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News

MINISTER KNOWS HOW BAKKER FEELS MELBOURNE PREACHER RECOVERED FROM AFFAIR

David Scruggs of The Sentinel Staff THE ORLANDO SENTINEL

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Jamie Buckingham knows what former PTL Ministries chairman Jim Bakker is going through, sorting out religious life after an affair exposed.

Today, Buckingham, 55, is the effervescent leader of the 4,000-member Tabernacle Church of Melbourne and author of 39 books, some best sellers, about Christian lives. But 23 years ago, Buckingham was a young married Baptist preacher out on his heels, banished by the church community in Greenwood, S.C., because of an affair he had with a church employee.

When Bakker stepped down several months ago, Buckingham said Bakker asked him to come talk. Buckingham went to the leader's California home, because despite his disdain for lavish living, "I've got a real heart for wounded pastors, for guys who've been where I've been, who have been crushed."

"I don't think the moral breakdown is new," he said. "King David had a moral breakdown, took another man's wife and had her husband killed. It's always been there."

Buckingham had started on the ministerial road in the 1950s, earning a bachelor of divinity degree and working toward a master's degree in counseling at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He married his Vero Beach High School sweetheart and they had five children when he was called to the \$7,000-a-year stewardship of a tiny Greenwood church in 1958.

"I had a morals problem and I got mixed up with the wrong person and they blew the whistle on me," Buckingham recalled from a recliner in the den of his Palm Bay home.

"It was a scandal," he said shaking his head slowly. "Big scandal. Small town scandal. I was invited out of the church. She had to leave town, too. She was, to some degree, an innocent victim because I was the guy responsible for that."

He realized then that after eight years of preaching, he was "spiritually empty . . . talking theory rather than practicing." Sent away from the Greenwood church, he offered himself to another congregation at the Harbor City Baptist Church in Melbourne. They asked him to be their minister.

When he took that preaching job in 1965, he never explained why he had left South Carolina.

"And they had gotten wind of why I'd been asked to leave and they dropped the ax on me. The first time around I was guilty, and the second time around I was innocent," Buckingham said, "but having not told the people about my past, they felt betrayed."

Some of the congregation were inspired by Buckingham nonetheless and left with him when he was ushered out of the chapel doors 15 months after he had arrived. The small group that followed him still wanted him as their spiritual leader, he said.

"By that time, I didn't know what 'spiritual leader' meant," he said. Buckingham said he felt called by God, but not equipped. He still was toting his bag of human frailties when he founded the Tabernacle Church of Melbourne. The equipping came in the next couple of years, Buckingham said. He entered a writer's contest in 1967 and was chosen by Guidepost Magazine, a Christian publication, to attend a writer's conference in New York along with 19 other winners.

A publishing company wanted Guidepost Senior Editor John Sherrill to write a sequel to *The Cross and the Switchblade*, a book about Pentecostal preacher David Wilkerson's sharing with New York street gangs. But Sherrill offered Buckingham the task, profiling the life of a Puerto Rican boy, Nicky Cruz, whom Wilkerson had converted in the first book.

Buckingham's writing career was launched.

Then in 1968 he attended a "full gospel businessmen's convention" in Washington to interview Cruz, who was speaking there, and instead of remaining the distant observer, Buckingham said, "I wound up on my knees on the floor weeping."

"There was something broken loose in the moral area of my life and I came home and told my wife I loved her," Buckingham said. "I hadn't done that for years. We had just co-existed, and she was very wounded by this affair I'd had.

"I'd never believed that God invaded our reality. I'd always thought he'd just set this world in motion and then stood back and watched."

In 1968, *Run, Baby, Run*, the Cruz sequel that Buckingham wrote, was released. It has sold about 11 million copies. Thirty-eight more books have followed, most of them life stories of Christian people, among them Pat Robertson in the 1972 book *Shout It From The House Tops*.

Another was a 1975 profile of Corrie Ten Boom, a Dutch woman who crusaded after World War II encouraging the world to forgive Adolf Hitler. She had been a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during the war.

"That book put me in this house," he said. Royalties on Ten Boom's story, *Tramp For The Lord*, exceeded \$100,000.

"This house" is an 11-room, 4 1/2-bath, two-story brick home with four white columns across the front porch, a matching detached two-car garage and a brick workshop. Two white concrete pillars declaring the wooded 20-acre spread Hebron, after a Biblical city south of Jerusalem, grace the entrance of Buckingham's Hield Road property in Palm Bay valued by the county property appraiser's office at \$245,000.

About 5 acres he has given to his five children and each lives with their own families within shouting distance of Buckingham's house. They have given Buckingham eight grandchildren, who were spiriting about the house peering impishly into the den as Buckingham talked.

The spread is vast for property within a city, and the house is huge, but Buckingham treats it all off-handedly rather than as a source of pride, as if it were no more than a shovel banging around in the bed of his truck.

"We have a nice home to live in, that's for sure, and I'm thankful for it," said Jackie Buckingham, his wife. "But we're not extravagant. I don't think we should be."

Buckingham agreed. "I have severe problems with and I've written extensively about waste in the Kingdom of God. It's one of my pet peeves."

He drives a Chevrolet pickup, and his wife, a 4-year-old Chrysler.

So there is no ostentation in Hebron, really, as far as the Buckinghams are concerned. It is a beautiful, quiet place, but spiders have made themselves welcome beneath the eaves outside and the white shutters and columns could use a visit from a water hose.

It has the look and homey smells of a well-worn house on the inside, hardly the showy Bakker palace. Bakker, the former leader of PTL Ministries, stepped down after an affair from several years ago was publicized recently. He since has been criticized by other religious leaders for his extravagant homes and his nearly \$2 million-a-year salary.

And behind the laundry room, papers clutter Buckingham's office floor and the computer worktable where he composes his books and his columns for Charisma, Guidepost and Ministries Today, all Christian magazines.

Buckingham said he and his wife struggled with moving into such a big house after that first \$100,000 rolled in. Their vacillations stuck on the thought that maybe "God had given us a really good bargain."

"We bought in here at \$2,100 an acre. It's worth \$21,000 an acre now," Buckingham said. "But we're not going to sell it. We bought it to use it."

The property is all he has taken from his work for himself, Buckingham said. About half of the \$50,000 a year he now receives in book royalties and honorariums goes toward supporting missionaries and shelters for the homeless. Most of the rest he writes off with the IRS as travel expenses for book research. He draws a salary, although he won't say how much, from the church to pay his living expenses.

The house, he said, is like a hotel, a clinic with a revolving door for clergymen, children stricken by affairs and drugs. He recalled three couples who have stayed there for several days for counseling in the last couple of years.

"We just kind of leave the door open for people who need help," Jackie Buckingham said.

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