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92-15

Some Romanians say union did not
support defunding of seminary

By Mike Creswell & Stanley Crabb

BUCHAREST, Romania (BP)--The president of Romanian Baptists will neither confirm nor deny whether his union's General Council actually agreed last November that Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board trustees should cut funds to the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland.

But several members of the General Council now confirm news reports circulating in Europe and the United States that they neither approved nor discussed the defunding and that no vote was taken.

Romanian Baptist President Vasile Talos declined specifically to confirm or deny in a Jan. 24 Baptist Press telephone interview that the 51-member General Council approved the contents of a controversial letter he and Nic Gheorghita sent to the Foreign Mission Board. Talos, an attorney, said he would have to check with Gheorghita, the union's general secretary, and others to reconstruct what happened.

But Gheorghita, interviewed earlier by Associated Baptist Press while on a trip in the United States, said no vote was taken by the council but that the letter was justified. "Everyone was agreed and no one said 'no,'" ABP quoted him as saying. "When there is no argument, there is no reason to vote."

Several other Romanian Baptists involved say that, although the Ruschlikon seminary was discussed in the Nov. 26 meeting in Bucharest, the specific matter of whether the Foreign Mission Board acted appropriately in defunding Ruschlikon was neither voted on, endorsed nor discussed.

The Talos-Gheorghita letter said "in the matter of the FMB decision of defunding the Seminary of Ruschlikon, the General Council of the Baptist Union of Romania, gathered in the meeting of November 26, 1991, agreed to this decision of the FMB."

A group of Baptist pastors, some of whom are General Council members, confronted Talos Jan. 23 and 24 in Bucharest about the letter and forced him to admit it did not reflect discussion the General Council held about Ruschlikon on Nov. 26, according to the president of the Baptist Theological Institute in Bucharest, Vasile Talpos. (Talpos should not be confused with Talos. They have the same first name and their last names vary only one letter in spelling.)

The 42 pastors, in Bucharest to attend classes at the Baptist Theological Institute, canceled two mornings of classes to discuss the letter after Talos returned to Romania from a visit to the United States. Several pastors said they learned of the letter sent by Talos and Gheorghita only after reading reports of it in the Baptist Standard, the state Baptist newspaper of Texas.

"Talos (the union president) tried to justify their position that it (the content of the letter) was discussed in general terms, but finally everyone convinced him that the decision was not taken in the council," Talpos, the Baptist Theological Institute president, told European Baptist Press Service. "So the pastors insisted that he (Talos) write a letter explaining the situation and correcting it. He agreed to do that, but we don't know what he will do because we will not see the letter."

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The Talos-Gheorghita letter represented the only support from any European Baptist union for the funding cut for Ruschlikon, which Foreign Mission Board trustees voted on Oct. 9 and reaffirmed in a second meeting Dec. 11. Baptist unions across Europe denounced the board's removal of funds to Ruschlikon; many union leaders termed it a betrayal of trust.

The Talos-Gheorghita letter, written to Eastern Europe mission administrator Paul Thibodeaux, was in circulation in the United States and being cited as support for the defunding before he saw it, Thibodeaux said.

In the General Council meeting Nov. 26, those present generally agreed it would be better to develop their own schools in Romania rather than depend on Ruschlikon, pastors said.

Ion Rincu, a General Council member, said he told Talos near the end of the Jan. 23 meeting: "Some of you on the Executive Committee (of the General Council) made a decision to send to the West a statement saying that the full council of the Romanian Baptist Union voted unanimously to support the defunding of Ruschlikon. This is not true and amends must be made." Rincu, the union's former general secretary, is pastor of the 700-member Second Baptist Church in Timisoara.

Asked Jan. 24 whether the defunding was discussed, Talos, the Romanian union president, said: "I have to check that with the general secretary and the deputy general secretary because they have all the records. I will check with that." Gheorghita was due to return to Romania in mid-February from the United States, where he has been preaching in many Southern Baptist churches. Talos said he would need to put his notes together with the notes of the other two in order to establish an "official" set of minutes.

Currently existing minutes of the Nov. 26 meeting typed by a union secretary contain no reference to a decision on the board's defunding of Ruschlikon seminary, Talos said, because the secretary left the room during that part of the meeting. But others say they contain no reference because it was not discussed. Talos said the current minutes are not "official."

Others present in the Nov. 26 meeting confirmed there was no official vote nor even discussion of whether to approve the Foreign Mission Board action.

"There wasn't a vote about this," Benjamin Poplacean, a union vice president, said in a telephone interview. Poplacean is a member of the union's seven-member Executive Council as well as the General Council.

Poplacean, pastor of the 600-member Baptist church in Sibiu, said he recalls no discussion of the funds cut for Ruschlikon. Though developing Romanian schools was discussed and the annual Summer Institute for Theological Education program held at Ruschlikon was discussed, even on that, "we took no firm decision," he said.

After hearing of the letter, Poplacean said he asked another Executive Council member if a vote was taken on the matter after he left the Nov. 26 meeting early. He said he was told there had been no vote. When he heard the letter was being publicized in the West, he began asking other pastors about why the letter incorrectly portrayed their actions.

Executive Council member Ovidiu Bulzan agreed in an interview that no vote was taken in relation to Ruschlikon and said discussions had centered on the SITE program. There was general agreement on those points, he said. Bulzan is a pastor in Arad.

Several pastors in the Bucharest meetings declined to be interviewed because they said they wanted Romanian Baptists to handle the situation among themselves and try to set right what they said was misinformation contained in the letter.

Veteran missionaries Charles "T" and Kathie Thomas, who serve in Romania, resigned in January after charging that Romanian Baptist Union support for the conservative movement among the Southern Baptist Convention and within the Foreign Mission Board "was motivated by promises of massive funding." The reference was to a new seminary and university which has been started by Second Baptist Church in Oradea. Gheorghita is senior minister of the church and a staff member of the school.

Thomas said that after the Romanian letter was sent, Gheorghita told him: "Well, this puts us in line to get all the money for Ruschlikon."

Gheorghita later denied involvement in any "deal" to support the defunding of Ruschlikon, but he acknowledged that a possible misuse of English, which is not his primary language, may have caused Thomas to misunderstand him.

Trustee Steve Hardy of North Carolina said he "would be willing to review any documentation that (the Thomases) can present about promises of massive amounts of mission money to the Romanian union if (the Romanians) would support the defunding of Ruschlikon." Hardy is chairman of the trustee committee supervising work in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Addition to 1/27/92 BP release

The following paragraphs are an addition and a correction to the Monday release: "Study committee on BJCPA, Foundation funds continues."

Add to end of story: The market value of the fund as of Jan. 27, 1992 was \$383,954. During a period from 1969 through 1991, \$568,384 was sent to the BJCPA as earnings or income from the fund.

Correction to second paragraph: Ray Fuller, chairman of the Executive Committee's administrative subcommittee, appointed the special BJCPA/Foundation Funds study committee.

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Texas church extends 'hands
of compassion' to the needy

By Ken Camp

Baptist Press
1/28/92

DALLAS (BP)--Four years ago, a group of women in a northeast Texas Baptist congregation became concerned their downtown church was failing to minister to needy people living practically within the shadow of its steeple.

Today, Hands of Compassion ministry at First Baptist Church in the county seat town of Greenville, is offering hope to more than 100 families each week.

The Hands of Compassion Crisis Center grew out of a twice-monthly Baptist Women's home Bible study that started a community ministry in December 1987, recounted Pat Gayle, current director of the center.

Initially the ministry distributed fewer than 20 sacks of groceries a month to needy families. In 1991 the crisis center helped an average of 402 families per month, providing food, clothing, emergency assistance and spiritual guidance.

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The ministry is open each Wednesday from 9 to 11 a.m., operating in the church's family life center. Prior to the distribution of food and clothing, clients are encouraged -- but not required -- to attend a Bible study and praise service led by Jack Lindenzweig.

Lindenzweig, a 70-year-old retiree who came to faith in Jesus at age 60, became involved in the ministry early in 1988 when he volunteered to help sack groceries in the food pantry. Struck by the needs of the people he saw, he approached pastor Doyle D. Sumrall about beginning a Bible study for the center's clients.

"I told him the food we were giving them would only last these people a couple of weeks but if we could get them involved in prayer and Bible study, that would stay with them a lot longer," he said. "A lot of these people have lost all hope. We're here to give them a little hope in life."

Many find hope for the first time through a relationship with Jesus Christ, he noted, pointing out that 72 clients at the center made professions of faith in 1991.

In addition to its food pantry and clothes closet, the crisis center also offers literacy training for adult non-readers and persons learning English as a second language.

During its first three years, Hands of Compassion ministry was supported solely by designated offerings. Since January 1991 it has been a line item in the church's budget. However, Mrs. Gayle said many members continue to designate over-and-above gifts to the crisis center especially for special projects such as distribution of toys and blankets at Christmas.

God has provided for the ministry's financial needs in often-unexpected ways, Sumrall said. He recalled one day when he saw a sobbing young woman sitting on the steps of the church. "I went and sat down by her, told her I was the pastor of the church and said, 'You look like somebody who could use someone just to sit with you. I'm just going to sit here quietly until you're ready to talk.'"

Sumrall learned the young woman had been battered and abused by her live-in boyfriend and that she was deeply concerned about her brother, who was on drugs.

First Baptist Church's crisis center offered the woman a place of safety and an opportunity to talk with Christian women concerned about her needs. In time, both she and her brother accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The young woman later shared her new-found faith with her landlord, explaining how First Baptist Church had ministered to her. He sent a \$1,000 check to the Hands of Compassion Crisis Center.

The crisis center ministry has opened the eyes of First Baptist members to needs of families within walking distance of the church building, Sumrall said. "Many are not conscious of just how deep the hurt is right here in our community until they meet some of the people who have been through what these folk have experienced and until they minister to them one-on-one," he said.

"It's put a lot of our people on a first name basis with the people the ministry serves. It means something when they're able to greet them when they see them out on the street or in the mall."

The majority of families attending Bible study and receiving services at the Hands of Compassion Crisis Center are black. Although breaking the color barrier was an adjustment for a few church members, Sumrall said some who initially were troubled by the idea have become the ministry's most enthusiastic supporters as they have seen how God has blessed it.

As it continues to reach an unchurched segment of Greenville's black population, First Baptist eventually hopes to start its own black mission.

"I was raised in South Carolina back in a time of strong segregation. I know how these people have been treated and how they are still being treated," Lindenzweig said.

"I just have a tremendous concern for them. I've made a lot of friends there. I guess it's the best thing that ever happened to me."

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Padilla's mission trip to Chile
draws interest in SSB literature

Baptist Press
1/28/92

By Frank. Wm. White

NASHVILLE (BP)--Baptists in Chile may become one of the first beneficiaries of an arrangement to allow the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board to market materials outside the United States.

Although Mexico was to receive the initial focus in April, a personal mission trip in January allowed Chuck Padilla, Hispanic church development field service coordinator in the SSB's special ministries department, an opportunity to promote Sunday School Board materials in Chile.

Last fall, the board and the Baptist Spanish Publishing House in El Paso, Texas, finalized an agreement for the publishing house to market its materials in the United States rather than through the Sunday School Board while allowing the board to market its materials outside the United States.

Padilla traveled to Chile as a participant in a Tennessee Baptist Convention partnership missions trip. His role was to teach Vacation Bible School sessions for children of Southern Baptist missionaries attending an annual planning meeting.

He also spoke with the approximately 40 missionaries from throughout Chile about Sunday School Board products and services now available to Baptists in Chile and other countries.

Although plans have not been finalized, the missionaries have asked Padilla and other Sunday School Board workers to return later this year for regional workshops to provide Sunday school and discipleship training information for Chilean national Baptists.

"Education is a high priority in Chile," Padilla said. "However, Sunday school and discipleship training programs are weak. Missionaries have done a good job starting churches and missions but they need Sunday school training to strengthen the organization to reach people."

Although Chilean churches have Sunday school, most use it for children only, he said. Discipleship training would help Chilean churches strengthen people who come into the church but have no background in doctrine.

Missionaries attending the planning session expressed particular interest in Sunday school literature, Outreach Bible Study materials and Baptist doctrine studies, Padilla said. Virtually no SSB materials currently are being used in Chile but Padilla predicts that will change soon.

Padilla plans to visit Mexico in April for another personal mission trip and while there follow up his initial efforts at introducing SSB materials.

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Mexican Baptists already have expressed interest in ordering 10,000 copies of "La Fe Bautista," the Hispanic edition of "Baptist Adults," the discipleship training dated curriculum for adults.

"I think we will develop orders from Mexico for discipleship training materials and doctrine study books," Padilla said.

Other avenues are being explored to distribute other Sunday School Board products in Hispanic areas outside the United States, Padilla said.

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ALSO AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST:

-- Feature by Martha Skelton on Peruvian nurse working among villagers in the Andes Mountains. (BP) photo mailed by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press