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September 20, 1990

90-125

Baptist Joint Committee objects
to Defense Department policy

N-BJC

WASHINGTON (BP)--The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission have objected to a U.S. Defense Department policy that prohibits the mailing of Bibles and other devotional literature to military personnel stationed in the Middle East.

Tens of thousands of U.S. troops have arrived in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait August 2. The Saudi legal system, based on the teachings of Islam, places restrictions on the practice of any faith other than Islam.

Since U.S. troops are based in Saudi Arabia at that country's invitation, American policy makers have worked assiduously to avoid offending Muslim sensibilities. Among their efforts is a policy prohibiting the mailing of any "religious materials contrary to the Islamic faith" -- including items for personal use -- to personnel in Saudi Arabia.

"While we can certainly understand the desire to be sensitive to our host nation, we think our service personnel's ability to receive this kind of literature is of crucial importance," wrote James M. Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, in a Sept. 10 letter. The letter was sent to Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Postmaster General Anthony Frank.

In a separate letter to Cheney, Richard Land, executive director of the CLC, said, "Surely our grateful hosts in the Persian Gulf would accede to a reasonable accommodation of fundamental religious freedom for U.S. service members. We urge you to do whatever is necessary to permit prompt delivery of Bibles and other religious materials through the Armed Forces postal system."

"The fact that our service personnel are in an area of the world not protected by the free exercise rights in our constitution does not mean that they have lost their religious freedom," Dunn continued.

"We at the Baptist Joint Committee believe that religious liberty is not dependant upon any particular political system. It transcends national boundaries and ideology. Religious liberty has fundamental theological moorings and, as our forebears noted, is an unalienable gift of God," Dunn said.

"The Department of Defense has a long tradition of accommodating the religious needs of its personnel," Land said in his letter. "The religious mail rule, however, is a troubling departure from this tradition. It is unconscionable that the United States would send its sons and daughters into harm's way, and at the same time deny them the spiritual solace to which they are guaranteed access by the Constitution they are defending, at the risk of their lives."

Dunn referred to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, written in 1948, which asserts a right to "freedom of thought, conscience and religion" for every human being.

"We urge you to move as quickly as possible to remove or ameliorate the Saudi mail regulation which stands in the way of our service personnel's free exercise of religion," since the literature is "for personal use, not evangelistic distribution."

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" ... (W)hile we recognize the need to respect the cultural and religious heritage of the Saudis, we must also state unequivocally our firm support for the religious liberty and free exercise rights of our service personnel at a time in their professional service when they need to exercise those rights the most."

Copies of the letter were delivered to two members of the U.S. Senate's armed services committee, Chairman Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), and ranking minority member John W. Warner (R-Va.); two members of the U.S. House of Representatives armed services committee, Chairman Les Aspin (D-Wis.), and ranking minority member William L. Dickinson (R-Ala.); and to Kenneth W. McFadden, an official in the U.S. Postal Service.

In addition, J. Brent Walker, associate general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, discussed the issue Sept. 17 with aides to Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), the ranking minority member of the Senate's foreign relations committee.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: In the Baptist Press mailing for tomorrow, 9-21-90, there will be a forward to go with the text of Morris Chapman's presidential address, delivered to the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee on 9-17-90. Please do not run the address until you have a copy of his pastoral remarks.

Thank you, Baptist Press

Claude H. Rhea
dies in Paris

Baptist Press
9/20/90

McG (Ja)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (BP)--Claude H. Rhea, 62, president of Palm Beach Atlantic College, died of an apparent heart attack Sept. 19 in Paris, France, on a business trip.

Rhea had been president of Palm Beach Atlantic College since February 1982. He came to the college from Samford University where he was dean of the school of music.

Surviving Rhea are his wife, Carolyn Turnage Rhea; his mother, Cecile Walden Rhea; two sons, Claude H. III of Reston, Va., and Charles Randall of Tuscaloosa, Ala.; a daughter, Margaret Elizabeth of New York City; and one grandchild, Nancy Elizabeth.

Foster Harwell, vice president for academic affairs will be acting president until an interim is named by the board of trustees.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that memorials be made to the Claude H. Rhea Memorial Fund at the college.

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CORRECTION: In BP story titled "Executive Committee alters personnel bylaw," dated 9/19/90, please made the following additions:

After paragraph 21, which begins "The relationship between the Southern Baptist Convention ...", add this new paragraph:

Executive Committee leaders burned a bank note symbolizing completion of payment for the Southern Baptist Convention building. Occupied in 1985, the building houses seven SBC entities.

Also, following paragraph 22, which begins "Members of the Executive Committee participated ...", add this new paragraph:

The Executive Committee also reaffirmed Bold Mission Thrust, the SBC goal to share the gospel with every person in the world by the year 2000.

Thanks, Baptist Press

Three decades of war test,
refine Ethiopian church

By Donald D. Martin

N- JMB

ROCKVILLE, Va. (BP)--Twenty-nine years of civil war have impoverished much of Ethiopia, yet the war has tempered and strengthened the evangelical church, a Southern Baptist foreign missionary said.

"In Ethiopia you find a refined church -- a tested church," said Paul Gay of Cuthbert, Ga., during a conference at the Southern Baptist Missionary Learning Center in Rockville, Va. Gay, his wife, Hannah, of Jackson, Miss., and their two children are on a 10-month furlough from Ethiopia.

Tragic events in the war not only tested Baptist churches, but often helped them flourish, he said. Late last year rebels overran parts of northern Shoa Province where Southern Baptist missionaries were working with 10 Baptist churches. The rebels' offensive forced missionaries to evacuate to the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. Contact with the young churches, nine of them less than two years old, almost completely was severed.

After several months, surprising news from the churches began trickling into Addis Ababa. "Something tremendous was happening," Gay said. People in rebel-controlled communities were astonished that the churches remained open after missionaries departed. Some in the communities had assumed church members were only attending to glean benefits from the mission, he said. "Their (the northern Shoa churches') credibility really took a leap," he said.

"After we had been gone for three or four months, and the churches were still meeting, people in the communities began to say, 'Well, there may be something more to this.' People who had stood on the sidelines watching finally became impressed with the changes they saw."

In four months, the membership of several churches grew by 50 percent. "This is exciting to us. It's like getting mid-term exam results and finding out you've been on track -- you've been following the professor," Gay said.

The Baptist mission also has received government approval of a proposed development project 80 miles southeast of Addis Ababa, where no evangelical work exists, Gay said. The three-year Minjar/Shenkora project will help provide basic living needs for 83,000 people living in the rural area.

The project will furnish area residents with clean water, nutrition education, improved animal breeding, and veterinary services. Project directors also hope to reverse the area's severe soil erosion by distributing 3 million seedlings in three years. "This project will improve people's lives in so many ways that we haven't even imagined," Gay said.

One of the greatest improvements for all of Ethiopia would be an end to fighting. It has claimed more than 400,000 lives. More than a million people died of starvation from 1984 to 1985 as well.

Recent signs indicate the war is drawing to an end. News reports from Addis Ababa say it is only a matter of months before President Mengistu Haile Mariam loses control of the country to the two largest guerrilla groups. Rebels of the Tigre People's Liberation Front, fighting to topple Mengistu's 16-year-old government, have pushed to within 150 miles north of the capital.

Farther north in the Eritrea province, secessionist rebels of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front have trapped 120,000 Ethiopian soldiers in Asmara, the provincial capital, a city of one million people. The defeat comes months after Eritreans won control of the vital Red Sea port of Massawa, thus closing Ethiopia's second largest port. The EPLF is fighting for independence of the province annexed by Emperor Haile Selassie in 1962.

Mengistu announced last March that Ethiopia will abandon Marxism-Leninism. The reversal came in the wake of the country's devastating human misery, major military defeats and cooled relations with the Soviet Union, Ethiopia's main arms supplier. News and political analysts have seen it as a last-minute maneuver for Western aid and investment. But international investors have shown little interest.

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The government reports it spends 50 percent of its budget on the war, while news reports place government military spending at 75 percent of the budget. With so much of the government's attention focused on the war, the evangelical church has experienced greater freedom, Gay said.

"The war is at such a bad point that the government doesn't have any energy to apply pressure or suppress the church. It's really as open as it's ever been," Gay said.

"Church groups in the southern part of Ethiopia, where evangelical Christians have been working for 40 years, are now having meetings with more than 10,000 people in attendance. There are youth meetings where 4,000 people attend," he said.

The war also has loosened the Ethiopian Orthodox Church's grip on people's lives. The Orthodox church was the state established religion until the mid-1970s, Gay said. When fighting forces people to flee, displaced villagers confront new ways of life and belief. Refugees sometimes start questioning local beliefs, often clouded in a haze of folklore and religious rituals. Evangelical Ethiopians have seized this chance to present the clarity of Christ's salvation, Gay said. "In all of history, right now evangelicals in Ethiopia have the greatest freedom they have ever had," he said.

"In the course of relief work we see people displaced from their homes," Gay said. "They're open to hearing and studying the Bible, as well as hearing about Jesus Christ and the gospel.

"Now we know it may be impossible to gather all those people into churches because of the disruptive nature of war, but we also know that the Lord knows where every one of them is and where they're going. And he's the one who's building the church in Ethiopia -- not Southern Baptists, not missionaries.

"I had it expressed to me by an Ethiopian who has worked for the mission for about 15 years. He said, 'God has opened the door of his church and no man's hand can close it until God decides it's time to close it.'

"I think we're fortunate to be witnesses at this time. We can't take the credit, but we can join the chorus that praises the Lord in what he's doing."

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Fairs identified
as mission fields

By Sarah Zimmerman

SP FMMB

Baptist Press
9/20/90

ATLANTA (BP)--The land of cotton candy and ferris wheels is one of the newest home mission fields identified by Southern Baptists.

Across the nation, ministry takes place with people attending the fairs as well as those working the fairs.

The Florida fair ministries began six years ago when a couple involved in Campers On Mission decided to move their recreational vehicle to the fair site and live with carnival workers. The retired couple distributed free coffee, donuts and Bibles to their temporary neighbors.

At first, the carnival workers were suspicious of the Christians' motives. Now the volunteers are expected, Davis said.

Members of Campers on Mission were also instrumental in ministering at this year's New York state fair. Volunteers from Georgia traveled to Syracuse to distribute Bibles and witness among the fair goers.

"Our booth was in the midst of the commercial exhibit hall, with people selling seamless siding for houses and others doing handwriting analysis," said Bob Freeman, New York student worker and resort minister. He said almost 7,000 New Testaments and more than 5,000 pieces of Christian literature were distributed during the 11-day fair.

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In Oklahoma, this is the fourth year Joe Williams, state director of chaplaincy, has coordinated a ministry during the state fair. The first year 16 people served as chaplains to the 25,000 fair workers. This year he plans to recruit and train 75 church staff members from around the state to serve as fair chaplains.

"Every year we have an experience we never had before," said Williams, director of chaplaincy for the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma.

One year Williams performed a wedding ceremony for two carnival workers on a merry-go-round. Another time a rock band was scheduled to perform in an outdoor theater, but an approaching storm delayed the concert. A chaplain was called to calm the disgruntled crowd.

Williams said ministries performed at the state fair include everything from suicide intervention to providing "care packs" of toiletry items. Davis added hair cuts and free dental treatment to the list.

Members of First Baptist Church in DeRidder, La., concentrate their efforts on the parish fair. Arline Harkreader and Vicki Smith coordinate efforts to serve dinner to about 100 carnival workers the evening before the fair opens.

Church members set up tables under funeral home tents for the meal. Each table has a table cloth and vase of fresh flowers. Volunteers serve the carnival workers rather than asking them to go through a line for food.

Last year a worker asked Smith why the church provided the dinner. Smith replied: "Because we love you and we want you to know that." The woman said to the person she was with: "We finally found somebody who loves us."

Each state reports professions of faith as a result of their fair ministries. "We're being Christ to these people who are never going to come into our churches," Davis said.

However, Williams added, "We have to be careful about evangelism." Volunteers hold Sunday worship services, but most of their evangelism takes place after ministry, he said.

Harkreader said her church puts Bibles and tracts on the dinner tables. Volunteers who are not cooking or serving "do a lot of witnessing as they sit around the tables."

In both Florida and New York, drawings are held for free family Bibles. Freeman said the card people use to register for the Bible includes a space to indicate interest in a Southern Baptist church, Bible study or children's program.

Freeman said of the 1,400 people who registered for the Bible this year, almost 300 expressed interest in one of those areas. Their cards will be given to associational directors of missions for follow-up.

Because follow-up is difficult with transitional fair workers, Davis said she attempts to coordinate ministries among fair volunteers. For example, if someone makes a profession of faith at one fair, the volunteers at the fair's next destination are asked to encourage the person to develop a daily walk with God.

Working with the management is one key to the success of ministries with fair workers. Williams sold the Oklahoma fair manager on the idea of chaplains by saying the program would provide a service at no cost to the fair. Now the fair manager provides work space and transportation for the volunteer chaplains. "He treats us like one of his departments," Williams said.