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92-17

Supreme Court denial  
guts dial-a-porn industry

By Tom Strode

WASHINGTON (BP)--Southern Baptists actively opposing pornography hailed the Supreme Court's recent refusal to hear an appeal by the dial-a-porn industry as the telling blow in a conclusive victory over such telephone indecency.

On Jan. 27 the court announced it would not review appeals court decisions upholding a 1989 law restricting dial-a-porn indecency. The law and resultant regulations by the Federal Communications Commission require customers to file a written request in advance for the service and mandates dial-a-porn companies provide a descrambling device paid for in advance by the consumer.

These restrictions block easy access to dial-a-porn numbers by children, who, in the past, constituted 70 to 80 percent of those calling such lines, lawyer Rob Showers of Washington, said.

The court's refusal to hear the appeal "signals the death knell for the \$2.4 billion industry known as dial-a-porn," said Showers, a Southern Baptist who has been a crusader against pornography from positions both inside and outside the federal government. "They've run the route and they've lost it all the way up to the Supreme Court." The case denied a hearing by the court was Dial Information Services v. Barr.

"I'm ecstatic," said Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission. "This is a mortal blow to filth peddlers who would corrupt the minds of our children. To use sports analogies, this is a combination World Series sweep-Super Bowl blowout."

"By requiring these smut merchants to obtain parental consent before piping their sewage through the phone lines, this valid law permits parents to protect the privacy and decency of the home," said Michael Whitehead, CLC general counsel. "The toxic waste called telephone sex need no longer pollute the minds of our children and may finally wind up in the dump where it belongs."

The Christian Life Commission was party to a brief filed by the National Coalition Against Pornography with the FCC asking for strict regulations in keeping with the 1989 law.

The '89 provision, sponsored by Sen. Jesse Helms, R.-N.C., was passed after the Supreme Court ruled against a previous ban on dial-a-porn indecency. In June 1989 the court said in Sable Communications of California v. FCC a prohibition of obscene dial-a-porn was constitutional but a ban on indecency was not. Such a law would have to be narrowly drawn to avoid violating freedom of speech, the court said.

Showers, who is in private practice but also serves as president of N-CAP's National Law Center for the Protection of Children and Families, helped draft the '89 bill. A member of First Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va., he is a CLC trustee. Land is a member of N-CAP's executive committee.

NOTE TO EDITORS: This is a corrected version of a story sent out 1/28/92 to include some information accidentally omitted. Changes have been made in paragraph 2. Also, new paragraphs 14 and 15 have been added (incorporating new information and the original paragraph 20).

Some Romanians say union did not  
support defunding of seminary

Baptist Press  
1/30/92

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 some members of the 51-member 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. Another member, who sits on the General Council's seven-member Executive Council, interpreted it differently, saying no vote was taken because there was no difference of opinion on Ruschlikon.

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 that 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 that "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 had 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.

Ovidiu Bulzan, a member of the smaller Executive Council, said the Ruschlikon situation was discussed "very thoroughly" in the Executive Council in November and December. "We also made it public in the meeting of the council of the union (General Council), together with the 45 or so pastors who were there at the beginning of December." He said the letter expressed the sentiment of the council.

Bulzan agreed that no vote was taken in relation to Ruschlikon and said discussions had centered on the annual Summer Institute for Theological Education (SITE) program held at Ruschlikon. There was general agreement on those points, he said. Bulzan is a pastor in Arad.

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 and Ruschlikon's SITE program were discussed, even on that, "we took no firm decision," he said.

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After hearing of the letter, Poplacean said he had 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 was no vote after he left. When he heard the letter was being publicized in the West, he began asking other pastors about why the letter incorrectly portrayed their actions.

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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Southern Baptist medical  
volunteers save Venezuelan

By Mary E. Speidel

Baptist Press  
1/30/92

GUARENAS, Venezuela (BP)--They were praying when they heard the crash.

Southern Baptist missionary Forrest Bohlen looked up just in time to see a parked car roll into another parked car on an incline. About 50 yards away, he and a group of Southern Baptist medical volunteers were just about to open the first day of a Baptist medical clinic. The clinic was set for Jan. 27-29 in Guarenas, Venezuela, in a house where Venezuelan Baptists are trying to start a Baptist mission.

"We were ready, we were praying ... ," recalled Bohlen, a general evangelist from Danville, Iowa.

But they weren't prepared for what happened next.

They heard people screaming and yelling beside the cars. In the middle of their prayer, medical volunteers and missionaries rushed to the scene.

When Bohlen arrived, several Venezuelans were trying to push back one of the cars. That's when he saw the child lying behind a rear wheel.

She was dressed in a preschool uniform. Bohlen later learned the 4-year-old girl and her mother were walking to the Baptist medical clinic.

Immediately, Elmer Motte, Southern Baptist volunteer physician from Hayden, Ala., tried to revive the child, but it was too late. Motte determined she died instantly after being crushed by the car.

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Onlookers had just freed the child's mother, Alida Rodriguez, from beneath the car. Motte quickly moved to Rodriguez, who was already being attended by Southern Baptist nurse Sandra Waller of Knoxville, Tenn. Motte began applying pressure to the woman's severe head injuries.

Bohlen said Motte, working with the other Baptist medical volunteers, probably saved the woman's life. "She probably would have bled to death before anybody could have done anything" if the volunteers hadn't been there, he said.

Rodriguez was taken to a hospital in the capital city of Caracas, about 30 minutes away. She is recovering from a broken pelvis and head injuries, Bohlen said.

"While it was total pandemonium, the (medical volunteers) responded very professionally and very quickly. I was impressed by that," he said.

Other Southern Baptist medical volunteers at the scene were Motte's wife, Jean; Malinda Knott and Bob Carter, both of Nashville; Betty Rigby of Winston, Ga.; David McGowin and Lavern Warhurst, both of Hanceville, Ala.; Frank Harris of Richmond, Va.; and Kathy Hutchens of Chelsea, Ala.

Although team members were grieved by the accident, Bohlen said it was fortunate the rolling car was stopped by the car in its path before further injuries were caused. Otherwise, it would have "come barreling down the street right into the crowd (of patients at the clinic) and right into our team," he said.

The owner of the car that caused the accident, a Venezuelan Baptist, is being held in a traffic jail for eight days, a standard practice in Venezuela, said Southern Baptist missionary Richard Beal of Pensacola, Fla. He will be released if the woman's family does not press charges, Beal said.

After the clinic opened, volunteers treated about 250 patients, mostly children, Bohlen said. Following spiritual counseling offered at the clinic, 40 patients accepted Jesus Christ as Savior.

The medical team was among 135 Southern Baptist medical volunteers leading clinics in the Caracas area through Feb. 3. The volunteers are conducting clinics at sites where Venezuelan Baptists hope to start churches.

Besides providing medical care at the accident scene, Baptists found opportunities to minister to the family involved, Bohlen said. He and two Venezuelan Baptists visited the injured woman in the hospital. Venezuelan Baptist pastor Rafael Esperagoza and Southern Baptist missionary Jim McDonald of Elida, N.M., visited her husband the day after the tragedy. The pastor also attended the child's funeral.

Baptists were "well received" in each case, Bohlen said.

At this point, the family and community don't blame Baptists for the accident, even though both cars involved in the accident belonged to Venezuelan Baptists who had transported volunteers to the clinic, missionaries said.

In fact, a Guarenas newspaper report said the North American medical professionals probably saved the mother's life. "The response of the newspaper I think reflected the community's feelings," Bohlen said as he described the shock of the clinic's opening day.

"The phrase that keeps going through my mind is 'You never know what's going to happen,'" he said.

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ALSO AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST:

-- Feature by Rebecca Carr on a Missouri church's effort to involve its members in ministry projects -- and do so in a way that meshes with today's busy lifestyles.