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91-117

CLC announces support for
freedom restoration act

By Herb Hollinger

N-CO

NASHVILLE (BP)--The Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission has decided it will support the Religious Freedom Restoration Act following a legal analysis that the RFRA "should not and need not advance an abortion rights agenda."

The question whether the proposed legislation would enhance the chances of persons seeking an abortion as a religious free exercise right was the subject of several months of "careful legal analysis" of the act, according to Richard D. Land, executive director of the CLC.

Following unsuccessful efforts in 1990, RFRA (H.R. 2797) was reintroduced in Congress June 26. Its purpose, sponsors say, is to provide a remedy to the Supreme Court's decision last year in Oregon Employment Division vs. Smith. The court ruled the government does not have to prove it has a "compelling interest" to restrict religious practice.

RFRA is intended to return the understanding of the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to its status before Smith, when religious freedom was protected unless there was a "compelling state interest" that overrode it.

Southern Baptists are committed to religious liberty and abhor the "Smith" decision, Land said.

"We have concluded that the dangers to religious liberty are clear and present. The solution urgently demands a carefully tailored legislative remedy. Southern Baptists are also committed to the sanctity of human life and abhor the Roe vs. Wade decision," said Land in a letter to Congressman Stephen J. Solarz, a RFRA sponsor. "We refuse to rank religious liberty as a higher or lower value than the sanctity of human life. Each value is fundamental and non-negotiable."

"While we respect the deeply held and carefully reasoned opinions of our pro-life friends, we respectfully disagree that RFRA necessarily will improve the chances of success for abortion rights advocates," said Land.

The CLC's decision to support RFRA brought out an apparent sensitivity between the SBC agency and the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. The BJC has been a religious liberty watchdog for Southern Baptists for many years but the Southern Baptist Convention, in June in Atlanta, voted to defund the agency in next year's budget.

The CLC had asked the BJC for a statement of the policy position of the BJC regarding claims to a "religious right to abortion" but was not satisfied with the BJC answer.

The CLC would support RFRA in spite of an "inadequate response" from the BJC regarding the CLC's concerns with some aspects of the bill involving abortion, Land said.

The BJC's response to the CLC request indicated the BJC would oppose any effort to amend RFRA that would bar any claim, including abortion claims, from being made. The BJC, however, "takes no position on whether such claims should be successful."

The BJC told Baptist Press July 3 it "has never supported abortion as a free exercise right, nor have we addressed the issue of abortion in any fashion."

SBC officials affirm
Salt Lake City decision

By Herb Hollinger

N-CO

NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptist Convention officials and Utah-Idaho Southern Baptist Convention leadership have been quick to counter criticism of the decision by the SBC to hold its 1998 annual meeting in Salt Lake City.

In its June meeting in Atlanta, SBC messengers approved a recommendation by the SBC Executive Committee to hold the 1998 annual meeting in the Utah capital, home of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or Mormons. A ministry directed at Mormonism, Utah Missions, Inc., based in Marlow, Okla., criticized the decision in a front page article in its July-August issue of The Evangel, its monthly newspaper.

"In choosing Salt Lake City, we (the SBC) show that we're serious about the Bold in Bold Mission Thrust," said Mark Coppenger, vice president for public relations for the Executive Committee, in response to Utah Missions' call to reverse the decision. "Pro-abortion groups are urging conventions to stay away because of Utah's strong pro-life stand. In electing Salt Lake City, we, so to speak, crossed their picket line."

"Southern Baptist messengers are not spiritually passive," said Coppenger. "Time and time again they've proven themselves effective in witnessing and in strengthening and planning churches in convention cities. The Holy Spirit works powerfully through many messengers to impact the sites for Christ."

The SBC meeting in Salt Lake City would have a major impact on Southern Baptists in particular and the Northwest in general, said C. Clyde Billingsley, executive director of the Utah-Idaho Southern Baptist Convention.

"It would make a statement to local non-Christian groups concerning the viability and legitimacy of Southern Baptists. It would make a life-changing impact on this and future generations of church members who are isolated, lonely and basically unaware of the real strength of Baptists," said Billingsley.

The Utah-Idaho convention is 26 years old, has 140 churches and missions and about 20,000 members, said Billingsley.

Following the SBC action in Atlanta, contracts with hotels and the convention center in Salt Lake City have been signed, according to Richard P. Rosenbaum, Jr., vice president for business and finance for the Executive Committee. Longterm contracts are needed for the size of the SBC meeting and only St. Louis and Kansas City were also available for the SBC dates in 1998, Rosenbaum said.

Rosenbaum said he had released tentative holds on the two Missouri cities in 1998 and no other American city, which fits the SBC and Executive Committee criteria, could accommodate the 1998 convention.

Charles Sullivan, recently elected executive director for the Indiana Baptist Convention, was vice chairman of the SBC Executive Committee at the time the Salt Lake City recommendation was discussed. He had vigorously opposed the earlier recommendation of Las Vegas, Nev., as a SBC meeting site.

"Three times I voted against going to Las Vegas. It didn't think it was an appropriate site for the convention," Sullivan told Baptist Press. "After the fact, I'm convinced it was one of our finest convention experiences ever. It did more for the kingdom and left more of a witness than in any other place we have ever gone. I see Salt Lake City as offering us the same sort of opportunity."

SBC officials said the only way the decision to go to Salt Lake City could be reversed would be for messengers at a future SBC annual meeting to do so. However, they cautioned, with contracts signed and other legal obligations apparent, it would be a costly decision to rescind.

Life cycle affects
church attendance

By Sarah Zimmerman

N-NMB

ATLANTA (BP)--Life cycles apparently affect a person's church attendance more than any other factor, according to a study by the Princeton Religion Research Center.

Twenty-seven percent of 1,012 people questioned in May said they attend church more frequently than they did five years ago. When asked to name two reasons for their increased attendance, 18 percent said for their children and 11 percent said to worship as a family.

"The growth that is taking place is not a temporary phenomenon precipitated by people who flocked to churches during the Persian Gulf War, but appears instead to be a result of natural patterns in the life cycle of American adults," the report summarized.

Though young people may quit attending church, the survey finds they return to church later in life. Factors motivating their return include marriage, children and a need for fellowship and community.

People ages 30 to 49 were most likely to report more frequent church attendance, with 34 percent saying they attend more often than they did five years ago. Thirty percent of people ages 18 to 29 said they attend more frequently, while 19 percent of people over age 65 said they attend more frequently.

People who said they attend church more frequently are typical of people who are most likely to be church members, according to the research. They include residents of the South and Midwest, people who are college educated, women and blacks.

On the other hand, 38 percent of the people interviewed said they attend church less frequently than they did five years ago. Nineteen percent said they attend church less often because they are too busy or have no time. Fourteen percent said church conflicts with their work or study schedule.

However, the age of those who said they attend church less frequently also reflects their life cycle. Fifty percent who said they attend less often were between the ages of 18 and 29.

Thirty-two percent of people interviewed said they attend church the same amount as they did five years ago, 2 percent said they have never attended and 1 percent did not respond.

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Ministry highest calling,
conference leader says

By Chip Alford

F-SSB

Baptist Press
8/6/91

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--There can be no higher calling than Christian ministry, James Semple told pastors, deacons and other church leaders attending Bible-Preaching-Administration Week at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center.

"Could there be a higher calling than to preach the word of God?" or to witness, build the church, and influence the world for good?" Semple, director of the state missions commission of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, asked before answering, "I think not."

Semple, who surrendered to preach as a 17-year-old and was pastor of First Church of Paris, Texas, for many years, said he has long had a great admiration for pastors.

"I don't know any other job that has a list of requirements like that (of a pastor)," he said, adding pastors are expected to be strong leaders and caring comforters, dedicated students and knowledgeable teachers, as well as saints of God.

Despite their high calling, pastors should remember they are chosen and ordained by God for ministry, not the other way around, Semple said.

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"We have no reason to be puffed up with pride in the flesh. God has chosen those who are weak and foolish to turn this world upside down," he said.

Semple is worship leader for Bible-Preaching-Administration Week at Glorieta. The Aug. 3-10 conference is sponsored by the church administration department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board. This year's conference features the theme, "Let's All Go to Church," a five-year denominational emphasis which promotes the relationship between authentic worship and church growth.

Gary Cook, vice president of the Sunday School Board's office of church programs and services, said a renewal of Bible-centered spiritual worship is "the greatest need among Southern Baptists today."

Before pastors can lead others to worship "we must first of all be worshipers ourselves," said Cook, Bible study leader for the week.

Like the Old Testament patriarch Abraham, believers still today are invited into dialogue with God through worship, Cook said.

"We are compelled in worship to bow down before God as servants, but we are also invited in worship to stand before God as friends," he said.

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Military personnel are forgotten
community within Baptist churches

By Susan Todd Doyle

Baptist Press

F-CC
wm4/8/6/91

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--There is a forgotten community of church members that needs the care and attention of a hometown church all the time, not just during a war, said a missions educator.

Southern Baptists shouldn't wait until there is a crisis such as the Persian Gulf War to minister to members of the military, said Jim Furgerson, director of Baptist Men and Senior Baptist Men for the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission.

"Members of the military live in a different world with distinct differences from the civilian world," Furgerson said. "It's a very mobile world, and separations are very real."

Furgerson suggested several ways churches can help lessen the separation from home and from church. He spoke to men and women who recently attended leadership training conferences sponsored by Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center.

The most important thing for a home church to do is to maintain contact with military personnel, he said. "You're so hungry to hear from your church, even a Sunday bulletin can be a treasure," Furgerson said, recalling his own days of military service.

Children involved in missions organizations such as Girls in Action and Royal Ambassadors are wonderful groups to enlist as pen pals for military personnel, he said. Girls in Action is the WMU-sponsored missions organization for girls in grades one through six. Royal Ambassadors is the Brotherhood-sponsored organization for school-age boys.

"Kids are a way to a soldier's heart," Furgerson said. "I don't care how hard that guy is, every letter (he gets from a child) will be read."

The children also will enjoy the friendship they establish through letters. Many of them will remember the men and women from their hometowns who serve in the military, he said. Some of the soldiers might have been heroes on local high school athletic teams.

"If your church does a special musical, somebody's going to record it," he said, suggesting they send a copy of the tape to the military personnel. "What a treasure that would be."

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Special days such as holidays, birthdays and anniversaries are obvious times for a home church to remember military members, he said.

"Establish a 'members-away class,'" he added. "This isn't anything more than we do for college students."

If a church has a deacon/family ministry plan, perhaps one deacon could be assigned all members who would fall in this group, he said.

A particular project adult WMU organizations such as Baptist Women and Baptist Young Women can take on is to minister to military personnel through care packages, he suggested.

"What a way to reach out and say 'We remember you,'" Furgerson said. Items such as home-baked goods and specialty foods from the church's locale are always welcome gifts, he said.

Handicrafts are other welcome gifts, he added. "Send the needlepoint, the cross-stitch."

Furgerson recalled his days of service in Vietnam. One of the only ways he and his buddies had to pass the time was by going to a local bar and getting drunk. Instead, Furgerson took up hooking rugs. "I didn't know what I was doing, but I didn't have anything else to do," he said.

One of the most important things a church can do to support and minister to members in the military is to remember them in prayer, Furgerson said.

Of the more than 2 million active-duty military personnel, 320,000 of them are Southern Baptists.

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Baptists urged to respond
to volunteer opportunities

By Jim Newton & Orville Scott

F- NMB Baptist Press
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GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--Southern Baptists were urged to respond to opportunities for volunteer mission service at home and around the world during a series of seminars at the Jericho missions festival at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center.

Last year more than 75,000 volunteers participated in short- and long-term mission projects sponsored by the Southern Baptist Home and Foreign mission boards. But only about three-fourths of the field requests for volunteers were filled, mission leaders said.

Participants in "Jericho: A Southern Baptist Missions Festival," held July 27-Aug. 2, were asked to respond to thousands of opportunities available to volunteers in home and foreign missions.

"If the Lord can use this old man with no talent, he can surely use you," said retired dairyman Charles Pearson, who has served with his wife, Anne, in short-term mission projects in 11 countries.

The Pearsons, members of First Baptist Church in Frisco, Texas, worked recently in a project drilling wells in Romania.

"Don't let the language barrier bother you," Pearson urged. "A smile is the same in every language."

Upcoming partnership evangelism projects overseas have a tremendous need for volunteers, said Dewey Merritt of the Foreign Mission Board.

About 75 volunteers are needed for a partnership evangelism project in Kenya scheduled for Oct. 2-16, and about 120 volunteers for a similar project in England Sept. 26-Oct. 8.

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Projects in the United States also need volunteers, said Jack Merritt of the Home Mission Board. He cited a need for construction teams to complete more than 200 church building projects this summer across the United States.

"We don't have enough teams to complete all 200 projects, so we're extending the projects year-round," he said.

One conference participant asked why volunteers should travel to other places to do mission work when needs are so great right at home.

"When you go somewhere else to do volunteer mission work, you can see more clearly the mission needs in your own backyard," Jack Merritt replied.

"My life has been changed, and I'll never be the same," added Edna Frances Dawkins, a retired Foreign Mission Board staff member who has participated in short-term mission projects since retiring. "At 74, I've adopted a whole new interest in life."

Mission leaders challenged people interested in volunteer opportunities to examine their own talents and skills and find places to use their abilities in mission service.

Both mission boards publish lists of needs for volunteers and places of possible service. Copies of the current needs are available by calling 1-800-HMB-VOLS for the Home Mission Board or 1-800-866-FMB1 for the Foreign Mission Board.

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Hands-on mission involvement
wears 'built at Jericho' label

By Steve Barber

Baptist Press
8/6/91

F-50
B-HOOD

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--Pounding hammers, shrieking saws and roaring sanders rudely interrupted the serenity so characteristic of the Southern Baptist conference centers at Ridgecrest, N.C., and Glorieta, N.M., this summer.

But it's not because the facilities need repairing.

Instead, participants at the Jericho festivals of home and foreign missions are getting plenty of hands-on missions involvement by building multi-purpose tables and portable pulpits for churches and mission congregations across the country.

Volunteers built about 60 furnishings for U.S. mission congregations this summer. Organizers project they will build about 80 more items -- 40 for one foreign mission field church and 40 for one home mission field church -- at the Jericho festivals next summer at Ridgecrest and Glorieta.

At Glorieta, more than 70 men, women and older children went about their noisy work all week July 27-Aug. 2 around a tent pitched in a parking lot alongside the center's New Mexico Hall.

Jim Furgerson, director of Baptist Men and disaster relief for the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission, supervised the effort. Dennis Quinn and Dennis Cone, both of St. Louis, assisted him.

"We had 49 home missionaries request that we build one of these items for them," Furgerson said, adding the patterns came from the monthly "Missions Blueprints" offered in Missions Today, a magazine for Baptist Men.

The Brotherhood-inspired project was open to all comers, including the Chancellor family of Shamrock, Texas.

"The table we're working on is going to Richland, Utah," said Anna Chancellor, whose husband, Mike, is pastor of Shamrock's First Baptist Church. "We chose Utah because Mike was involved in summer mission work there before we were married."

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"It's a good thing for us to do as a family," she continued, as her sons, Timothy and Joseph, steadied a piece of plywood for their father. "Sometimes Mike and I have been involved with mission trips, but it's not always possible for us to take the kids with us when we go."

Meanwhile, R.C. "Nick" Nichols and his wife, from First Baptist Church in Jacinto City, Texas, also worked as a family team to produce a table for a church in Pascagoula, Miss.

"We tried to find one in Texas, but they didn't have one on the list," Nichols said. "I was born in Columbia, Miss., so we picked a church in my home state."

Every item completed bears the official "Built at Jericho" label on the underside, signed and dated by the people who built it before it is shipped to its destination.

Project participants paid for their own building materials -- \$25 per table and \$20 per pulpit.

Southern Baptist agencies sponsoring Jericho, besides the Brotherhood Commission, are the Home Mission Board, Foreign Mission Board, Woman's Missionary Union and Sunday School Board.

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Health pros learn to
'make most with least'

By Steve Barber

Baptist Press
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F-CO
BROAD

GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--Medical workers who have learned to "make do with what they have" passed on their secrets to Southern Baptist health professionals attending the 20th annual Baptist Medical Symposium at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center.

The symposium, focusing on "Making The Most with the Least" in health-care missions, met in conjunction with "Jericho: A Southern Baptist Missions Festival," held July 27-Aug 2.

Physician Wilson Wayne Grant of San Antonio, Texas, told how Texas Baptists have made efficient use of resources in the Rio Grande River Ministry, which he serves as medical services director.

The Rio Grande ministry treated more than 26,000 patients in 1989 with a budget from Southern Baptists' Cooperative Program of less than \$70,000.

Volunteer doctors, dentists and nurses from the United States, along with an increasing number from Mexico, are the key to handling the load, Grant said. More than 500 such professionals worked in the ministry in 1989 and the number has increased since then.

"One of the most important trends is the increasing participation of Mexican Baptists, particularly doctors and dentists from Mexico," Grant said. "For instance, we have several churches now that operate their own program. They have their own clinic. They staff it and they enlist volunteers from their own congregations. That's exciting, and it's what we want to see."

The Rio Grande River Ministry, started in 1968 to minister to people along the U.S.-Mexico border, now has more than 60 clinics.

Two other Southern Baptist health workers making the most of a difficult situation in the Middle East are Karl and Thelma Weathers. They operate a three-year nursing program at the School of Allied Health Sciences in Gaza, which they describe as "100 percent Palestinian."

Gaza is seven miles wide, 25 miles long and home to 750,000 Arabs -- a population density higher than Hong Kong, Weathers said.

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Leaving or entering the Israeli-controlled territory is extremely difficult. "We're surrounded on three sides by barbed wire and by the Mediterranean Sea on the fourth side," he said.

Their work is made more difficult by a Middle Eastern culture that holds nursing in low esteem. Sometimes their kindness is met with hostility, he admitted. "But we're challenged to respond with love. We must give the response Christ would have us give."

"Do you want a challenge?" Weathers asked. "Then come to Gaza. We've got a lot for you to do."

Other speakers at the four-day conference addressed "low tech" methods for ensuring sanitary conditions among the poor, helping patients avoid depression, public health techniques and nutritional needs of children.

Sponsors for the conference were the Southern Baptist Home and Foreign mission boards and the Wake Forest University Medical Center in Winston-Salem, N.C.