



--FEATURES

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Baptists In Israel Obey Law
But Would Like More Freedom

By Stan Hasteley

WASHINGTON (BP)--While Israel's attention is once more riveted on military conflict, this time with the Palestine Liberation Organization, Baptists and other religious minorities continue to maintain an uneasy truce within a nation that is by design and purpose a homeland for Jews.

How this modern-day Jewish state deals with a pluralistic population, albeit a pluralism dominated by the Hebrew faith, has been one of Israel's most nagging problems since its founding in 1948.

A major factor in the ongoing struggle of religious minorities to coexist with the state of Israel has been the nation's failure to adopt a constitution guaranteeing religious freedom to all its citizens. Such a document has for years been before the Knesset (parliament) but languishes unadopted.

Among the sections of the proposed constitution is one headed "Freedom of Religion:" "Every man is entitled to the freedom of religious belief, the freedom of worship of God, and to the fulfillment of the precepts of his religion."

In another section of the proposed document, "Equality Before the Law and Prohibition of Discrimination," all citizens of Israel are declared to be "equal before the law." Furthermore, "There is to be no discrimination between man and man for reasons of race, sex, ethnic affiliation, community, country of origin, religion, view, social standing or political affiliation, or for any other reason."

Aside from the stalemate over adopting a constitution, the current status of religious minorities is clouded by the adoption two years ago of the Amutot Law, a statute governing non-profit societies. Designed to replace the old Ottoman Law, the Amutot statute took effect in April 1981, although a one-year grace period was extended for actual registration and enforcement.

The Association of Baptist Churches in Israel, acting three months before the effective date, applied for government registration in January 1981, under the Amutot, or Friendly Societies Law. But Baptists in the land of Jesus are nevertheless concerned.

According to a review of the law's provisions in the quarterly Baptist newsletter Hayahad, "the main source of concern for the religious societies is that the law calls for full exposure to the public of names on the rolls of the societies. It is feared by many that this will be fuel for extremist groups to cause problems for those whose membership in such societies is resented." Such "problems," according to Hayahad, could surround Jewish Christians particularly.

Other objectionable features of the new law include the power of state officials to order changed the name of a friendly society, to review the society's internal rules, to inspect financial records, to investigate "the business and position" of the society and to order such a group to disband.

Such a law in the United States, with its absolute guarantee of religious freedom would, of course, be unthinkable. The simple commands of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution forbidding an establishment of religion and assuring its free exercise have been consistently interpreted by courts to mandate protection for religious minorities, even when their beliefs and practices are noxious to the general population.

But in a religious climate such as Israel's, government control or oversight of some magnitude is practically dictated.

Complicating the current religious scene in Israel, which by all accounts is a highly secularized modern state, is the tenuous political situation confronting Prime Minister Menachem Begin and his ruling conservative Likud party. Last summer, after an election in which Likud won a plurality, but not a majority, of seats in the Knesset, Begin was forced to invite small Orthodox religious parties to join his coalition in order to form a government. They did so, but only after insisting that Begin accept some of their demands, including strict monitoring and regulation of non-Jewish groups.

Despite these perhaps inevitable, built-in tensions, however, the state of Israel, supported by an overwhelming majority of its people, is trying to protect the basic rights of religious minorities.

One of the Cabinet posts, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, includes a Department of Christian Communities, headed by young, American-born Daniel Rossing, who says with conviction and somewhat justifiable pride that "there is here no potential threat to Christian freedom."

Meeting last year with a group of U.S. Baptist journalists in Jerusalem, Rossing noted that in spite of the special place it reserves for Judaism, Israel is sensitive to the fact that it is a "Holy Land" to Jews, Christians and Moslems alike, and that appropriate provisions must be made for all.

Yet he acknowledged that religion and the state in Israel are "intertwined and bound up in each other," in contrast to the situation in the U.S., where separation of church and state is enshrined in the Constitution.

Rossing emphasized, just the same, that religious pluralism is acknowledged to the degree that his department's function is not to supervise Christian churches but to help them, "acting as a kind of advocate" in solving their problems. Such problem-solving became his task, Rossing illustrated, when Baptists in Nazareth in early 1981 suffered a series of acts of vandalism directed against their well-known school and church. Southern Baptist missionaries in Nazareth gratefully credit Rossing and other Israeli officials with moving quickly and decisively to meet their complaints.

Baptist and other missionaries in Israel work daily with the ongoing tensions inherent in a nation where the state and its official religion are so intertwined. Most of them want to evangelize more aggressively but feel intimidated by the generalized Israeli revulsion to "proselytism."

"We work within the limits of Israeli law," one missionary told the visiting Baptist journalists last year. "We are guests in Israel."

But the same missionary expressed regret that governmental and cultural pressures militate against the kind of freedom missionaries want. Missionaries in Jerusalem told the journalists that four separate firebombs were set off during 1980 alone at the Baptist House in Jerusalem. At the same time, they credited Israeli police with tracking down the perpetrators, one of them a follower of U.S. Rabbi Meir Kahane, leader of the radical Jewish Defense League.

Isam Ballenger, named last year as area director for Europe and the Middle East at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, underscores the ambivalence sensed daily by missionaries in Israel.

"There is an honest effort," he says, "to grant freedom of activity to the Christian churches." Yet it is "freedom with different degrees of limitations."

Recalling his first official visit to Israel last November after being named to his present position, Ballenger said he was received warmly at an official reception for Christian groups which was attended by the Minister of Religious Affairs.

Ballenger says he senses a "reserved" yet "positive" attitude toward the government by Baptist missionaries and states emphatically that "Israel is the land of freedom" in the Middle East for Southern Baptists. For that reason, he says of his attitudes toward Israeli restrictions, "We will continue to work within the laws."

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Chinese Baptist
Form Fellowship

By Patti Stephenson

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FRESNO, Calif. (BP)--Rallying around the theme "One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism," Chinese Baptist pastors from the United States and Canada recently forged an alliance aimed at unifying their churches and strengthening their collective outreach.

Approximately 40 Chinese pastors, the majority Southern Baptist, approved a formal constitution creating the Chinese Baptist Fellowship of the U.S. and Canada during a three-day conference at First Chinese Southern Baptist Church, Fresno. The fellowship is the offspring of an informal organization created at the 1980 Baptist World Alliance meeting in Toronto. There are now 12-14 similar ethnic associations within the SBC.

According to Cephas Wong, pastor of Monterey Park (Calif.) Chinese Baptist Church and fellowship president, the structure will link Chinese Baptist churches through chapters, similar to Southern Baptist associations. Chapters in California, New York, Texas and Canada now form the fellowship's nucleus.

The fellowship, representing 45 churches with 5,000 members, will operate much like an independent convention, with an elected secretary, board, and delegates to a biannual conference. Financial support comes from affiliated churches and the Home Mission Board.

In addition to promoting unity, the fellowship "will help Southern Baptist understand Chinese work as well as help Chinese understand Southern Baptist," Wong noted.

Though some fellowship churches are not aligned with the SBC, "all are true to Baptist doctrine," according to Oscar Romo, HMB language missions director. "This is a way for all Chinese Baptist churches to minister together."

Andrew Wong, pastor of Toronto Chinese Baptist Church, affiliated with the Canadian Baptist Convention, said the fellowship "will guard the purity of our Baptist faith while offering opportunities for Chinese Baptists to support worldwide evangelism and missions.

Cephas Wong confirmed the fellowship "will cooperate with Southern Baptist in starting new work, sending missionaries and promoting common goals." While acknowledging that Anglo churches "are handicapped by language and cultural barriers in reaching Chinese," Wong stressed, "as Chinese we can have a more effective indigenous ministry."

Peter Kung, Chinese church growth consultant for the Sunday School Board, described the fellowship as a "structural base for growth" and "a major step toward cooperating with Southern Baptists."

Though more than 50 percent of Chinese in the United States are American-born, 98 percent of the work is with foreign-born Chinese, Romo stated. To strengthen outreach among all Chinese, fellowship churches will address a lack of Chinese literature and trained leaders, Wong said.

The fellowship will also fortify Chinese Baptists sense of identity, Wong noted. "Though many Chinese speak English, it's at the Chinese church where they find spiritual identity."

Conference highlights included revival services led by Lieu-Wah Chow of Taiwan, former pastor of Chinese nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek.

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Baptists Help Argentine,
Paraguayan Flood Victims

FORMOSA, Argentina (BP)--The worst flood in Paraguay's history and the second worst of the century in northern Argentina left at least 80,000 people homeless and Baptists are working to provide food and shelter for stricken families.

Relief funds totaling \$20,000 from the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board are allowing Southern Baptist missionaries, the Evangelical Baptist Convention of Paraguay and Brazilian Baptist missionaries to aid flood victims in four areas of Paraguay.

In Argentina, Baptist home missionaries Andres and Lidia Rivas, using funds from the FMB, are distributing food and clothing to residents of Formosa, Clorinda and other towns in the region. At least 20 Baptist families left homeless by flooding have been sheltered in two Baptist churches in the two cities according to Southern Baptist missionary Sarah Wilson. The FMB has released \$23,040 in hunger and relief funds for aid in the Argentina area.

Wilson, relief coordinator for Southern Baptist missionaries in Argentina, reported that part of the funds will be used to repair homes of Baptist families affected by flooding in the area. The water was expected to crest July 25-26, but will take weeks to recede, Wilson said.

Swollen by torrential rains, the Paraguay River and its tributaries poured water reaching nine meters above flood stage into the province of Formosa. Some 10,000 people living in the provincial capital, Formosa, abandoned their homes and half the population of nearby Clorinda (pop. 21,000) evacuated.

The Iguazu River in Misiones Province also is flooding. According to local authorities, the raging river has turned the famed Iguazu Falls into one enormous torrent that will submerge the adjacent national park. Tourists in the area were reportedly not in danger, however.

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BWA Faces Opportunity,
Financial Difficulties

By Robert O'Brien

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NAIROBI, Kenya (BP)--The General Council of the Baptist World Alliance projected far-reaching opportunities for worldwide ministry, laced with the reality of difficult financial times ahead, at the Council's weeklong meeting at the Kenyatta Conference Center.

BWA President Duke K. McCall of Louisville, Ky., said the General Council meeting represented a "quantum jump" in the willingness of African and other Third World Baptists to move into active leadership in the BWA and another "quantum jump" as the BWA moves from a body which meets to talk and have fellowship to a body which wants to participate in active ministries around the world.

But the optimism over opportunities for worldwide outreach was tempered by a financial report which revealed that the BWA, now living on reserves accumulated before 1980, is receiving only 51.6 percent of the funds it needs to meet its minimum operating budget.

"Such a deficit cannot continue," declared BWA budget committee chairman Jack Jones of Arlington, Va., "or the BWA must drastically curtail operations or cease to exist."

The General Council voted to study ways to increase allocations paid by member bodies, and raise funds through other approaches. All Baptist bodies, especially those from North America, were urged to increase efforts to support the BWA.

Before the meeting began, African Baptist leaders concluded an intensive three-day exploration of ways to strengthen African evangelism and education by forming the All Africa Baptist Fellowship.

The General Council voted to accept the AABF as its fifth regional body and elected Nigerian Samuel T. Ola Akande, AABF general secretary-treasurer, as BWA regional associate secretary for Africa.

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It also voted \$15,000 to help launch the AABF, which BWA leaders had encouraged to organize, and set a joint BWA-AABF Day on the first Sunday in February 1983, with an offering to be divided between the two groups.

McCall said the establishment of the regional offices, such as the AABF and two others hoped for, adds to the BWA's expenses, "but I support them strongly," noting they will expand BWA efforts to proclaim the message of Christ.

McCall said he believes the new activism by Baptists from Third World nations and their new sense of participation will lead to more active financial support of BWA causes. "Heretofore, these bodies felt Baptists in North America would surely do it all, but I believe that is changing," he said.

In other action, the General Council voted to keep the 10th Baptist Youth World Conference in Buenos Aires, Argentina, but to delay it from July 1983, to July 1984.

The move, seconded enthusiastically by leaders of the Argentine Baptist Convention and the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, was designed to give the situation time to cool off following the hostilities between Britain and Argentina over the Falkland (Malvinas) Islands.

The General Council, however, voted to hold its own meeting, as originally planned, in July 1982, in Buenos Aires.

The 250 council delegates from 65 nations also passed resolutions on world hunger, fundamental freedoms, disarmament and peace and heard reports about possible discussions between world Baptist and Lutherans and Roman Catholics and about the need for churches to take part in a Human Rights Day, Dec. 10.

Council members participated in several forums, including one to encourage increased participation of laymen and one to learn what the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and others are doing around the world in partnership evangelism.

They also approved a theme for the Baptist World Congress in 1984 in Los Angeles--"Out of the Darkness Into the Light of Christ"--and voted a 1983 relief budget of \$2 million. That amount includes \$10,000 for relief in war-torn Lebanon. The council also approved an expenditure of \$20,000 for Lebanon relief in 1982.