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Iranian man facing death
for his Christian faith

Baptist Press
12/29/93

BRUSSELS, Belgium (BP)--As Christians everywhere prepared to celebrate Jesus' birth, a Christian man in Iran already imprisoned for almost nine years prepared to face possible death because of his faith.

The fate of Mehdi Dibaj was unknown Dec. 22, Christians inside Iran reported. But they fear the worst following Dibaj's Dec. 3 trial, during which he refused to renounce Christianity and presented a strong testimony to his faith in Christ.

Security concerns delayed getting news of Dibaj to the outside world, but a written copy of his message to the court has been sent to churches in the West.

Once a nominal Muslim, Dibaj became a Christian years ago. He has served as evangelist and also helped translate the New Testament into Farsi, the main language of Iran. He was arrested and charged with apostasy from Islam. Christians in Iran say Dibaj spent two of his eight-plus years of imprisonment in solitary confinement in a 3-by-3-foot cell with no lights.

"I am a Christian, a sinner who believes Jesus has died for my sins on the cross and who by his resurrection and victory over death, has made me righteous in the presence of the holy God," Dibaj told the court trying him Dec. 3.

He also responded to the charges leveled against him:

"I have been charged with 'Apostasy'! The invisible God who knows our hearts has given assurance to us Christians that we are not among the apostates who will perish but among the believers so that we may save our lives. In Islamic law an apostate is one who does not believe in God, the prophets or the resurrection of the dead. We Christians believe in all three!

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"They say, 'You were a Muslim and you have become a Christian.' No, for many years I had no religion," he continued. "After searching and studying I accepted God's call and I believed in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to receive eternal life. People choose their religion but a Christian is chosen by Christ. He says, 'You have not chosen me but I have chosen you.' From when? Before the foundation of the world."

Iranian Christians fear for Dibaj's life because Iranian law was changed in 1993 to prescribe death for Muslims who openly declare they are Christians. Now, under Islamic law, called "sharia," a judge is required to issue a death sentence against converts charged with apostasy -- defined as "blaspheming the Prophet Mohammed."

Christians outside Iran who follow events there have feared the policy change will make evangelistic outreach even more difficult. No reports of widespread executions of Christian converts have followed the law change, but such a sentence has been carried out before.

The most recent known execution of an Iranian Christian occurred Dec. 3, 1990, when Hoosein Soodmand, an Assemblies of God pastor, was hanged.

In November the Iranian government demanded that all Christian congregations sign declarations promising not to evangelize Muslims. Some signed, according to reports, but the Assemblies of God and Brethren churches refused. The issue reportedly is causing friction among some of the groups.

At the same time, ministers are being intimidated. Some have received threats by phone that their children will be kidnapped. Some churches have been told to discontinue worship on Fridays and that Sunday worshippers would have to show identity cards indicating their religious affiliation -- Christian or Muslim. In at least one case government agents went to a church on Friday and demanded to see churchgoers' identity cards.

Reports of Christian growth continue to filter out of Iran, despite the increased persecution of recent years. Some Iranian Christian leaders claim Iranians are the most responsive people in the region to the gospel. But the militant brand of Islam in power in Iran continues to wage a fierce, violent battle against Christianity as well as more moderate Islam.

Iranian Christians inside and outside Iran have called for believers to pray for Dibaj.

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Text of Mehdi Dibaj's message
in Iranian court, Dec. 3, 1993

Baptist Press
12/29/93

In the Holy Name of God who is our life and existence.

With all humility I express my gratitude to the Judge of all heaven and earth for this precious opportunity, and with brokenness I wait upon the Lord to deliver me from this court trial according to His promises. I also beg the honored members of the court present to listen with patience to my defense and with respect for the Name of the Lord.

I am a Christian, a sinner who believes Jesus has died for my sins on the cross and who by His resurrection and victory over death, has made me righteous in the presence of the Holy God. The true God speaks about this fact in His Holy Word, the Gospel. Jesus means Savior, "because He will save His people from their sins." Jesus paid the penalty of our sins by His own blood and gave us a new life so that we can live for the glory of God by the help of the Holy Spirit and be like a dam against corruption, be a channel of blessing and healing, and be protected by the love of God.

In response to this kindness, He has asked me to deny myself and be His fully surrendered follower, and not fear people even if they kill my body, but rather rely on the creator of life who has crowned me with the crown of mercy and compassion, and who is the great protector of His beloved ones and their great reward.

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I have been charged with "Apostasy"! The invisible God who knows our hearts has given assurance to us Christians that we are not among the apostates who will perish but among the believers so that we may save our lives. In Islamic Law an apostate is one who does not believe in God, the prophets or the resurrection of the dead. We Christians believe in all three!

They say, "You were a Muslim and you have become a Christian." No, for many years I had no religion. After searching and studying I accepted God's call and I believed in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to receive eternal life. People choose their religion but a Christian is chosen by Christ. He says, "You have not chosen me but I have chosen you." From when? Before the foundation of the world.

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ANALYSIS

Yale prof challenges
'Culture of Disbelief'

By David P. Gushee

Baptist Press
12/29/93

Of the tens of thousands of books published every year, few receive the personal endorsement of the president of the United States. Yet President Clinton spent much of the fall raving about one such book: "The Culture of Disbelief" by Yale Law School professor Stephen Carter.

The president's comments attracted considerable attention in the media -- and considerable celebration among committed Christians. Some Christians even saw the president's positive response to the book as a direct answer to prayer. What could possibly be so significant about "The Culture of Disbelief," the heavily footnoted scholarly book that turned into a national event?

Carter argues that this nation's political, legal and cultural leaders fail to take religious devotion seriously, except perhaps as a threat to the republic. These leaders act as if there is something wrong with serious religious commitment. They profess outrage if religious persons bring their deepest commitments into public life -- as though non-religious people leave their deepest commitments at home when they enter public life. This anti-religious bias can be seen in politics, education, culture and the law. Carter is deeply disturbed by all of this; he sees the elite's disdain for religion as both out of step with U.S. history and culture and a major threat to the future of democracy in the United States.

Carter begins his book by describing "some of the many ways in which our culture has come to belittle religious devotion, to humiliate believers, and ... to discourage religion as a serious activity" (p. 16). The picture he paints is true to the experience of many Christians. He then considers the constitutional status of religion today, arguing that the separation of church and state must be defended, but that this must occur without treating religious belief as an irrational annoyance. He thinks that an anti-religious bias has been increasingly apparent in legal decisions regarding religion, and again he is on target. Carter considers several of the life-and-death issues of our time -- abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment -- asking how religious convictions should figure in debates over these issues. He rightly rejects the idea that the convictions of religious Americans on these questions should be ignored just because their views are religiously rooted.

Throughout "The Culture of Disbelief," Carter boldly tackles most of the major controversies that have arisen recently at the intersection of religion, law and politics. He considers the issue of cults and worries deeply over so-called deprogramming. He discusses the heavy use of religious language at the Republican Convention of 1992, rejecting many of the political goals to which the name of God was linked but not the appropriateness of offering religious justification for political positions. For example, he points to the openly religious motivations and public rhetoric of the leadership of the civil rights movement. He deplores the fact that the religiosity of that movement was properly seen as acceptable by liberal-minded folks but the religiosity of today's anti-abortion movement is not similarly accepted.

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Carter addresses organized prayer in the public schools as well as other education-related issues such as the evolution/scientific creationism debates, the teaching of values, sex education and funding for private religious schools. He argues that the modern, morally relativist and secular spirit of public education today is driving off many religious families who feel that in good conscience they simply cannot send their children to the public schools because of this spirit. Again, he is perceptive; he has understood the anguish of millions of Christian families.

"The Culture of Disbelief" turned from a book into a national event because Stephen Carter was able to bridge a gap that has grown dangerously wide -- the gap between the nation's largely secular cultural and political elite and its largely religious citizenry. He was able to do this because he stands at the intersection of both groups: He is a deeply religious Christian who is a leading professor of law at Yale University.

Religious readers, especially evangelical Christians, have responded to the book with jubilation, not because Carter agrees with them on every point -- he certainly does not -- but because he is a member of the cultural elite who has listened to them. And precisely because of his membership in that elite, his peers in the liberal political and cultural world have also listened to him, when they would not listen to many other religious persons who have voiced similar concerns.

Carter's book is a warning shot across the bow of secular culture. The warning is this: If you pour contempt on the religious convictions of the majority of Americans, the results will be disastrous. Religiously committed Americans will either withdraw support from the institutions you control or will organize to take control of these institutions themselves.

It is a warning that is being heard: in the political parties, in the halls of secondary and higher education and in the institutions of culture and government. To this, serious Christians can only respond with a "Thank you" to Stephen L. Carter. It's about time.

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Gushee is assistant professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

EDITORS' NOTE: The following three stories marking the ongoing 25th anniversary of Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission disaster relief ministry are excerpted from a Brotherhood book to be released this coming summer tentatively titled "Involving Southern Baptists in Disaster Relief."

Disaster tales spin
when action stops

By Clay Renick

Baptist Press
12/29/93

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP)--Volunteers tell some unusual stories about disaster relief.

"You've got to have something to laugh about," said Ed Lauderdale. "There's so much sadness going on."

Lauderdale owns a fiberglass shop in Heber Springs, Ark. But he also volunteers with the state Brotherhood feeding unit, part of the disaster relief plan through the Arkansas Baptist Convention.

One morning a train derailed in Rison, Ark., and Lauderdale's unit responded. It was a chemical spill so everyone in town had to evacuate.

Lauderdale pulled close to the overturned train and set up camp. He had pots on tables and a tarp overhead when a man walked up in a space suit.

"You've got two minutes to get that thing out of here," the man said.

"We noticed an odor in the air," Lauderdale recalled. "(It was) kind of green looking."

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The crew was in danger. Lauderdale flagged a pickup truck, threw pots in the back and then raced out to safety.

Lauderdale has also seen some unusual meals in disaster relief. They included breakfast cucumbers in South Carolina and prison take-outs in Arkansas.

One day they got a call to Glenwood, Ark., after high winds damaged a state park. Federal disaster officials used prisoners to clean the area. Lauderdale's unit would feed the crew.

One prison lieutenant overheard the menu and had a question about breakfast.

"What'd you say you're having?"

"Grits."

The man shook his head. "Not good enough."

"We're not here to fatten 'em up," Lauderdale replied. "We're there to feed 'em."

The lieutenant stuck his chest out. "My men have to have three or four eggs a morning. They have to have one-quarter pound of ham or sausage. They have to have hot biscuits or toast with butter and jelly -- two or three pieces a man. They have to have fruit juice, milk and coffee."

"We're not set up to cook that kind of food," Lauderdale argued. "We're set up for one or two items." He paused. "Maybe I need to be in the prison. I don't eat that good at home."

The lieutenant dropped his expression. "If I don't feed them that good, they'll sue me."

Red Cross officials told the team to pull out. They paid for disaster relief supplies and couldn't afford that type of menu. Prison leaders had to arrange their own meals.

Another strange case happened with Jerry Kersey and the Missouri Baptist Men several years ago, when he was an associate Brotherhood director for the state. Hurricane Hugo had just hit South Carolina, so Kersey took his team to help with the feeding.

They found neighborhoods in confusion and Red Cross workers trying to help.

At the disaster scene, a man walked into the feeding unit and wanted to see the leader.

"He looked like a real estate salesman," Kersey recalled. The man was neatly dressed, drove a 280-Z and had a Red Cross patch.

"We got some pockets of mobile homes that aren't being reached," the man said. "I'm Donny Davis and I'm a liaison with the state senate. Tomorrow a helicopter is coming down to check things out. We want you to come along and take a look."

"Wait," Kersey replied. "We've got vans that make deliveries. Just tell me where the areas are."

"I'll show you in my truck."

"We go at 4:45."

"Too early," the man argued.

Kersey began to wonder. The man seemed pushy for a volunteer. "Look," Kersey said. "We have a schedule. We're going with or without you."

The man decided to follow their van. He had a truck and loaded it with food from the Red Cross warehouse. Kersey grew suspicious and called officials.

"You're the fourth person that called today about him," Kersey was told. "We don't know who he is."

It came out later that night. Some National Guard troops were able to watch TV's "Unsolved Mysteries." And they recognized "Donny Davis." He was on the FBI's most wanted list.

Davis had 28 aliases across the country and specialized in scams with money. The troops called police.

They caught Davis in Surfside Beach, S.C. He had a restaurant there and used Red Cross food to fill orders.

"He made you think he was out there to help you feed those that were in need," said Kersey.

"He talked a good story."

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Renick is a free-lance writer based in Martinez, Ga. (BP) photos available from the Brotherhood Commission beginning Jan. 4.

Disasters bring --
unexpected results

By Clay Renick

Baptist Press
12/29/93

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP)--Disasters can change the way you see life. One example comes from Chesnee, S.C., a small town on the North Carolina border.

A killer tornado hit in the latter 1980s. And residents there will never forget it.

"Looked like a big wall," Roger Ledbetter recalled. "Dark and black and debris twisting."

He looked across the yard and saw trees roll in the cloud. "I ran and put my wife and daughter in the hall," he said.

High winds damaged his roof and then completely destroyed his apartments down the road.

Trailers buckled. One resident ended up in some peach trees. And Ledbetter found the shell of his apartment with a 2-by-8 rafter driven through the bathroom wall.

"If you had gotten in the bathroom and tub, it would have gone right through you," he said.

Two people died and 50 homes needed repairs. The damage was 10 miles long and up to one-half mile wide.

"I didn't realize how much it had gotten to me until later," added Troy Gregg, pastor of First Baptist Church in Chesnee. "At the time, I thought I was OK."

He tried to counsel with victims. But the trauma extended throughout town. It became a numbness that affected even the simple tasks of everyday life.

"It stops you from being able to function," Ledbetter explained.

Church members came from South Carolina coastal towns to help rebuild. Chesnee residents needed help and appreciated the effort.

The projects took all summer with up to 50 volunteers a day. One church from Charleston sent 20 workers on their vacation time.

Then the unexpected came with Hurricane Hugo. It was September 1989. The storm pounded the South Carolina coast.

News footage showed houses on end and people beside rubble. The men who helped at Chesnee -- now needed the same favor.

"It was not hard to get men to go," recalled Troy Gregg, from Chesnee's First Baptist. "Anytime you're helped -- you want to help (others)."

Disasters also can show flaws in the relief effort. Bob Simpkins saw that on the Kentucky Baptist Brotherhood disaster unit. He's the state Brotherhood director who has worked at more than a dozen major disasters.

But it all started with one problem. Back in 1977, Simpkins was a new pastor in Kentucky. There had been a flood in Pike County.

Simpkins had a friend named Lat Crum who owned a house there and suffered flood damage. Simpkins decided to stop by and check on him.

The house was quiet. Simpkins called his name. Brother Lat walked up from the basement with several men behind him.

"I want you to meet someone," Crum said. They were disaster relief volunteers from the Mennonite church.

"These men love the Lord and will do anything to help in disasters," Crum added. "Why don't we have anything like this?"

"One of these days Kentucky will," Simpkins replied.

Other states had Baptist disaster units then. Kentucky used the Tennessee crew for a model. Now Kentucky has 1,400 volunteers and a 22-foot trailer with steam line cookers.

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They can put out 65,000 meals a day. That's more than any disaster unit in the world -- including the U.S. Army.

"We proved that at Hurricane Andrew," said Simpkins.

They served 328,000 meals there. The Army didn't have portable kitchens with that capacity.

Brother Lat has since passed away. But he saw Kentucky Baptists grow in disaster relief.

"He was certainly pleased to know what we were doing," Simpkins noted.

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Disasters inspire
'local miracles'

By Clay Renick

Baptist Press
12/29/93

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (BP)--Mexican villagers felt helpless. Hurricane Gilbert was pushing high rains into the mountains near Monterey. It was late September 1988.

"Rivers that didn't have any water in them for years suddenly became raging torrents," said Al Wallraven of Oklahoma.

"It was the most severe flooding I've ever seen," he added. More than 100,000 people were affected. One policeman saw a village covered.

"They had no place to go," Wallraven recounted. "No clothes, they had nothing."

Wallraven is a retired toolmaker who directs volunteers for the Oklahoma Baptist Brotherhood disaster unit. In Mexico they set up their feeding unit and served several thousand at each meal.

But supplies came through the Mexican government. And elections complicated the process. Each politician wanted endorsement from the Baptist volunteers.

Wallraven refused.

"We're here to help people," he said.

The food supply slowed. Then there was none. Wallraven had enough for one more meal and some leftover beans.

"We'll stay as long as we have something to cook," he told the crew. Flood victims still needed help.

Then an old truck pulled up. A man with deep wrinkles got out.

"Are you in charge?" he asked.

"Yes I am," Wallraven said.

"Is any of this food going to the Mexican government?"

"No."

The man was a farmer. He donated 100 dozen eggs and 240 pounds of potatoes. The team now had enough to cook for lunch.

"We fed on time," Wallraven recalled. And 2,000 people ate.

But dinner approached and all they had left was hard tortillas. "They were so tough the kids were using them for frisbees," Wallraven said.

Supplies had stopped from the government. Wallraven's crew was ready. A crowd was expected.

But the food was gone.

"The Lord provides," Wallraven said. "He's never failed me."

A government truck drove up to the unit. They had 100 kilos of frozen hamburgers and 100 kilos of hot dogs. It came from a government cooler nearby that somehow lost power.

"Why it broke, I don't know," Wallraven mused. "But I know the Lord caused it."

He got an idea to steam the tortillas. That night 7,300 people ate from the Oklahoma team.

"You have to draw on a lot of prayer just to go on one of these things," Wallraven said. "The Lord works in mysterious ways."

Pete Walmer started the Oklahoma unit back in 1978. He's a retired truck driver who helped build the mass feeding trailer. They've been on 30 major disasters since then.

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One of the most difficult was the Mexico City earthquake in 1985.

Approximately 19 million people lived there. The quake killed 6,000 and injured up to 40,000. Mexican government officials asked the Texas Baptist Men for help.

They in turn invited feeding units from Louisiana, Mississippi and Oklahoma. Local relief agencies had shelters for the victims. They just needed help with feeding.

Disaster units from four states offered to leave equipment. That would allow Mexicans to continue the relief work. But the government there imposed a tax on each item listed.

Volunteers from Oklahoma then offered to build kitchens. They worked in a soccer stadium with an old cutoff torch.

They bought pots and pans locally and had other materials flown in. The result was five separate kitchens in operation with Mexican Baptists. The U.S. disaster teams went home.

Years passed and Jim Furgerson was talking with a Southern Baptist representative in Mexico. Furgerson was then the national director of Southern Baptist disaster relief. He wanted to check the results from the earthquake.

"What happened to those field kitchens?" he asked. "Do you have five churches there now?"

"No," said the worker. "We don't have five churches."

There was a pause. "We have 14 churches and five missions."

Each came from a kitchen left behind. Those feeding sites grew into Bible studies and preaching points. Now villagers could spread the gospel themselves.

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As Russian election observer,
she urged Baptists to vote

By Linda Fisher

Baptist Press
12/29/93

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--When Rebecca Jackson was chosen by the International Republican Institute as one of 25 delegates sent to observe the Dec. 12 elections in Russia, she knew immediately she wanted to leave behind a thank-you gift to people she met there.

She told her pastor, "I want Russian-language Bibles."

The request did not surprise William L. Hancock, pastor of Highview Baptist in Louisville, Ky., who has witnessed her commitment to evangelism during her 16 years in the church. In 1987 Jackson joined a volunteer team on a three-week evangelism trip to Kenya. And it is widely felt her open stance as a Christian helped her re-election as Jefferson County (Ky.) clerk with 73 percent of the vote last November.

Highview Baptist, which has a fledgling ministry to Russians in the Louisville area, provided Jackson with 20 New Testaments and 40 Gospels of John in Russian. Hancock also was able to put Jackson in contact with Norman Lytle, Southern Baptist representative in Moscow. On her arrival, Lytle met her with 24 children's Bibles.

After two days of orientation and briefings, the 25-member delegation was sent out in teams to cities to observe the election process. Jackson was excited to learn she would go to Voronezh, where a centuries-old Baptist congregation was in the midst of a building project.

Voronezh, 100 miles south of Moscow, straddles the banks of the Voronezh River. During World War II, the Nazis advanced to take half the town, but the Russians held and stopped the invaders from crossing the river. Most of the town was leveled during the siege.

What the Nazis spared was destroyed by others. Nikita Khrushchev had the Baptist church dynamited, ordering the rubble carted away and another structure built on the site to discourage members from having anything to remind them of their church.

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This congregation knows a church is built of people, not mortar and brick. Despite Khrushchev's effort to blot them out, the congregation thrived during the years of repression. Meeting in homes they continued to grow, currently numbering 1,000 members. A new three-story building is near completion on property donated by the Russian government in restitution. The sanctuary seats 1500 and features a steeple that opens to let in the light. "This absolutely magnificent structure has all been done by the hands of the members," Jackson marveled. First Baptist of Voronezh also has begun three other churches.

After meeting all day with local election officials and candidates, Jackson squeezed time from her official schedule to contact the church's associate pastor, Vladimir Cheprasov. She was amazed to learn that Cheprasov was a student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville from September 1992 to May 1993 and had visited Highview Baptist Church several times. Arrangements were made for Jackson to attend the two-hour-long Saturday evening worship service, followed by dinner with Cheprasov and his family.

Arriving at the church, Jackson was invited to meet with pastor Alexeyev Oleg Alexandrovna and other church leaders. The church even found a translator, Irene Sherstukova, a university English and French teacher and member of a non-denominational church.

As she described her mission as an election observer through the translator, Sherstukova spoke up. "I never vote because I don't know if these people are Christians or not. So I just don't vote."

"God has a history of using both believers and non-believers to accomplish his purposes," Jackson told her. "Pray, and God will guide you as you vote. God also needs for his people to be willing to enter public service. Christians must be willing to offer themselves for such service."

The pastor asked Jackson to share this same message with the congregation, as many of them felt the same frustration. With elections to be held the following day, Jackson readily agreed. "They thought it was very unusual to have a Christian as an elected official," Jackson noted. "Christians in public office are something they are only beginning to dream about."

During the service, Jackson pulled a King James New Testament from her purse and asked Sherstukova to show her the passages the Russian pastor was reading so she could follow along. After the service, she offered the New Testament to the translator, who was very pleased to it to add to her library. Jackson learned that books are very scarce in Russia. On her visit to a busy shopping center in Moscow, she noted there were no bookstores. However, the Russian people are very literate and scores of newspapers are published daily. "But a book is a most treasured possession," Jackson said.

The response of those who received Bibles confirmed that observation. The local election liaison official, Tatiana, expecting her first grandchild in January, was thrilled to receive a heavy, hard-bound children's Bible. The bus driver, who had been very shy with the Americans, was "simply overwhelmed" when Jackson gave him a Bible for his children. And the Russian translator in Moscow wanted three things: American cigarettes (three cartons of which Jackson had carried as a government representative from a county with a large tobacco industry), a Bible for his nephew and an English New Testament for himself. "He thanked me for all three when I presented them, but he came back and thanked me again for the Bibles as we were leaving," Jackson recounted.

Of the elections, Jackson said, "Election day was like a big party. Vendors set up outside the polling stations, most polls had either bands or stereo systems playing loud music. It was very festive, but the people take the voting very seriously."

The International Republican Institute observers' role was to simply observe the election process, identify strengths and weaknesses of the system and make recommendations for future elections. An earlier delegation observed Russia's April 25 referendum, detailing weaknesses in the technical aspects of the voting process. The team's recommendations were published in Izvestiya and later introduced in the Russian Parliament by its pro-democratic members, according to IRI reports.

Jackson and her team observed the voting process, conducted exit interviews and observed the ballots being counted.

The election commissioner in Voronezh presented each member of Jackson's delegation with a seal from the ballot boxes as a remembrance of their trip.

"God blessed me all along the way, both in the official work and in the work he had for me there," Jackson said. "There are those who would say the series of events that led me to Russia are coincidence or serendipity. I say it was God's plan."

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Fisher is a Southern Baptist missionary currently on leave of absence in Louisville, Ky., and was press representative for the Spain mission of the Foreign Mission Board.

Moderate-conservative panel
to study cooperation in Va.

By Robert Dilday

Baptist Press
12/29/93

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--The president of the Baptist General Association of Virginia has created a committee he hopes will help Virginia Baptists with varying theological viewpoints work together in cooperative ministries.

Ron Crawford, who also is chairman of Virginia Baptists' general board, announced his 20-member "Presidential Council on Cooperation" during the board's fall meeting at the end of November.

"The purpose of the council will be to foster trust among the leaders of significant Virginia Baptist coalitions," he said. "These people (on the council) will explore ways to enhance cooperation, trust and mutual respect in Virginia Baptist life. They will help us define and set parameters of cooperation for the future."

Co-chairing the council will be two well-known Virginia pastors: moderate Neal Jones of Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church and conservative Tommy Taylor of London Bridge Baptist Church in Virginia Beach.

Other members, whose names Crawford hopes to announce by Christmas, will be five moderates, five conservatives and five non-aligned persons.

In addition, ex officio members will include Crawford; Reginald McDonough, BGAV executive director; and Nat Kellum, BGAV treasurer.

Crawford said leaders of the moderate and conservative organizations in the state will recommend five council members each to represent their viewpoints. A list of five non-aligned members will be drawn up by Crawford and McDonough.

In the past few years, Virginia Baptist organizational life has reflected some of the theological tensions in the Southern Baptist Convention. But unlike in the SBC, where conservatives hold positions of leadership, in Virginia moderates consistently have won elections by decisive margins.

Virginia conservatives say they feel excluded and are wary of what they call a loosening of ties between the BGAV and the SBC. Last January they formed Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia as a vehicle to voice their concerns.

As the BGAV has opened its budgeting process to permit churches to give to causes other than those sponsored by the SBC, some conservative churches have decreased their contributions to Virginia Baptist ministries, sending money directly to the SBC Executive Committee, which distributes funds to SBC causes.

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But some Virginia leaders say they detect a desire to ease tensions in the state. They cite a recent meeting of pastors from the top 25 Virginia churches in financial gifts which brought together prominent conservatives and moderates. Participants in the meeting -- initiated by Jones and Taylor, the co-chairs of the new cooperation council -- said the collegial spirit was encouraging and left open the possibility of closer relations among different factions. Additional meetings of the group are expected.

Crawford resisted comparisons to the SBC Peace Committee, which functioned from 1985-87. Although its recommendations were overwhelmingly adopted by messengers attending the 1987 SBC annual meeting, many moderates claim it was unsuccessful in ending theological disagreements in the national convention.

Instead, Crawford said, "The council will explore concerns to see if we can balance divergent needs within a clustered community of faith. The point is not to bring us to the same place, but to explore methods of cooperation, given our different places."

He added: "We apparently cannot be homogenous, but can we be heterogenous and cooperative?"

Crawford told the Religious Herald, the Virginia Baptist newsjournal, the cooperation council's makeup does not represent voting patterns in the BGAV, where moderates usually win 70 percent of the vote or more. "That is by design," he said. "It is obvious that in a group like this taking a majority vote would be useless. As a matter of fact, a two-thirds vote would be useless. You haven't achieved a consensus until all three groups have reached agreement as to what kind of cooperation we should we have."

As a presidential committee, the panel will report its recommendations to him, Crawford said. In turn, he will forward the recommendations to the BGAV, the general board or other appropriate entity, he said.

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Pastor/former BSSB exec
replaced on Okla. committee

By Glenn Brown

Baptist Press
12/29/93

OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)--Gary Cook, pastor of First Baptist Church in Lawton and a former vice president at the Baptist Sunday School Board in Nashville, has been replaced on the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma's strategic planning committee.

Committee chairman David Willets said he replaced Cook because of Cook's recent public involvement with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The committee is charged with the task of developing a strategic plan to guide future work of the convention.

Willets said he had selected Cook to serve on the committee because of Cook's expertise in management and planning and because he could also represent those who feel disenfranchised by the conservative resurgence. However, at the time Willets asked Cook to serve on the committee, Cook had not been identified in any public support of the CBF or its Oklahoma affiliate (CBFO).

"If Gary had told me of his forthcoming involvement in the CBF, I would not have enlisted him. So I was disappointed to see that kind of involvement," Willets said. "The climate of the annual convention was very clear that the CBF is perceived and is in reality a competing organization to the Cooperative Program."

In November, Cook served as moderator of one of the discussion groups at the state CBFO meeting, introduced Cecil Sherman, CBF national head, at a meeting in a Lawton hotel and agreed to serve on the CBFO coordinating committee.

The conflict between supporters of the CBF and Southern Baptist Convention leadership spilled over into presentations and motions at the state convention in November. Willets said a number of people expressed concern over Cook's serving on the committee because of his apparent support of the CBF.

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Currently churches may send money through the state convention to three non-Southern Baptist or state convention causes, the Christian Action League of North Carolina, American Bible Society and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, but may not count this money as Cooperative Program contributions.

The Luther Rice/Mid-America proposal would be similar to these three causes, except such money would be listed as Cooperative Program.

If any arrangement is approved with the two seminaries, the money would be distributed as grants for North Carolina Baptist students attending those seminaries, similar to the plan already in place with Gardner-Webb Divinity School and the Richmond seminary.

The Seminary Committee members, in addition to Allred, include Tom Bland Jr., of Sharpsburg; Robert "Bobby" Blanton of Asheboro; C.J. Bordeaux of Monroe; Chuck Brawley of Faith; Jean Hinton of Princeton; and Lamar King of High Point.

Ex-officio members include Jack Causey of Statesville, general board vice president; Kathryn Hamrick, Boiling Springs, convention first vice president; Alfred Ayscue of Mt. Airy, convention president; and Roy Smith, convention executive director.

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Pastor buoyed by friends,
memory of wife's courage

By Mark Baggett

Baptist Press
12/29/93

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (BP)--There were days during those 11 months -- three days that defined the painful vigil -- but the day Mary Sue Cleveland died quietly and calmly at the radiation clinic in Birmingham, Ala., holding Tom's hand and closing her eyes -- "that was not a terrible day," said her husband of 33 years.

Friends often would ask Tom about the roller coaster, the emotional heights and depths in the 11 months of waiting for the cancer to unfold its course Nov. 8. "Yes, there were lots of ups and downs, but let me tell you, we remember the ups," he said.

One of the up days was July 2, when they studied the CAT scan after a series of chemotherapy treatments. Her doctor, well acquainted with the relentless, unsparring cloud of cancer, looked up to say, "This is fantastic." The cancer was gone. "We considered it a miracle," Tom said.

But it returned and on Aug. 31, the worst of the bad days, they could see the difference in the doctor's face: "It's back," he said. "There's nothing we can do with this disease."

Still, there were miracles. Given only a few more weeks to live, Mary Sue instead lived a full two months and more, "bonus months," their son Ed called them. Even when they drove to the clinic for the last time, they packed her bags to come back home, and there were plans to go to Alabama's Gulf Shores on Thanksgiving. "She did everything she could possibly do every day, depending on her strength," Tom said. And she died as she had wished to die, not at home and with no unfinished business.

"The morning she died," Tom said of the small circle of friends and family there, with fellow pastor and friend Lindy Martin leading a short prayer, "there was nothing that had to be said, nothing I regret I did not say. Neither of us had the feeling of 'Why didn't we do this with our lives?'"

Indeed, what was it that Mary Sue could not do? Those 11 months were only a symbol of her 53 years, of her infecting personality, spilling over with enthusiasm, encouragement, compassion, humor, grace, courage.

When her memorial service was held at Dawson Memorial Baptist Church Nov. 10, it is no exaggeration to say those attending were more than 1,000 of her closest friends. Tom and the two boys, Ed (a middle school choral director in suburban Vestavia Hills and minister of music at Meadow Brook Baptist Church) and Bill (a junior high teacher and coach in Adamsville, Ala.), could remember almost every one of them providing support during the last 11 months.

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It began, really, in October 1992 when Mary Sue felt an odd pain in her lower back one weekend after a six-mile jog. She and Tom were dedicated runners, and she would do 3-4 miles several times a week and longer runs every few weekends. By Thanksgiving, though, after running a mile or so along the beach at Gulf Shores, she had done her last running. She began to go for tests, and on the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday after Christmas, she was in the hospital for the first time.

On the first Friday of January 1993, the first of the bad days, the dire diagnosis came: a tumor with the malignant Burkett's cells in her blood, the rarest, most aggressive type of non-Hodgkins lymphoma. A person with this tumor untreated would have no more than a week or two to live, and a short-term diagnosis might include a stroke, heart attack, even brain damage. Her doctor had treated 20 patients, and only three were still alive.

So began the "bonus months." On the Sunday after the diagnosis, Tom preached to his congregation at Carson Road Baptist Church telling them, "The cancer cloud has come over our home, and I will be looking for a rainbow with blue skies." (Tom began serving in February 1990 as interim at Carson Road and in June 1991 as pastor after many years as an active member at Dawson Memorial.)

While they looked for the rainbow, Mary Sue wanted to make sure Tom knew where she stood. For three decades, they had been a team; even their answering machine ("Mary Sue and I are out ..." or "Tom and I can't come to the phone ...") attested to that. She knew Tom's self-professed "addiction" to her and his "gung-ho" spirit, natural for a man who -- besides being a popular administrator at Birmingham's Samford University for many years -- was an effective pastor and much-loved interim preacher at churches across Alabama and his native Kentucky.

"Tom, this is something you cannot fix," she said. "I just want you to be my husband, and we'll trust in the doctors to do all they can."

Tom agreed to "stable my white stallion," and he found comfort in husbandly things: helping her exercise each morning; massaging her back with a blessed spray of water; once, after she had lost most of the function of her right leg, putting a towel around her ankle, holding her leg out straight, and helping her bump down the stairs on the other leg.

"She called me her cheerleader," he remembers, and as she became his sounding board, their relationship became richer. Every morning, he would joke, he wanted to serve her a bowl of Wheaties, "Breakfast of Champions."

Mary Sue was never fooled about the cancer. In mid-life, when son Bill was in his first year of high school, she had taken the nursing board exams ("I decided I want to be a nurse," she had announced) and went to University Hospital to work. She knew things from a medical point of view that her family and friends did not know, and yet she never lost hope.

"I'm in a win-win situation," she told Tom. "I want to live, but if I die, I want to be a testimony, a witness." She remained strong throughout, "functioning at the highest quality level throughout," Tom said, usually turning the tables to minister to others.

Once Tom came home late one night after planning a church member's service at a local funeral home. Mary Sue was up playing the piano, the catheter attached to her inevitable sodium and potassium, but practicing for the church member's service. "She knew from the first night how tough this thing could be," Tom said.

In June, the third bad day, after doctors had used their most powerful chemotherapy agents on the mass and still it grew from thumbnail size to 12 centimeters, Mary Sue and friend Louis Josof began to plan the memorial service. "I want to live," she told Tom, "but it's something that has to be done."

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Slater was hospitalized the week before the Dec. 12 program, but he and many friends were praying he would be able to host the farewell broadcast. Doctors released him from the hospital on Friday and on Sunday morning he "waked up feeling fine."

The 2,250th broadcast of "Hymns We Love" was carried by satellite remote control from the Slater home in East Dallas.

"It's the Lord who made this," said Slater, whose colorful radio career spans more than 60 years. He began in 1929 on WBAP in Fort Worth as a part-time announcer, piano player and singer while studying church music at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

He served with WHB Radio in Kansas City from 1930-38 before joining WFAA in 1941 where he was producer and singer on the "Early Bird" show and in the early 1950s pioneered the playing of recorded religious music through "Hymns We Love."

Meanwhile Slater served as part-time music director for churches in Dallas as well as Missouri, Oklahoma and Kansas.

From 1959-62, he was announcer-producer of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission's syndicated radio series, "Master Control." In 1971, while Slater was public service director for WFAA TV in Dallas, Texas Baptists honored him with their annual Communications Award.

"The Lord blessed me by giving me the opportunity to be part of 'Hymns We Love,'" Slater said. "I feel it gave me an outreach to many people who wouldn't have listened to a Christian station."

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Naval academy minister
dies after heart attack

Baptist Press
12/29/93

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (BP)--Dick Bumpass, 60, director of Baptist Student Union ministries at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., for 24 years, died Dec. 7 after a massive heart attack.

"His death leaves a tremendous vacuum in our campus ministry family," Ron Brown, director of ministries in higher education for the Baptist Convention of Maryland and Delaware, told the convention's newspaper.

Hours before the Southern Baptist missionary's death, Bumpass completed an essay on Christian response to tragedy, Brown said. In the essay, Bumpass noted hope exists in the midst of tragedy and death. God weeps over deaths and is present in tragedy, Bumpass wrote.

A member of Broadneck Church in Cape St. Claire, Bumpass served on several committees for the Baptist Convention of Maryland and Delaware, including the Christian Life and Public Affairs Committee and the resolutions committee.

Bumpass was a founding member of the Association of Southern Baptist Campus Ministers and served as the group's second president.

He was BSU director for Arkansas State University from 1962-69 and pastor of Ward Chapel Baptist Church in Atoka, Okla., from 1957-62.

Born in Breckenridge, Texas, Bumpass graduated from Texas A&M University in College Station and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Texas Christian University, both in Fort Worth, Texas. He received a doctorate in ministry from Union Seminary in Richmond, Va.

Bumpass is survived by his wife, Nancy, and daughter Tiffan, both of Annapolis; daughter Lori and sons Nick and Kelly, all of Texas. The family requested memorials be sent to the Annapolis Baptist Student Union Alumni Association at 201 Hanover Street, Annapolis, MD 20401.

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**Baptist academy
to relocate in 1994**

BUDAPEST, Hungary (BP)--The International Baptist Lay Academy will relocate to the city of Szigetszentmiklos, a city just outside Budapest, at the end of 1994.

Szigetszentmiklos Baptist Church has agreed to house the school in a lease agreement that runs from 1995-97, according to Southern Baptist missionary Errol Simmons, academy director. The new host city has about 22,000 residents and will be the site of the 1996 World Expo. The lay academy has met since its founding in 1990 in facilities of the Hungarian Baptist Theological Academy, but that lease expires at the end of 1994.

In 1998 European Baptist leaders plan for the academy to become part of a new theological education center to be developed in Prague, Czech Republic. The academy is backed by the European Baptist Federation and the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and was founded to provide theological education to Eastern European Baptists.

The school opened its fall session Sept. 11 with 21 full-time students from Hungary, Latvia, Romania and Ukraine. Another 18 students attend evening classes part time. Total enrollment is the largest since the school opened. Oklahoma Baptist University in the United States is providing teachers on a continuing basis through a special partnership arrangement.

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**Overseas-minded scholarship
for journalism grad students**

**Baptist Press
12/29/93**

WACO, Texas (BP)--A Baylor University scholarship has been established for students seeking careers as foreign correspondents through Baylor's master of international journalism program.

The scholarship is named for Loyal Gould, former journalism department chairman, and his wife, Ilse. He currently is the Fred Hartman Professor Emeritus of Journalism at the Waco, Texas, Baptist-affiliated university.

Applicants for the scholarship must be a degree holder from an American university or a bona fide foreign university; have a spoken fluency in English and at least one other language; and have an overall grade-point average of at least 3.5 and at least a score of 1,000 on the Graduate Record Examination. Preference will be given to applicants with financial need.

Information about the scholarship can be obtained from Baylor's student financial aid office, (817) 755-2611.

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