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Worship Was For Propaganda,
Released Hostage Declares

By John M. Wilkes

WIESBADEN, West Germany (BP)--Christmas services in 1979 and 1980 for the 52 American hostages in Iran were staged for propaganda, one of the freed hostages says.

The services, he added, were the only Christian worship services allowed the 52 hostages during their 444-day ordeal.

Television cameras recording the services for the waiting world showed some of the hostages, but did not reveal their captors standing guard with loaded weapons, a former security guard at the U.S. Embassy told a European Baptist leader.

James Lopez, of the United States Marine Corps, interviewed during the de-briefing interlude in Wiesbaden by John M. Merritt, executive secretary of the European Baptist Convention (English-language), said the Christmas services both years were obviously for propaganda. Several hostages refused to attend because they felt their presence would only give credence to the setup.

About 40 of the militants, armed with submachine guns, formed an overbearing presence to the hostages even though they remained off-camera during the filming of the services, Lopez revealed.

Merritt, a Southern Baptist missionary from Hattiesburg, Miss., also spoke with Robert Ode, a retired U.S. State Department officer who was on temporary consular assignment in Iran when the Nov. 4, 1979 saga erupted.

"We prayed for you," Merritt said.

"It worked," Ode replied.

Lopez, one of the younger hostages, and Ode, oldest of the group, "both looked well," Merritt reported, although several others "appeared fatigued."

"I think their arrival and stay here caught the full emotion of both U.S. military personnel and the German community," Merritt said.

The local German response may have stemmed from the active role in release negotiations played by Gerhard Ritzel, West Germany's ambassador to Iran.

German folk bands provided music, school children brought flowers, and "people walked or drove by the hospital compound in great numbers" hoping to get a glimpse of the freed Americans, Merritt said.

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But he added they "were very protected." News persons were not permitted inside the compound, although the hostages who voluntarily came out to an unrestricted area could speak to anyone they chose.

Merritt, a former member of the European Baptist Federation executive committee and of the executive board of the Baptist Theological Seminary of Ruschlikon, was able to meet seven other former hostages although there was not much time for talking with them.

He was on hand also when former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former Vice President Walter Mondale made the rounds personally to embrace each one of the hostages. As Carter addressed the returning Americans, applause arose at several points. When Carter told them that "no ransom was paid" for their release, and that—due to escrow accounts and international claims pending—Iran would not receive most of its assets which Carter had frozen immediately after the embassy attack, "their cheers could be heard through the whole hospital area," Merritt said.

Churches of the European Baptist Convention all along had placed the hostage drama "very high on their prayer priority lists," Merritt told European Baptist Press. One hostage, educator William Keogh, is a close friend and former associate of European Baptist Convention Vice President James Kirkendall, a Southern Baptist missionary from Birch Tree, Mo.

Most European Baptist Convention congregations last Sunday offered thanks to God for looking after the hostages, and prayers for their safe journey home.

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Southern Baptist Disappointed
In Agenda For Eighties Report

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--The only Southern Baptist who served on the President's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties says he is "disappointed in the group's final report."

Foy D. Valentine, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said: "I am disappointed and I think the president (Jimmy Carter) was disappointed. The Christian community, I believe, has a right to be disappointed that there was not a facing up to the primary importance of recovering moral values and spiritual ideals."

The commission was appointed more than a year ago by Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter after a speech identifying America's crisis as a crisis of spirit.

The commission's final report was released recently in Washington. In a preface to the report, chairman William J. McGill, president emeritus of Columbia University, noted the "intention" of the commission "was to conduct an objective study of the problems facing our nation in the coming decade."

Also in the preface, McGill admits the agenda "hardly addresses such themes having to do with 'what it means to be human'" and says: "We have found this dimension of life to be extremely illusive and talk about it in such a forum to be generally unproductive."

Valentine, however, said a "substantial number" of the 45 persons on the commission "shared the president's hope and my plea for a clear focus on moral values and spiritual ideals."

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The Southern Baptist urged emphasis on values and ideals and the recovery of those values and ideals because they "will affect everything that goes on in our national agenda during the decade before us."

In a letter to McGill, Valentine urged stronger focus on such issues, saying: "The crisis of the United States of America in the 1980s is a crisis of spirit. Without vision any people will perish. Without 'order in the soul', to use Augustine's phrase, no nation or civilization can long survive.

"A spirit of malaise really does permeate the life of our nation as a whole. ...Many things are needful in an agenda for the eighties, but the first and most needful thing is a recovery of values and ideals which constitute the glue without which the nation could not long hold together."

Valentine mentioned "four cardinal virtues" of wisdom, justice, temperance and fortitude, coupled with "three cardinal theological virtues" of faith, hope and love.

"Among those values in our own country are freedom or liberty, honesty, character, integrity, meaningful work, loyalty, faithfulness, dependability, responsibility and self sacrifice, all of which are largely in the personal arena. Among those virtues also are peace, human rights and justice in the political arena."

Despite the lack of a focus on moral and spiritual values, Valentine said the final report is "not without value" in highlighting important items for the national agenda in the coming decade.

In declining to focus on spiritual and moral things, Valentine noted the commission was "not hostile; they just didn't see this as what they were set up to do."

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High Court Rejects
Church-State Disputes

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WASHINGTON (BP)--The U.S. Supreme Court reiterated the long-standing doctrine that hierarchical-type church bodies control the properties of local congregations, even when the latter secede from their denominations.

In a pair of cases involving Episcopal churches in New Jersey, the high court unanimously declined requests from local parishes to review lower court decisions holding that their properties belong to the mother denomination, the Protestant Episcopal Church. Both congregations had objected to changes in the denomination and withdrew from membership.

By rejecting the appeals, the high court reasserted the principle, first enunciated in 1872, that church bodies controlled by a hierarchy have property rights over local congregations. On several occasions, the court has decided other church property disputes, but in each case the contending parties were Presbyterian.

Although no church property dispute involving congregational-type churches or denominations had ever been argued or decided by the court, virtually all church-state experts agree that in such bodies local congregations control their own property.

In a separate church-state action, the Supreme Court also refused to hear a challenge by a Lutheran parochial school student to the Louisiana high school athletic association policy barring athletes from participating in interscholastic competition for one year if they are recruited by high schools outside their primary school districts.

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The complaint was lodged by a student at a Lutheran high school who was declared ineligible for a year because he transferred from one school district to another between his elementary and high school years in Lutheran schools.

Attorneys for the student-athlete argued that the transfer rule placed an undue burden on his free exercise of religion as guaranteed by the First Amendment.

They argued further that the student's constitutional rights to due process and equal protection of the law were violated.

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Publishing, Music Leaders
Named at Sunday School Board

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Jimmy D. Edwards was elected vice president for publishing and distribution and Wesley L. Forbis was named secretary of the church music department by trustees of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board at their semi-annual meeting.

Edwards, an 11-year employee of the board, moves to his new position from the board's book store division, where he has been manager of the east central region since 1975. Before that he was manager of the Broadman trade sales department at the board.

Forbis, 49, chairman of the music department at William Jewell College, Liberty, Mo., for 18 years, also has served the Missouri Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention as a frequent music worship leader and seminar resource person. He has been part-time minister of music for a number of congregations.

As vice president for publishing and distribution, Edwards, 42, will be responsible for supervision of the Broadman, Holman and book store divisions and in charge of general publishing and retail distribution through book stores.

James W. Clark, executive vice president of the Sunday School Board, said the newly created position grew out of the desire to "develop a unified and more efficient marketing program of our different publishing divisions of Bibles and general religious materials. Edwards will coordinate our publishing efforts both in wholesale and retail areas."

Edwards, a native of Virginia, is a graduate of the University of Richmond and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Before moving to the Sunday School Board, he was pastor of churches in Virginia and an employee of the Humble Oil Company.

As secretary of the board's church music department, Forbis will lead the Southern Baptist program in which more than 1.5 million persons participated last year, according to the denomination's statistical projections. Forbis succeeds William J. Reynolds, who served in that position from 1971-1980.

J. Ralph McIntyre, director of the board's church and staff support division, said Forbis "will bring to this position not only a remarkable expertise in his musical ability, but also great administrative, management and human relations skills."

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"From his rich experience he will lead the department to provide greater assistance to all sizes and types of Southern Baptist churches," McIntyre continued.

Prior to assuming his position in Missouri, Forbis, a native of Oklahoma, worked in music ministry positions for churches in Nashville, Tenn.; Corpus Christi, Texas; Cleburne, Texas, and Tulsa, Okla. In the mid-1950s, he was instructor of church music and assistant football coach for the University of Corpus Christi, as well as Baptist Student Union director and Bible teacher at Del Mar Junior College in Corpus Christi.

He earned the bachelor of music education degree and the master of arts degree from the University of Tulsa and the master of music degree from Baylor University. In 1970, he earned the Ph.D. degree in music education from George Peabody College (now a part of Vanderbilt University) in Nashville.

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Georgia Retiree Prays
His Way Into Pastorate

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ATLANTA (BP)--Barton Jones might not be working so hard if he'd kept his prayers to himself.

But when members of Cambridge (Kansas) Baptist Church told him they'd lost their pastor, Jones felt compelled to ask God to send help for them.

God said, "I want you."

Jones' involvement with the church began last summer when he spent two months helping construct a building. A retired Delta Airlines employee from suburban Forest Park, Ga., he simply wanted "to make the best use of my time."

He endeared himself to Cambridge Baptist, and they thought of him when their pastor left. "We decided we needed a bivocational pastor, and we asked brother Jones to help us look," says deacon Stanley Asbury. Then they decided on Jones as interim pastor and "grabbed him with open arms."

Although new to the pastorate, Jones doesn't plan to start out like a novice. "There is a great need for personal visitation and evangelism," he says of the 47-member church in the small south Kansas farm and ranch community.

Jones realizes he "doesn't know it all," so he's counting on an extra source of wisdom and strength. "I can't do anything of myself," he explains. "I've just got to let the Lord work through me."

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