

News & Views: Metropolis

Vernon goes to church

DeKalb CEO buys a cathedral from Earl Paulk — and refuses to answer questions about sex with one of the bishop's flock

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DeKalb County CEO Vernon Jones is hardly shy about his sexual exploits. He once boasted to me that "there's nothing illegal about a ménage au trois."

That's true, although his conduct often gets him in trouble, like his sex scandal three years ago. One of the participants in an alleged ménage with Jones made a written statement that hardly paints a favorable picture of a public servant. The woman complained: "I said no and continued to protest. He continued, while trying to convince me that somehow I owed it to him." The woman later withdrew her charge, but didn't recant her allegations.

The best you can say about Jones' private life is "tawdry." And now there are allegations that Jones was provided at least one sexual partner by a prominent minister, and that the CEO wasted a couple of million dollars of public money as a favor to the preacher.

Here's the background: Earl Paulk, who runs the Chapel Hill Harvester Church, is DeKalb's version of Elmer Gantry on steroids.

Paulk, among other things, has pleaded guilty to perjury. The "bishop," according to his confession and to lawsuits filed against him, philandered and fornicated in a style worthy of Caligula. Paulk's women parishioners were told their "minister" has special sacraments for them, according to their lawsuit allegations. He demanded absolute obedience. One woman, Mona Brewer, stated in her lawsuit that Paulk would require her "to have sexual intercourse with leaders of other churches, sometimes with other individuals observing the sexual acts."

It was proven by DNA testing that Paulk's nephew was actually the holy man's son. A little adultery with Paulk's sister-in-law accomplished that.

The worst stories are of child molestation. Jessica Battle, for example, claimed in a lawsuit that Paulk sexually abused her when she was only 7. Her mother, Patty Battle, has testified that she, too, engaged in sex with multiple partners while under Paulk's domination. Patty Battle's mom, Lynn Mays, is a minister in Paulk's church. Even Paulk's own granddaughter, Penie White, went public in December and accused him in sworn statements of molesting her when she was a child.

Back to Vernon Jones. He held his 2001 inauguration at Paulk's "cathedral" – Jones knows the value of squeezing votes out of megachurches. A year later, Jones used money from a \$125 million greenspace bond issue to buy Paulk's old church building on Flat Shoals Parkway. The price, \$2.4 million, likely would not have been justified even if DeKalb County had a use for the property. It didn't. In a 2004 *AJC* report, a state Soil and Water Conservation official called the church building a "white elephant," and neighbors grouched that the county "gave away [bond] money."

Jones eventually leased the building to a new cable network headed by some very wealthy gentlemen, including boxer Evander Holyfield. The lease price is one lousy buck a year.

All of this becomes really interesting in light of a lawsuit brought by Mona Brewer. Brewer contends Paulk coerced her into having sex with him by telling her it was the only route to salvation, praise the Lord. She also claims Paulk pimped her out to other ministers and to members of his family.

Patty Battle was one of the women questioned by Brewer's lawyer, Louis Levenson. "I believe Paulk had her [Patty Battle] engage in sex with Vernon Jones," Levenson says. "If this case goes to trial, her testimony will be that she had a sexual relationship with Vernon Jones."

Battle's lawyer, former DeKalb District Attorney – and fervent Jones critic – J. Tom Morgan, said she doesn't give interviews. Morgan did, however, say he does not dispute Levenson's account.

Levenson deposed Jones in October, asking such questions as: "Can you tell me any time that you recall that you have been in the company of Patty Battle?" "Do you recall being in the company of Earl Paulk and Patty Battle together?" "Have you had any sexual relationship with Patty Battle?"

Jones, who was under oath, refused to answer those questions and many others, including whether he considered Paulk his pastor and whether the CEO had received counseling at the church. Levenson says there is a long and close relationship between Jones and Paulk's church.

**In November**, Levenson asked the judge in the Brewer lawsuit to compel the CEO to answer. Let's meet that judge: Mark Anthony Scott. He's tight pals with Jones, according to Morgan. Records show Jones and Scott are fraternity brothers, and that the CEO contributed \$1,000 to the judge's election campaign. Before Levenson could get a ruling that would force Jones to answer questions, Paulk's lawyers filed for a summary judgment in the case.

Levenson said he felt questions Scott asked him in court indicated bias toward granting Paulk's motion, which would have meant the case never would have gone to trial. So before the judge ruled on the summary judgment, Levenson voluntarily dismissed his client's case. That was a maneuver that allowed him to refile the case, and draw a different judge, which he did.

It was Paulk's testimony in Brewer's lawsuit that led to the disgraced preacher's perjury conviction. Yet in the dismissed lawsuit, Scott ruled the case was frivolous and ordered Brewer to pay Paulk's attorneys \$1 million in lawyers' fees.

It was such a bizarre use of judicial prerogative that lawyers are head-shaking throughout the state. "It's completely unheard of," Morgan says. "Only in the most extreme circumstances, only when a case is clearly frivolous, are attorney's fees awarded."

Scott's decision had the result – Levenson says the *intended* result – of halting Brewer's revised case before the new judge, which means Jones has yet to be forced to answer some simple questions about his relationship with Patty Battle.

Morgan and Levenson contend that the real reason behind Scott's ruling was to protect Jones.

Jones, meanwhile, is running for the U.S. Senate seat held by Republican Saxby Chambliss. Thanks to Judge Scott, Jones will be spared the ordeal of testifying until after the primary and general elections.

Levenson says he'd like to see a law enforcement inquiry into the purchase of Paulk's former church. "Do I think there's fertile soil for investigation?" Levenson mused. "Yes, I do."

(Phone messages were left with Jones' office, and he was given more than a week to respond. He didn't. A spokeswoman for Judge Scott said he wouldn't comment. The best journalistic investigation of Paulk's relationship with Jones has been done by WAGA/Channel 5 senior investigative reporter Dale Russell, who shared some of the documents used for this column.)

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