.} \]
are necessary to our development into the best leadership and because the facts prove that we can get such opportunities nowhere else but in an organization of our own." The all-black organization faced numerous obstacles in a white-dominated society and yet strove to maintain independence from whites in an effort to achieve equality through black empowerment.

During the Jim Crow period, blacks resigned themselves to the impossibility of gaining full independence within the confines of a system plagued with racism and beliefs of white supremacy. Instead of continuing to support Morris's ideals, many Black Baptists opted to play the role of the "loyal Negro." They sought to make changes by working inside the established racial confines. By the time Joseph H. Jackson became president of the NBC in 1953, no one was surprised when he promoted a substantially different mission from the ideals of black pride that Johnson preached in 1897.

In 1956, as many blacks saw integration as the only way to achieve equality, Jackson enunciated a caveat against desegregation. He warned blacks not to "make the impression on white Americans that we are anxious to mix with the other group."

Jackson added, "Much of the jittery feelings of the South would be removed if white people could discover that colored people are not concerned with being with them as such. I do not emphasize integration in churches if it means colored people joining white churches. We can afford to wait and go on to Heaven or hell and let the white folks meet us there." Although Jackson promoted equality between the races, he encouraged blacks

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8 Harvey, 189.
9 Reverend Harvey Johnson, "A Plea for Our Work as Colored Baptists, Apart from the Whites" (paper presented at the National Baptist Convention, Boston, Mass., 14 September 1897).
10 Harvey, 228.
11 Harvey, 179.
to stay within the confines set by whites, rather than forcing integration. He encouraged blacks to "display exemplary character and conduct" before whites accepted them.\footnote{Edward Gilbreath, "Redeeming Fire: The National Baptist Convention and the Aftermath of the Henry Lyons Scandal," \textit{Christianity Today}, 6 December 1999.}

This doctrine angered civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr., who had been diligently promoting integration as the only means to achieve equality. King realized that support of the purported 5 million members of the NBC would provide exceptional strength to the cause, but he also understood that endorsement was unlikely as long as Jackson held office. As the 1957 NBC session neared, optimistic civil rights leaders believed the Convention's tenure limit would preclude Jackson from becoming president again. Indeed, prior to the convention, Jackson agreed to relinquish the presidency.\footnote{Taylor Branch, \textit{Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63} (New York: Touchstone, 1988),228.} As members gathered in Louisville, Kentucky, in September, however, Jackson reneged on his promise.

While opponents went to lunch, Jackson called for a surprise vote. With only supporters in attendance, Jackson unanimously won reelection.\footnote{"Returned to Office by Voice Vote," \textit{The Call}, 13 September 1957.} Wielding the power of the presidency, Jackson turned the convention away from civil rights and toward a more conservative agenda.\footnote{Branch, 228.} At the September 1959 convention in San Francisco, California, Jackson declared, "No American Negro has the right under the laws of our land to seek to force himself upon a congregation of white Christians who do not invite or welcome his membership among them. He who seeks church membership for racial reasons is just an unChristian [sic] as those who deny him membership for racial reasons. It is both unChristian and unfair to seek to force ourselves upon others and to enjoy the fruits of..."
their sacrifices and labor without a willingness to pay the price.” Refusing to concede to Jackson’s agenda, civil rights leaders continued their efforts to gain control of the presidency.

In 1961, at a session held in Kansas City, Missouri, King and other civil rights leaders endorsed Gardner Taylor for president. As Taylor and his men forcibly attempted to take the stage, Jackson supporters pushed them back. Chairs toppled, and Reverend A. G. Wright was slammed to the auditorium floor, crushing his skull. Two days later, Wright died from the massive head injuries. Jackson won the voice vote 2,732 to 1,519 and, utilizing the omnipotent powers afforded the president of the NBC, removed Martin Luther King, Jr. from his position as vice president on the Sunday School Board.

The dissension among members regarding civil rights further fractured the convention. In 1962, claiming that “the insistence of the former group upon dictatorship and ‘lifetime tenures’ for its president despite bitter convention contests and the need for a ‘more dynamic Christian approach to the principles of democracy,’” two million Baptists left the NBC to form the Progressive Baptist Convention of America. Three million members remained with Jackson. During the remainder of his twenty-nine-year tenure, Jackson continued to use his presidential authority to oppose integration. The organization instead advocated self-improvement as the only acceptable means for African-Americans to achieve equality. Jackson remained president of the NBC until 1982, when the convention voted three to one in favor of his retirement.

Jackson’s successor, the Reverend T. J. Jemison, a popular Baton Rouge, Louisiana, civil rights leader, promised “to address major issues that negatively affect black people—unemployment, inadequate participation in the political process, and

17 "Dr. Jackson's Idea of Struggle,” Defender, 10 September 1959.
18 Branch, 500-505.
declining support for public education. Jemison favored using the strength of the
convention's purported 6.9 million members to "bring a new occupant to the White
House" in the 1984 presidential election. According to Jemison's autobiography, the
convention donated more than $1 million toward the Jesse Jackson campaign. Although
Jemison claimed he did not advocate using the church as a political organization, he
promoted the idea that the "church must have a voice in all areas of life." A 1987
Gallup survey confirmed the importance of the church in the black community, revealing
that seventy-four percent of black respondents considered religion "very important."

In addition to the political clout of the NBC, Jemison also mobilized the awesome
financial power of the black churches. Citing receipts of $12-million to $15-million in
collection plates each week, Jemison claimed that $3-million to $4-million could be
given to black schools annually. Under Jemison's leadership, congregations that had left
the convention over disputes with Jackson returned. As a result, the NBC's annual
income increased to $1.3 million in 1983. Members who had departed because of
Jackson's high-handed management of the convention also returned, and by 1990 the
NBC claimed a membership of 7.8 million.

Although Jemison professed a commitment to social activism, internal disputes
emerged when Jemison sanctioned the building of the seventy-one-thousand-square-foot
World Baptist Center in 1989. Opponents believed convention money should go
toward social programs rather than architectural monuments and considered the $10

21 Theodore Judson Sr. Jemison, The T. J. Jemison Story (Nashville: Sunday School Publishing Board,
National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., 1994).
24 Hyer.
25 "Racism Is Worse Than Ever Says Leader of Biggest Black Church," The San Diego Union-Tribune, 7
September 1990.
million cost of the building excessive.\textsuperscript{27} Using his autocratic powers as president, Jemison moved ahead with the project even though he acknowledged the criticism: "Of course, there are always doubters on any large project and many nights I prayed for them to see the light and share my belief that we could do what no other Black religious group had done."\textsuperscript{28} At the 1990 session, Jemison called for financial support of the massive building. Religion journalist Edward Gilbreath later accused Jemison of maintaining the same unbridled power that Jackson exercised for years, citing the construction of the headquarters as a prime example of "a central office that is paradoxically too strong and too weak." He explained that "the president wields great power, with little accountability."\textsuperscript{29} In 1991, the NBC took in $2 million but spent $2.3 million, using the majority of the money to finance the World Baptist Center.\textsuperscript{30}

Jemison’s popularity waned further in 1992 when an FBI investigation revealed that the minister had offered beauty pageant contestant Desiree Washington money to withdraw her sexual battery charges against heavy-weight boxing champion Mike Tyson. Following Tyson’s arrest, Jemison formed the National Committee for Mercy for Mike Tyson, claiming that the fighter needed the support of the church to combat the racism inherent in the judicial system.\textsuperscript{31} Many women parishioners expressed indignation at this assertion.\textsuperscript{32} Several Jemison adversaries claimed that the support centered more on financial issues, since Tyson had pledged $5 million to the convention. As Reverend

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\textsuperscript{26} Jemison, 82-85.  
\textsuperscript{27} Hyer.  
\textsuperscript{28} Jemison, 82.  
\textsuperscript{29} Gilbreath.  
\end{flushleft}
Wallace Charles Smith, a pastor at NBC-supported Shiloh Baptist Church, explained, "It was a dollar and cents proposition—Tyson can’t give away money when he’s in jail." 33

On July 24, 1992, federal officials charged Jemison with perjury for denying that he had offered Washington money. 34 The pending criminal charges did not preclude Jemison from acting as president during the September convention. 35 On May 1, 1993, a federal judge dismissed the case against Jemison, citing inappropriately obtained statements, but Jemison's image had suffered irreparable damage. The seventy-six-year-old president announced his intention to retire effective September 1994. 36

Jemison suggested W. Franklyn Richardson as his successor, but other candidates complained that a candidate picked by Jemison offered no opportunity for change. For example, the election platform of Reverend William Shaw from Philadelphia included reform of the NBC hierarchy. He explained: "Brother Jemison has operated pretty much out of a power center that does not involve people. I say that the president of the convention is not the pope of the convention." 37

Candidate Henry Lyons of St. Petersburg, Florida also called for dismantling the “top-down leadership style,” including a public budget and regular audits. 38

On September 9, 1994, in a symbolic break with the tradition of electing the candidate supported by the outgoing president, Lyons defeated Richardson by a little more than five hundred votes. 39 The narrow margin and confusion during the election angered Alabama members who filed a lawsuit alleging illegal voting practices to prevent

33 Stepp.
37 Ibid.
Lyons from taking control of the office. On October 27, 1994, Judge Zinora Mitchell-Rankin dismissed the case, citing the First Amendment as preventing her from ruling on an internal church-related issue. She explained her refusal to hear the case, stating, "The crux of the delegation's claims is about church/convention politics—one faction's desire for power and the right to head one of the most potentially powerful church organizations in the United States."

As Lyons assumed his position as president of the NBC, he expressed his intention to change the organization he referred to as a "sleeping giant." He professed, "We have got to turn our convention around. I would like to bring us back to our roots, and that is our contact with God." A February 12, 1995, St. Petersburg Times article reported on Lyons's "ambitious social program," which revealed a dire need for improvement in the black community. "You've got some blacks doing well. But you have the masses and masses of blacks that now can't read, can't write, can't figure. Doesn't have an education, can't get work, won't get work. You've got 800,000 black men in prison. You've got the home life, the family life, shot to pieces," he stated.

Lyons explained that as president of the nation's largest black organization he intended to make those changes happen. Notwithstanding the traditional views of the NBC, the time for change had arrived.

40 "Baptist Quarrel Taken to Court," Christian Century, 26 October 1994.
Chapter Four

Trial and Errors
In October 1994, following litigation pending the validity of the September election, Judge Zinora M. Mitchell-Rankin ordered former NBC president T. J. Jemison to relinquish the position to the newly elected leader, Henry J. Lyons. In accepting the presidential assignment, Lyons also assumed the fiscal responsibility that accompanied the office. Traditionally, the president of the African-American organization held complete authority over the use of convention funds with no accountability. In Lyons’s case, this meant he inherited the debt incurred by his predecessor during the 1989 construction of the $10 million World Baptist Center. According to the 1995 Annual Report of the Convention: “The previous administration paid only $400,000 of our $1 million World Baptist Center mortgage obligation and turned over $38,000 to us to begin our work (of paying the $1 million mortgage payment).” Lyons called upon NBC members for support, and at the January 1995 Mid Winter Adjourned Session and Board of Directors Meeting, state conventions, associations, and churches donated over $1 million, allowing payment of the mortgage. Lyons also professed a commitment to “forthright accountability” at the session, and for the first time in its history, the convention prepared an annual budget. The 1995-1996 total proposed incoming funds provided for of over $1.8 million for the parent body.

As the newly appointed president, Lyons created programs that assisted the convention in soliciting money. Jettisoning a policy that allowed churches to give whatever amount they deemed appropriate, Lyons created specific guidelines for congregations to follow. The “Unified Program” required member churches to donate

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1 Jay Hebert, Defense Attorney, Interview by author, 17 November 2000.
three percent of their tithe and offerings to the parent organization. In return, the churches could access convention staff and services. In an attempt to enlist added donations, Lyons set up a program that recognized individual churches that gave above the three percent. By designating specific “Army of God” titles and colors (Gideon’s, purple, $5,000 annual donation; Abraham’s, red, $3,000 donation; Elijah’s, white, $1,000 donation, and David’s, no color, any amount below $1,000), the system encouraged churches to compete for the color-coded recognition. Lyons also created the “Standard Bearer Individual Monthly Giving Program” with gold, silver, and white designations tied to the amount of donation, fostering competition among individual members. By 1997, the NBC projected 1997-1998 income from the Unified churches and the Armies of God totaled $1.5 million and the total proposed income for the parent body listed a figure of over $5 million, a figure arbitrarily formulated by the president in accordance with the number of member churches.

Additionally, in an unprecedented move for the NBC, Lyons created alliances with corporations interested in soliciting business from the purported 8.5 million convention members. Since many of these corporations were white-owned, this alliance risked offending members who still held to the original NBC ideal of black empowerment. Thus, Lyons made a commitment to restrict knowledge of these partnerships to the inner sanctum of the NBC. These business ventures did not become public until after investigators began reviewing Lyons’s finances.

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While attempting to ascertain the source of the funds Lyons used to purchase a $700,000 Tierra Verde mansion and investigating a possible fraud on the mortgage application, detectives reviewed thousands of bank records related to accounts in Lyons’s name. The records showed several disturbing inconsistencies. David Kurash, an employee of the State Attorney’s Office of Pinellas County, became the primary investigator on the case and attempted to ascertain where the money came from, its intended purpose, and the actual disbursement of the funds. Assistant State Attorney William Loughery acknowledged that the prosecutor’s office generally did not conduct investigations, but questionable purchases that involved tax-exempt monies and funds designated for religious purposes warranted Kurash’s involvement. Loughery later explained that Kurash’s previous twenty-five years of employment as a Special Agent for the Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigation Division made him more qualified in economic crimes than any other law enforcement officer in Pinellas County.\(^7\)

On July 17, 1997, while the State Attorney’s Office attempted to determine if the misuse of convention funds violated Florida state laws, Lyons met with officials from the NBC. Following a closed-door session, the convention unanimously accepted Lyons’s explanation and gave him a vote of confidence. Convention officials and attorney Grady Irvin blamed the media for Lyons’s woes. Irvin stated, “We really think this whole thing has totally been blown out of proportion. Dr. Lyons has done absolutely, positively, nothing illegal at all. The witch-hunt has to end at some point. We don’t have to explain the house in Tierra Verde. We don’t have to explain anything to the media.”\(^8\)

\(^7\) William Loughery, Assistant State Attorney, Interview by author, 1 November 2000.

Immediately following the meeting, Reverend C. L. Fairfield of Waukegan, Illinois, explained that Lyons had not violated any NBC rules with his actions. "I do not think it is his fault. I think it is our convention’s fault. He hasn’t taken anything. We gave it to him. I think that the way the convention is structured, we encourage corruption," he declared. Fairfield conceded that the complete financial discretion afforded to the convention president might prove difficult for individuals, both within and outside membership of the NBC, to understand.  

Fairfield’s assumption that Lyons’s credibility had suffered proved correct. While some NBC officials perceived the show of solidarity of tantamount importance, other African-Americans refused to condone Lyons’s actions. *St. Petersburg Times* reporter Elijah Gosier suggested in his July 19, 1997 article that by defending Lyons NBC officials gave the appearance of accepting his immoral behavior and disgraced the convention further. He wrote: “Rather than ensuring that the leader of the largest black church organization exemplified the highest standards of morality and Christian values, they didn’t even bother to rule out the possibility that their leader is a scoundrel, maybe even a criminal.”

Law enforcement officials continued to investigate Lyons despite the convention’s contention that Lyons acted within the organization’s parameters. The State Attorney’s Office subpoenaed numerous witnesses and bank records as part of its investigation. They repeatedly uncovered questionable business practices involving Lyons and corporations attempting to solicit business from NBC members.

Ultimately, the State Attorney’s Office came to the conclusion that the financial improprieties rose to the level of a criminal act. According to an arrest affidavit sworn to

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9 Ibid.
by Investigator Kurash and filed in Pinellas County Circuit Court, Lyons opened a secret
bank account in the name of the “Baptist Builders Fund” shortly after his election to
president in 1994.11 Although the account never appeared on any NBC audits because
Lyons reported that the account held little money, a $90,000 deposit for the Tierra Verde
house had been drawn on this account. Officials at the NBC denied knowledge of the
account.12 Prosecutors reasoned that the secret account held funds that Lyons and the co-
owner of the property, Bernice Edwards, had accumulated by promising to provide
corporations with names of NBC members. From the time the account opened in
October 1994 to July 1997, deposits accumulated totaled close to $5 million. After
withdrawals, the account contained a little over $40,000.13

Kurash identified three companies that had paid Lyons substantial sums of money
in return for his recommendation of their products. Kurash spoke with several officials at
these corporations, and they complained that the names provided by Lyons provided
minimal profits compared to the projected figures analysts speculated an organization
with 8.5 million members should have generated. In making its agreement with Lyons,
one of the companies—the Loewen Group—anticipated making $400 million a year from
the NBC alliance.14 Loewen held Lyons in such high esteem that the corporation
considered support by Lyons more valuable than that of basketball superstar Michael
Jordan.15

11 Kurash affidavit, 9.
13 Kurash affidavit, 6.
14 Rick Ouston, "Preacher's Funeral Swindle Cost Burnaby's Loewen Group Millions. A Baptist Minister Is
on Trial for Taking Money to Set up Cemetery Sales Scheme," The Vancouver Sun, 2 January 1999.
The Loewen Group entered into a contract with Lyons in August 1995 to become the NBC’s officially endorsed funeral company. In October 1995, the Canadian-based company suffered a $500 million judgment in an unfair competition lawsuit in Mississippi. The possible new sales from the NBC became critical for the company, and, more importantly, officials at Loewen believed that support from Lyons could repair their image. Further, as Loewen appealed the massive judgement, Lyons indicated he knew influential people in Mississippi who could assist Loewen win its case. However, Loewen’s attorneys instead decided to settle the case for $175 million and withdrew the appeal. Lyons and Edwards called officials at Loewen demanding $2 million for contacts they said they made in Mississippi on Loewen’s behalf. Lyons provided no documentation of his efforts, but the Loewen Group agreed to send $500,000, trusting that the man it believed in so vehemently, the man sometimes called the “Black Pope,” would forward the receipts.\(^{16}\)

Officials at Loewen admitted to Kurash that they knew Lyons had blackmailed them, but because of the recent lawsuit they feared that negative publicity from Lyons would potentially destroy the company. Thus, they acquiesced to Lyons’s demands for more money when he threatened to stand on the steps of the White House and “tell the world that Loewen reneges on contracts.”\(^{17}\) In spite of this behavior, Loewen, enticed by the potential income that the NBC’s enormous roster might provide, preserved its contract with Lyons. Between June 1995 and July 1997, Loewen paid Lyons over $3 million and, in return, the company netted a little over $1 million in sales.\(^{18}\)

\(^{16}\) Kurash affidavit, 16-21.
\(^{17}\) Ibid, 22.
\(^{18}\) Ibid, 24-35.
The Loewen partnership angered African-American funeral directors who felt betrayed by Lyons's support of the company. The small, independently owned businesses, which feared take-over attempts by the Loewen conglomerate, felt frustrated that the man who preached black empowerment had hypocritically struck a deal with the large, white-owned Loewen Group. Robert Young of Young Funeral Home in Clearwater explained that prior to Loewen becoming involved, funeral services provided "one of the few independent businesses that African-Americans can claim as their own—somewhat like the church." To his dismay, a man of the black church left the black morticians out of the deal. Earl Banks, a fourth-generation funeral home owner from Mississippi, compared Lyons to Judas and considered the churches affiliated with the NBC as selling out to the whites. Lyons defended his actions, citing the job potential for church members interested in selling funeral products for the white-owned Loewen as his way of empowering blacks: "As we build jobs, we continue to take people off welfare and give them dignity through work, and a credible job that will allow them to feed their families. My intentions were and are totally noble and honest. I tell you, ain't nobody more black than Henry Lyons."

Although financial analysts considered the plan innovative, Robert Creal from St. Petersburg-based Creal Funeral Homes said the arrangement lacked an essential element of the black-owned funeral home—compassion. By choosing to make a profit over addressing the needs of black customers, Lyons alienated himself from a portion of the black community. The deal contained further flaws. According to Loewen Vice

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President Larry Miller, the income potential for sales never came to fruition; he characterized the marketing agreement as a "complete failure." 20

State Attorney’s Office investigators spoke with officials at Globe Life and Accident Insurance Company who indicated that in June 1995 they also made a business agreement with Lyons to purchase a list containing the names and addresses of the 8.5 million NBC members. 21 Globe had checked the membership figure with the Statistical Abstract of the United States, however. According to employees of the Glenmary Research Center who collects these statistics, reporting of religious affiliations is completely voluntary. 22 Previous NBC figures had been reported sporadically (5.5 million in 1958 under Joseph Jackson 23 and not again until 1991 when Jemison reported a membership of 7.8 million 24 ). Jay Hebert, an attorney familiar with the internal operation of the NBC, acknowledged that an accurate membership figure never existed: "It certainly was a false list to a certain extent and there may have been some numbers that were puffed by the organization but they were done previous generation, previous generation, and previous generation. 25 Officials at Globe, however, relied on Lyons’s representation of 8.5 million members as a true figure when they agreed to buy the list for a price of fifty dollars per one thousand names.

After Globe mailed out the first group of letters to names retrieved from the list provided by Lyons, officials at the company recognized a problem. Globe received numerous complaints from individuals who had received the letter identifying them as a

20 Kurash, 24.
21 Ibid, 49.
22 Glenmary Research Center, Telephone interview by author, 1 July 1999.
25 Hebert interview.
member of the NBC. The people, including several Globe employees and an Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, were not Baptists; nor were they black. However, Globe accepted Lyons’s explanation that the previous president of the NBC, disgruntled at his loss to Lyons, had sabotaged the list. Lyons promised to remedy the situation, although he did not provide a specific plan of action to Globe officials.

Reasoning that solicitation of 8.5 million members would adequately recoup the money the company expended, Globe paid Lyons $600,000 more in October 1995.26 According to George Burke, Globe Senior Vice President for Mass Marketing, “the demographic potential of the NBC membership was such that it could have been one of Globe’s greatest successes since the NBC members were among those deemed to be ‘underutilized and undersolicited’ by the insurance company due to the socioeconomic factors.”27 Globe continued to attempt to solicit individuals whose names it retrieved from the list provided by Lyons and Globe eventually sold policies worth approximately $1 million from the mailing. Nevertheless, the mass marketing plan eventually cost the company over $3 million.28

Additionally, officials at Union Planters National Bank (UPNB) of Memphis, Tennessee, advised State Attorney investigators that Lyons had defrauded their company by his representation of 8.5 million NBC members. In April 1995 as a condition of a credit-card-marketing agreement between Lyons and the bank, UPNB advanced Lyons $300,000 based on future commissions from NBC members. According to the “Application for Master Card Affinity Program Approval” signed by Lyons on April 19, 1995, a solicitation of three to four million NBC members “projected 28,000 accounts

26 Kurash, 48-65.
27 Ibid, 61.
and 42,000 cards to be signed within the first two (2) years."

Melissa Russell, Manager for Product Development at UPNB, advised Kurash that she based her decision to lend Lyons the money on these projections and the future earning potential for the bank. She categorized the credit card program as a "complete failure" with less than one hundred credit cards distributed. On September 12, 1997, UPNB filed a lawsuit against the NBC for failure to repay the loan.

All three companies informed investigators that they relied on the NBC membership figures when negotiating agreements with Lyons. On October 25, 1997, Lyons admitted to reporters from the St. Petersburg Times that an accurate figure of NBC members did not exist, and he acknowledged that the actual figure added up to substantially less than the 8.5 million listed on the NBC letterhead. Lyons explained that because of the much smaller number of members, it became more essential for him to create alliances with big businesses intent on accessing the generally unsolicited group of African-American consumers. He concluded that these agreements would generate income for the convention that could not be raised by the limited number of members alone. By the time law enforcement suspected Lyons of criminal activity, he had formed corporate deals with thirteen companies.

On February 25, 1998, Pinellas County prosecutors charged Lyons and fellow convention employee and co-owner of the Tierra Verde residence, Bernice Edwards under the Florida state statute outlining the Racketeering Influenced Corruption Organization (RICO) Act. Citing a pattern of fraudulent activities, the State Attorney's

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Kurash, 62.
Ibid, 73.
Ibid, 71-82.
Office charging documents indicated that the two defendants perpetrated the crime by misrepresenting the NBC membership numbers to The Loewen Group, Globe Life and Accident Insurance Company, and Union Planters National Bank. Prosecutors also charged Lyons with Grand Theft for failing to disperse money entrusted to him by the Anti-Defamation League to assist black churches destroyed by arsonists. The following day, Lyons surrendered to officials at the Pinellas County Jail. Lyons emerged twenty minutes later after posting a $100,000 bond. Reverend W. Franklyn Richardson of New York called the arrest of the president “the saddest day in the 115-year history of the National Baptist Convention.” The convention and Bethel Metropolitan Ministries, Lyons’s St. Petersburg church, both promised to extend support to the fallen leader.

By the time the State filed the charging information, Lyons had retained the services of four attorneys, including the flamboyant F. Lee Bailey. The defense team sought to have the charges dismissed based on the First Amendment right to separation of church and state. By contending that the NBC did not consider itself a victim and that as president Lyons had full authority to solicit and spend convention funds, the motion suggested that the charging document, or Information, filed by the State “attempts to criminalize the manner in which the Defendant allegedly conducted the affairs of a religious organization.” The motion further stated that allowing the case to continue would create a “chilling effect” that “could effectively cause every Baptist preacher to

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35 Ibid.
think twice before passing the collection plate.” Pinellas County State Attorney Bernie McCabe defended the State’s charges, contending that defense attorneys misrepresented the charging document and used hearing time to “pontificate and bluster,” and to “stir passion.” He explained the language in the racketeering statute charged Lyons and Edwards with using legitimate individuals and organizations, including the church, to further their criminal intent. Prosecutor Bill Loughery explained: “You can have innocent people as part of a RICO act. They are maybe unwittingly involved. When we included family members and churches it was not necessarily to suggest that they were crooks themselves but that they had some involvement. We had to show the complete movement of the funds and that would include sometimes being used for legitimate purposes.” Judge Susan Schaeffer, the chief circuit judge assigned to hear the case, denied the motion.

In addition, Edwards’s attorney moved for a change of venue because of the immense pre-trial publicity surrounding the case. Schaeffer appeared unconvinced that six impartial jurors could not be found. “It always surprises me in high-profile cases how many folks don’t seem to like the St. Petersburg Times, the Tampa Tribune, or just don’t watch TV,” she said. Schaeffer’s assumption proved correct. As attorneys questioned potential jurors, many denied reading about the case in the newspaper or hearing details of the case on the television. Although some jurors did mention the intense publicity as

[References]

37 “State of Florida V. Henry Lyons and Bernice Edwards,” Memorandum of Law in Support of Defendant, Henry J. Lyons’ Motion to Dismiss Information and/or Strike Predicate Acts 4-12.
39 Loughery interview.
“overwhelming,” many cited the potential four-week length of the trial as the reason they felt unable to serve. The trial remained in Pinellas County. 41

As the case progressed, Lyons reshuffled his defense team. Attorney Anthony Battaglia, who had originally advised Lyons as a victim on the Arson case against his wife Deborah, withdrew from the case, citing the complexity of coordinating the case between Lyons’s attorneys as “too draining and cumbersome.” In addition, Battaglia severed his relationship as mentor to Grady Irvin, whom Battaglia had been supervising as part of a suspension imposed on Irvin by the Florida Bar. 42 Bailey never formally withdrew from representing Lyons, but he did not participate with Lyons’s defense at trial. To fill the void, Denis de Vlaming, a prominent criminal attorney, and Jay Hebert, who had represented Irvin in an unrelated criminal matter, joined the defense team. By the time the trial began in January 1999, the team consisted of two white attorneys—one former prosecutor and one former assistant public defender—and a black attorney with limited criminal experience.

The two opposing groups of attorneys presented two very different scenarios as explaining Lyons’s behavior. According to Hebert, “The primary strategy was that most people did not understand the workings of the church (the NBC) and how things functioned.” The defense attempted to convince the jury that Lyons operated in a manner consistent with African-American religion. “Unlike traditional businesses and unlike traditional religious organizations, this particular church was run a different way. In the African-American church the money all goes into one pot and if we don’t have the

money (in a specific account) we go to wherever we need to go and get the money. The accounts were there and they fluctuate and they flow,” Hebert explained. 43 Defense attorneys related that as president of the NBC Lyons had made legitimate business deals with corporations that hungered for the consumerism of the untapped source he could provide. Lyons claimed the payments he received belonged to the church and, in accordance with the tradition of the convention; he could use the money in any manner he wished. He maintained he had committed no crime.

The State gave a far different depiction of the events surrounding the money. Prosecutors contended that Lyons used inflated membership numbers to consummate business agreements with corporations that relied on the figure as accurate when projecting potential earnings. According to Loughery, the defense contention of religious differences did not ring true. He argued: “I do not think religion had anything to do with it. It is just another way to scam people. He (Lyons) just did it in a different fashion. He could have been selling miracle diet cures.” 44

The two defendants and their attorneys and the state prosecutors convened on January 13, 1999 to begin selection of the jury that would decide which version of the story to believe. Although the jury pool assembled was substantially larger because of the intense pre-trial publicity, the random selection had pulled only two African-Americans, one of whom informed the judge that she already considered Lyons guilty. 45

43 Hebert interview.
44 Loughery interview.
Two days later, the completed jury consisted of five women and one man, all of whom were white. Somehow, the fate of the fallen leader of the largest black organization in the nation had been placed in the hands of a jury that was something less than a jury of the defendant's peers.\footnote{William R. Levesque, "Attorneys Select Jury for Trial of Lyons, Edwards," \textit{St. Petersburg Times}, 15 January 1999.}
Chapter Five

Winners and Losers
On January 25, 1999, in the Grand Courtroom of the Pinellas County Criminal Justice Center, the trial regarding the *State of Florida versus Henry J. Lyons and Bernice Edwards* began. Only months earlier Lyons—who claimed a friendship with President Bill Clinton—had been one of the most influential black men in America, the well-respected president of the NBC, reportedly the largest African-American organization in the United States. But now, Lyons sat before a jury of five women and one man ready to try to explain that he had broken no laws when he made deals to endorse products to the purported 8.5 million members of his Black Baptist organization. Prosecutors contended that the business transactions became fraudulent when Lyons reported an inflated membership figure that he knew was false. According to the charging document filed by the State Attorney’s Office of Pinellas County, Lyons perpetrated a pattern of fraudulent activity by constantly confirming the inflated figure in an effort to generate further payments from the corporations. Prosecutors related that much of the money the religious leader earned by these agreements supported a lifestyle that included a waterfront home, two Mercedeses, and relationships with at least three women other than his wife. The State Attorney’s Office also charged Lyons with Grand Theft for failing to distribute money entrusted to him as a donation to assist in the reconstruction of burned African-American churches.¹

Prior to the trial, Lyons claimed that the criminal acts pressed by the prosecutors amounted to nothing more than unfulfilled business ventures. Indeed, officials at one of the corporations listed as a victim by the State testified that the company continued to give Lyons money simply because an affiliation with Lyons’s organization had a calculated earning potential of $400 million annually. Lyons’s attorneys claimed that the

corporations became frustrated when the sales failed to materialize and the activity the State alleged constituted a crime was nothing more than “big business” that did not come to fruition.\(^2\)

In addition, Lyons’s attorneys complained that the media, especially the *St. Petersburg Times*, had poisoned the community with intense coverage of the case. “The *St. Petersburg Times* became an extension of law enforcement and spent resources that led to evidence,” defense attorney Jay Hebert explained. “He (Lyons) did not feel he was a friend of the *St. Petersburg Times,*” Hebert added. Police and prosecutors acknowledged that the *Times* uncovered copious amounts of information that forced a criminal investigation and ultimately led to felony charges. Since such sharing of information with the press rarely occurred, defense attorneys argued that the newspaper took an extraordinary and unhealthy interest in the case, ostensibly because Lyons had treated them with contempt. Even Prosecutor Loughery later admitted that the rebuff by Lyons had hurt his cause. “Lyons’s biggest mistake that led to his downfall was when he came back from Africa and essentially accused the *St. Petersburg Times* of being racist. I would imagine they were quite offended by that.”\(^3\) But Mike Wilson, a reporter who covered the Lyons story, adamantly denied that any personal vendettas influenced the investigation and claimed the articles merely represented thorough journalism.\(^4\) Loughery agreed this explanation is also plausible: “Once they (the *St. Petersburg Times*) started digging around and found there was information there, they just followed up on it because of his notoriety.”

\(^2\) Hebert interview.
\(^3\) Loughery interview.
\(^4\) Wilson interview.
It should be noted, however, that one of the victims, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), did not realize Lyons had been accused of misusing funds until they learned of it through media reports.\(^5\)

Lyons insisted that even though he did not disburse the money to the churches, he eventually returned the money once questions arose. Lyons’s attorneys claimed that his busy schedule and a long-standing inaccurate accounting system within the NBC led to confusion with the ADL money. “The bookkeeping was very loose and the accountability was very loose,” Hebert explained. Hebert admitted that Lyons did spend some of the money for personal use but suggested that Lyons intended to replace the funds with money from another NBC account, allegedly a regular practice at the NBC.\(^6\)

In his position as president of the NBC, Lyons possessed full authority over convention money, and both the convention and the church that Lyons presided over refused to press charges. According to Assistant State Attorney Bill Loughery, “He (Lyons) got a lot of money out of these folks (the NBC and Bethel Metropolitan), but that’s the way they set it up. They did not want to be victims.”\(^7\) Pointing out that Lyons still held the position of NBC president, defense attorneys claimed this support proved that Lyons merely acted in a fashion customary to his religion. In response, prosecutors contended that the case had nothing to do with religion. Assistant State Attorney Jim Hellickson explained the motivation for Lyons’s and Edwards’s actions: “Their creed was greed.”\(^8\)

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\(^5\) Kurash affidavit, 14.  
\(^6\) Hebert interview.  
\(^7\) Loughery interview.  
Throughout the next four weeks, the panel of jurors heard details more lurid than those related on a tabloid talk show. All the attorneys agreed that the case revolved around power, sex, and money, but they disagreed about the use and abuse of those qualities. While defense attorneys contended that peculiarities of the NBC hierarchy and the Black Baptist religion played an important role, the State claimed Lyons only used religion as a means to acquire money. Of all the money Lyons stood accused of misusing, the money from the ADL became the most difficult for him to explain.

From the beginning, the State recognized the strength of the Grand Theft charge involving donations from the ADL. Loughery indicated the implicit instructions for disbursement dictated by the organization when the ADL delivered the money to Lyons and Lyons’s subsequent use of the money for personal reasons provided what the State considered a clear-cut case of Grand Theft for the jury to follow. No credible defense ever ensued. The State filed the charging document to include the Grand Theft charge with the organized crime charge, thereby forcing Lyons to request a trial on the entire episode if he disagreed with any of the events. In addition, the State refused to concede to probation and hence a trial offered Lyons the only possibility of avoiding a prison sentence. Loughery explains the rationale: “There were too many victims; it was too ongoing; there was too much money.”

Hebert suggests Lyons might have demanded a trial even if an offer of probation had been given. Lyons felt his reputation had been damaged by the allegations of spending money designated for churches destroyed by the race-related arson. “I want America, African-Americans and all Americans, to know that Henry Lyons is not guilty

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9 Loughery interview.
of these crimes," Lyons stated.\textsuperscript{10} More importantly, the reputation of all black Americans hinged on Lyons's personal character because of his prominence in the community. For many black Americans, the unwelcome scrutiny of the NBC provided another example of white Americans attempting to control black organizations. The very premise of the black organization's existence came under inspection once Deborah Lyons set fire to the Tierra Verde mansion. Lyons and his defense team hoped that by explaining the organization they could justify Lyons's manner of conducting business with the corporations. "There was a thought that as white trial lawyers, we, and prosecutors, and judges, and hopefully juries, did not appreciate the nature of the NBC and the structure of the church," Hebert stated.\textsuperscript{11} Defense attorneys appealed to the white jury to consider the transfer of funds between accounts as commonplace in the black organization. The attorneys also attempted to portray the dismal sales as a typical business failure.

There is no doubt that Lyons provided some monetary success for the previously financially unstable convention. Lyons reduced the $6 million debt he inherited from his predecessor to $2.8 million.\textsuperscript{12} Hebert contends: "He constantly had things on the horizon from corporate America trying to tap into his membership. It provided a new stream of revenue. There was an old saying that the NBC was run out of a briefcase—the one the president was carrying."\textsuperscript{13} Lyons envisioned a more capitalist approach to raising funds for the convention and some money used to pay down debt had been generated from these corporate alliances.

\textsuperscript{10} Lisa Holewa, \textit{Baptist Leader Gets His Day in Court} [AP Online] (Cited 3 March 1999).
\textsuperscript{11} Hebert interview.
\textsuperscript{13} Hebert interview.
The State maintained that the relationships between the companies and the NBC presented no problems; however, prosecutors established that Lyons enticed corporations with promises of 8.5 million members—an inflated number that had no basis in fact.

“The money (payment for endorsement by Lyons) was all predicated on a criminal misrepresentation by Lyons having to do with the member list. The people were buying access to these folks that he claimed existed and had a list when in fact he did not. There was evidence that not only did he know there was not a list, he fraudulently manufactured one to keep these people on the hook,” Loughery stated. Once the State established evidence that Lyons manufactured the list, the defense of unfulfilled legitimate business endeavors held no credibility.

Much of the State’s case relied on the testimony of Bonita Henderson, a one time NBC employee and former mistress of Lyons. Henderson initially eluded authorities that sought to question her in regard to the list, but she eventually turned herself in to federal agents after a material witness warrant was issued. Henderson reluctantly appeared at the trial, claiming she feared for her life. Testifying that her relationship with Lyons ended in 1995 when she could “no longer tolerate his erratic, unprofessional, anti-Christian behavior,” Henderson stated she left her employment with the NBC shortly after the creation of the list.

She further testified that she worked with Lyons to establish a fraudulent NBC membership list immediately following his election to president of the organization in 1994. In a previous deposition, Henderson had explained that prior to the creation of the duplicitous list Lyons had made attempts to establish an accurate roster of NBC

members. She recalled that she recorded names and addresses of individuals who contributed to the NBC and stored that information on a computer.\textsuperscript{16} When Lyons attempted to obtain individual members’ names and addresses from churches, however, the pastors declined to provide that information. Retired Detroit Pastor Anthony Campbell refused to provide the requested information when he received the letter from Lyons, complaining that “ Lyons had franchised the National Baptist name, and now they wanted him to deliver some names.”\textsuperscript{17} Without the cooperation of the member churches, a roster became impossible forcing Lyons to devise an alternative plan.

According to Henderson, in early 1995, at the request of Lyons, she used a computer program to compile a fictitious list so that Lyons and another minister, Fred Canfield, could establish a “sweet deal” with Globe Life and Accident Insurance Company (Globe). Henderson admitted that she knew the names provided to Globe did not represent NBC members as she prepared the list for Canfield who told her: “It don’t matter, that many names it doesn’t matter if they are black or white.”\textsuperscript{18} When prosecutors asked Henderson why she did not confess to Globe representatives who later questioned her about the names on the list, she answered: “‘They did not ask.’”\textsuperscript{19} Henderson received $150,000 for her role in assembling the list.

Once Globe realized the flagrant errors in the computer-generated list, they continued to pay Lyons $600,000 to create a new list. Defense attorneys claimed this further payment proved the company knew the first list did not represent actual members.

\textsuperscript{15} "State of Florida V. Henry Lyons and Bernice Edwards," (Pinellas County Circuit Court, 1998), Henderson deposition, 96-99.
\textsuperscript{16} Henderson deposition, 73-75.
\textsuperscript{17} Gilbreath article.
\textsuperscript{18} Henderson deposition, 53.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 105.
and that Globe had not suffered as a result of the bogus list. In fact, Lyons’s attorneys contended, Globe remained interested in doing business with Lyons. Hebert agreed that Lyons had no idea of the true number of members and acknowledged Lyons’s attempts to secure business based on the 8.5 million members figure could appear criminal. He admitted that Lyons had become enamored with his authority as president and had made unethical business arrangements: “This is a capitalist society. He was a very good capitalist who had very limited business knowledge who did not take care of crossing his t’s and dotting his i’s and then the power thing.”

However, Hebert maintained that the corporations agreed to pay for the “key to the kingdom” to access the previously unsolicited black membership of the NBC. “Loewen was using Reverend Lyons as much as he was using them,” he added. Corporate greed fueled their continued payment, according to Hebert. If the sales did not follow the solicitation, the companies shared the blame for the failed business ventures.20

Loughery speculated that embarrassment, not greed, prevented the companies from severing the business relationships with Lyons: “In a situation when people are kind of made fools of and they rely on something that turns out not to be true, they are not particularly thrilled about being made to look foolish nationally.”21 Globe, the Loewen Group, and Union Planters National Bank all relied on the number of members the convention recorded as accurate when deciding to conduct business with the NBC. In fact, Globe had verified the accuracy against the Statistical Abstract of the United

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20 Hebert interview.
21 Loughery interview.
And yet, when establishing business relationships with the NBC, none of the companies ever considered that the voluntary information had been falsely reported for years.

Past NBC presidents had known about the inconsistencies in the membership figures, but this information had not affected anyone outside the convention. By contrast, when Lyons used false figures to establish business relationships, the parties who believed this information to be true suffered as a result. By continually representing the inflated figure as accurate, the State contended, Lyons perpetrated a fraud. Further, as spokesperson for the largest African-American organization in the nation, Lyons exploited his position as president and jeopardized the reputation of the entire convention. The implications ran far deeper than merely whether or not Lyons committed a crime. Many Americans had never heard of the NBC prior to the Lyons trial, but by the time the case went to trial, thousands of newspaper articles had examined the organization. Not surprisingly, very few articles painted the convention in a positive light.

Hebert insisted that this constant media attention had produced a backlash effect that influenced the Lyons trial. The jurors who sat on the panel testified that they possessed no previous knowledge of the case. But to Hebert, this meant the jurors “lived in their own world,” and that they were individuals who had difficulty comprehending the complexity of multimillion dollars business agreements.23

Both the State and the defense agree that the theft of the ADL money ultimately decided the case. Since the charging document included the ADL charge with the

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22 Kurash affidavit, 49.
23 Hebert interview.
racketeering offenses, jurors based their deliberations on the testimony concerning all the offenses. The defense team offered no strong defense for Lyons's misuse of the funds. In addition, when the ADL provided Lyons with the money, implicit directions for its disbursement followed. "I think if we had been able to get rid of the ADL stuff, we might have been able to deal with this on a more subjective level for the jury," Hebert explained. On February 27, 1999, thirteen hours after the trial testimony ended, jurors returned their verdict. They found Lyons guilty on all three counts but acquitted Edwards.24 Judge Susan Schaeffer scheduled Lyons's sentencing for March 31, 1999.

On March 31, 1999, before a capacity crowd, Schaeffer entertained statements from character witnesses for Lyons who pled for mercy from the court. As an emotional Lyons stood by, individuals whose lives Lyons affected lauded the man whom they considered a mentor and a friend. In addition, Lyons's attorneys presented the court with over one hundred letters of support for the fallen leader. The authors of the letters begged the judge to consider the positive impact Lyons had had on so many lives, in spite of the negative information that came to light during the criminal investigation.25

Lyons and his wife Deborah stood at the podium and publicly apologized for implying that race had prompted the investigation. Tearfully, Lyons acknowledged: "It was not about race. It was about the mistakes that I have made. I cannot shake the feeling that I have let so many people down." While Lyons showed no remorse regarding the business transactions, he wept openly when referring to the ADL money. Lyons explained that the stigma attached to the ADL funds provided the reasoning for his

requesting a trial. Lyons admitted taking the ADL money constituted a “vile act” that stinks “in God’s nostrils and it stinks in the law’s nostrils and it stinks to me.”

Eighteen months after an arson investigation started the house of cards tumbling down, the case of Henry Lyons came to an end as Schaeffer sentenced Lyons to three years for the Racketeering charge and two and one-half years for the Grand Theft of the ADL money. Scheduling the sentences to run concurrently, Schaeffer effectively ordered Lyons to spend the next five and one-half years in the Florida Department of Corrections and ordered him to pay almost $2.5 in restitution. Refusing to allow Lyons to serve his sentence in a federal prison environment, she made it clear that she expected him to pay the full penalty for his crime.

In the end, no one claimed victory. Although the criminal charges had been resolved, they left behind many unanswered questions. The charges divided both the local community and the NBC; some individuals still believed in Lyons while others felt only anger toward the man they once held in such high esteem. Lyons himself understood the long-lasting effects of his actions. In his last words before the Pinellas County Court, he summed up his emotions: “I’ve asked God every single night and day to forgive me for that and I ask the Court and I ask the black people to forgive me because I believe that it will haunt me for the rest of my life.”

The intense scrutiny of the NBC and its president brought many revelations to light. Individuals within the Black Baptist organization as well as those with no previous

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
knowledge of the convention questioned how a system based on Christian values had
strayed so far from its ideals. Thus, as Lyons prepared to begin his prison sentence, the
NBC began a long overdue period of self-evaluation.
Chapter Six
Fallen Down
In June 1997, Deborah Lyons ignited a fire at a Tierre Verde, Florida residence that focused speculation on the financial status of her husband, Henry Lyons, the president of the National Baptist Convention—purportedly the largest black organization in the nation. During the arson investigation, police learned that the house belonged to Henry Lyons and Bernice Edwards, a fellow convention employee. Media and law enforcement questioned the ability of a religious leader to own a $700,000 property. At a press conference shortly after his wife’s arrest for burglary and arson of the structure, the St. Petersburg Times approached Lyons regarding the propriety of a minister owning a house of such value with a woman other than his wife. Lyons refused to answer questions from the press and accused the newspaper of racial bias—a charge the Times adamantly denied.

Unable to attain credible answers from Lyons regarding the source of the funds, the St. Petersburg Times began an investigation. Mike Wilson, a reporter who worked on many of the subsequent stories, explained that the newspaper felt compelled to explore the stories surrounding the national leader who lived within its community. Lyons’s behavior constituted news and the inquiries occurred concomitant with the newspaper’s duty to inform the public. For the next eight months, reporters enthusiastically revealed intimate details of the embattled leader’s life and the rules and regulations of the organization Lyons oversaw.

Law enforcement became suspicious of some of the information that the media uncovered and launched a criminal investigation. After reviewing thousands of bank records, the Pinellas County State Attorney’s Office filed charges against Lyons in

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2 Mike Wilson, St. Petersburg Times Reporter, Interview by author, 19 September 2000.
February 1998. The charging document accused the preacher of inflating membership figures of the NBC to entice white-owned corporations, eager to do business with the convention’s mostly African-American membership. More damaging to Lyons, the affidavit also accused Lyons of misappropriating funds collected and designated for black churches burned by race-related arsons.³

When Deborah Lyons started the fire at the Tierra Verde residence, she set a complex chain of events in motion. If several intervening factors had not occurred, it is possible that none of Lyons’s improprieties would have surfaced. As Mrs. Lyons fled the scene of the arson, she lost control of her vehicle. Police arrived on the scene and Mrs. Lyons spontaneously stated, “My husband’s cheating on me.”⁴ This revelation, coupled with the matching description of the suspect vehicle in the Tierra Verde arson, provided officers with an immediate avenue of inquiry. The patrol deputy who had seen the suspect at the arson scene positively identified the driver of the vehicle involved in the accident as the individual he had seen at the arson scene.⁵ The close time frame of the two crimes provided police with a viable suspect immediately.

When Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office Detective Terry Sterling questioned Mrs. Lyons regarding the arson, she used the interview process as a forum to express her dissatisfaction with her marriage.⁶ Although she later recanted many of the statements, this interview was critical to the investigation. The initial statements furnished investigators with numerous leads. These tips cumulated in a criminal investigation by

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⁴ Officer Michael Morgan, St. Petersburg Police Department, Telephone Interview by author, 28 August 2000.
⁵ "State of Florida V. Deborah Lyons," (Pinellas County Circuit Court, 1997), police report.
⁶ Sergeant Terry Sterling, Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office, Interview by author, 6 September 2000.
the Pinellas County State Attorney's Office. The local newspaper also followed the unfolding criminal story.

The *St. Petersburg Times* believed the story held such importance that it assigned three full-time reporters to the case. Wilson maintained that the story necessitated the manpower because each inquiry led to further questions. He acknowledged that prior to the unfavorable stories, Lyons had received little publicity from the newspaper. Wilson admitted that the deluge of negative information could taint the reputation of Lyons and the entire NBC, but he defended the newspaper’s extensive coverage, stating that the proximity between the newspaper’s headquarters and Lyons’s home and church made it inevitable that the *St. Petersburg Times* would become the most involved newspaper.7

Many local stories circulated into the national press and it became incumbent on the *Times* to produce accurate information. The media interviewed hundreds of individuals as part of its investigation.

The parent body of the NBC supported Lyons throughout his ordeal, although many blacks disagreed with Lyons’s behavior. Whether Lyons recognized the responsibility or not, as one of the most prominent black men in America he became a spokesperson for the race. By giving Lyons a vote of confidence it appeared as though the convention condoned Lyons’s behavior. This angered many African-Americans who considered Lyons’s actions reprehensible. The convention and the community became divided between those who supported Lyons and those who felt betrayed. Regardless of whether individuals advocated Lyons or not, it appeared that he had not violated any convention rules with his conduct.

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7 Wilson interview.
Established in 1895, the NBC covenants gave complete autonomy to its president. Past presidents had abused this power and done little to promote the convention's original ideals of black empowerment. Many individuals within the convention and those within the community considered Lyons capable of instilling those standards into the organization when he began his presidency in 1994. Indeed, Lyons initially had a positive impact on the previously ineffective organization. He set up specific programs to raise money and reduced convention debt by over half. Lyons broke with the Black Baptist tradition of supporting black-owned businesses and formed alliances with white-owned corporations to generate additional income for the convention. The white-owned corporations eagerly paid Lyons for a chance to solicit the Black Baptists that they did not previously have access to. This decision became critical—both to the black community and to Lyons ultimately appearing in criminal court.

When Lyons made an agreement with white companies, he justified his decision by explaining that he had made arrangements for convention members also to work at the corporations. In addition, he contended that payments received for endorsements had enriched the convention bank account. Many African-Americans argued, however, that Lyons had taken jobs away from blacks. Morticians felt especially betrayed when Lyons made an agreement to endorse the white-owned Loewen Group as the NBC funeral service provider of choice. The black funeral directors argued that they could not compete with the large conglomerate and that the deal would end up costing them business. To make matters worse, Lyons kept many of these alliances secret until the

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media uncovered them as part of their continuing investigation. Some convention members felt that Lyons sacrificed the original NBC tenet of black empowerment for corporate greed and that their leader had betrayed them.

State prosecutors had a different interest in the agreements Lyons made with corporations. They alleged that Lyons knowingly inflated membership figures to solicit business from companies who believed Lyons’s claims of an NBC membership of 8.5 million members. In the case of the Loewen Group, Lyons used a recent civil judgement as leverage when attempting to elicit more funding from the company.\textsuperscript{11} This massive civil judgement allowed Lyons to intimidate the Loewen Group. If it had not been so financially vulnerable when it made the agreement with Lyons, it might not have given in to his demands so readily. Corporate officials acknowledged to prosecutors that they knew Lyons blackmailed them, but they felt giving Lyons the money offered a better solution than the potential damage the powerful leader could inflict.

At trial, defense attorneys attempted to portray the corporate agreements as simply failed business ventures. They acknowledged that Lyons fabricated the membership list that he provided to one of the companies but contended that the companies who did business with Lyons did so willingly. Defense attorneys argued that all of the companies had earned income from the deals they made with Lyons and that Lyons should not be held responsible because the actual sales did not meet their expected goals. Defense attorney Jay Hebert claimed the corporations, who stood to make millions if Lyons’s membership figures had been accurate, eagerly paid for the “key into the kingdom.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} William Loughery, Assistant State Attorney, Interview by author, 1 November 2000.  
\textsuperscript{12} Jay Hebert, Defense Attorney, Interview by author, 17 November 2000.
As millions of dollars flowed in and out of the NBC bank accounts, Lyons transferred funds between the accounts regularly, oftentimes supplementing his own income with monies from NBC accounts. The NBC maintained that this practice presented no problems for the organization. Lyons’s attorneys agreed that before the jury could comprehend the shifting of money, they needed to understand that the president had complete authority regarding the appropriation and management of funds.\(^{13}\) In 1999, an all-white jury sat to judge this system set up by Black Baptists in 1895.

Both prosecutors and defense attorneys agree that the most difficult crime for the jury to comprehend became the misuse of money donated by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to assist black churches burned by arsons.\(^{14}\) Lyons replaced the money that had been given to him once the newspapers determined the funds had not been disbursed; however, the shame lingered deep in the mind of the community. The idea that Lyons could take donations intended for such an emotional purpose and instead purchase luxury items proved too egregious for the jury to overlook. On February 27, 1999, the jury convicted Lyons of misrepresenting the membership numbers to corporations and of stealing the money from the ADL. Bernice Edwards, who had been charged with scheming to defraud corporations based on the membership figures only, was acquitted.

On March 31, 1999, Judge Susan Schaeffer heard statements from witnesses prior to imposing sentence on Lyons. In addition, hundreds of letters of support had been written in Lyons’s behalf. The testimonials detailed a man who began his career with great promise and then became tempted by the allure of easy money consistent with his

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

\(^{14}\) Hebert and Loughery interviews.
position as president of the NBC. Defense attorney Grady Irvin bemoaned the loss to the community, stating: “We have so few leaders.”\textsuperscript{15} In spite of the shame and embarrassment Lyons had brought to his church and his community, many still asked the judge for mercy. Following the state sentencing guidelines, Judge Schaeffer ordered Lyons to serve five and one-half years in a state prison facility. On April 30, 1999, Lyons filed a Notice of Appeal. On June 28, 1999, Lyons withdrew his appeal and instead accepted full responsibility for his actions.\textsuperscript{16}

While Lyons serves his sentence in the Department of Corrections, the NBC has taken steps to reevaluate the system that proved so easy for Lyons to manipulate and so difficult for others to understand. Financial audits have become standard and the convention has turned its goals more toward religion than fund raising. The convention that lived in obscurity for almost one-hundred years finally achieved prominence through shame and deceit. Following the Lyons’s scandal, the convention experienced a substantial drop in membership.\textsuperscript{17} Officials acknowledge that the damage done by the Lyons ordeal will take years to overcome but credit the fallen leader with enabling them to recognize flaws inherent in a system that attributes such immense power to one man.\textsuperscript{18}

When the NBC met in September 2000, members elected William J. Shaw to lead them in a different direction. Shaw defeated E.V. Hill—Lyons’s choice for successor—who suggested maintaining the system that Lyons had freely abused. The election of a candidate who promised to dismantle the current system indicated that the majority of the NBC members realized that restraint that accompany power. Shaw pledged to steer the

\textsuperscript{17} Larry B. Stammer, “Baptist Leader Pledges to Clean House,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, 9 September 2000.
convention away from deals with corporate America and decided to focus on returning the convention to spirituality instead.¹⁹

In October 2000, Henry Lyons transferred to a less secure prison facility. During his incarceration, he has been providing religious counseling for fellow inmates. Lyons keeps in contact with members from his former church and is anxious to return to the community. He is scheduled for release in 2004.

¹⁸ Gilbreath article.
¹⁹ Ibid.
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