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Some ACTS affiliates upset  
with interfaith agreement

By Tammi Ledbetter

Baptist Press  
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FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--A new venture by the Radio and Television Commission will make it possible for millions of Americans to see Southern Baptist-produced programs previously unavailable in much of the country.

But to some, the price is too high. It's not a matter of economics, critics say, but principle.

"We're getting in bed with the enemy," said one local affiliate of the decision by RTVC management and trustees to share a channel with Vision Interfaith Satellite Network (VISN) of New York City. The RTVC is the Fort Worth-based broadcasting arm of the Southern Baptist Convention.

RTVC has scheduled an Aug. 20 teleconference for the 650 affiliates of its American Christian Television System (ACTS) to answer call-in questions about the shared-channel arrangement.

Jack Johnson, RTVC president, will field the queries, along with Richard McCartney, the agency's executive vice president, and Mike Wright, vice president for network operations.

ACTS went on the air in 1984 and now carries 24 hours a day of Christian programming to an estimated 8.2 million households primarily in southern regions of the country.

In a matter of weeks, that number could grow to some 21 million households receiving up to eight hours of ACTS programming, under an agreement with VISN announced July 28. The reduced broadcasting hours will be sandwiched between a consortium of interfaith VISN broadcasts representing such diverse faiths as Catholics, Jews, Methodists, Presbyterians as well as Christian Scientists, Mormons and Unitarian-Universalists.

VISN also carries Southern Baptist worship service programs of First Baptist Church of Atlanta, featuring Charles Stanley, and Riverbend Baptist Church in Austin, Texas.

While ACTS is carried on 650 cable systems primarily in the South and Southwest, VISN is aired through 712 cable TV systems with strong coverage in the Northeast, the northern tier of central states and western regions where RTVC has been unable to gain a hearing.

Programming slots for ACTS will be from 10 a.m.-1 p.m., 5-6 p.m., 10 p.m. to midnight and 4-6 a.m. Eastern Standard Time.

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In the news release announcing the VISN-ACTS agreement, Johnson said it will "help all of the faith groups on the two networks to reach the greatest number of people in America with faith and values programs. The result could be better understanding between faiths and a tremendous influence for good in communities all over the nation."

The official release referred to participation in VISN by Protestant, Jewish, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faiths. Conspicuously absent was any mention of groups also on VISN which Southern Baptists regard as cultic -- Mormons, Christian Scientists and Unitarian-Universalists. Nor did the release note the inclusion of broadcasts by the National Council of Churches.

ACTS currently features Baptist as well as Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Seventh-day Adventist and Church of Christ productions.

Like ACTS, VISN is a relatively young player in religious broadcasting, beginning in 1988 as a cooperative venture representing 54 faiths.

Also like ACTS, VISN is still in debt to the tune of \$16 million for start-up costs. ACTS' start-up debt, meanwhile, remains at some \$5 million.

"This will help VISN look good in the evangelical market to get ACTS," observed George Doods, a Southern Baptist worker with Tri-State Youth for Christ in Evansville, Ind., and longtime member of the National Religious Broadcasters. But, he said of VISN, "They're going to dominate the channel."

Rod Payne of the Wichita, Falls, Texas, ACTS affiliate and chairman of the nine-member ACTS Affiliate Council, noted the stiff rivalry between the two religious networks and said, "We have been (urged) by RTVC officials for years that wherever we could we needed to get ACTS on instead of VISN." In some cases, cable operators decided against both networks, avoiding offending religious groups involved on each side.

Some ACTS affiliates sympathize with the RTVC desire to break into territory ACTS previously was locked out of, but they have difficulty bringing VISN into their own communities with programming they find objectionable.

Payne, for example, whose channel last year was named by RTVC as "Affiliate of the Year," said, "I don't think I can participate to help pay money to carry Christian Science programs and others on the VISN list."

While affirming the right of other faiths to broadcast their beliefs, Payne said, "I cannot participate in assisting them in the propagation of their gospel. The way Mormonism worms its way into a person's life and lifestyle is insidious and I cannot in all sincerity participate by sending what I think of as tribute money to pay the VGI folks (support company of VISN) for an affiliation."

Some ACTS affiliates like ACTS 32 of Monticello, Ind., likely will drop their involvement when VISN is part of the package. Norman Sands, ACTS 32 station manager, said he was surprised by the move and disappointed he had no warning other than a letter announcing the move would take place in October.

"VISN is not a strictly Christian network," Sands said. "It's an interfaith network. That's not our goal. We exist in order to reach people with the word of Jesus Christ. I don't feel that can be done through VISN programming."

Sands said he is looking into an option extended by the local cable company to utilize a public access channel for programs produced by the local ACTS affiliate. But he said that will eliminate their independence and self-supporting financial base that comes through advertising.

Garland Morrison, an RTVC trustee and pastor of a Marion, Ind., church that established an ACTS affiliate there, voiced disappointment over the shared-channel agreement but added he is grateful for the years ACTS operated independently.

"Many people have been reached and it's been a very successful program," Morrison said. "I believe Jack Johnson looked for all of the alternatives he could, was not necessarily pleased with everything about this, but saw some positive things to it. Though I disagree with this decision, Jack is a very good man with a compassionate heart for reaching people" through TV and radio.

Mark Brooks, head of an ACTS board of cooperating churches in Springdale, Ark., one of 150 such boards across the country, predicted many cable operators will prefer the new arrangement because "it's all things to all people." And financially "it's a sweet deal," he said. "It relieves a lot of pressure at the RTVC and, theoretically, they will be able to improve the programming."

But as a local ACTS board leader, Brooks said, "What the RTVC has ignored are the local affiliates." He said he feels ACTS boards were "blindsided" by the agreement to cooperate with VISN and reduce ACTS programming to eight hours per day. "There is not one affiliate that I've talked to who thinks this is a good idea, who is excited about this."

Brooks said viewers in northwest Arkansas identify the ACTS channel with local Baptist churches and the SBC at large. The sudden appearance of 16 hours of VISN programming is a mixed signal his church and ACTS board will not risk, he said.

"I will pull the plug on ACTS, sell my TV equipment and get off the air before I will have the programming of VISN and identify ourselves with these groups," Brooks said. "When the WMU ladies find out we're in bed with the Mormons and Muslims, the RTVC is in for a big backlash on this."

RTVC officials counter that viewers will be able to distinguish between the providers of each program since material shown during ACTS' eight hours will carry the network's logo in the lower corner as will VISN's material during their 16 hours.

RTVC public relations director Steve Gregory said those with apprehension about the other programming should see this as "an opportunity to let ACTS penetrate these markets where people haven't seen our programs before." And in areas where ACTS is established, Gregory said the tie to VISN will "strengthen the width and breadth of our penetration in the market. Catholics who have not watched ACTS in the past may turn over to it" after watching a VISN program they're familiar with.

"We believe that by gaining the 12 million-plus (VISN) subscribers, we are carrying a light into the darkness in areas where we have not had access to before -- places like Salt Lake City and New York City," Gregory said.

One condition of the agreement, and a policy of ACTS from its beginning, is that ACTS programming may not malign any religious belief or faith group. RTVC's Gregory says the clause would likely prevent "a Baptist preacher from standing up and saying Mormons are absolutely wrong -- that constitutes a breach of the clause."

On the other hand, programming during the ACTS allotment could include "a preacher saying we serve the one true living God and anyone who tells you different does not," Gregory said. "That's a much broader statement."

Payne, however, doubts if the documentary his board just produced on location in Salt Lake City would sit well with VISN -- it includes an interview with former Mormons Sandra and Darrel Tanner of their conversion to Christianity.

Gregory said he does not expect the agreement with VISN to prevent Southern Baptist programming which takes a stand on moral issues such as homosexuality and abortion that might conflict with beliefs of other faiths.

The VISN arrangement, Brooks said, may be the only way Southern Baptists will ever "get into the big leagues" of broadcasting. "It has always been a struggle, always a drain as we continued to pay off our debt."

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If it were necessary to share a channel with another network, Brooks said he would have preferred Southern Baptists appeal to a charismatic group like Pat Robertson's. "I'd a lot rather get in bed with the charismatics," Brooks said, "than the National Council of Churches."

Brooks added, "The VISN people aren't any more excited about getting in bed with us than we are them. We've got Jerry Falwell."

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Art Toalston also contributed to this report.

Baptist college presidents  
protest New Orleans action

By Herb Hollinger

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NASHVILLE (BP)--An undergraduate degree program to start this month at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary has drawn strong criticism from state Baptist colleges and universities and a request to the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee for intervention.

Thirty-one Baptist college and university presidents have asked the Executive Committee to intervene in the New Orleans proposal because, college presidents allege, it conflicts with the seminary's program statement.

Harold C. Bennett, Executive Committee president, has agreed with the colleges' protest and has written New Orleans Seminary's president, Landrum P. Leavell II, expressing his opinion the action will violate the seminary's program statement. Bennett told Leavell in a July 20 letter that the matter will be on the agenda of the SBC Executive Committee meeting in Nashville, Sept. 21-23.

Bylaws of the Southern Baptist Convention give the Executive Committee a "watchdog" responsibility in matters of program statements of the various SBC agencies.

SBC seminaries traditionally have offered graduate-level degrees such as the master of divinity, master of religious education and master of music education. Some have offered associate degrees for students who did not have undergraduate-level degrees but these have been mainly awarded to students interested in church-related vocations.

New Orleans will begin a bachelor of arts and bachelor of general studies degrees when its fall term starts Aug. 25. The programs are for seminary students age 25 and older, the first of their kind offered by any SBC seminary, according to New Orleans officials.

"We're filling that void between associate's and master's level work for older, non-traditional students who are involved in ministry," Jimmy Dukes, director of admissions, registrar and director of the School of Christian Training at New Orleans, said in a special summer edition of the seminary's Vision publication advertising the new programs.

Presidents of the 31 Baptist colleges and universities sent a letter June 25 to Leavell asking the seminary not to implement the bachelor degrees. Earlier, on June 22, James W. Edwards, president of William Carey College in Hattiesburg, Miss., sent a letter evidencing concern about the new program and seeking dialogue with New Orleans about possibly having baccalaureate programs offered by William Carey on the seminary campus.

A number of letters were exchanged between Leavell and Edwards in the ensuing weeks. Finally, in a July 9 letter to Bennett, Edwards and Robert L. Lynn, president of Louisiana College in Pineville, asked the Executive Committee to intervene in the dispute "in stopping a violation of the SBC program assignment for New Orleans ... ."

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"There has been no indication of a recognition on the part of the seminary administration of this violation," the two presidents said in the letter. "Therefore, we are calling upon you to act to maintain adherence to the program authorized by the program statement approved by the SBC in 1979.

"We ask that special actions be immediately taken by the SBC Executive Committee ... to deal with this unprecedented violation of the SBC program statement. Failure on the part of a SBC institution to abide by the limitations of program statement approved by the messengers will cause irreparable damage to the relationships with state Baptist institutions.

"We are asking for immediate attention to prevent the program from becoming operational and, thus, 'established.' We further ask that the (seminary) funding formula (distribution of Cooperative Program funds) clearly reflect that such an unauthorized program will not be funded.

"We think this issue is one which has the potential to be among the most volatile in recent years in Southern Baptist life. We urge you to act quickly to avert another round of division developing within Southern Baptist life in response to the unauthorized initiative by NOBTS," the two presidents said in the letter.

In his July 20 letter to Leavell, Bennett said "it is my judgement that the program statement does not authorize the six Southern Baptist seminaries to offer bachelor degrees. I therefore believe the bachelor degree program of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary is in violation of the SBC program statement."

Bennett also acknowledged in his letter "there may be other seminaries which offer similar degrees."

"At the same time, I recognize the fact that there are state Baptist colleges which offer studies in the area of 'theological education.' It is my feeling that these matters need to be discussed by appropriate representatives."

Samford University in Birmingham, owned by Alabama Baptists, has a theological school and Baylor University in Waco, Texas, formerly owned by the Texas Baptist Convention, has announced plans to operate a theological school in the near future.

Since the matter is scheduled for the September Executive Committee meeting in Nashville, Leavell indicated to Baptist Press he did not plan to make further comment until then.

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Stewardship repentance  
blesses struggling church

By Jack Brymer

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HIALEAH, Fla. (BP)--For several years Horeb Baptist Church diverted funds earmarked for Southern Baptists' missions and ministry Cooperative Program fund to cover the church's budget needs.

Even so, the church's financial woes reached a point of "economic disaster," as Edwin Diaz, pastor of the Hispanic congregation, put it.

Then, in reading the Bible, it "clearly reminded me that God's missions money could not be touched because it is the very center of his heart," Diaz recounted.

In a worship service last October, Diaz "asked for forgiveness and told the congregation that (Cooperative Program) money was not the church's."

Diaz voiced conviction the first thing to be done with the weekly offering is to give a set percentage to the Cooperative Program, to associational missions and to Florida's Maguire State Missions Offering.

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"Then comes the pastor's salary and all the rest," he said.

"Well, as to be expected from the Lord, two weeks later God kept his promises and we met our budgetary needs and received even more," Diaz said. "But the blessings don't stop there. We were able to bring in a full-time music director, our 20-member choir has grown to 44-plus, baptisms have increased tremendously and close to 300 people are attending Sunday services."

The church also was sponsoring a blossoming mission in Merida, Mexico, and now is making plans to establish a permanent clinic in the Mexican city.

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Art Toalston also contributed to this report.

Prof says biblical scholarship  
lacks emphasis on modern world

By Pat Cole

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8/13/92

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Modern biblical scholarship has not placed enough emphasis on the message of the Bible for today's world, stressed renowned New Testament scholar Eduard Schweizer.

"Usually we are just content with the critical and historical research and that's all," said Schweizer, emeritus professor at the University of Zurich, in an interview at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A biblical text, he said, is not really understood "if you don't see what it means for you in this time."

Schweizer, author of more than 25 books, was the Bible teacher for the fourth annual Pastor's School at the Louisville, Ky., seminary.

"For me preaching means that the Bible itself shall preach, not I," Schweizer said. "I am only the translator. I have to translate that old text into our world today."

Schweizer, an ordained minister of the Reformed Church in Switzerland, said pastors should preach on texts that are difficult to interpret. "If you see something in the text and you say, 'I can't understand that,' that's exactly where you really need to work until you really understand what the Bible has to say," he said.

A pastor for 10 years before beginning his teaching career, Schweizer said interaction with people is necessary for preachers to translate the message of the Bible to today's society. "If I have to translate something, I have to know the language of the audience; otherwise, I can't translate.

"This means visiting people often," Schweizer said, "speaking to them in their kitchen or their office or wherever it is they work so that you can learn to understand their language and their questions."

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