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-- FEATURES

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Assyrian Pastor Has
'Distinctive' Ministry

By Gail Rothwell

RIDGECREST, N.C. (BP)--George Shahbaz holds the distinction of broadcasting the only Assyrian evangelistic radio program in the world.

His broadcast originates from Chicago, Ill., where he also is pastor of the only Assyrian Southern Baptist congregation in the United States.

Expense limits Shahbaz's broadcast to 15 minutes every Saturday. "But everywhere I go in Chicago I meet people who say 'I heard you on the radio,'" he says.

Shahbaz's ministry spans the metropolitan and suburban areas of Chicago and is supported by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and the Illinois Baptist State Association. He estimates that 200,000 people from Middle East countries, including his native Iraq, live in the Chicago area.

"There is such a need here," he says. "I know of four new congregations that could be started, but Shahbaz is only one person."

His message to Southern Baptists is simple--provide help that the people from the Middle East might know the love of Jesus.

Shahbaz holds weekly Bible studies in Aramaic, his native language, and in Arabic. He also does mission work in the suburb of Morton Gap where there is no established Southern Baptist work. To broaden his ministry he enrolled in Chicago Truman College in 1978 to witness to the students there. "I studied Spanish," he laughingly admits. "The Great Commission says to go, so I go."

Shahbaz and his wife came to the United States in July 1971, a month after his graduation from the Lebanon Baptist Seminary. His parents had been in the states since December 1970.

He became a Christian in 1965 while translating for a Lebanese preacher who was speaking to a pastorless Assyrian congregation in Baghdad. He was later baptized by missionary James Leeper in the swimming pool of the American army base in Turkey.

Because of Shahbaz's close association with Americans he was once accused of being a spy. "I remember being taken to the Turkish embassy," he recalls. "They asked me if I was a spy. I gave them tracts and told them about Jesus."

Shahbaz's ministry in the United States has not been without obstacles. "It is nearly impossible to find Bibles in our native language, and my people have such a demand for Bibles," he says. In addition, no Sunday School literature is available in Aramaic or Arabic. Shahbaz gathered material for resources and ideas at Sunday School Leadership Week at Ridgecrest Baptist Conference Center. He then has to translate all that he uses into Aramaic or Arabic.

Obstacles to Shahbaz's ministry also exist within the culture of the people he is trying to reach. "They are baptized as infants and find it very hard to understand believers baptism,"

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he explains. He claims 75 percent of Assyrians still practice black magic or witch craft and says, "I'm dealing with tough Satan work."

Shahbaz hopes Southern Baptists realize they have a foreign mission field at home. "We need to witness to our neighbors who live next door," he declares. "Southern Baptists have the power, energy, ability and people to reach our Bold Mission Thrust Goal--we just have to put them all to work."

Shahbaz's congregation, which averages about 25 in weekly attendance, currently meets in the facilities of the Lakeshore Baptist Church in Chicago but plans to relocate later this year.

"We have no building, we have no money, but we have Jesus," Shahbaz says. "We can be a light to the Middle East."

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Sunday School Board bureau of Baptist Press.

Man Charged in Daingerfield
Deaths Ruled Incompetent

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DAINGERFIELD, Texas (BP)--Alvin Lee King III, charged with killing five persons with a spray of gunfire in the sanctuary of First Baptist Church, Daingerfield, Texas, was ruled mentally incompetent to stand trial.

But the jury of eight men and four women ruled there is a "substantial probability the defendant will attain competency to stand trial in the foreseeable future."

The 45-year-old defendant, whose forehead bears two deep scars from brain surgery after a self-inflicted wound, was ordered back to Rusk State Hospital for up to 18 months to continue recovery from the wound.

King is accused of killing five worshippers and wounding 10 others June 22 in a shooting spree during Sunday morning services.

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Religious Spokesmen Assail
Helms School Prayer Measure

By Stan Hastey

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WASHINGTON (BP)--Legislation which would strip federal courts of jurisdiction in school prayer cases came under attack from leading religious spokesmen and the U.S. Department of Justice as a House subcommittee opened hearings on the volatile issue.

Assistant Attorney General John M. Harmon, who attended the hearings, predicted that Attorney General Benjamin R. Civiletti would recommend a presidential veto in the event Congress passes the measure.

Brief oral statements from most congressmen on the nine-member panel indicated, however, that it is unlikely that the so-called "Helms Amendment," named after chief sponsor U.S. Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., will be voted out favorably.

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Subcommittee Chairman Robert W. Kastenmeier, D-Wis., said in opening remarks that discussion on the heated issue has thus far lacked "thoughtful" and "constructive" content. He expressed hope that his panel's hearings "will raise the level of debate."

Ranking Republican member Robert McClory, R-Ill., joined Kastenmeier in opposing the Helms language, which would remove jurisdiction over the school prayer issue from all federal courts, including the Supreme Court.

Representatives from mainline Protestant denominations and the American Jewish community told the subcommittee the Helms proposal not only violates the First Amendment's ban on an establishment of religion, but also threatens the fabric of the Bill of Rights.

Speaking for a panel representing the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, American Baptist Churches General Secretary Robert C. Campbell declared that "government's lack of competence in religious matters is a fundamental legal principle in the United States."

Campbell said that prayers mandated by government authorities have the effect of destroying "the true nature of prayer." By definition, the American Baptist executive said, prayer "is an act which is and must be voluntary."

Campbell, whose denomination's general board adopted a strongly-worded statement opposing the Helms amendment in June, was joined by Grady C. Cothen, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Sunday School Board, and C.J. Malloy, general secretary of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.

Cothen, pointing to a similar Southern Baptist action during its annual session in June, told the subcommittee that because "historically Baptists have been dissenters," they are concerned that the "rights of the majority should not compromise the rights of the minority." Southern Baptists, he said, do not want matters of religious faith put in the hands of local authorities whose decisions cannot be tested in federal courts.

Malloy, new chief executive of the 800,000-member Progressive National Baptist Convention, declared his opposition to the Helms language in view of his denomination's commitment to separation of church and state.

Also appearing during the first of two days of testimony presently scheduled by the subcommittee were M. William Howard, president of the National Council of Churches, and Meyer Eisenberg, chairman of the National Law Committee, Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'Rith.

The Helms proposal, passed by the U.S. Senate in April 1979 as an amendment to S.450, a bill dealing with Supreme Court jurisdictional questions, has languished in Kastenmeier's subcommittee without action until the present hearings. The Wisconsin legislator scheduled the hearings, to be continued in August, after support grew for a device to bypass the subcommittee and bring the issue directly to the House floor.

The bypass effort has been led by U.S. Rep. Philip Crane, R-Ill., who at latest count had succeeded in securing the signatures of 172 members of the House on a "discharge petition" which would bring the issue to a vote. A simple majority of the House, or 218 members, would have to sign to bypass the committee procedure.

Efforts to discharge the bill from the subcommittee have stalled, however, in light of Kastenmeier's decision to hold hearings.

Ethicist Says World Peace Primary Campaign Issue

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--World peace is the single greatest issue to consider when voting for a presidential candidate, says Southern Baptist ethicist Bill Elder.

"We need to be careful about single-issue politics," Elder told participants in a conference on ethical issues of the 1980 elections, "but if voters insist on choosing a candidate on a single issue, I would suggest they make that issue world peace."

Elder, director of Christian citizenship development for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said unless Southern Baptists get concerned about world peace, their efforts to tell everyone in the world about Jesus by the year 2000 will "go up in a mushroom cloud."

During the commission-sponsored event at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center, Elder presented the positions of presidential candidates Anderson, Carter, Kennedy and Reagan on such issues as peace, foreign policy, welfare, energy, abortion, women's rights, crime, and the family. Glen Stassen, associate professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, then talked about the moral dimensions of each issue from a biblical perspective.

Stassen told participants that sincere Christians can have different positions on the many controversial issues in the 1980 presidential campaign. He said Jesus not only teaches that we should live by peace, but that Jesus emphasized taking surprising initiatives to make peace.

"We should take surprising initiatives as Jesus did in working for peace in Iran, Afghanistan and with the Russians," Stassen said.

"The Old Testament prophets taught that when people put their trust in horses and chariots, they become foolish and deaf to the word of God and to justice," he said. "When we put our trust in MX missiles or neutron bombs, the results are the same. The consequence is destruction."

On the issue of welfare reform, Stassen urged Southern Baptists to use the guiding biblical principle, "To know God is to do justice."

Stassen said one of the overriding principles for Christians in dealing with moral issues in the 1980 presidential campaign is that of justice to the poor and needy.

"How we fight inflation and unemployment can 'do justice' to the needy," Stassen said. He indicated that oil conservation will produce jobs, promote a healthier economy and do more to help world hunger than anything else.

Stassen said that in terms of the welfare system, he felt Christians were more preoccupied with honesty than with justice and fairness.

"We are offended by people who cheat on the welfare system, but is it any more just to provide middle and upper class handouts through legal tax loopholes and tax incentives?" Stassen asked.

"We need to find ways to reduce cheating in the welfare system and at the same time provide incentives for people on welfare to work. We also need to be careful not to create a welfare system for the rich through the use of unfair depreciation and capital gain exemptions, double dipping pension plans, and the two martini business lunches."

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'Church Plan' Amendment
Receives Senate Approval

By Larry Chesser

Baptist Press
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WASHINGTON (BP)--The U.S. Senate gave near-unanimous approval to pension legislation which will preserve the right of denominational employees and missionaries to continue participation in Southern Baptist Annuity Board retirement plans.

The legislation, S.1076, amending the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (ERISA), was approved 85-1. It contains an amendment introduced in the Senate Finance Committee by Sen. Herman Talmadge, D-Ga., which clarifies definitions of church employees and church agencies affected by ERISA.

Without the clarification, virtually all Southern Baptist denominational workers outside local church ministries would have been excluded from participation in SBC Annuity Board retirement programs by the Jan. 1, 1983 effective date.

Before being signed into law, the Senate ERISA amendments must be approved by the House of Representatives which passed its version, H.R. 3904, in May without including a church plan amendment.

The Talmadge Amendment was supported by the Annuity Board as well as the Church Alliance for Clarification of ERISA. The Alliance is chaired by Annuity Board President Darold H. Morgan and represents the interests of 27 Protestant, Catholic and Jewish groups.

"The Talmadge church plan ERISA amendments clarify the law consistent with the First Amendment principles of separation of church and state," said Morgan. "These amendments will enable denominational workers serving in church missions and other ministries to continue to receive benefits from church retirement and welfare benefit plans."

The Talmadge Amendment definition of an employee of a church, convention or association of churches includes any "duly ordained, commissioned or licensed minister of a church in the exercise of his ministry, regardless of the source of his compensation," as well as all unordained employees of church agencies and institutions.

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