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Nation's social health  
in decline, index shows

By Lacy Thompson

(ABP) American life is failing to make the grade, and its decline is posing a very real challenge for the modern church, leaders insist.

In the last two decades, the nation's social health has steadily worsened, an annual index indicates. In fact, in the last year of record (1989), the Index of Social Health dropped to its lowest recorded level -- a score of 33 on a scale of 100.

The index tracks 17 social problems as a means of monitoring the well-being of American society.

By any account, the decline means the church must step up its efforts to meet the needs of hurting people.

"The church today will not be able to reach people without addressing their needs, without meeting them at the point of their needs," insists Sarah Frances Anders, chair of the sociology department at Louisiana College in Pineville. "We need to be ministering to people in crisis and helping people prepare to handle the crises that will come in their own lives."

Ann Putnam, who works with church-based ministries for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, agrees. "We need to be aware of needs and where we can minister," says Putnam, associate director of the HMB's church and community department.

"The needs are so overwhelming," Putnam explained. "We're hearing every year that more and more people are coming to food pantries. More and more children are in need of after-school care. More and more families are being affected by crises. Almost all the ministries in place are reporting increased numbers."

Such increases are not surprising in light of the findings of the Index of Social Health, which has been compiled annually for the last 22 years by the Fordham Institute for Innovation in Social Policy in Tarrytown, N.Y.

The index tracks infant mortality, child abuse, children in poverty, teen suicide, drug abuse, high school dropouts, unemployment, poverty among heads of household, persons without health insurance, persons without unemployment insurance, poverty among persons over 65, out-of-pocket health costs for persons over 65, homicides, highway deaths due to alcoholism, persons in poverty without food stamps, the gap between rich and poor and the lack of affordable housing.

"These problems are integral to our society; monitoring them tells us much about the quality of life in America, both today and over time," the index report notes.

And what they tell is discouraging. In 1970, the first index score was 68. That mark climbed to 71.8 in 1976 before beginning a steady decline. In fact, the 1980s "marked a period of severe decline," the index report notes. "In fact, the highest score achieved during the 1980s was below the lowest score achieved in the 1970s."

Meanwhile, the lowest score of the 1980s was really low -- 32.9 percent in 1989, a drop of six points from the previous year and a decline of more than 50 percent from 1970.

"Of particular concern is the fact that America's social health has been at so low a level for so many years, reaching over 50 only once during the past decade," the report says. "It seems clear that the worsening of so many social problems carries adverse implications for the social fabric of the country."

The decline has been pervasive, as breakdowns show:

-- Child abuse, teen suicide and the gap between the rich and the poor have grown worse in nearly every year since 1970. Reported child-abuse cases have tripled in that period. Teen suicides have doubled. And the gap between the rich and the poor has increased by 59 percent.

-- Poverty among children has risen 26 percent since 1970, so that one in seven U.S. children now is on welfare.

-- In 1989, five of the seventeen problems reached their lowest point on record -- child abuse, teen suicide, the health-insurance gap, out-of-pocket health costs for persons over 65, and the gap between the rich and poor.

-- Despite improvement, the United States still ranks 20th in the industrial world in infant mortality, which is the rate of children who die in their first year of life.

-- A companion study of three major urban areas indicates a "substantial decline" in the social health of the nation's cities, according to the index. The health index of the cities dropped 19 points in the last two years, researchers report.

The trends have serious implications, the report insists. "What seems most disturbing is that the general worsening of social health has affected all sectors of society: children, adults, the aged. The central question is whether, as a society, we are prepared to act to reverse the recent decline."

That is a question that belongs not just to society as a whole but to modern churches as well, notes Anders, a Southern Baptist. "I don't think the pressure has been on the church to address these issues and others that have arisen," the professor says. "But it better start."

In addition to the problems noted in the social index, society and churches face other concerns as well, such as the AIDS epidemic, spouse abuse

and the environment, Anders points out. But she agrees that the social index is representative of the state of the nation's life.

Putnam adds that the index offers churches a starting point for investigating the needs around them. "We need to be sensitive to these kinds of studies because they give us an idea of where to look in our own communities."

How ready is the church to respond? Indications are mixed.

-- In a 1988 Gallup poll, 41 percent of respondents said churches are not concerned enough about social justice. In another Gallup poll, 49 percent of Americans gave man's reason and intellect more credit for the advancement of humankind than traditional religious values (40 percent).

-- And most people see religion losing influence on American life. In a 1991 Princeton Religion Research Center poll, 57 percent of respondents said religion was losing influence, up from 49 percent in 1985.

-- On the plus side, however, hope in religion remains. Polls indicate more than half of all Americans believe religion has strengthened their families and that most churches are effective in helping people find meaning in life.

-- In addition, a recent poll by the Princeton Religion Research Center indicates 59 percent of Americans believe religion can answer all or most of today's problems.

In the midst of sometimes conflicting indicators, the key is for local churches to be about meeting the needs of persons around them, leaders note.

"The indication is that people still look to churches for help," Putnam notes. "But in some of the areas of greatest needs, such as inner cities, many churches have left. And so those people are beginning to believe the church really doesn't care for their needs."

Putnam insists churches cannot flee the problems. "Many churches are finding they must be ministering to the needs of those around them in order to be believable and accepted in a community."

"We have to do things to help people see the relevance of the gospel to their lives."

Anders said churches especially need to target young adults, those in their 20s and 30s. "These are the ones who have control or soon will have control over the children and youth and aged of the nation."

"The church doesn't have to supply all the answers," Anders added, "but people want to know where they can go and find answers."

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### Slump in hunger giving by Baptists continues

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Baptists gave an average of 52 cents per person to meet worldwide hunger needs in 1991, according to figures from the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign and Home Mission boards.

The 15 million Southern Baptists, who comprise the nation's largest Protestant denomination, gave \$7,828,996 in 1991 through their national mission boards, which are responsible for hunger ministries.

"We gave individually for an entire year the cost of one can of soda to feed the hungry," said Robert Parham, who heads the Nashville-based Baptist Center for Ethics. "For a wealthy denomination like ours, that amount is a far cry even from the biblical imperative of giving a cup of water in Jesus' name. It's more like an eyedropper."

The 1991 figure was an increase of \$48,924 -- or 0.6 percent -- over 1990, when hunger gifts totaled \$7,780,072.

Total hunger gifts in the Southern Baptist Convention have declined since 1985, when Southern Baptists recorded their largest-ever annual contribution of \$11,830,146. Hunger contributions hovered near \$9 million from 1986 to 1987. Gifts then plateaued at a much lower level the next three years -- about \$7.8 million.

The Home Mission Board, which handles contributions for stateside hunger needs, reported receiving \$1,327,034 in 1991, compared to \$1,301,228 in 1990.

Receipts for hunger abroad through the Foreign Mission Board were \$6,501,962, a slight increase from \$6,478,844 in 1990 but below the total of \$6,613,785 in 1989.

"The stagnant giving by Southern Baptists means more hunger for those already hungry," said Parham.

"I'm fearful that many Southern Baptists have lost the vision of caring for the global poor that was born in our denomination's heart in the mid-1970s," he said.

"People really do perish when there is no vision," he continued. "We desperately need a new vision for our relationship with and responsibility for the poor."

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Europeans postpone FMB talks  
until Parks' future settled

HAMBURG, Germany (ABP) -- The executive committee of the European Baptist Federation has postponed talks with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board until after FMB trustees determine the fate of board president Keith Parks.

"As soon as the situation concerning the future of Dr. Parks and others is clear, we will establish a date for the meeting, maybe in May," explained Karl-Heinz Walter, general secretary of the European Baptist Federation.

Parks has asked trustees to decide by their April 6-8 meeting if he will remain as president of the Foreign Mission Board. Trustees have scheduled a private two-day meeting with Parks March 19-20 to discuss the matter.

Parks said in February that his tenure at the FMB is in doubt because of trustee actions that have "brought change and crisis to our world mission program." Those actions have particularly affected Europe, where the FMB cooperates in mission efforts with European Baptists.

Trustees of the FMB appointed a six-person committee in February to try to patch relations with European Baptists. There had been suggestions the trustees wanted to meet with the European leaders this month.

However, Walter told the European Baptist Press Service there is too much potential for major shifts within the board's structures before the April trustee meeting.

If Parks' tenure as president is shortened, Walter told a group last month in Germany, it will create "a very new situation" for European missions.

Speaking Feb. 17 to a fact-finding group from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Walter also predicted some FMB missionaries in Europe will resign if there is further disruption of the FMB administration.

The FMB's top two administrators for Europe announced in January they would leave the agency because of what one termed the "global agenda" of trustees to impose a narrow view of theological orthodoxy on Baptists overseas. As an example, they cited the FMB's defunding of an EBF seminary in Switzerland -- a decision opposed by Parks and other administrators.

Parks, in a speech to trustees in February, asked them either to confirm

their confidence in him as their leader until 1995 or begin the search for his successor.

The discussion which resulted from Parks' surprise statement led trustees to call for the two-day "retreat" in March.

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-- By Stanley Crabb and Greg Warner

Missionary Martin to retire early  
in protest of FMB's 'new direction'

RUSCHLIKON, Switzerland (ABP) -- Longtime Southern Baptist missionary Earl R. Martin, 64, will retire earlier than planned because of what he calls the "new direction" of the Foreign Mission Board.

Martin, a professor at the Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland, and veteran of 25 years of mission service in Africa, announced his Dec. 31 retirement in a letter to FMB administrators.

"I just can't work with the direction that is coming, (or) is already here," Martin told a fact-finding group from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship that visited the Swiss seminary Feb. 21.

Although seminary policy requires that Martin leave his teaching post when he turns 65 in November, he had planned to continue his missionary service in another setting, an FMB administrator said. But recent actions of the FMB trustees and the early retirements of the FMB's top two administrators for Europe convinced him to leave early, the FMB was told.

Martin told the Fellowship audience that his retirement also indicates his agreement with a recent speech by FMB President Keith Parks, in which Parks told trustees their actions -- including the defunding of the Ruschlikon seminary -- had brought "crisis to the world mission program."

In addition to teaching missions, evangelism and world religions at Ruschlikon, Martin is director of the seminary's Institute for Mission and Evangelism, which offers missions training to seminary students and European church leaders.

Previously Martin served as a missionary for 25 years in several East African countries, opening Southern Baptist mission work in Kenya. He is a recognized expert in Islam, world religions and cults and has taught at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"He has been a very good missionary, with more than 20 years of experience," said Tom Warrington, FMB associate area director for Europe. "He is very influential throughout Europe."

Warrington said Martin's expertise and experience will make him difficult to replace at Ruschlikon.

Because of the FMB's defunding of the seminary, it is not known if Martin will be replaced with another missionary. Warrington suggested that decision would await a request from Ruschlikon. Or the European Baptist Federation, which now owns and operates the school, may name its own replacement, he said.

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-- By Greg Warner

Thomas welcomed  
by Fellowship group

RUSCHLIKON, Switzerland (ABP) -- Charles Thomas, who resigned as a Southern Baptist missionary in January in protest of recent Foreign Mission Board actions, received a hero's welcome when he spoke briefly to 50 participants in a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship fact-finding trip to Europe.

Thomas and his wife, Kathie, became Southern Baptists' first missionaries in Romania last year after serving 17 years in France. The couple resigned over changes in the FMB's mission strategy in Europe.

"The history of Southern Baptists, and the history of Southern Baptist missions in Europe, is one of partnership," Thomas told the Fellowship group during a visit to Ruschlikon, Switzerland. He said FMB trustees have abandoned the principle of partnership with European Baptists in favor of "imperialistic foreign missions."

In such an approach, he said, the FMB tells Europeans, "I will give you money if you will give back the theology the way we want to hear it."

"I am not a quitter," Thomas said. Although he and Kathie have resigned from the Foreign Mission Board, he said, "we have not resigned from foreign missions."

Thomas paid his own expenses to travel to Ruschlikon, where he met with Fellowship officials who are interested in hiring Thomas as a missionary.

He said after the meeting no decisions were reached about his employment. He said he is not sure if he will remain in Romania, return to France and undertake some new assignment.

After his brief greeting to the Fellowship group, Thomas received a standing ovation. Tour participants later took up an impromptu offering for the Thomases totaling about \$600. Thomas, who said he was humbled by the gift, returned \$100 of it as a contribution to the Fellowship's missions efforts.

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-- By Greg Warner

Visit to Ruschlikon galvanizes  
support, participants say

RUSCHLIKON, Switzerland (ABP) -- Fifty Southern Baptists who participated in a fact-finding trip to the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, say they are more convinced than ever of the importance of the embattled school.

"Baptists back home don't know how crucial and central Ruschlikon is to Baptists in Europe," said Mike Jamison, a pastor from Greensboro, N.C.

"It's the hub of everything Baptists do in Europe," added Virginia pastor Ray Allen, noting the seminary sponsors short-term and off-campus instruction for European Baptists.

The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, which founded the seminary in 1949 but deeded it to the European Baptist Federation in 1989, cut all FMB funding from the seminary last October in a dispute over the theological direction of the school. The action sparked an international controversy over Southern Baptist mission work in Europe.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which sponsored the fact-finding tour, has pledged to help the seminary recover from the financial loss incurred by the FMB action. Fellowship leaders presented seminary administrators with a check for \$240,898 during their visit.

"The SBC Foreign Mission Board is trying to kill this seminary, and they are going to do it if something isn't done," said Ann Allen of Blacksburg, Va. "This is much more serious than I thought when I left home."

The Fellowship is expected to put the Ruschlikon seminary in its missions budget to provide ongoing support. But tour participants said helping the school will require a long-term commitment, as well as a significant increase in missions funding for the Fellowship from Southern Baptist churches.

Cecil Sherman, recently elected coordinator of the Fellowship, said Ruschlikon administrators like President John David Hopper are sizing up the commitment level of the Fellowship. "He is trying to determine if we are a strong enough crutch for him to let his weight down on," said Sherman, of Fort Worth, Texas. "We are not evaluating him as much as he is evaluating us."

Most participants who spoke during a post-trip debriefing seemed ready to make the commitment. They frequently noted the need to take advantage of unprecedented mission openings in Europe.

"You don't get too many opportunities to be on the cutting edge of history," said Joseph Hairston, a layman from Washington, D.C., and member of the Fellowship's coordinating council. "I hope we do something."

"Being here woke up some of the missionary in me," said Don Mantooth, a pastor from Morehead, Ky., and former Southern Baptist missionary in Israel.

John Hewett, moderator of the Fellowship and organizer of the tour, said he had received "a new mission vision" during the trip.

"I think we have found direction," he said.

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-- By Greg Warner

Fellowship chapter  
formed in Oklahoma

By Dave Parker

NORMAN, Okla. (ABP) -- A state chapter of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was formed Feb. 29 in Oklahoma, considered one of the most conservative Southern Baptist states in the country.

The action took place after the second annual Oklahoma Baptist Heritage Conference, held at First Baptist Church in Norman, Okla. A total of 414 persons registered for the conference from 48 churches in 28 towns.

About 150 persons stayed after the conference to form the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma. They elected a coordinating council composed entirely of laypeople.

Laypersons are "taking this over and getting it out of the ministers' hands, because they feel the ministers face a job-threatening situation if they speak out," explained Lavonn Brown, pastor of the host church.

The newly formed coordinating council elected Dan Hobbs, a layman in the Norman congregation, as moderator.

Several speakers at the heritage conference outlined what they say divide Southern Baptists today.

Cecil Sherman, coordinator of the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said fundamental-conservatives and moderate-conservatives differ over their interpretation of Scripture but not over the inspiration or authority of the Bible.

"We want to be biblical, especially in our view of the Bible," he explained. "That means that we dare not claim less for the Bible than it claims for itself. But it also means that we cannot claim more for the Bible

than it claims for itself.

"The Bible neither claims nor reveals inerrancy as a Christian teaching," he continued. "Bible claims must be based on the Bible, not on human interpretations of the Bible."

He also said there are differences in approach to education, missions, the role of the pastor, women and the church itself. He said fundamental-conservatives are more concerned with power and control, while moderate-conservatives allow for differences of opinion.

"Were our fundamentalist brothers able to compromise, we could come together on common ground," Sherman said. But to them, he added, "compromise is a sin."

Sherman said the Fellowship is an alternative to continued political strife in the SBC. "Twelve to 13 years is too long to engage in political activity," he said. "The CBF was formed so we might have a voice in the presentation of the gospel."

Grady Cothen, former president of the Sunday School Board, said the diverse traditions that combined to form the Southern Baptist Convention coexisted in the past because Southern Baptists looked beyond their differences to concentrate on world missions.

"For 140 years all diversity existed side by side, usually without conflict," said Cothen, a former Oklahoma pastor and former president of Oklahoma Baptist University. "From 1839-1979, diversity reigned."

That came to an end in 1979, he said, when Houston judge Paul Pressler and Dallas educator Paige Patterson announced their plan "to rid the denomination of liberals. Out of that experience, diversity became heresy."

Cothen said both he and another former Sunday School Board president, James Sullivan, are no longer allowed to speak at the board's conference center in Glorieta, N.M., because their views are not tolerated by current leaders. Cothen recalled a conversation in which Sullivan told him, "Grady, I built Glorieta and I can't even speak there anymore."

Such treatment is "unmoral, unethical and un-Baptistic," Cothen said. "It is heresy in every sense of the word." The people who historically have "paid the bills" and made sacrifices to build the SBC are now excluded, he said.

That exclusiveness means even B.H. Carroll, founder of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, "couldn't serve in the SBC today," Cothen said. "He was a divorced man. He had women deacons in Texas at the turn of the century."

Cothen said churches today have two options: either ignore the conflict or deal with it.

"You can continue with the status quo, do missions as you have always done and ignore the violations of Baptist polity," he said. "Or you can educate the church. Give them full information. Open free discussions in love."

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Fellowship general assembly  
will decide future direction

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Decisions will be made regarding the future direction of the ministry and missions of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship during the organization's general assembly April 30-May 2 at the Tarrant County Convention Center in Fort Worth, Texas.

"At the general assembly, Baptist ideas will live," said CBF moderator John Hewett of Asheville, N.C. "Every free Baptist will have the right to

speak. Dissenting voices will be heard. Local church autonomy will be honored. The priesthood of every believer will be respected."

Cecil Sherman, former pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, will be installed as coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship during the final session Saturday, May 2. Sherman will move to Atlanta to begin work April 1.

"We clearly are turning outward," Sherman said of the organization, formed last year by Southern Baptist moderate-conservatives. "We are Christians seeking a mission and eager to be about it. This 'turned outward' group will gather in Fort Worth and begin doing gospel."

Since it was formed in Atlanta in May 1991, the Fellowship has begun to structure its work in five areas: world missions, theological education, literature for Christian education, ethics and public policy, and 'equipping the laity.'

In 1991 contributions to Cooperative Baptist Fellowship totaled \$4,517,000.

Theological education and missions became critical issues for the Fellowship in late 1991 when trustees of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board voted to defund the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland. Two top FMB administrators with responsibilities for missions in Europe resigned, charging the trustee action caused irreparable damage to the FMB relationship with European Baptists.

The CBF Coordinating Council voted in January to fund the work of those Southern Baptist missionaries in Europe who no longer want to work for the Foreign Mission Board and who meet Fellowship criteria.

Fellowship leaders have met with some of those missionaries and with European Baptists to discuss ways to cooperate in missions. A report of the global missions ministry group will outline details and guidelines of the Fellowship's missions partnership with European Baptists.

The Fellowship already has delivered \$240,898 collected for the Ruschlikon seminary. A report on the Fellowship's February fact-finding trip to Ruschlikon will be presented during the assembly May 1.

"Given the fundamentalist assault on our schools and mission programs in the past year," moderator Hewett said, "the Fort Worth gathering will be a crucial meeting for the Fellowship -- a chance for free and faithful Baptists to stand up and be counted for a better future."

Theme of the general assembly is "Presence and Promise."

Speakers at the three-day general assembly will include Samuel Proctor of New Brunswick, N.J., pastor emeritus of Abyssinian Baptist Church, New York City; Phil Lineberger, pastor of First Baptist Church, Tyler, Texas; Cheryl Collins Patterson, writer and editor from Fallon, Nev.; Paul Duke, pastor of Kirkwood Baptist Church, St. Louis, Mo.; Linda McKinnish Bridges, assistant professor of New Testament at the Baptist Theological Seminary of Richmond (Va.), Bill Leonard, professor of religion at Samford University, Birmingham, Ala., and Tillie Burgin, minister of missions at First Baptist Church, Arlington, Texas.

The opening message April 30 will be delivered by Hewett, pastor of First Baptist Church, Asheville, N.C. Moderator-elect Patricia Ayres, a layperson from Austin, Texas, will speak during the final session May 2. A dramatic presentation of John's Gospel by actor Paul Alexander of London, England, will be part of each session.

Pre-assembly institutes on a wide range of church-related subjects will be held Thursday afternoon, April 30. Plenary business sessions are scheduled both Friday and Saturday, May 1 and 2. Among other items of business, a purpose and strategy statement for the CBF's global missions ministry will be presented.

The general assembly will include sessions that focus on unique ministries churches have developed in areas of education, ministry, worship

and community programs. State meetings will be held, at which nominations will be made to the CBF Coordinating Council.

A breakfast for laity will be held Saturday morning at the Worthington Hotel in downtown Fort Worth. Auxiliary meetings are scheduled by the International Development Council of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland; Southern Baptist Women in Ministry, alumni and friends of Baylor University and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the National Alumni Association of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

At a resource fair in the Tarrant County Convention Center, more than 100 vendors will display resources for churches and individuals.

About 6,000 people attended the Fellowship's national meeting last May in Atlanta. Organizers have not yet released an attendance estimate for the upcoming assembly.

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North Carolina church votes  
to 'bless' union of gays

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- By a margin of almost two-to-one, a Southern Baptist church in North Carolina voted to conduct a service blessing the union of two homosexual men.

Although not a marriage ceremony, the service at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh apparently represents the first time a Southern Baptist church has formally endorsed a homosexual relationship. No date for the service has been set.

Even before the vote was announced March 1, the church's action drew the ire of Southern Baptist leaders.

A resolution passed in February by the SBC Executive Committee condemns Pullen for condoning "the gross perversion and unquestioned sin" of homosexuality. The committee also denounced another North Carolina church, Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, which will consider in April whether to give a gay divinity student a license to preach.

The Executive Committee also is trying to exclude churches that affirm homosexuality from membership in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Members of Pullen Memorial Church defied those criticisms, however, approving the "blessing" ceremony by secret mail ballot. Sixty-four percent voted in favor.

Pullen pastor Mahan Siler said the church is not launching a "crusade" for homosexual rights. "We're just trying to be faithful to what God would have us to be," he said.

"We're taking a stand toward a responsible expression of sexuality," Siler told the Raleigh News and Observer. "It's a stand of support toward persons who want to commit to a long-term monogamous relationship."

Kevin Turner, a 27-year-old church member asked last September for the church to recognize his relationship with 23-year-old Steven Churchill.

Church leaders said the blessing ceremony will not be a wedding rite, with legal rights and responsibilities which marriage confers. But it will be a public promise of mutual love and monogamy on the part of Turner and Churchill.

In addition to blessing the union, church members voted to accept gays into "full membership" (94 percent) and voted to establish a church document which will include an example of a ceremony of blessing, "along with its biblical, theological and historical underpinnings" (75 percent).

The church mailed out 750 ballots to members in February. A total of 531 members returned the ballots. The results were announced at the end of Sunday

morning worship service March 1.

"It has been a very intense time," Siler said afterward. "The issue is very emotional and has required deep soul-searching. This church has honored diversity through the years. We have a tradition of being willing to address difficult issues."

"Our open struggle has raised a difficult, complex question: 'How is the church to respond to persons who are both homosexual and Christian?'" he added.

"Unintentionally, I think, we happen to be a visible part of a worldwide raising of consciousness toward homosexuality."

While church members worshiped March 1, opponents of the decision placed anti-homosexual fliers on cars in the parking lot. The fliers offered lengthy interpretations of biblical passages about sex, marriage, lust and hell.

"We all regret the media attention and the strong, sometimes negative, reactions from the community and the larger Baptist family," Siler said.

Despite differences of opinion within the church, members seemed ready to accept the decision.

"I personally am not in favor," Steve Edwards, 54, told the News and Observer. "But I respect this congregation's stance. It was not an easily made decision. It was a long, laborious process. But clearly it was a decisive vote. I didn't want to see a 51-to-49 split."

"We as a Christian community can embrace all people," said Dan Chartier, 43, a member who favors the same-gender blessing ceremony. "If we really believe what we say we believe, then there are no differences between us as Christians."

Two North Carolina Baptist leaders defended the right of the church to make its own decisions but voiced strong personal objections to the action.

"The precious principles of soul liberty and church autonomy have the potential for grave error," wrote R. G. Puckett, editor of the North Carolina Baptist state paper. Pullen Church is "dead wrong," Puckett wrote.

Roy Smith, executive director of North Carolina Baptist Convention, released a statement upholding church autonomy and "the worth of every individual." But Smith added, "My personal understanding of the New Testament compels me to reject the homosexual lifestyle based on several passages of Scripture."

This is not the first time Mahan Siler has encountered controversy because of his stance on Christian ministry to homosexuals.

In 1988, he wrote an article in Baptists Today urging churches to minister redemptively to homosexuals. Because of that article, Siler was removed from the list of adjunct professors at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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-- This article by Jack Harwell of Baptists Today includes information from Donna Seese of the Raleigh News and Observer.

Land, Chapman bash Bush  
for 'courting' gay vote

By Ray Waddle

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Two Southern Baptist leaders are warning President Bush that he is quickly losing the trust of evangelical voters after Bush's campaign chairman held a meeting with national gay activists.

Many conservative Christian voters, previously seen as supporting Bush, are turning to challenger Pat Buchanan, partly because of Bush's "hypocrisy"

in "courting" a gay and lesbian group recently, one Baptist executive argued.

"People who campaign for office as pro-family and pro-traditional values are engaging in hypocrisy when they court people whose lifestyle is not pro-family or traditional," Richard Land, executive director of the Nashville-based Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said March 4.

"The president needs to understand he can't ride two teams of horses in opposite directions," Land said.

Land and SBC president Morris Chapman fired off a letter of complaint to Bush after Bush's campaign chairman, Robert Mosbacher, met Feb. 13 with staffers of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and a representative of the AIDS Action Council.

This is not the first time the Bush White House has aroused the alarm of Southern Baptist leaders.

Land and other spokesmen in the 15-million-member denomination were similarly dismayed two years ago, when the Bush administration invited gay task force leaders to the White House for the signing of anti-hate crime legislation.

Land argued that many evangelical voters are shifting to Buchanan to protest the meeting with gay leaders, as well as Bush's support of the National Endowment for the Arts, which they say funds anti-Christian material, and his perceived indifference to tax relief for families.

"Evangelical voters don't want Buchanan to win; they want Bush to listen," Land said. "They're not happy."

Repeated efforts to reach ranking Bush officials were unsuccessful. But in a Baptist Press article Feb. 21 a Bush spokesperson said the gay task force meeting was "only a meeting," not a signal of new "outreach" to the American gay community.

Robert Bray of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force said March 4 the February meeting was a "warm, open and extremely frank" discussion of issues important to gay Americans, including AIDS research and job and housing discrimination.

Bray denounced Baptist complaints about the meeting, saying gays and lesbians are being "Willie Hortonized" by critics who want to stir American hostility against them and deny them basic constitutional rights.

"Communism isn't a political threat now, so homosexuals have been labeled the new threat to 'traditional family values,'" said Bray, who is based in Washington, D.C.

"It would be tragic if Bush capitulated to extremist pressure to deny 25 million gay and lesbian Americans justice and freedom," Bray said.

But Bray said the Bush administration's stand on acceptance of gay issues remains "ambiguous" because the president seems to downplay or distance himself from such meetings in order to cater to conservative voters.

The Feb. 19 letter written by Land and Chapman calls on Bush to "disavow any support or sympathy for the homosexual civil rights agenda."

But instead, Land said, the Bush campaign has not "disavowed" the meeting with the gay task force or apologized for it, giving the impression that Bush is flirting with approval of the gay movement's hope for civil rights based on sexual orientation."

**Bush touts religious liberty  
in speech to evangelicals**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President George Bush restated his support of religious liberty and his opposition to abortion in remarks at a March 3 evangelical gathering.

Addressing the 50th annual meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Rosemont, Ill., Bush said it is "no accident that in drafting our Bill of Rights, the Founders dedicated the first portion of our First Amendment to religious liberty."

Bush said both religion clauses are important.

"We rightly emphasize the opening clause of that amendment, which forbids government from establishing religion," he said. "In fact, I believe the establishment clause has been a great boon to our country's religious life. One reason religion flourishes in America is that worship can never be controlled by the state."

But Bush said the free-exercise clause too often is ignored.

"This myopia has in some places resulted in an aggressive campaign against religious belief itself," he said. "Some people seem to believe that freedom of religion requires government to keep our lives free from religion. Well, I believe they're just plain wrong."

Bush insisted government must never promote a religion but that it is "duty-bound" to promote religious liberty.

He went on to assert his "conviction that children have a right to voluntary prayer in public schools" and his support for tax vouchers to help parents send their children to private and religious schools.

While the president's remarks drew frequent applause from the evangelical crowd, his school prayer and parochial school aid comments drew criticism from religious-liberty organizations.

"It is distressing that President Bush has once again linked religious liberty with prayer in public schools and aid to parochial schools," said Robert Lifton, president of the American Jewish Congress. "But it is surprising that, in acknowledging the importance of religious liberty, President Bush failed to mention the Supreme Court's disastrous Employment Division vs. Smith decision, which virtually eliminated the free exercise of religion from the First Amendment as an enforceable legal right."

Lifton also criticized Bush for his failure to endorse the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (H.R. 2797), a proposal he said would "undo the damage done in Smith" by restoring the judicial standard that prevented government from curbing religious exercise without a compelling reason.

Lifton noted that the legislation is supported by NAE, as well as the American Jewish Congress and a broad coalition of religious and civic groups, including the Baptist Joint Committee and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

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-- By Larry Chesser

**Lobbying disclosure proposal  
could burden church activity**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The prophetic ministry and public advocacy of churches and religious organizations could be burdened if a Senate bill introduced Feb. 27 becomes law.

However, the bill's sponsor, Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., told a Baptist Joint Committee attorney March 4 that he did not intend the bill to impact the religious community.

Levin introduced the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1992 (S. 2279) to require lobbyists to register and report an array of information about their activities.

The bill defines a "lobbyist" as anyone who is retained by another to perform services that include lobbying contacts. A "lobbying contact" is defined as any communication, on behalf of a client, with a government official designed to influence legislation, regulations or policies.

While the bill exempts the press, it does not exempt churches and other religious organizations.

In a letter to Levin, BJC General Counsel Oliver Thomas said that the bill violates the time-honored principle of church-state separation.

"When churches and religious organizations speak out on public issues and communicate those sentiments to government, they are engaging in a central part of their prophetic and pastoral ministries," Thomas wrote. "Thus, these activities are protected by the free-exercise clause of the First Amendment. The all-inclusive provision of S. 2279 represents a significant impediment to our moral advocacy.

"Further, the registration and reporting requirements of the bill and the supervisory and monitoring functions which it gives to government will result in excessive entanglement between church and state in violation of the no-establishment clause of the First Amendment," Thomas continued.

Most religious organizations take seriously the right to speak to government and would not engage in what the Internal Revenue Service considers to be "substantial" and therefore an inappropriate amount of lobbying, Thomas said. He also noted the regulation of religious organizations would be particularly offensive because the bill exempts the media.

In a March 4 meeting, Levin assured Thomas that he did not intend the bill to apply to churches and synagogues, Thomas said.

"To the contrary, he (Levin) feels nothing should be placed in the bill that implies government has power to regulate the moral advocacy of religious institutions," Thomas said.

"Unfortunately, the Supreme Court's cramped reading of the free-exercise clause in *Employment Division vs. Smith* means Senator Levin's bill would probably be interpreted as applying to churches."

In the *Smith* decision, issued in April 1990, the Supreme Court held that government need not demonstrate a compelling interest before restricting religious exercise.

Thomas said there are two solutions to potential problems presented by Levin's bill. First, the bill could be amended to exempt churches and other religious organizations. Second, Congress could swiftly enact the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (H.R. 2797) that is designed to restore the high protection lost in *Smith*.

The passage of RFRA should be coupled with statements by Levin acknowledging that the bill does not apply to churches, he said.

"We welcome the recognition that churches should be exempt from this requirement," said James Dunn, BJC executive director. "The proclamation of the gospel and worship always have social and political implications. An integral part of the mission of the church is her public witness.

"Therefore, it is none of the business of government to define, manage or regulate the nature and purpose of the church," Dunn added. "A free and prophetic pulpit is at least as sacred in our society as a free press."

House bill drops  
'choice' proposal

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Members of the House Committee on Education and Labor will take a second look at a bill that would have allowed private and religious schools access to public funds.

House committee leaders decided to revisit the issue of private school aid after the Senate approved its major education bill (S. 2), defeating attempts to include plans to channel public funds to private schools.

The House committee approved the Comprehensive Neighborhood Schools Revitalization Act (H.R. 3320) in October but it never reached the House floor. A new bill (H.R. 4323) was introduced Feb. 26 by Rep. Dale Kildee, D-Mich.

The committee is expected to take up the new bill in the next several weeks, said John Jennings, general counsel for education of the House Committee on Education and Labor. Jennings said the new bill is identical to the original with two exceptions. The new bill drops all "choice" provisions that would have awarded parents federal vouchers to send their children to parochial schools. The other difference involves language dealing with local school boards.

While the bill contains no choice provisions, it is still subject to revision, Jennings noted. He said committee members anticipate possible amendments that would reinstate choice in the bill.

The choice debate began nearly a year ago when President George Bush announced his America 2000 educational-reform package, proposing a plan to channel federal funds to public and private institutions.

Efforts to amend the House bill appear likely because the committee approved the original bill only after Democratic leadership struck a deal with the White House. The Bush administration agreed to support H.R. 3320 if the voucher language was not weakened.

"Even though the new bill has dropped the provision allowing choice, we are not yet out of the woods," said Brent Walker, associate general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee. "I fully expect attempts to amend the bill in the committee...to include choice demonstration projects and the like.

"These attempts were turned away in the Senate," Walker said. "We hope the House will do the same."

Walker referred to the Senate's stand against efforts to amend its previously approved education bill (S. 2) to include elements of Bush's choice proposal.

One amendment, sponsored by Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, would have established a school-choice demonstration project. The amendment, which was defeated 57-36, would have authorized \$30 million to carry out projects providing low-income parents with federal money to help pay for public or private education.

Jennings said an amendment similar to Hatch's might be offered to the House bill.

The Senate approved the Neighborhood Schools Improvement Act (S. 2) by a 92-6 vote on Jan. 28. The Senate bill would allow public school choice.

The BJC has adopted a position statement deploring any attempts to funnel public money to parochial education.

After the new development in the House, BJC Executive Director James Dunn, said, "We still hold some truths to be self-evident: that public money goes only for public purposes, that no one pays taxes to support religious institutions, that Americans have a common commitment to the common school."

Senate tax legislation provides incentives for charitable gifts

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Senate committee has joined the House of Representatives in approving legislation that would make it more attractive for Americans to donate gifts of appreciated property to charitable institutions.

The Senate Finance Committee approved a tax package March 3 that would temporarily repeal a 1986 provision that subjected the appreciated portion of such gifts to the alternative minimum tax. The proposal provides only a two-year window, affecting contributions made in 1992 and 1993.

The House approved 221-209 a tax package containing a provision that repealed the 1986 rule permanently.

Representatives of charitable organizations, including Baptist institutions, say the 1986 tax provision has caused a decline in large gifts to universities, hospitals and other institutions.

Like the House bill, the Senate bill, drafted by Finance Committee chairman Lloyd Bentsen, D-Texas, did not contain the church-reporting requirements proposed by the administration. The administration's budget proposal contained a provision asking that churches and other tax-exempt organizations report to the Internal Revenue Service the charitable contributions of donors who give more than \$500 annually.

The administration also has backed away from that provision. In a March 5 meeting, the administration assured Baptist Joint Committee attorneys and others that the administration will not continue to press the church reporting requirement.

The Senate package also proposes a permanent extension of present law that limits itemized deductions, including charitable contributions, for higher income individuals. Itemized deductions for high-income taxpayers are reduced by an amount equaling 3 percent of their adjusted gross income in excess of \$105,250 in 1992.

The Senate bill, approved 11-9 along party lines, could reach the floor early next week because Democratic leaders are trying to meet the March 20 deadline President George Bush set in his State of the Union address.

Although both chambers may have approved tax legislation by the deadline, an anticipated veto of the Democratic bills has clouded the future of tax legislation for 1992.

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-- By Pam Parry

BJC, others ask Supreme Court to reverse solicitation ruling

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Baptist Joint Committee and nine other religious and educational organizations have asked the U.S. Supreme Court to reverse a lower-court ruling that banned religious solicitation at New York-area airports.

In a brief written by Edward McGlynn Gaffney Jr., dean of the Valparaiso University School of Law, the religious groups sided with the International Society of Krishna Consciousness in its dispute with New York authorities over a ban on solicitation and distribution of literature.

After the trial court struck down the ban as unconstitutional, the 2nd

U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals issued a divided ruling, holding that in-person solicitation of funds could be banned in airport terminals but that distribution of literature, viewed as a less disruptive activity, must be allowed.

Brent Walker, associate general counsel at the BJC, said the case has implications beyond airport regulation of minority religious groups.

"If the government is allowed to quiet the religious speech of an unpopular religious group, it can do the same to everyone, including Baptists," he said.

Gaffney's brief argues that the ban implemented by New York officials is not neutral but takes aim at an unpopular religious group.

The officials, Gaffney wrote, have "singled out the unpopular speech of a vulnerable religious minority for disparate treatment, subjecting the devotees of the Hare Krishna faith to regulation that it would never dream of imposing upon President (George) Bush or Governor (Bill) Clinton when they come to New York to campaign for the presidency, or upon traveling salespersons coming to the hub of commerce from around the globe to negotiate lucrative business deals."

The brief argues that solicitation of support and distribution of religious literature are well-established practices protected by the First Amendment and that religious groups are as entitled to as much free-speech protection as those involved in commercial and political speech.

Additionally, the brief contends that the government's stated interest in the regulation -- keeping terminal passageways free for the convenience of travelers -- do not justify singling out religious speech for disparate treatment. The brief states that its signers "deny that government ever could have a compelling interest in forbidding for religious purposes an activity it permits for secular purposes."

Finally, the brief asks the high court to clarify that its 1990 ruling in *Employment Division vs. Smith* "does not countenance official hostility toward religion."

BJC General Counsel Oliver Thomas said airports can serve passengers' interests without resorting to the type of ban imposed in New York.

"If an airport is concerned about religionists obstructing traffic or harassing travelers, it may restrict solicitation to a booth," he said. "It may not, however, create a 'First-Amendment-Free Zone' or discriminate against religious speech as New York has done."

"This case is particularly important," Walker added, "because it will give the court an opportunity to clarify, and hopefully, limit its ruling in *Smith*".

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-- By Larry Chesser

BJC directors approve  
endowment campaign

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- At the direction of its executive committee, the Baptist Joint Committee will launch a multiyear endowment campaign aimed at ensuring a solid financial foundation for the Washington-based religious-liberty agency.

In other actions at its March 2 meeting, the BJC executive committee approved a resolution opposing the Bush administration's now abandoned proposal to require churches and other organizations to report to the Internal Revenue Service the contributions of donors who give more than \$500

annually. The committee also signed a letter asking members of Congress to co-sponsor the Religious Freedom Restoration Act -- legislation that would restore the requirement that government demonstrate a compelling reason to limit religious exercise.

The decision to endow the work of the BJC comes after one of the agency's founding national member bodies, the Southern Baptist Convention, withdrew its financial support, about half the agency's annual operating budget.

James Dunn, BJC executive director, said that in response to "the defection of current Southern Baptist leaders from the cause of church-state separation and the denial of funding for the Baptist Joint Committee, thousands of Baptists who value their heritage are determined to maintain a strong voice for the historic Baptist witness to religious liberty and separation of church and state."

Dunn added that recent events, "such as the BJC's early warning regarding the Bush administration's demand that all churches report their donors to the IRS and the necessary political action that resulted in the proposal being withdrawn, demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of the BJC. This one action alone saves churches across the land millions of dollars and underscores why this work should be endowed."

John Womble, BJC director of denominational relations and development, said campaign activities will begin immediately.

"We will be moving forward promptly to further identify and enlist leadership," he said. "These leaders will assist us in structuring the campaign and soliciting pace-setting gifts. While a specific dollar amount has not yet been set for the first year, this will be a multi-year program that we anticipate will result in an endowment exceeding \$5 million."

Also during its meeting, the executive committee discussed the status of a disputed \$400,000 capital-needs fund on deposit with the Southern Baptist Foundation. No action was taken by the committee, however.

The Southern Baptist Executive Committee voted in February to give the corpus of the fund to the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and the interest to the BJC. The BJC had said it would consider legal action if it was denied access to the fund.

In its IRS resolution, the executive committee said the church-reporting proposal would open the door "to destructive governmental intrusion into religious affairs and unwholesome entanglement between church and state."

The resolution said the proposal "would make churches the government's agent for tax collection, force churches to disclose and report confidential information, and require churches to make legal determinations as to the deductibility of contributions."

It also charged that the requirement would be burdensome, particularly for small churches.

In its letter asking members of Congress to support RFRA, the committee said "the First Amendment's free-exercise clause is virtually useless" following the U.S. Supreme Court's 1990 decision in *Employment Division v. Smith* that abandoned the long-standing compelling-interest test.

"If passed, the measure would not create any new rights or favor any particular religion," the letter states. "It would simply restore the law as it existed before *Smith*."

In the House, RFRA (H.R. 2797) has more than 150 co-sponsors, and a companion bill soon is expected to be introduced in the Senate.

Maddox to leave Americans United  
to accept pastorate in Maryland

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Robert Maddox has resigned as executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State to become pastor of Briggs Memorial Baptist Church in Bethesda, Md.

Maddox, 54, joined the Americans United staff in 1984. Previously he served as a White House speech writer and liaison to religious groups during the Jimmy Carter administration and for 20 years served as pastor of Texas and Georgia Baptist churches.

"Dr. Maddox guided Americans United through a tumultuous period in church-state relations," said Foy Valentine, AU president and former executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"Dr. Maddox has spoken clearly, courageously and consistently in support of church-state separation, and he will be sorely missed in AU's ongoing work," Valentine said.

Valentine said AU's executive committee will be convened as a search committee to recommend a replacement for Maddox, whose resignation is effective April 1.

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Church arson suspect  
pleads not guilty

GAINESVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Patrick Lee Frank has entered a plea of not guilty to 16 church arsons in North Florida.

The 41-year-old drifter from Tennessee was arraigned in Gainesville Feb. 20 on a 10-count indictment covering fires set in Gainesville, Lake City, Ocala, Winter Haven, St. Augustine, Jacksonville Beach and High Springs. The rash of fires last year hit several Florida Baptist churches, including the historic First Baptist Church of Ocala.

The suspect was indicted also for four church arsons in Tennessee. If convicted, he could be sentenced to 10 years in prison for each count, according to federal prosecutor Ken Sukhia.

Frank was found to be incompetent to stand trial earlier this month in Ocala on misdemeanor charges of trespassing and loitering. He was committed to a state mental hospital for mental treatment but remained in the Marion County Jail.

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EDITOR'S CLARIFICATION: Please substitute the following paragraphs for the final two paragraphs of the Feb. 27, 1992, ABP story: "Administration signals retreat from requiring church reports."

Congress is showing little willingness to back the church reporting requirements, as well as some other parts of the administration's budget proposals.

In a Feb. 26 vote, the House rejected 427-1 a comprehensive tax measure that contained the church reporting provision proposed by the administration.

Ways and Means Committee chairman Dan Rostenkowski, D-Ill., said the bill "contains all of the tax proposals supported by President Bush in his State of the Union address and submitted in his budget for fiscal year 1993."

But House Republicans said some of the tax provisions had been substantively changed.

House Republicans joined the Bush administration in supporting a trimmed-down tax bill that features a capital-gains tax cut and tax credits for first-time home buyers. That proposal was rejected 264-166 on Feb. 27.

The House then approved 221-209 a Democratic tax package that emphasizes tax cuts for the middle class. The measure would provide refundable tax credits of up to \$200 for single taxpayers and \$400 for married taxpayers. The loss to the treasury would be offset by raising the top tax rate to 35 percent for upper-income taxpayers and imposing a 10 percent surtax on taxable income over \$1 million.

Neither the Republican nor Democratic proposals voted on Feb. 27 contained the church reporting provision. The House-passed bill, however, did contain a provision that would make it more attractive for Americans to donate gifts of appreciated property to charitable institutions by repealing a 1986 provision that subjected the appreciated portion of such gifts to the alternative minimum tax.

Representatives of charitable organizations, including Baptist institutions, say the 1986 tax provision has caused a decline in large gifts to universities, hospitals and other charitable institutions and that the cost to the federal treasury of repealing the provision would be minimal.

With President Bush vowing to veto the Democratic bill approved in the House, the future of tax legislation this year remains clouded. The Senate Finance Committee, chaired by Sen. Lloyd Bentsen, D-Texas, is expected to begin drafting its tax package during the first week of March.

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-- By Larry Chesser

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CORRECTION: In the ABP story "Fellowship leaders deliver check..." (Feb. 27), please make the following corrections.

Change the 9th paragraph to read:

The decision by .... over the next 15 years, since FMB trustees had agreed to fund the school until 2007.

And in the 32nd paragraph change "10 years" to "15 years."

Thank you.

\*\*\*\*\* END \*\*\*\*\*