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INTRODUCTION: The religious liberty won by Christians in Bulgaria when communism fell in 1989 is slowly being lost as a new wave of repression sweeps the country.

Already Bulgaria is arguably the most restrictive of the former Eastern bloc countries on religious issues. And Baptists fear more restrictions are coming in the form of new laws from the Bulgarian parliament. Church meetings have been disrupted as the government has declared public meeting halls off-limits to Baptists and other evangelicals. Churches have been denied the right to buy private land for buildings, even with money in hand, and in some cases church construction already under way has been stopped.

A year-long propaganda campaign has filled newspapers, radio and television with wild stories linking evangelicals with suicides among young people and even cannibalism. Further, the government is refusing to grant foreign missionaries permission to reside in the country in some cases and making the granting or extension of visas difficult in others.

Mike Creswell, Baptist Press' Europe correspondent, has visited Bulgaria twice in recent weeks to cover unfolding developments. The following stories report what he found.

Why does the situation in Bulgaria deserve close attention? Because the challenges evangelical Christians are experiencing there -- including resurgent opposition from government and Bulgarian Orthodox Church forces and the influx of cult groups -- represent what is happening in varying degrees all over Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

(BP) photos relating to these stories were mailed to state Baptist newspapers Dec. 3.

**Baptists avoid deportation
as hostility rises in Bulgaria**

By Mike Creswell

**Baptist Press
12/6/93**

SOFIA, Bulgaria (BP)--A Southern Baptist couple was granted another 60 days to minister in Bulgaria after narrowly missing deportation.

James and Audrey Duke of Lufkin, Texas, got a call from police in Sofia, the capital city, in late November confirming they had won their hard-pressed request to remain in the country.

Duke is pastor of the English-speaking International Baptist Church in Sofia. He is backed by the European Baptist Convention, a fellowship of 60 English-speaking Baptist churches across Europe with close ties to Southern Baptists.

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Two volunteers sponsored by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board also don't know how long they will be allowed to stay. Stan Meador, 25, of Broken Arrow, Okla., and Bruce Cassels, 23, of Casa Grande, Ariz., were denied permission to work in two Bulgarian towns near the Romanian border.

After both reapplied to live and work elsewhere, Meador received verbal notification from police Dec. 1 that he also could remain in Bulgaria for another 60 days. Cassels' visa status is not known. The tense residency permit situation has involved lengthy discussions with Bulgarian authorities in recent weeks. It comes amid a year-long anti-evangelical smear campaign apparently orchestrated by the government and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

Prayer was a key to the permits, Duke said. "We spent (many hours) in prayer and fasting, but all the Baptist churches throughout Bulgaria were praying for the situation, too," he said in an interview.

Duke told his congregation Nov. 21 he didn't know if he would be there the following Sunday or would be deported during the week. The Dukes have been in Bulgaria since March, but their final residency permit was to have expired early in December. They had been told it would not be renewed.

Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board missionaries Bill and June Wardlaw, based in central Bulgaria, managed to secure one-year visas for themselves and four other Southern Baptist volunteers earlier this year. But their long-term residence also remains in doubt.

Meanwhile, leaders of Bulgaria's five evangelical church groups met with two members of parliament and members of the government's commission for religious affairs Nov. 17. They lodged an official complaint about the heavy media campaign against them and asked that it be stopped.

The leaders also asked to see copies of a new law regulating religion, said to be under discussion in the parliament. According to one published report, the proposed law would limit church property ownership to the Orthodox Church. A copy of the proposed law was to be shared with evangelical leaders in late November.

Shown a newspaper article accusing evangelicals of endangering state security, one parliament member told the evangelicals bluntly, "I agree with (the writer). All sects are a danger for the security of the Bulgarian state."

"These are the words and accusations we heard during communist times, and now we are hearing them from the people who have to protect us," said a worried Theodor Angelov, president of both the Bulgarian Baptist Union and the Bulgarian Evangelical Alliance. "The thinking of these people made me very afraid."

Angelov and the other church leaders also had asked parliament to intervene in the case of the Dukes.

Foreign Mission Board volunteer Cassels had been assigned to Montana, a city north of Sofia. But local police refused to give him residency documents and told him not to bother to submit application forms again. Similarly, volunteer Meador was told by police in nearby Lom that he couldn't live in the town.

Both volunteers had been assigned to work with students and young people in local Baptist churches.

The two were prominently cited in newspaper stories warning about the influence of "sects" that appeared across Bulgaria in late October and early November. Both were mentioned by name and one story included Meador's address.

Meador was credited with baptizing 250 people in one account, an apparent attempt to alarm readers over the Baptist church's impact. But Meador has been in Bulgaria little more than four months and has only been studying the Bulgarian language so far. He has not baptized anyone or even preached.

The owner of Meador's apartment asked Meador's language teacher if the young American was like David Korresh, the leader of the Branch Davidian cult who died in the fire that destroyed the cult compound in Waco, Texas.

Evangelicals were linked to the suicide of a young woman in one account and the near-suicide of a woman in another version. The stories grouped evangelicals with Hare Krishna followers, Bahais, Mormons and other groups. Ironically, evangelicals themselves are concerned about the influx of such groups into the country, since their teachings run counter to Christianity.

Stands on Sofia streets sell books promoting Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age ideas and other non-Christian teachings -- a new development in a country where most religious ideas were harshly suppressed during communist rule. But both the government and the Orthodox Church are trying to outlaw any non-Orthodox teachings and look with suspicion on any non-Bulgarians.

One newspaper article on Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses stated, "The most dangerous is the second one, the Baptists." A boldfaced section asked, "Must we wait on an incident in which somebody dies to take care of the dangers which are coming to our city? The police must answer this question before it is too late." The most outlandish charge appeared in a Varna newspaper earlier this year: It accused Baptists of eating babies for breakfast.

Baptist leader Angelov dismissed all the stories as "full of lies." The media campaign against Baptists and other evangelicals "blames us for all possible sins," he said.

"We are said to be giving young people drugs in order to get them into the church (and) distributing humanitarian help only to buy the people, including the help we give to orphanages, which are in such a bad condition. They say we are using brainwashing," said Angelov, with pain showing in his face.

Angelov and other Baptists also are incensed to be considered Johnny-come-latelys in their own country. The first Bulgarian Baptist church was organized in 1865 by Ivan Cargill, a Russian Baptist missionary.

A week after the anti-evangelical articles appeared in Montana, authorities there stopped Baptists from renting a public building. Members of the congregation arrived for Sunday morning services to find themselves locked out of the building they have rented since September 1990.

When pastor Rumen Iliev contacted city officials, he was told the city would not rent facilities to "sects" such as Baptists anymore. Iliev said he's been spending so much time talking to city officials and looking for a new meeting place since then "I've hardly had time to even read the Bible."

Currently church members meet in an unheated factory room, the only space they've been able to find in the city. Baptists in Blagoevgrad also were turned out of a rented public building earlier this year. The building manager declined to explain why the rental was stopped. The group now meets in a rented bar.

After more than four decades of communist oppression, many evangelicals do not have their own church buildings. Many groups have met in private homes for decades.

Other evangelical groups in Bulgaria report similar problems with renting meeting spaces, buying property and getting visas for foreign missionaries.

In October Augustin Vencer, who heads the World Evangelical Fellowship, was denied a visa for even a three-day visit. Earlier the government also refused to allow prosperity theology promoter Ulf Eckman of Sweden to enter the country when he arrived with 105 workers for a much-publicized rally. Newspaper headlines crowed: "Evangelicals Turned Away at the Border."

"Our situation at the moment is no better than it was during the communist regime," said Victor Virtchev, president of the Union of Pentecostal Churches in Bulgaria. "It's not because we don't have a bigger freedom but because we are losing the sympathy of many people. That's why we need prayer and spiritual support from our brothers outside."

Leaders of the five leading evangelical groups in Bulgaria organized earlier this year, but the government refused to officially recognize them, Angelov said.

Evangelicals are convinced the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is jockeying for power because its leaders feel challenged by the rapid growth of evangelicals across the country. In the first rush of freedom following the fall of the Communist Party in late 1989, many Bulgarians attended the Orthodox Church out of curiosity. But attendance soon dwindled, apparently because they found little to entice them to remain.

While almost every village has an Orthodox church, Orthodox worship services remain drenched in tradition and proclaimed in an ancient Slavic language today's Bulgarians don't understand. The churches usually hold worship services only and don't emphasize Bible teaching as evangelicals do.

In 1992 the Orthodox Church split into several factions fighting for control as some leaders tried to oust the supreme authority, Patriarch Maksim. When Orthodox Easter arrived, Bulgarian television broadcast three rival services. During one church holy day, Orthodox priests were said to have swapped punches as factions fought for control of the mammoth Aleksandr Nevski church in Sofia.

In July an amendment to media laws gave the Orthodox Church the right to TV and radio time for the stated purpose of opposing "religious sects which have spread throughout this country," announced the Parliamentary Radio and Television Committee.

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(BP) photos relating to this and the following three stories were mailed Dec. 3 to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press.

Quick Bulgaria church growth over;
now real work begins, Baptists say

By Mike Creswell

Baptist Press
12/6/93

SOFIA, Bulgaria (BP)--Baptists in this former communist country still blink in the light of new freedoms they have enjoyed since communism collapsed in 1989.

Church activities taken for granted elsewhere -- preaching a sermon or handing out Bibles -- are still treasured.

Certainly life is not perfect. Bulgarian evangelicals are targets of a propaganda campaign linking them to suicide cults and other strange groups. Authorities try to prevent them from meeting in public halls. Missionaries from other countries have problems getting government permission to stay. Evangelicals fear a new law on religion may bring fresh restrictions.

Like other Bulgarians, they also face hard economic times. Bulgaria's economy still lags far behind many of its European neighbors. Government figures show only one in four Bulgarians can maintain a decent standard of living. Annual inflation runs at up to 65 percent. Official unemployment is said to be 16 percent but many observers put the figure far higher.

Yet for Baptists and other evangelicals, these are minor problems compared to the fierce oppression they endured from the late 1940s to 1989 when communism fell. In those days most evangelical pastors served long prison terms and churches were restricted to a closely watched skeleton program.

Baptists recall the first free children's Bible study they had in 1990. "Most people wept," said Theodor Angelov, pastor of Sofia Baptist Church and president of the Bulgarian Baptist union.

People also wept when Varna Baptist Church dedicated its modern new building in 1991. "Can you imagine what kind of joy it was for us?" Angelov asked. "What does a church dedication look like? Nobody had seen it before!"

Older Baptists used to laugh out loud when Angelov dreamed the then-impossible dream of preaching in a military school. But it happened in 1993.

The building in central Sofia that once housed the Communist Party is now used for movies and art exhibits. The big red star that once sat atop the roof has been torn down.

As the star of communism fell, that of Baptists rose. They numbered about 700 in 1989. That total multiplied to more than 3,000 in 1993 -- a more than four-fold increase. A Bible conference earlier in 1993 drew about 450 Baptists from all over the country -- a record attendance for any Baptist meeting.

These days Baptists minister in nursing homes, hospitals, orphanages, schools and prisons. They have taken a special interest in one state-run orphanage where children have endured harsh conditions.

Under communism, they couldn't even think of such things.

But the membership growth many Western observers expected here after communism's collapse has slowed as churches have lost their initial "forbidden fruit" attraction to the public.

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"We saw an explosion of revival after the changes came in 1989," said Boshidar Igoff, pastor of Varna Baptist Church and general secretary for Bulgarian Baptists. Some churches doubled or tripled in size. Membership at Sofia Baptist Church jumped from 80 to 350 in the mother church and the five missions it has started.

"For 45 years the communists lied about the church and people understood that they lied," said Simeon Neicheve, business administrator of the Varna church. "So the people were curious to see what the truth was about it. But out of all these people who were so interested and curious, only a small handful of people believed and have stayed in the churches."

Baptists across the country confirm the rapid post-freedom growth is over. The time when big evangelistic rallies were effective also has passed, said Igoff. Baptist leaders throughout Eastern Europe have reached much the same conclusion.

"We started with street evangelism and big evangelistic meetings in secular halls," Igoff said. "But slowly we saw this was not the best way of evangelism. In one meeting we registered 500 decisions for Christ but we lost contact with people and only one person became a member of the church."

Rapid growth during the past four years brought its own problems, Igoff acknowledged. "We have had some growing pains because we cannot control everyone who wants to be baptized. ... In this explosion of revival we received some people who are not really converted," he explained. "Now we have not so many new people coming in, but I think people coming into the church are more mature."

Igoff's church is setting up introductory courses for new believers. A challenge for Baptists will be developing a strategy for evangelism while discipling new members already in the churches.

One of the biggest needs: trained leaders. Only 10 pastors spread themselves thinly across 37 churches and missions.

To help meet the leadership need, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board transferred missionaries Bill and June Wardlaw from Japan to Bulgaria in 1991. Wardlaw has been preaching and teaching all over the country, visiting a dozen small churches almost as a circuit rider.

After the initial travel blitz, he will coordinate the MasterLife discipleship program across the country and continue working with three churches, including the church in Kazanluk, where the Wardlaws live.

Wardlaw also helps coordinate the ministry of half a dozen volunteers assigned to help churches' youth ministries. Work with students and young people is a crucial focus of Baptist outreach, because interest in Christianity runs highest among that age group.

"I can say only positive things about working with the Wardlaws. (They are now) part of us; they are no more Americans," Igoff said with a broad smile.

The Wardlaws are from Texarkana, Texas, and West Palm Beach, Fla., respectively.

Baptists eagerly request more foreign missionaries. But it remains to be seen if the Bulgarian government will allow more workers to stay in the country.

A new Baptist Bible school in Sofia has about 50 students. Ironically, the school operates on a campus formerly used to teach communist ideals to students who came from all over the communist world. Most of the buildings and grounds are unkempt and in poor repair, reflecting the bankrupt status of abandoned communist ideals.

Baptists have set up the school with extension courses, bringing together the students every three months for a week of intensive courses. They have called on Baptist pastors from Europe and the United States to teach courses.

Baptists are wary of linking up with American para-church groups, whose offers to teach often come with unacceptable strings or doctrinal problems. "This is a dangerous thing for us," said Angelov.

The Foreign Mission Board has transferred veteran missionary seminary teacher Roger Capps from Singapore to teach. He and his wife, Janice, of Beaufort, S.C., and Rancho Cordova, Calif., respectively, moved to Bulgaria this fall. After a brief furlough in the United States they will return to study Bulgarian and begin teaching. Mrs. Capps teaches English.

Bulgarian Baptists also have the same need facing Baptists all over Eastern Europe: buildings. Only a few congregations have buildings and they are inadequate. Sofia Baptist Church, for example, is filled beyond capacity for all services. Some churches have met in small apartments for decades.

Churches began renting public buildings, often former Communist Party buildings, after freedom came. But with the anti-evangelical campaign launched by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the government in 1993, several congregations have been banned from using such buildings.

Angelov is talking with the European Baptist Federation about a joint project to build prefabricated church buildings at a factory in Bulgaria, then truck them to locations across Eastern Europe for erection. Stalled for now because of lack of funds, the program could provide badly needed meeting facilities to Bulgarian Baptist congregations as well.

Like other Eastern European Baptists, Angelov also dreams of constructing a major Baptist union complex in the Sofia area with space for a church, their Bible school and an orphanage. Plans for the \$2 million facility have been drawn.

If faith were money, Bulgarian Baptists could build it tomorrow.

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Evangelism complicated
by cults in Bulgaria

By Mike Creswell

Baptist Press
12/6/93

SOFIA, Bulgaria (BP)--When communism lost its grip on Bulgaria in 1989, Southern Baptists and other evangelical groups scrambled to send in missionaries.

They weren't the only ones: Many of Christianity's competitors also sent in workers -- and plenty of them.

After four years of relative religious freedom, Bulgaria is now awash in religious ideas and movements never seen during four decades of communist repression. Newcomers range from Satan worshippers and New Agers, "prosperity theology" pushers and Hindus to Mormons, Scientologists, Hare Krishna followers, Jehovah's Witnesses and followers of Sun Myung Moon.

Such groups are making evangelism a much more complicated process for Baptists and other evangelicals, church leaders report.

Mormon missionaries are so common in Sofia, the capital city, that Southern Baptist pastor James Duke said he recognizes a dozen or more of their dark-suited, two-member teams.

"I would guess there are at least 30 in Sofia alone. Every time I drive through town I see them about," said Duke, pastor of the International Baptist Church there.

In Russe, a city near the Romanian border, active groups include the Children of God, a cult that has drawn legal action in the United States and Europe for its deviant sexual practices; Satan worshippers; Buddhists; Krishna followers; yoga practitioners; and Transcendental Meditation adherents.

"The people are open and they may turn to anything, especially cults," said Ivailo Sayarov, pastor of Russe Baptist Church. "We have a lot of intelligent people in Bulgaria, but we've never had these kind of influences before. The problem for us is that all these crazy groups claim to be evangelicals."

Now Baptist pastors must take care to alert their members to the error-filled teachings of the many new groups in the country, Sayarov said.

One recent Bulgarian television program showed how the Hare Krishna cult is bringing huge amounts of Krishna literature into Bulgaria, he said.

Yoga is a big hit in the Black Sea resort city of Varna, said Michael Platt, a Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board volunteer who works with Varna Baptist Church.

"The philosophical ideas presented include the belief that there are many gods, that God is just a remote observer, not personal," Platt said. "A lot of people ask me if Jesus came from another planet. Book tables on the street sell Hindu books and a lot of New Age stuff."

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Religious literature of all kinds is being distributed in Bulgaria at a breakneck pace, Baptists say. A British newspaper report d that more than 500 publishing houses have emerged in Bulgaria during the past four years. They're churning out books of all kinds for Bulgarians hungry for anything to read. Sidewalk bookstalls sprout like mushrooms and carry everything from Mickey Mouse comics to fashionable New Age tomes on crystals and witchcraft.

The best reading material for new Christians is just the Bible, said Damyan Podgorski, a Baptist pastor in Dovpnitsa. Podgorski is reluctant to use many study materials for new believers "because there is so much strange literature going around."

"The talk going on about the cults has caused a huge problem in sharing the gospel. It has become a new wall," observed Simeon Neicheve, a longtime member and business administrator of Varna Baptist Church.

"So many people have lied that the people don't know who to believe. It doesn't matter if you speak the truth; you're seen as the others who have lied. The Orthodox Church has exploited this to help them oppose (us) evangelicals."

Baptists also are denied access to TV and radio, so they can't respond to Orthodox attacks.

In Plovdiv, the largest city in central southern Bulgaria, a cult from Ukraine called the "Great White Brotherhood" is active. "The members walk around with white robes," said Stoicho Nikov, a leader of the Plovdiv Baptist Church.

The "Great White Brotherhood," which claims 150,000 members, got international headlines in November when Ukrainian police arrested 700 members of the group to stop a feared mass suicide attempt in Kiev. Leader Maria Devi Khristos had announced the Apocalypse was near and that she would somehow be "crucified" Nov. 14. She wound up being arrested for hooliganism as the Ukrainian government took steps to defuse the movement.

About 80 percent of the people he talks to about Christianity tell him they are afraid to become believers because of the things they've heard and read in the media, reported Philip Aidov, pastor of Blagoevgrad Baptist Church.

"They are under a lot of stress on spiritual questions," he said.

Evangelical Christians also feel the stress, as sharing the good news of Christ becomes an increasingly complex challenge.

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Bulgarian Baptists
recall hard times

By Mike Creswell

Baptist Press
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KAZANLUK, Bulgaria (BP)--To this day, Zdrafka Gurdeva instinctively looks around when she enters a room -- to see who's listening or watching.

Old habits die hard in Bulgaria.

Caution in speaking -- and being heard -- were habits all Bulgarians learned during 40 years of communist rule. Baptists like Gurdeva, a physician, had to be especially cautious. As evangelical Christians they perennially placed high on the government's "most despised" list.

Today she and her family are solid members of Kazanluk Baptist Church. Her husband, Christo, is lay pastor of the church. Their son, Georgi, was baptized in September.

But ask the family about hard times and she pulls out a Bible and some tattered documents from a living room bookshelf. The items recall a time when police raided their home and confiscated Christian literature.

"Two years later they returned this Bible to me," she said, pointing to a mark indicating the police had surveyed it.

A police inventory she still has lists "dangerous" materials seized in the raid: a Bulgarian translation of "Peace With God" by Billy Graham, a children's Bible story book, hymnals, Gospels of John and other materials.

The Bible was all the police ever returned; they kept the rest.

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She's sure God watched over her during the raid. "Up high on a bookshelf I had some really 'special' correspondence. There were lots of sermons neatly typed and printed and letters and cards from foreign countries," she said.

This was especially dangerous contraband, since contact with foreigners could have given the government the little evidence they needed to make it appear she was "spying for the West."

"Evidently the policeman was thinking only about books. He opened and closed the cabinet without seeing any sermons or correspondence," she said.

They survived that raid with no repercussions. But Gurdeva's voice turned sad as she recalled another "big search" at her mother's home.

"They found lots of Bibles and Christian literature from the West," she recalled. "They fired her from her work. Three years later she died from cancer. But she had really worked for the Lord."

Only a fluke allowed Gurdeva to go to medical school. Academically qualified, she was still turned down the first two years. In the communist system, city government provided the school a certificate on the applicant.

"At the university they would look at it," said her husband, "and say, 'Oh! She's a believer!' and they would throw her application away."

She got around the system by working two years in a cheese factory and doing cleaning work to acquire a "positive" work record. She was admitted to medical school only because her original application was lost in the system.

An engineer, Christo Gurdeva excelled at designing machinery. His boss told him he could become chief engineer if he would renounce his faith and sever ties with Christian family members. He refused and was not promoted.

In the early 1980s a machine he designed was to be exhibited in Cuba. Just before his departure his boss said, "Sorry, you can't go to Cuba because you're a believer. America is close to Cuba and you might run away."

Many Baptists across Bulgaria have similar stories of being shunned by family and friends and losing jobs just for becoming Christians.

Damyán Podgorski, pastor of a Baptist church in Doprnitsa, became a Christian during the 1980s. Police repeatedly hauled him into the station and warned him to quit having church meetings in his home -- and beat him up to make sure he understood their message.

Podgorski doesn't like to recall those years. "Thanks to the Lord, these things passed," he said. Many believers look away and hesitate to answer when asked about their suffering. Memories dredge up the pain.

The early years of communism in the late 1940s were the worst.

"In 1948 maybe 95 percent of all Bulgarian evangelical pastors were arrested," said Boshidar Igoff, pastor of Varna Baptist Church and general secretary for Bulgarian Baptists.

"Not just Baptists -- Methodists, Congregationalists and Pentecostals were arrested too. The (state) tried to say they were American spies. The government tried to destroy churches. Atheistic propaganda said the church would die automatically if we changed the economic circumstances of society. But these were not the facts."

In 1948 a newspaper carried a picture of leaders of a meeting of the national evangelical alliance. It was the group's last meeting; within weeks all the leaders had been rounded up and imprisoned.

(When leaders of the Baptists, Pentecostals, Congregationalists, Church of God and Methodists reorganized an evangelical alliance in May 1993, the government still refused to recognize it.)

Igoff was young in those days but the horrors of the time remain fresh in his memory. His father, Igor Igoff, spent six years in a concentration camp for being a Baptist pastor. Igoff was allowed to visit him only twice during those six years -- 10 minutes for each visit.

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Igoff and other family members were banished to a Gypsy village in northwestern Bulgaria. They weren't allowed to work and had no income. For years the family was forced to live in a small apartment with the families of two other pastors -- three women and eight children. One was Ivan Agelov's family. His son, Theodor, is now president of Bulgarian Baptists.

Science was Igoff's love and he managed to get a postgraduate degree. But after he worked for a year as a scientist, his supervisors learned he was a believer and fired him. He went without work six months. Since 1991 he has worked full-time with Baptists.

"During this time the working field of churches was very limited. Sunday school, children's work and youth activities were forbidden. Security watched Baptist meetings. Most church activities were in house groups," Igoff said.

Even some theological topics were off-limits. They were not allowed to discuss Israel or the end of time, for example. "They had a reason to argue with us," Igoff said, "because our proclamation was that Jesus Christ is the future of the world. They said, 'No, this is capitalistic propaganda. The communist system will be in the future.'"

Igoff waves his hand to indicate the great number of believers who were persecuted. Some punishments were worse than others: His own 16-year-old daughter was arrested and beaten by the secret police.

Spies often were sent to report on church meetings. In some cases the government even assigned secret policemen to serve as pastors of churches.

"Security police were always behind us, wanting to know anything happening in or out of the church. Once I was arrested because I had a meeting with foreigners," said Angelov. "We had to be very careful about what we preached or said. Often we did not know who they were."

As late as 1986 the government sent an agent to lead the Baptist congregation in Sofia. "He arrived one night in a black suit and said, 'Hello, I am your new pastor!'" Igoff recalled.

The government demanded that Baptists ordain the man but they refused. "We suggested that perhaps a major in the security forces could ordain him better," Igoff said with a smile.

What Baptists endured for their faith only now can be told.

Igoff and Theodor Angelov were two of the main Bible smugglers beginning in 1966. They helped get and distribute thousands of Bibles in Bulgaria.

Sometimes Western Bible groups would come to football matches masquerading as fans. Someone would ring Igoff's doorbell in the middle of the night and he would dash out to transfer Bibles to safekeeping.

Once three cars of Bibles were moving across Bulgaria; Igoff was driving one. Police stopped them. One put a machine gun against Igoff's head. "Move your gun; it could go off!" Igoff joked. The policeman laughed and said, "You're a good boy." The cars pulled away safely.

Another time Igoff was carrying Bibles in a suitcase and a policeman demanded to look inside.

"He saw the Bibles but closed the suitcase and said, 'Thank you, sir.' And he went on. I don't know if he was a 'secret friend' (secret believer) or if God blinded him for an instant. It was a miracle!" Igoff said.

Once the police arrested Igoff in the middle of the night and made him lean against a wall. He was terrified. "The policeman threatened to kill me. He said I was an enemy of the people. But God gave me a melody in my heart. It was so beautiful. God gave me liberty and the policeman was the prisoner!"

But Igoff scoffs at the idea he should be considered a hero for God: "In every minute of my life I was full of fear and had problems, but the Lord was very, very good with us."

Church leaders alive today carry the marks of those days, he said. One has high blood pressure; another's hands tremble. Yet Igoff knows of only two Baptists who denied their faith.

Still, because of their harsh treatment under communism, Baptists and other evangelicals fear the propaganda campaign being waged against them and the continued persecution by the Bulgarian government. In many ways life is much more complicated for believers now, Igoff said.

"In the past everything was clear. The problems were as simple as black or white. Here were the enemies and here was the church," he said wistfully. "Now it's harder to make choices."

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Houston church and RTVC produce
Christmas special for ABC-TV

By G.C. Risenhoover

Baptist Press
12/6/93

FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--A one-hour Christmas special produced by the First Baptist Church of Houston in association with the SBC's Radio and Television Commission will be aired on ABC-TV following the Dec. 24 edition of "Nightline."

The program, "And the Angels Sang," will be seen on most ABC affiliates.

What viewers will see is part of the 24th annual Christmas pageant at the 22,000-member First Baptist Church, involving 13 performances Dec. 3-12. The event is directed by Gerald B. Ray, the church's minister of music.

The pageant has a cast of 590 characters in wardrobe, a 350-voice choir and 45-piece orchestra. It also features live animals -- camels, donkeys and sheep.

"This is the presentation of the Christmas story and life of Christ, including the extraordinary king's processional to Bethlehem, ministry of Jesus and resurrection scenes," said Bob Thornton, vice president of television services for the RTVC. "It is a magnificent production, the music outstanding and uplifting."

Thornton said two years ago a one-hour Christmas special, "Night of Nights," featuring the pageant at First Baptist Church of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., may have been the most watched program ever produced by the RTVC. It, too, was aired by ABC, which reported about 4.5 million viewers in 186 cities. Thornton thinks viewership this year will equal or exceed that of two years ago.

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Argentina may drop requirement
that president be Roman Catholic

By Mary E. Speidel

Baptist Press
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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (BP)--For the first time, Argentine evangelicals can run for president -- if recently proposed changes in Argentina's constitution are approved.

Argentine President Carlos Menem and his predecessor Raul Alfonsin have signed an accord calling for reforms in Argentina's 140-year-old constitution.

The proposed changes delete a requirement that the country's president and vice president be Roman Catholic, although they don't address other religious issues of concern to evangelicals.

After Alfonsin signed the agreement Nov. 15, Menem agreed to postpone a national referendum on constitutional reform set for Nov. 21 if Alfonsin's Radical party would approve the agreement. Press reports said the Radical party did so Dec. 4.

Press reports also said Argentina's congress could vote to reform the constitution by Dec. 10, the 10th anniversary of the country's return to democracy. A military junta ruled Argentina from 1976-83.

Menem, who was elected in 1989 on the Peronist party ticket, and evangelicals want constitutional reform for different reasons.

"The main issue they're negotiating is the re-election of Menem" so he can run when his term ends in 1995, Pablo Deiros, Argentine Baptist pastor and church historian, said in a Baptist Press phone interview. The reforms would allow the president to serve two consecutive terms, barred under the current constitution. The presidential term would be cut from six years to four.

"For evangelicals, however, this means one of us can be president" someday, said Arnoldo Canclini, Argentine Baptist historian and pastor.

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But given the other religious freedom issues not addressed in the reforms, "that's not v ry much," added Canclini, pr sid nt of the National Evangelical Commission for Constitutional Reform.

For example, although Argentina has no official state religion, the current constitution allows the government to provide economic aid to the Roman Catholic Church. The constitution also gives the Argentine president the "right of patronage," allowing him some rights in the government of the Roman Catholic Church. The proposed changes do not deal with either of these clauses, according to Canclini.

In addition, Argentine law requires all non-Roman Catholic religious groups to register with the government. Argentine Baptists have been leading critics of this registry, saying it limits religious freedom.

Argentina's House of Deputies is considering a new religious liberty law that would ease some of the registry's requirements. The legislation passed "in a sudden way" in the Senate, said Canclini, a leading evangelical spokesman on religious liberty issues. "It's impossible to know why."

If passed, the bill, now under study by a House committee, would not eliminate the registry, so Baptist and other evangelicals oppose it.

The proposed religious liberty law "represents a limitation in the end because we still would have to register our buildings, names of pastors and leaders and other information that could eventually be used against us or to limit us," Deiros explained. For example, "if instead of having a democracy we had a dictatorship, the registration could be like a boomerang -- it could come back against us."

Argentine Baptists know what it means to fight for religious liberty during such times. Canclini's father, Santiago Canclini, became known as a champion of religious freedom during Juan Peron's dictatorship -- "one of the worst moments for religious freedom in Argentina," the younger Canclini said.

But historically Argentina has enjoyed broader religious tolerance than some other Latin American countries where Roman Catholicism predominates.

In the current debate about constitutional changes, "the religious liberty issue is not of general concern as it is seen as a 'fait accompli' (a thing already done)," Canclini said.

In fact, Canclini said he believes if the proposed constitutional reforms are approved as they now stand, "it will not have any affect on the issue of religious liberty."

But it would be another story if the reforms are broadened to prohibit state support of the Roman Catholic Church. If that should happen, the proposed religious liberty law before congress would have to be revamped.

Meanwhile, observers say evangelicals are pleased they may be allowed to run for the nation's highest office. That change is something evangelist Billy Graham reportedly discussed with Menem when he met with the president two years ago. Graham spent an hour with Menem while in Buenos Aires leading a crusade in November 1991.

"Graham told him this (requirement that the president be Roman Catholic) was not just," said Southern Baptist missionary Marion Lineberger, who helped with local arrangements for the Graham crusade. Menem reportedly responded, "Yes, we are working on that."

The next step in the reforms is approval by the Argentine congress. If that occurs, Argentine voters then will elect a constitutional assembly to revise the constitution. If all goes according to plan, the reforms could be in place by June 1994.

However, "this situation is changing every day, and it's not easy to know what may happen tomorrow," Canclini stressed.

**Ruschlikon seminary
to move to Prague**

DIDCOT, England (BP)--European Baptists' executive committee has agreed to move the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, to Eastern Europe after it consults with member unions.

The committee's final vote to move the seminary to Prague, capital of the newly formed Czech Republic, is expected in May.

The move will not only ease student visa problems and slash the high cost of operations, but it will better link the seminary to Baptists in Eastern Europe, according to seminary leaders.

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board founded the school in 1949 but deeded it to the European Baptist Federation in 1989. Foreign Mission Board trustees cut off all funding to it in 1991, but many Baptists continue to support it.

The federation plans to either sell or lease its Ruschlikon property, valued at about \$12 million, when it moves the school. No facilities have been identified for the school. The move could take a couple of years.

The seminary will shift its focus somewhat to provide advanced education following up basic training offered through many European Baptist unions. It will continue to offer practical training through workshops and conferences. But it will cooperate with Baptist colleges and seminaries throughout Europe and develop partnership agreements with similar institutions in Europe.

The executive committee's action resulted from a recommendation by a joint committee from its own members and seminary trustees.

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**Fixed fund target range
announced by Annuity Board**

By Thomas E. Miller Jr.

Baptist Press
12/6/93

DALLAS (BP)--Southern Baptist Annuity Board retirement plan members' Fixed Fund investments may enjoy 1994 earnings in a target range "... higher than current bank certificates of deposit," a board executive said.

John R. Jones, the board's senior vice president for fiduciary services, announced a 1994 Fixed Fund earnings range of 5.15 percent to 6.15 percent.

"Given today's markets, no one will be surprised we are scaling back our target range, even though the Fixed Fund has enjoyed an exceptional year in 1993," Jones said. The Fixed Fund had earned a cumulative 6.51 percent by the end of November. "It appears we will credit earnings at the upper end of the 1993 target range of 5.75 to 6.75 percent," he said.

The Fixed Fund target range is not guaranteed, but the board believes there is a high probability of performance within the range.

"The crediting rate each month is the actual performance of the fund, and there are fluctuations on a month-by-month experience," Jones said.

The Fixed Fund is a diverse portfolio of short- and intermediate-term fixed income securities. The mix includes securities of the U.S. government, U.S. government agencies, corporations, insurance companies (guaranteed investment contracts) and banks (bank investment contracts). The main objectives of the fund are preservation of principal and income. This fund is a moderate- to low-risk investment.

In 1991, the Annuity Board announced a long-term restructuring of the Fixed Fund designed to continue its safety, enhance its competitiveness and provide increased diversification.

The restructuring of the Fixed Fund will gradually reduce insurance companies' guaranteed investment contracts with short-term maturity investments over the coming years. "Since the market value of the new securities changes with the general level of interest rates, account balances and the return credited to the Fixed Fund will vary some over time," Jones said.

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"If we earn more than the target range, we'll credit more to accounts. If we ever experience a loss, each member will share in proportion to his or her accumulations in the month in which the loss occurs," Jones added. The accounting of the Fixed Fund is at market value.

Most guaranteed investment contracts in the Fixed Fund are being phased out and replaced with other low-volatility fixed-income investments. These include U.S.

"Members do not see the kind of earnings fluctuation they see in the Variable or Balanced Fund," noted Jones. "Maturities of the investments are short enough to prevent this."

Jones suggested members who can tolerate higher risks for more earnings potential can use the Annuity Board's Variable Fund of stocks or the Balanced Fund of stocks and bonds. The Variable Fund unit value increased 8.39 percent in the period January-November 1993 and the Balanced Fund had cumulative earnings of 11.22 percent in the 11-month period.

The Variable Fund is a diverse portfolio of U.S. stocks (equities) with a goal of matching or exceeding the performance of the Standard & Poor's 500 Stock Index. The main objective of this fund is growth/capital appreciation rather than income. Therefore, the Variable Fund has more risk than other funds offered.

The unit value in the Variable Fund reflects ups and downs in the stock market. The value of the Variable Fund is expressed in "units" similar to the expression of "shares" in a mutual fund. The unit value is determined at the end of each month by dividing the number of outstanding units into the market value of the Variable Fund.

The Balanced Fund is a mix of stocks and high-quality bonds. The stocks are intended to produce growth/capital appreciation, while the bond investment is designed to produce income and preserve capital. The stock-to-bond ratio will change periodically to meet economic challenges. The ratio normally averages approximately 45 percent and 55 percent for both stocks and bonds. This asset mix produces moderate risk.

The Short-Term Fund, which had cumulative earnings of 2.7 percent in the first 11 months of 1993, is a diverse portfolio of short-term fixed-income securities issued by the U.S. government, U.S. government agencies and corporations. The fund's average maturity will be 12 months or less. The main objective of the Short-Term Fund is to minimize risk, providing very high security of principal.

Members can change the fund or funds to which contributions are made by notation on their monthly billings or by calling the Annuity Board's toll-free number: 1-800-262-0511.

Accumulations in funds can be moved once each month by written instruction to the Annuity Board.

Jones encouraged members to secure Annuity Board brochures describing funds and possible diversification strategies before making decisions on investment of contributions.

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