

SUNDAY, APRIL 22, 2007 7:51 AM

Parish investigation raises concerns for some Christians

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The Post and Courier

As authorities catalog Al Parish's assets and investigate an alleged multi-million dollar investment fraud, many Lowcountry Christians have expressed dismay, concern and anger over what they call irresponsible and unchristian behavior.

In numerous Internet blog posts and e-mails, observers familiar with the charges levied against Parish have commented on the case and criticized the university where he became a "star" professor.

"Please know that most of us remain at CSU ... because we feel we've been called to teach and serve others," a blogger and Charleston Southern University faculty member wrote recently. "We form close relationships with our peers and students, trying to put into action Christ's words, 'love thy neighbor.' It's not a Christian environment when we put profit over employee and student welfare and safety."

Parish had to affirm he was a practicing Christian active in his church when he joined the faculty at Charleston Southern in 1990.

CSU's declaration of faith requirement for faculty and staff has become increasingly detailed since then, according to university spokeswoman Allie Osman.

"The current form requires faculty to fill out a faculty background questionnaire that requires a written statement describing the faculty member's personal acceptance of Christ as their Lord and Savior and a written statement describing the faculty member's commitment to integrating faith in his work with students and colleagues," Osman wrote in an e-mail to The Post and Courier.

Christian ethics

As a community ponders the ethical implications of the case and details of Parish's past emerge, his pastor insists on reserving judgment, calling instead for "repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution."

"Let the state work out whatever the state needs to in regard to the allegations - that is the legitimate expectation of, and proper function for government," Cameron Keyser, pastor of St. Matthew's Lutheran Church, wrote in an e-mail to The Post and Courier. Parish and his wife, Yolanda Yoder, attend St. Matthew's. "As a pastor, however, my job is to be there to support Al and his family spiritually, as well as others who feel they may have been victimized. ? These are the kinds of situations which truly put the whole of the Christian ethic to the real test."

Keyser referred to the "social statement" on economic life adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America at its sixth Churchwide Assembly on Aug. 20, 1999.

"If the economic arena becomes a reigning power for us, the question arises: in what or whom

shall we place our trust and hope? The First Commandment is clear: 'You shall have no other gods before me.' Or as Jesus said, 'You cannot serve God and wealth.' To place our trust in something other than God is the essence of sin. ? Too uncritically we accept assumptions, policies and practices that do not serve the good of all."

Buster Brown, pastor at East Cooper Baptist Church, said that, in principle, he is not much concerned with an individual's accrual of wealth so long as the proper focus - God - is always maintained. Problems arise when becoming rich is the ultimate goal, when good deeds and respect for God are made secondary priorities, or worse, he said.

Brown said he feels bad for those involved in the scandal but holds CSU officials blameless. "I think they were hoodwinked just like everybody else," he said.

Denied tenure

Herb Silverman, math professor at the College of Charleston for the past 30 years, had Parish as a student. Silverman said the young Parish had talent.

"I taught Al when he was an undergraduate," Silverman said. "He was a good student, but not a superstar."

Bill Golightly was chairman of the department when Parish returned to teach at the college. Parish was hired at a time when the department was expanding to accommodate a booming business and economics program, and many business students were taking advanced math courses. "He was exactly what we were looking for," Golightly said.

The college hired Parish before he completed his dissertation, but the department was assured that his doctorate was nearly in hand, Golightly said.

When the former chairman called Parish's thesis advisor in North Carolina to verify, he received a surprise.

"I was told not quite the same thing," Golightly said. The thesis advisor hadn't heard from Parish for some time and didn't know the status of his dissertation. "I told Al he had to go back and complete his degree," Golightly said. Prodded to do so, Parish took a year off from the college and obtained his doctorate from UNC.

When it came time for Parish's tenure review, the faculty was troubled, Golightly said. Despite promises of impressive papers soon to be published, it appears Parish published very little in peer-reviewed journals. "We recommended Parish be denied tenure," he said.

In academia, a professor who is denied tenure is effectively terminated and must leave his job, usually within a year. Parish left the College of Charleston for CSU in 1990.

Dealing with anger

Keyser said he understands why many people might be angry about the investment scandal, but cautions observers to withhold judgment.

"The Al Parish I know never presented himself to be the kind of person who would ever intentionally or maliciously? harm others," he wrote in his e-mail. "There will come a time for justice? as well as the 'justice' that comes in Christian discipleship - of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution. When that happens, it seems to me that it would serve well if that could become the focus for all."