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March 4, 1987

87-30

Government Denies
New Lebanon Appeals

N-FMB

WASHINGTON (BP)—The U.S. government again has turned down renewed appeals that Southern Baptist missionaries be allowed to keep working in Lebanon.

"To allow the people to stay over there on valid passports would not really be consistent with our responsibilities to safeguard the safety and lives of U.S. citizens," State Department official William Wharton said March 3. Wharton is the department's director of citizen appeals.

March 6 is the final deadline for departure of American citizens from Lebanon, Wharton said. The U.S. ban on travel and residence there will remain in effect for one year, after which it will be reviewed and either lifted or renewed. "We're always hopeful that we might be able" to lift the ban, he said, "but I have no information as to when that might occur."

Groups of Southern Baptist missionaries in Lebanon already were departing for Cyprus in late February and early March.

Wharton reported the State Department had received "quite a few" appeals from American humanitarian and religious workers in Lebanon for exemption from the U.S. government's Jan. 28 order that all Americans leave the embattled country. All such appeals have been turned down, he said.

Wharton said the government recognized the valuable work done by American missionaries in Lebanon but repeated the State Department's refusal to risk more kidnappings or deaths of U.S. citizens in Beirut.

In applying for exemption, Southern Baptist missionaries insisted most of their work was carried out in the relative safety of Christian East Beirut and asked for the right to make their own decisions about personal risk in service to God and the Lebanese people.

Their applications were turned down Feb. 12. R. Keith Parks, president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, then appealed directly to President Reagan, asking that a skeleton force of 13 missionaries be allowed to remain. The White House forwarded the appeal to the State Department. In a letter to Secretary of State George Shultz, U.S. Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina also asked for reconsideration of the refusal to exempt Southern Baptist missionaries from the evacuation order.

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N-BJC

BJCPA Executive Committee
Approves Membership Changes

By Stan Hasty

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WASHINGTON (BP)—Alterations in the size and composition of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs moved a step closer to completion March 2 as the Washington-based denominational agency's executive committee approved a necessary bylaw change. Final approval of the proposal is expected in October when the full Baptist Joint Committee is to meet.

A key component of the new representation formula is an increased Southern Baptist presence on the committee charged by eight cooperating U.S. Baptist bodies with monitoring religious liberty and separation of church and state. The Southern Baptist Convention, along with two other Baptist conventions, founded the Baptist Joint Committee in 1936.

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The number of Southern Baptists on the BJCPA will rise from 15 to 18 under the new plan. According to a formula approved by the SBC Executive Committee last month, the SBC representatives will be the SBC president, the president of the Executive Committee, the presidents of the Foreign Mission Board, Home Mission Board, Annuity Board and Sunday School Board, and 12 at-large members elected by messengers to the annual convention. In addition, the executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission will be an ex-officio, non-voting member. The new formula must be approved by messengers to this year's SBC in St. Louis.

At present, the 15 Southern Baptists on the BJCPA include the convention president, nine heads of denominational agencies and five at-large members.

A proposal to alter the size and composition of the Public Affairs Committee emerged from last year's SBC meeting in Atlanta, where the SBC Committee on Boards asked the SBC Executive Committee to study the matter and recommend changes. The proposal later was assigned to a special fact-finding committee that has spent the last nine months conducting an investigation of the BJCPA.

More than a year before those actions, however, the BJCPA appointed a three-person task force to recommend changes in representation from all eight member bodies. Last October, the full committee approved that panel's recommendations, including that of increasing the number of Southern Baptists from 15 to 18.

Other features of the new representation plan include a provision that no proxy voting is to be permitted in the future and that no participating body may have more than one-third of the total membership. Overall, the new plan provides for up to 54 members.

Besides the Southern Baptist Convention, other member bodies given additional seats on the committee are the Baptist General Conference, from its present three to eight, and the North American Baptist Conference, from three to six.

Those losing seats will be the American Baptist Churches, from 15 to nine, and all three participating black bodies. Both the National Baptist Convention of America and the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc. will lose members, from the present allotment of 15 seats each to three and one, respectively. The Progressive National Baptist Convention will drop from five to three. The Seventh Day Baptist General Conference also will drop, from three to one.

The new formula is based on both membership and financial contributions, with the incentive that smaller groups may increase their representation by contributing larger amounts.

In another action, the BJCPA Executive Committee approved a proposed 1987-88 budget of \$632,625. Of that amount, 71 percent is anticipated from the SBC Cooperative Program, with another 5 percent coming from the Southern Baptist Foundation on earnings from a capital fund.

These figures follow a pattern in recent fiscal years of a slight percentage decrease in SBC contributions as compared to those of the other member bodies. Two of the other bodies — the Baptist General Conference and the North American Baptist Conference — outdistance the SBC in per-capita gifts to the BJCPA.

Executive Committee members also gave approval to BJCPA co-sponsorship of a 1988 religious liberty conference to be held at First Baptist Church Providence, R.I., the first Baptist congregation in America. Other sponsors will be the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and the American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island. The June 5-7, 1988, conference will commemorate the 350th anniversary of the founding of the historic congregation.

Florida Churches Asked To Collect
Sales Tax On Weddings, Retreats

By Greg Warner

N-10
(Fla.)

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (BP)—Unless the Florida legislature changes its mind, churches in the state will have to begin collecting sales tax on many of the services they provide.

Weddings, funerals, retreats, even Valentine's banquets may be subject to sales tax when the law goes into effect July 1. Critics have charged the new tax policy will make churches the agents of government. "This would put the church in the role of the tax collector," said Dan Stringer, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention.

The Sales Tax Exemption Repeal Bill, passed by the legislature last fall, is intended to increase state revenue by shortening the list of organizations and professions that are not required to charge their customers sales tax for their services.

Accountants, barbers, doctors and many others who for years have not collected sales tax soon will have to add the 5 percent levy to their bills. Churches and other non-profit organizations are also among those who have lost the exemptions.

Private schools will be hard-hit as well when the tuition they charge students becomes taxable. Students at Stetson University, which is owned by Florida Baptists, will have to pay about \$400 in sales tax on top of their tuition, while state-owned schools will be exempt.

In passing the new law, the legislature also created the Sales Tax Exemption Study Commission, which since December has been evaluating the impact of the new law and considering whether to reinstate any of the exemptions. The group's recommendations will be reviewed in April by legislators, who will then decide if any alterations need to be made in the new law.

Church activities subject to taxation have not been determined. The new law does not require churches to pay taxes on goods and services they buy, however, since non-profit organizations are themselves tax-exempt. Neither would churches be required to charge sales tax on items they sell, such as books and tapes, because religious groups already enjoy a sales tax exemption on tangible goods.

While the new law is intended to tax professional services in the same manner as tangible goods, it would create an irony for churches, which would charge sales tax on services but not on tangible goods.

Christian Weiss, legislative analyst for the Florida House Finance and Taxation Committee, which is handling the legislation, said if religious groups are not "re-exempted," many gray areas will exist in the new law, such as what religious services are offered "for a price."

If a church has a fixed price for use of its sanctuary for a wedding, he suggested, it could be subject to sales tax. Donations or honorariums received for such services, however, likely would not be taxable, "although it would be open to discussion."

Also unclear is the effect the legislation will have on activities of the Florida Baptist Convention. The money spent by Florida Baptists at the convention's camps and assemblies, this year estimated at \$1.7 million, apparently will be taxed, adding about \$85,000 a year to the state's coffers.

Pope Duncan, president of Stetson University, said taxing private-college tuition "would be like raising tuition 5 percent." If state schools are exempt, he added, the sales tax would only widen the gap between public and private tuition.

Considerable opposition exists in the state legislature to the sales tax on non-profit services, Duncan noted. "We are a long way from having the tax," he said. "I am not panicked at this point, but I am concerned."

Church-related groups are not the only ones concerned about the new sales tax laws. Bills already are being drafted that would exempt medical services and perhaps some other services. State lawmakers will have to consider these proposals, as well as the recommendations of the study commission, when the legislative session opens April 7.

Meanwhile, the Florida Baptist Convention plans to form a task force to lobby for an exemption for churches and church-related organizations. Executive Director Stringer said the group will enlist the help of Baptists active in the political system and the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Oliver Thomas, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said Florida's new sales tax policy poses serious constitutional questions. "One of the major reasons for the religion clauses of the First Amendment is to guard against excessive entanglement between the church and state," he said. "This is precisely the type of entanglement the First Amendment intended to prevent.

"Anytime you have this sort of governmental monitoring of the internal affairs of the church, you create the possibility of a nightmare," he added. "Can you imagine a tax commissioner snooping around the corner to see if you are collecting sales tax on your Wednesday night supper?"

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Supreme Court Hears
Jews For Jesus Dispute

By Stan Haste

N-BJC
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WASHINGTON (BP)--An attorney for the city of Los Angeles tried to convince the Supreme Court March 3 that his city's Board of Airport Commissioners did not exceed its authority by forbidding the messianic Jewish group, Jews for Jesus, from distributing its literature at Los Angeles International Airport.

Assistant City Attorney James R. Kapel asked the high court to uphold a policy implemented by the commissioners explicitly forbidding "First Amendment activities" inside the airport, a policy aimed at keeping religious proselytizers from approaching incoming and departing passengers with their appeals. The policy, Kapel argued, is a "reasonable time, place and manner" restriction on free speech.

Pressed by several of the justices, Kapel insisted the policy does not unduly restrict free speech and falls within the commissioners' "right" to restrain otherwise protected activities because they are not "airport related."

During a series of questions from Justice Thurgood Marshall, Kapel admitted no complaints had been lodged against Jews for Jesus members for physically impeding passengers. They were not "grabbing passengers by the arm" and keeping them from moving about, he acknowledged. "What right do you have to stop them?" Marshall demanded. "You are singling out one group of people" for discrimination, the high court's only black member declared.

But Jews for Jesus attorney Jay Alan Sekulow faced similarly grueling questioning, particularly from Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist and Justice Byron R. White, two members of the court who frequently vote to uphold governmental limitations on claimed First Amendment rights.

Rehnquist and White — sometimes joined by other justices — suggested government has authority to declare some public places off limits for free speech or other First Amendment activities. For his part, Sekulow insisted, "There is no justification for a sweeping ban" on those activities such as that imposed by the airport commissioners.

"Our position is that LAX (Los Angeles International Airport) traditionally has been an open forum," he said.

Both attorneys faced questions relating to the presence in the airport of another religious group, the Christian Science Church, in the form of a Christian Science Reading Room. That body leases space from the airport commissioners.

When Sekulow tried to make the point the commissioners were discriminating against Jews for Jesus by permitting the reading room, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor reminded him of the lease arrangement. But Sekulow replied, "Our position is that First Amendment activities are not something you should have to pay for. What we have here ... is a viewpoint discrimination."

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Asked by Justice Antonin Scalia about the apparently "uneven" enforcement of the commissioners' policy by giving approval to the reading room while excluding Jews for Jesus, Kapel responded by acknowledging the situation "looks bad" but insisted the city sees a difference in kind between the airport activities of the two groups.

The dispute came to the high court after the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with a lower federal panel the commissioners' policy violated the free speech guarantee of the First Amendment.

A decision in the case is expected sometime before the current Supreme Court term ends in early July.

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N-Texas

Easter Sunday Will Bring New Life
To Church Destroyed By Tornado

By Ken Camp

Baptist Press
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SWEETWATER, Texas (BP)—Resurrection Sunday will mark the beginning of a new life for Highland Baptist Church in Sweetwater, Texas, thanks in large part to the cooperation of fellow Southern Baptists.

Easter Sunday, April 19, will be the first anniversary of the tornado that cut a swath through Sweetwater, ripping the roof off the 60-year-old Highland Church building. If all goes well, it will also be the day Highland Church moves into its new facility, built primarily by volunteers.

Although he does not blame God for the devastation caused by the tornado, Pastor Jack Willoughby believes God worked through that tragedy to lead his church to a new location.

"It really turned out to be a blessing for us," says Willoughby. "We had been on a 130-by-130-foot lot, and we couldn't purchase any of the land around it.

"After we decided to move rather than rebuild at the old location, we looked six months before we located the land God wanted us to have. Our building site is about one-and-a-half acres, approximately three times the size of the original location."

The building project is being supervised by George C. Harrison, missionary/church builder with the church building and support section of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Under his direction, builders are erecting a 4,800-sq.-ft. building valued at \$170,000 for just a little more than half that cost.

Most of the work force is composed of volunteers, including a Texas Campers on Mission building team. Working with the church ministries section of the Texas convention, the builders are part of a national fellowship of Christian campers who share their faith wherever they camp. The organization is sponsored by the special ministries section of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and the church recreation department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

Other volunteers have come from Texas Baptist churches including First Baptist Church of Snyder, First Baptist Church of Hathaway, First Baptist Church of Champion, First Baptist Church of Sweetwater, Trinity Baptist Church of Sweetwater, Colonial Hills Baptist Church of Snyder, and Ridglea West Baptist Church of Fort Worth.

Willoughby says he never can adequately express the appreciation of his church family to Southern Baptists for their spirit of cooperation and their assistance.

"The weekend after the tornado, Jerry Bob Taylor (Baptist encampment manager at Circle Six Ranch in Stanton) came by to say, 'We're here to help you.' Mr. Harrison has been a tremendous help. And Bill Walters (coordinator of the church building and support section) has been a great support. He's given us an opportunity to see our Cooperative Program money put to use."

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