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94-17

BELGIUM -- Christian leader slain in Iran; some blame government for death.
 WASHINGTON -- Clinton plan to force churches to fund abortion, Mitchell says.
 TEXAS -- Modern-day David knocks giant Donahue off station.
 ENGLAND -- 23-year-old's univ. studies stretch from Harvard to Oxford.
 FLORIDA -- True Love Waits attracting commitments -- and coverage.
 NASHVILLE -- He says end times doctrine helps Christians grasp their ministry;
 photo.
 NASHVILLE -- Correction.

Christian leader slain in Iran;
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Baptist Press
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BRUSSELS, Belgium (BP)--A Christian leader in Iran, earlier reported missing, has been killed.

The body of Haik Hovsepien-Mehr, 49, superintendent of the Assemblies of God churches in Iran, was found along a road in the Tehran area, police told his family Jan. 30. One of his sons identified the body from a photograph.

Hovsepien-Mehr, who had been working to stop a campaign by the Iranian government against evangelicals, is survived by his wife, Takoosh, and four children.

The Tehran Office of Investigation told the family that Hovsepien-Mehr had been killed and buried 10 days earlier. Family members said the picture showed stitches on the abdomen. According to the coroner's office, such stitches indicate an autopsy had been performed on the body.

Christians inside Iran released the information through Iranian Christians living in Europe and the United States.

Hovsepien-Mehr was reported missing Jan. 19 when he went to the airport in Tehran, Iran's capital, to meet a visitor. Christians in Iran initially delayed publicizing the disappearance for several days, since he had been detained by police at least twice in the past. In each case he was released in less than a week.

One observer familiar with the case openly blames the Iranian government for Hovsepien-Mehr's death.

"There is no shadow of doubt that Haik Hovsepien-Mehr was in the hands of government security forces. They wanted him to withdraw his invitation to the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva and New York to visit Iran," charged Patrick Sookhdeo, director of the International Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity in London.

Iranian Christian leaders in Europe hope a group of prominent church leaders from around the world will attend Hovsepien-Mehr's funeral in Tehran at a time to be announced.

"This gesture of support will be vitally important not only to the Iranian church, but also for the Christians in the entire region," said one leader.

"At this time Iranian church leaders need your prayers for wisdom for hard decisions that they have to make."

Christians in Iran are asking Christians to send messages to Iran's embassies protesting Hovsepian-Mehr's death, requesting that the anti-church campaign in Iran be stopped, and urging that Mehdi Dibaj, an Iranian evangelical who won a recent death-sentence reprieve, be cleared of all charges.

Hovsepian-Mehr's efforts to stop the campaign against evangelicals included detailed reports to the United Nations of evangelical church closings, police brutality against evangelicals and other incidents. Before Jan. 19 he had invited representatives of the U.N. Human Rights Commission to visit Iran to discuss religious persecution there.

Hovsepian-Mehr, also chairman of the Council of Protestant Ministers in Iran, led a campaign during December and January to secure the release of Dibaj, an Assemblies of God evangelist. Dibaj spent nine years in prison because he converted from being a nominal Muslim to Christianity.

Dibaj, a member of Hovsepian-Mehr's church, was tried in December and later sentenced to death. But he was abruptly released Jan. 17 after many organizations, including the U.S. State Department, intervened with the Iranian government.

Dibaj was not fully cleared, however, and is subject to recall by police at any time. "Mehdi Dibaj is expecting to return to the Islamic Court later this year," said Sookhdeo.

Iranian authorities have said Dibaj had not actually been subject to a death sentence, a statement rejected by Iranian Christians who have followed Dibaj's case for years.

Hovsepian-Mehr also led the Assemblies of God churches in Iran to resist pressure to sign a letter stating they have full constitutional rights as Christians in the country. Some churches in Iran signed such a statement under government pressure. The government then faxed copies of the statements to the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva and New York "in an attempt to demonstrate that Iran's religious minorities enjoy full protection and fair treatment," Sookhdeo said.

Asking church groups to sign such statements apparently was an effort by the Iranian government to reduce international scrutiny of its systematic anti-church program, according to observers.

Some observers see a general plan behind the religious persecution in Iran. A "deliberate campaign" against evangelical churches in Iran, Sookhdeo charged, is being led by the government's Ministry of Islamic Guidance for Minorities and is endorsed by Iran's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The plan, Sookhdeo said, was drawn up by the Supreme Revolutionary Cultural Council sometime in 1991.

Christian Solidarity International, a watchdog group on human rights, quoted a U.S. Congressional Research Report issued in January that says some Islamic governments have formulated a worldwide plan to deal severely with Christianity and the church at large.

The escalation apparently is tied to the recognition of Israel by the Roman Catholic Church. One key Iranian leader warned in a Jan. 7 speech that "this year might be the last Christmas celebrated in Tehran." According to the congressional report, the government leader "had in essence predicted a marked escalation in the Islamist's holy war (against the Christian world)."

Some Christians gathered at the Iranian embassies in Washington, London and Oslo, Norway, Jan. 30 to protest Hovsepian-Mehr's disappearance. Word of his death arrived just before the demonstration in London.

Church leaders have asked police for the body to provide proper burial. "The absence of his body is causing concern, and until his body is recovered the exact manner of his death will be unknown," said one Iranian Christian worker in Europe.

Clinton plan to force churches
to fund abortion, Mitchell says By Tom Strode

WASHINGTON (BP)--President Clinton's health care proposal would force churches and denominations to pay for abortions or face the consequences, a Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission staff member said in a congressional hearing.

"Every congregation as an employer would be coerced to take money from the offering plate and offer it up to abortionists," said Ben Mitchell, the CLC's director of biomedical and life issues. "The choices would be extremely limited: Pay up and shut up or face the harsh repercussions of following religious conscience. There would be no 'safe harbor.'"

The CLC will "oppose vigorously" the Clinton proposal and any other plan which includes abortion coverage in its basic benefits package, Mitchell told a House of Representatives subcommittee.

"This is such a critical concern for us that we are prepared to oppose any reform which is otherwise excellent if it also includes abortion on demand," he said.

Mitchell offered his warning in a Jan. 26 hearing on women's health and the Clinton plan before the Health and Environment Subcommittee of the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

His testimony included pointed criticism of the "conscience clause" language in Clinton's plan.

"The so-called 'religious exemption' or 'conscience clause' is a presidential placebo for the pain of a wounded conscience, intended to try to make religious persons feel better about their participation in the morally nauseating practice of abortion," Mitchell said in written testimony also prepared for delivery but removed because of a time limit.

"Religious institutions will either harden their consciences toward the killing of unborn babies, as the president's plan tempts them to do, or religious institutions will follow their consciences by engaging in widespread civil disobedience," he said. "In a nation which has ranked religious freedom as its first liberty, it is unconscionable our government would force us to make that choice."

The CLC and other pro-life groups have described the "conscience clause" as meaningless. Though the Clinton plan does not require pro-life physicians, nurses and hospitals to perform abortions, an administration official has said the "conscience clause" does not apply to health care plans. Taxes and employer contributions, apparently even from those morally opposed, would underwrite abortions indirectly, Clinton has told reporters.

Clinton is a member of a Southern Baptist church in Little Rock, Ark. In numerous annual meetings in recent years, the SBC has passed resolutions opposing abortion, except to save the mother's life, and abortion funding.

While abortion was not the only issue considered in the hearing, it was the most divisive one discussed by the 20 witnesses. In addition to Mitchell, four other pro-life witnesses testified, but a majority of the panelists addressing abortion called for its coverage to be included in health care reform.

The president's plan "recognizes that the abortion option is basic to women's health and must be covered," said Rep. Nita Lowey, R.-N.Y. "Absence of abortion coverage in a national plan would marginalize this basic procedure, rendering the legal right to choose meaningless for many American women. It would relegate this legal service once again to the back alley and put women's lives at risk."

Rep. Barbara Vucanovich, R.-Nev., said the Clinton plan would make abortion a "federal entitlement."

"Every American who pays taxes would be funding abortions," she said. "Abortion without restrictions, funded by taxpayers, has no place in basic health coverage."

The CLC opposes elective abortion, Mitchell told the subcommittee, not only because it is wrong ethically, theologically and medically, but because it fails to regard women's health as a fundamental value.

"The practice of elective abortion is, in fact, contrary to women's health," he said. "We are troubled by the probability that studies on the link between abortion and women's health will not be investigated adequately."

"Whatever our lawmakers choose to do, we must be true to our God, our convictions and our conscience," Mitchell said. "We cannot do otherwise. We hope we will be able to stand with our elected officials for revisions and reforms in health care that will evidence our commitment to the intrinsic value of every human life."

The CLC sponsored a consultation on health care Jan. 18 in Washington. Two documents were formulated as a result of the consultation: "Health Care Reform: A Moral Preamble" and "Health Care Reform: A Statement of Concerns." Mitchell included them in the written testimony submitted to the committee.

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Modern-day David knocks
giant Donahue off station

By Tim Tune

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FORT WORTH, Texas (BP)--This time David's victory is not final: One Goliath has fallen and another is descending into the valley. But the David of this story, Texas Baptist dentist Richard Neill, says he's not going to stop fighting the giants: TV stations that broadcast the Donahue talk show during times when children can have easy access, as well as advertisers that support the program.

Neill, of Fort Worth, declared a moral victory when Dallas ABC affiliate WFAA-TV decided to cancel the show several months before the contract runs out in December 1994.

WFAA general manager "Cathy Creany called two months ago and said they wouldn't renew the contract because advertisers had blackballed the program and they were losing money," Neill told Baptist Press. "I assumed business as usual but they decided to stop the program at the end of September. That was a surprise to me."

The station broadcasts the program at 9 a.m., an hour Neill says children have easy access to the show that frequently deals with subjects he says are inappropriate for youngsters. During Neill's almost two-year scrutiny of the program, hosted by Phil Donahue, the dentist and his wife have documented discussions of prostitution, penile transplants, masturbation, mother-daughter stripper teams and spouse-swapping orgies.

According to some newspaper reports, during the school year about 1,000 children watch Donahue daily on WFAA. In the summer, it's about 8,000.

Neill began his campaign after seeing spots promoting controversial, sexually-oriented Donahue programs. After researching the program with transcripts and analyzing dozens of hours of videotapes, he requested the station change the program's time slot, perhaps to late night, when children don't have as much accessibility, he said. He circulated petitions and many community residents signed them, supporting Neill's request for a schedule change.

When the station would not change the time slot, Neill began contacting the program's sponsors, local and national, about the show's often-controversial topics. He asked the advertisers -- many selling family-oriented products -- to withdraw support. Many have, according to Neill.

He said 221 sponsors had dropped Donahue as of the day he found out WFAA would cut short its commitment to run the program. Those sponsors include advertisers Baskin-Robbins ice cream, Dr Pepper soft-drink bottlers, Keebler snack foods, Kmart department stores, Sara Lee bakeries and Wendy's restaurants. Another of the show's former mega-sponsors, which Neill said would prefer to remain anonymous, had spent as much as \$5.5 million annually on the program, he said.

However, despite the loss of so many sponsors, Dallas CBS affiliate KDFW-TV will pick up the show. KDFW management has not decided a time slot for the show, said Karen Cage, the station's public relations director. The station will begin broadcasting Donahue on Sept. 12.

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If KDFW "wants to lose money," Neill said, "that's fine with me. I'll just keep it up and they'll just have to learn the hard way."

Despite what Neill says Creany told him, the WFAA general manager and another station spokeswoman don't acknowledge that Donahue is costing the station money. Creany deferred questions to the station's community relations director, Alva Goodall, who said the program is not a money-loser but acknowledged that some advertisers had dropped it. In its Jan. 21 editions, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram quoted Creany as saying that some advertisers have dropped Donahue during the past two years and that the program has become less profitable.

The station decided not to renew because management is giving "consideration to some other programming that could go in there" at the 9 a.m. weekday time slot, Goodall said. She would not be specific about changes the station is considering. However, she did say dropping Donahue was not related to the station's ongoing Family First emphasis. In early January, the station sponsored several community forums, giving area residents the opportunity to discuss concerns about social issues related to the family. According to Goodall, the year-long emphasis will focus on trying to help people deal with problems that threaten to disintegrate the family.

Goodall said, "As far as I can tell," changing the time Donahue is broadcast "was never a serious consideration. We didn't consider moving him because that was a slot where he performed well for us." She said the station had "... made commitments to other time periods. You would have to move other programs."

Despite what the station spokeswoman say, "... it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know what's happening," Neill said. And Donahue producers won't admit the program is losing money on WFAA, he said. "The Donahue people will deny that," Neill said, "but then why in the world did he come to Fort Worth?"

Donahue broadcast his show from the north Texas city for three days in April. Audiences of almost 3,000 people filled the city's convention center for three programs. The April 16 show was titled "Crusading Christians Who Hate Phil." Neill declined to appear on the program, which he said was staged to discredit him. Donahue's producer offered to allow Neill's supporters up to half the seats. Neill still declined.

"... Who in their right mind would go on and debate somebody when the person you're debating is the moderator, and he controls the on-off switch to the microphone?" Neill was quoted as saying in the June 21 edition of Citizen, a publication of Focus on the Family, the Colorado Springs, Colo., organization headed by psychologist and Christian author James Dobson.

Robert Peters, president of Morality in Media, a New York-based family organization, and Monsignor Jim Lisante, director of Family Ministries for the Diocese of Rockville Center in Long Island, N.Y., appeared on the show. Citizen said, "Neill praised Peters and Lisante for their efforts."

"I was kind of glad he came," Neill told Baptist Press of Donahue's visit. "The week that he came down here, 19 sponsors withdrew." Neill said that in an average week, four or five sponsors drop out.

Another indication of the drop-off in paid advertisers, Neill said, is the frequent use of station promotions in paid commercial slots. Such announcements promote other programs the station carries. He said that during one particular Donahue program, the station promoted Oprah Winfrey's talk show four times. He said other frequently used promos pitch the station's local news program and the popular game shows Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune.

Before he started his campaign, Neill said, two or three of the promotions would appear during the one-hour program. During the past six months, he said, the average had been about 18. One program, Neill said, has 25 promotional announcements.

Lee Martin, an independent TV producer in Dallas, said, "... When you start seeing promotions ... show up in a show that has been highly sold in the past, something has changed." Such promotional spots, Martin said, are not generally revenue-producing. "Those are for the station's purposes." And, he said, stations will block out commercials to accommodate station promos. But promos often are used, he said, "because you don't have a (paid) commercial to go in there."

Kathy Clements-Hill, WFAA general sales manager, said she wasn't at liberty to discuss advertising in Donahue but did say WFAA's sales office has an arrangement with the promotion department to provide on-air time for promos. She said she could not be specific about how spots are allocated to certain programs.

However, she said, "In a round-about way ... " promos "are revenue-generating" because they can contribute to increased viewership, which increases ratings and boosts a program's value.

Martin said a typical one-hour program will have 13 to 14 minutes available for advertising, which is broken down into 24 to 26 30-second spots. And the use of more than a few promos during a program "... usually indicates there is something wrong with the spot sales, especially on a show that is doing well in the ratings." Donahue is rated No. 1 in the Dallas-Fort Worth area in the 9 a.m. time slot, according to the Cage, KDFW public relations manager.

But, said Martin, "Getting good ratings doesn't necessarily mean good sales. Advertisers are getting more concerned about the image of certain programming." He said sponsors are becoming more sensitive to the tastes of their viewers and advertisers take a program's content into account when considering shows to support.

Apparently, Neill has struck a cord with many Donahue sponsors, capitalizing on advertiser sensitivity to viewers who are potential customers.

Most of Donahue's major sponsors pulled out by late 1992, according to Neill. "The family-oriented businesses pulled out fairly early," he said. "We knocked out probably 70 to 80 percent of the top major advertisers."

One of the major advertisers still supporting Donahue is Time-Warner, the entertainment-giant, which, Neill said, was involved in publishing Madonna's controversial book, "Sex," and produces so-called gangsta-rap music albums and videos, which feature sex and violence themes. Another he named was the tabloid newspaper, The National Enquirer. Neill said such companies cater to audiences similar to those who like Donahue.

The next big target, he said, are Lever Brothers and Warner Lambert, both makers of household and diversified products.

Neill said he will just keep plugging away, doing what he's done since April 1992. With only the help of the Lord and his family, he said, this has generally been a solo effort.

"Some organizations have written stories and given it exposure," Neill said, "but as far as help, it's still a one-man campaign."

Just like David vs. Goliath.

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23-year-old's univ. studies
stretch from Harvard to Oxford

By Dave Couric

Baptist Press
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OXFORD, England (BP)--One of his teachers at Harvard University scrawled in red ink on his term paper, "You're the first person I've met in my life who believes these things!"

Southern Baptist Eric Gregory, now a Rhodes scholar, was almost as shocked at the professor's remark as the professor was at the "just basic Christianity stuff" about which Gregory had written.

But a bigger surprise came when Gregory went to his teacher after class that day several years ago to talk about the comment. The professor's candid response to the after-class inquiry would serve to encourage Gregory as a student to "keep on witnessing to the faith."

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Gregory asked the professor, who taught philosophy, "If you believe these things (I've written about) are so false, why do you spend your life asking these questions?"

His teacher simply replied, "I hope somewhere out there, there's a God who loves me."

Not many in the scholarly world have opportunity to contrast academic experiences at both Harvard and Oxford. But 23-year-old Gregory, a 1992 political and oral philosophy Harvard graduate, is able to do just that as he completes his master of philosophy degree in theology at Oxford this semester, which is his fourth as one of 32 Americans selected annually by the Rhodes scholarship program.

Not many theology scholars earn a doctorate by age 25 either, which is what Gregory could do if he decides to stay at Oxford another year and earn the doctor of philosophy degree rather than returning to seek an American Ph.D.

The Wheaton, Md., native, a member of Montrose Baptist Church in Rockville, the largest Southern Baptist church in the state, has come a long way in his spiritual journey since his days in high school when he met with success at every turn, in grades (valedictorian), sports (three-sport varsity letterman) and popularity (student body president) -- and still came up empty.

"It seemed everything should be going right for me," Gregory said, "and yet I knew there was something wrong. I was very restless. And it was only in the person of Christ that I found meaning."

It was at a high school Young Life camp meeting where he heard a clear presentation of the gospel and "went back to my room and I remember there was a fireplace in the room. I just sat staring into the fire and had an experience of the love of God. After that I committed my life to the Lord and since then have been walking (with him) day by day."

The young scholar, who is specializing in Christian ethics under the tutelage of Trinity College theology faculty member and evangelical Oliver O'Donovan, wants to be involved vocationally with the American university because of what he sees as a theological crisis taking place in both the university and the church.

"Before a revival will occur, there needs to be theological reformation," Gregory said, describing a split between theology and the university and between theology and the church as a divorce in what was once a "marriage between the pulpit and the academy."

Citing the need for restoring the relationship between the university and the church for a better balance of theory and practice, Gregory said he observes a general trend in which "ministers don't have academic backgrounds or approaches and professors don't have ministry skills."

The theological crisis in the university is a result of both an intellectual and moral collapse, "a loss of truth," said Gregory, who is arguing in his master's thesis that sound theology is integral to proper ethics by using the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr as an example of how "neo-orthodox" or liberal theology has a "perverse" effect on ethics.

Gregory said this campus relativism, "a feeling that we can't know anything, and anyone who claims to know something is not being intellectual," results in a lowering of academic standards and eventually will be "the end of any university."

For example, it was "easy" for Gregory to make an "A" in each of his seven or eight divinity courses, he said, because one opinion is as good as another -- there are no right or wrong answers. The hostile professor, who reacted so angrily to Gregory's paper by claiming never to have met an evangelical Christian before, was the exception rather than the rule since a "patronizing arrogance was more common at Harvard than an open hostility toward the faith," said Gregory, who for four years was president of the Harvard Campus Crusade for Christ, called "Christian Impact" because the school doesn't officially allow any national Christian groups on campus.

The patronizing came in the form of, "Oh, I used to believe that, too!" Gregory said. "They couldn't believe that my belief system was consistent and that I wasn't a right-wing Republican."

A pietism or pragmatism based on what seems to be "working" rather than truth also is a problem even in the evangelical church, Gregory said. Because of a fear of absolutism, society and even the church have to some extent rejected absolutes, creating a philosophical crisis in the modern university. And "Niebuhr is the founder of that (crisis) in theology," said Gregory.

Beyond the campus intellectual problem, which was basically theological illiteracy of his own generation of "baby busters," Gregory noticed "a spirit of depression" about Harvard, the result of which was a sort of passive indifference to Christianity as a competitor in the marketplace of ideas. "The people I met," Gregory said, "didn't really have intellectual problems with Christianity as much moral problems because it did make claims on their lives (about things) which they weren't willing to give up."

Although his bachelor of arts degree at Harvard was in government, Gregory took a fourth of his courses in the divinity school. The difference between theology at Harvard and Oxford, he said, was the former was "trendy" while the latter gives more attention to the classics.

"At Oxford I've been able to probe questions more deeply rather than having to constantly deal with presuppositional relativism (as at Harvard)," said Gregory, who is president of the Oxford C.S. Lewis Society. "The Rhodes community is less patronizing and more open and honest in their search for meaning."

Gregory went on to characterize his peers at Oxford as being much like he was growing up: "They are very successful people. But they know something is wrong. Something is wrong with their lives -- what Pascal called the 'God-shaped vacuum' of the heart."

Gregory said he looks back in wonder at God's grace in preparing him -- even from childhood and at his Southern Baptist church where he found "stimulation intellectually, emotionally ... totally -- for this time of 'being trained in Pharaoh's court,'" as he calls attending a secular school.

"After I worked through it initially, there was nothing (at Harvard) which challenged my faith" in the end, he said. In fact, "learning how the secular mind works," since it sets "the agenda for culture," is one of the benefits Gregory said has received in going to two of the most prestigious schools in the world.

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Dave Couric is a freelance writer in Dallas.

True Love Waits attracting
commitments -- and coverage

By Barbara Denman

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (BP)--There's more to life than sex. That message was presented to nearly 2,500 teen-agers attending a True Love Waits rally in Tallahassee's Leon High School gym Jan. 19.

The youths heard speaker after speaker touting chastity as an alternative to unwanted pregnancies and diseases.

The gathering featured the current Miss Tallahassee, Cindy Price; Clint Hendry, an outfielder on the Florida State University baseball team; and David Burton, director of the personal evangelism department of the Florida Baptist Convention.

"These heart-felt testimonies gave the youth who attended this rally the unfailing message that there is an alternative to using a condom -- to use the Bible as a guide for God's purpose for sex and marriage," Burton said. "Abstinence is the safest sex there is."

Burton added, "Many that night were convicted, convinced and committed to following God's plan."

The teen-agers at the rally represented 72 churches and 26 denominations or Christian organizations. When the evening was over, 970 youths signed commitment cards to remain pure and 169 made professions of faith.

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The rally, whose sponsors included Celebration Church and the personal evangelism department of the Florida Baptist Convention, is one of dozens which have been held or are scheduled around the state to encourage youths to remain sexually pure.

The rallies are one aspect of the True Love Waits program initiated by the Baptist Sunday School Board that encourages sexual abstinence among teens. The program has caught on among teens and the leaders of 18 denominations and religious organizations who have joined in the campaign.

The program also has attracted a lot of media coverage.

The Tallahassee meeting was covered by three local networks and the Tallahassee Democrat newspaper which carried the story on page 1-B.

Recently the Florida Times Union in Jacksonville devoted nearly a page in its Lifestyle section to a well-researched story prominently displaying the True Love Waits logo, pledge cards, philosophy and phone number for more information.

Times-Union reporter Matthew Soergel said he was drawn to the story because "it was a dramatic departure from society as a whole." Soergel likened the subject to a "man bites dog" story that goes against the grain of the prevalent attitude of society.

Soergel also commented on the high visibility of the campaign where "kids would openly say, 'I'm a virgin and I'm proud of it.'"

Because he's often been interested in how society comes to change its mind, Soergel predicts there will be a societal shift in thinking that will make teen-age sex taboo, much like smoking, not using seatbelts and guns.

The Orlando Sentinel plans to continue tracking the True Love Waits campaign until the summer when thousands of pledge cards will be displayed during the Southern Baptist Convention in Orlando June 14-16.

Mike Lafferty, topics editor at the Orlando Sentinel, said they decided to treat the story as news because it focused on current topics of interest: health and teen pregnancy. "So many news stories are written about teen pregnancy and AIDS and very often you see abstinence pointed to as an alternative," Lafferty said.

But in True Love Waits, "you actually see a movement that points to something tangible. Beside just telling, they're getting a commitment."

There is also a "good deal of interest in it from students who are signing up," Lafferty added. "The numbers of youths seemed significant. If it's that many, it's incumbent on us to treat it as news."

The Baptist Sunday School Board reported that as of mid-January, the campaign's story has been carried in 250 media outlets with a readership and viewership of 130 million people. These have included Time magazine, Phil Donahue, New York Times, Washington Post, CNN, NBC Today Show, British Broadcasting Corporation, London Daily Telegraph, and the Associated Press, which twice fed the story nationally.

Chip Alford, a spokesperson with the Baptist Sunday School Board, credited the "obvious subject matter and attention on AIDS," as reasons for the coverage. "People are looking for an answer. Obviously safe sex is not bringing the statistics down in that area.

"Media are now referring to abstinence as a trend or movement in America," Alford noted. "We're happy True Love Waits has played a part in bringing abstinence into the national conscious."

He says end times doctrine helps
Christians grasp their ministry By Terri Lackey

NASHVILLE (BP)--That Christ will physically return to earth someday is one fact about the end of the world Bill Stephens is sure of.

From that point on, though, said the author of the 1994 Baptist Doctrine Study book, "The Bible Speaks to End Times," multiple theories about the second coming exist. Baptist Doctrine Study Week, an annual emphasis, is scheduled for April 18-22 on the Southern Baptist Convention calendar.

"Southern Baptists have never made belief in a particular view of Christ's return a test of faith," Stephens writes in the introduction to his book. "We have insisted that one must believe in the literal, bodily return of Christ ..., but a variety of views about how he will return has been common among us."

While some Christians do relate the high crime rate and recent natural disasters to a sign Jesus' return is imminent, Stephens, an author, teacher and speaker, does not make that correlation.

"I don't like trying to relate things now to end times. What's happening in the world today could be a foreshadow of end times, but this game has been played out throughout Christian history, and I think it's dangerous to look for too many signs."

The point of studying the doctrine of end times is not to determine exactly how the world is going to end, but to discover one's ministry in society, he said.

"The doctrine of end times has to do with what God intends this world to be," Stephens said.

"If, through studying end times, I get an idea of what God is working toward, I will have an influence," Stephens said. "As a Christian, I can contribute to making this world what God wants it to be."

That, Stephens says, is a world without anger or war -- "just full of love and compassion."

"I do not believe we can succeed in that (making the world perfect as God first envisioned). But I think Christians through a spiritual influence can change society to the best of their ability. For example, a businessman can live out Christian principles by doing his work morally and ethically and not just holding to the fads of the day.

"Any profession has ideals and can be based in Scripture," he said.

"It took me a lot of years to come to a firm opinion of what I think the Bible teaches about end times, and it's been a growing kind of thing. Early in my ministry I didn't focus on this doctrine as a way to make a ministerial decision. Only after I came to the Sunday School Board did the significance of this doctrine become compelling to me. My work as editor became more focused toward what God is trying to do in this world."

Stephens, who retired in 1992 from the board, said he continues to contribute a spiritual influence through his writing. While he finds eschatology or the doctrine of end times intriguing and important to his ministry, he said he is not concentrating on writing theologically based study books.

"My first love is writing novels. In my writing, I like to contribute to a person's understanding of Scripture in a more interesting way. I am trying to create a new genre of biblical novel which I call the Bible study novel with a story line that is biblically accurate."

In fact, Stephens, author of "Elijah," now used as background reading in several colleges and seminaries for Old Testament study, is writing a trilogy novel series about Paul.

In the mornings he works on his current book detailing the first 10 years after Christ's resurrection, Stephens said. In the afternoons, weather permitting, he drives to his 21-acre farm located 34 miles southwest of Nashville to complete construction of a timber-and-beam house that will become his study.

Stephens' interest in the doctrine of end times has seemingly come full circle. He said that while in college he worked as a carpet layer with an independent Baptist preacher.

"This preacher told me a lot of things about the end of the world that I knew I needed to research. So I made a decision then to give myself a thorough education in it, but not until later in my study at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary when I would have a more solid doctrinal base."

Now, the handiness with tools that allowed Stephens to get a job laying carpet is yielding a country house where he will write novels and use his ministry "to contribute to making this world what God wants it to be."

Baptist Doctrine Study is sponsored by the BSSB discipleship and family development division. The Doctrine of End Times is available in Baptist Book Stores and Lifeway Christian Stores or by calling the board's customer service center, 1-800-458-2772.

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by the BSSB bureau of Baptist Press. A three-part series of articles by Stephens on end times is posted in the news room section of SBCNet.

EDITORS' NOTE: Please update (BP) story titled, "Baptists relief workers begin mass food production in Calif.," dated 1/28/94, by replacing the first paragraph with the following:

Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, California and Mississippi Baptist Disaster relief teams prepared about 27,000 meals Jan. 26 for Californians still reeling from the Jan. 17 earthquake that rocked the San Fernando Valley. The combined meal total for all units from Jan. 17-26 was 269,868.

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Baptist Press

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