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ACTS, VISN near agreement
on plan to share TV channel

By Greg Warner and Bob Terry

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Negotiations are underway between ACTS, Southern Baptists' cable TV network, and VISN, the largest interfaith cable network, that would allow the two to share a cable TV channel while retaining their separate identities.

The deal, which network officials said could be finalized by the end of July, could eventually make the ACTS-VISN partnership the largest religious cable network in the country.

Under terms of the proposal, ACTS would use one third of the channel's airtime, or eight hours a day, and VISN would use two thirds, or 16 hours a day.

Each network would get portions of prime time and other daily time blocks. ACTS, for instance, would have two-hour time slots in each of four time blocks -- morning, afternoon, evening and overnight.

"We're excited about the potential this combination represents for reaching all of America with programming designed to enhance family values and teach the importance of a vital religious faith," said ACTS President Jack Johnson. "Our interest always has been to reach as many people as possible with the Christian message."

The 28 faith groups participating in VISN include Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, United Methodists and other mainline Protestant denominations, as well as Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Jewish groups.

ACTS, which went on the air in 1984, claims access to 8 million cable TV households. VISN, launched in 1988, claims 12 million households. Since few local cable TV systems now carry both, the one-channel approach has a potential audience of about 20 million households.

Only Eternal Word Television Network, a Roman Catholic cable network reaching 23-to-27 million homes, claims a wider reach. The Family Channel, televangelist Pat Robertson's 50 million-subscriber network formerly called

CBN, no longer promotes itself as a religious network.

The cable systems that carry ACTS are concentrated in the South and Southwest, areas where VISN is weak. VISN's cable systems are focused in the North and Northeast, where ACTS has had trouble getting a hearing for its Baptist-dominated network.

"We think this would be a wonderful way to support Southern Baptist work in pioneer areas," Johnson said.

By joining hands and building on that momentum, the ACTS-VISN partnership "will be the largest cable religious faith and values channel in very short order," predicted Nelson Price, president of VISN, which is based in New York.

The hybrid network can add at least 4 million households in the first year, according to industry sources. That number includes local cable systems unable to add both VISN and ACTS but unwilling to choose between the two.

Many in the cable TV industry expected VISN to force ACTS out of existence when it was launched in 1988. Instead, the two networks have become major competitors. Now, however, each has limited potential for further growth, according to some industry observers.

"The feeling in the cable industry is there needs to be some clear direction for faith and values programming," said Bill Airy of TCI, the large Denver-based cable system owner that founded VISN. A VISN-ACTS partnership "really makes it an easy choice for most cable operators," he said.

Although the viewing potential makes the joint venture attractive, the driving force behind the proposal apparently is money.

Neither ACTS nor VISN has been large enough to attract major advertisers or other sources of income to their network, and both have labored under large debts incurred in launching their channels.

Johnson and Price said exploratory talks have been held off and on for three years. The negotiations have become serious lately because of the cost involved in both networks making the necessary switch to a newer generation of satellites.

ACTS must move to a new satellite by the end of the year, said Richard McCartney, executive vice president of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission, which owns ACTS. The move will cost at least \$420,000 a year -- money ACTS and the RTVC don't have in sight -- he said.

"This makes economic sense," McCartney noted. "We look forward to having money to do some of the things that need to be done with ACTS programming."

VISN, meanwhile, has spent an estimated \$32 million to \$37 million to date in building its network, Price said. VISN still owes TCI \$16 million used in launching VISN.

VISN's satellite channel and marketing are handled by VGI, a company founded and controlled for that purpose by TCI. Eager to recover their investment in VISN, officials of TCI and VGI reportedly have been urging VISN to pursue a partnership with ACTS. VGI initiated the latest negotiations in April.

"I would not be at all surprised if that move was being given some impetus by TCI," said Tom Kerver, financial editor of CableVision, an industry magazine.

But Airy, who serves as president of VGI, told ABP VISN's debt was not the driving force in the negotiations. "The negotiations come out of the desire to bring two faith communities together and achieve certain economies of scale," he said.

Airy noted, however, VISN should be able "to achieve a positive cash flow" within 18 months of the agreement.

VISN directors met July 15 to consider the proposal, but they balked at several details. "There are several issues that still are unresolved," Price told Associated Baptist Press July 16. "But we hope they can be resolved by the end of next week."

Price was unwilling to describe the sticking points in the agreement. He said he has been authorized to act for the board of directors to finalize the agreement.

Details of the proposal also were discussed by the trustee executive committee of the Radio and Television Commission. The trustee leaders, in a special meeting July 10 at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, also objected to parts of the agreement.

McCartney said the trustee leaders will return to Fort Worth later to vote on the pact when the differences are ironed out.

ACTS officials also are hesitant to discuss sticking points of the agreement.

One area that could cause problems is program content. Although the identities of the two networks would remain distinct, their programs would appear in homes on the same cable channel, which could imply an endorsement to some viewers.

ACTS, for instance, carries programs from televangelist Jerry Falwell, who is not a favorite among mainline Protestant leaders. VISN carries programs from Mormon and Jewish groups among others.

The agreement asks neither network to surrender control over its program content.

The proposal also would protect the right of local Baptist churches to air their own programs on local cable systems, an arrangement that has won ACTS support from both local churches and cable system operators.

Under the terms of the proposal, both ACTS and VISN would contract with VGI to operate a joint channel on the satellite, which would carry the combined signal to cable system operators around the country.

VISN's current satellite will be available until sometime in 1993, when the network is scheduled to switch to a new satellite not yet in orbit. ACTS and VISN would share VISN's current satellite channel beginning in January, then together switch to the new satellite later in the year.

ACTS currently is airing about 60 hours of fresh programming per week, which is repeated about three times a week. Under the terms of the contract, ACTS would cut to 56 hours of fresh programming per week. That would be mixed with VISN's 112 hours a week, creating the two-to-one ratio specified in the contract.

After two years of the agreement, the two-to-one ratio would be re-evaluated on the basis of audience ratings of the two networks' shows. Disagreements about the time-share arrangement reportedly would be settled by arbitration.

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Report says child poverty
rising, with worst in South

WASHINGTON, D.C. (ABP) -- The number of American children living in poverty rose by more than 1 million during the decade of the 1980s, according to an analysis by the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C.

The study, based on U.S. Census figures for 1980 and 1990, indicates 11.2 million children under 18 lived below the poverty level in 1990 -- an increase of 1.1 million from 1980. That represents about 18 percent of all children under 18 nationwide.

During the decade, child-poverty rates rose in 33 of the 50 states, the report said.

Stella Ogata, a spokeswoman for the Children's Defense Fund, blamed the rise on the fact family earnings have not kept up with inflation, while the government has trimmed the budgets of income-support programs.

Eight of the 10 states with the highest child-poverty rates are in the South and Southwest, where Southern Baptists are most numerous.

That fact should spur Baptists to action, said Robert Parham, director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. "The 1990 U.S. Census figures remind us that the nation's Bible belt and child-poverty belt are the same belt," Parham said.

"Why is it that the most religious region in America has the highest percentage of children trapped in crippling poverty?" Parham asked. "The taproot answer is that too many Christians divorce their faith from public policy. We have missed the message of God's prophets, who said 'Do justice.'

"If Baptists and other Christians do not start loving their neighbors through public-policy initiatives that care for the weakest members of our society, we will reap a whirlwind of social and spiritual judgment," Parham warned.

The child-poverty statistics present Christians with not only a public-policy challenge but also a moral imperative, said Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission. "'I was hungry and you fed me' must become an applied expression of our Christian faith, not just a sermon topic," he said.

Strickland noted that Texas, which ranked eighth highest in child poverty, had almost a fourth of its children living in poverty in 1990. "And unless present trends are reversed, scholars say Texas may resemble a Third World country within the next 10 to 15 years," he warned.

The 10 states with the highest child-poverty rates in 1990 were Mississippi (33.5 percent), Louisiana (32.8 percent), New Mexico (27.5 percent), West Virginia (25.9 percent), Arkansas (25 percent), Kentucky (24.5), Alabama (24 percent), Texas (24 percent), Arizona (21.7 percent) and Oklahoma (21.4 percent), according to the Children's Defense Fund.

The states with the lowest child-poverty rates were in the East and Northeast, led by New Hampshire (7 percent).

The statistics should awaken Baptists in America who think of poverty as something that happens elsewhere, Strickland said. "It's happening here...."

Poverty is spreading among children at a rate faster than among any other group in society, he noted.

"Poverty translates into a broad range of social disadvantages for children," he said. "Poverty is a foundational problem. Child abuse, teen pregnancies, the school drop-out rate, juvenile delinquency and a host of other problems have substantial roots in growing up dirt poor."

While Texas had the eighth highest child-poverty rate, it ranked third from the bottom in government spending on public welfare.

"The problem of poverty offers no simple solution," Strickland said. "The local church must not forfeit to the government its ministry to people in need. The most fundamental solutions come from caring people, not programs."

Strickland offered several suggestions for concerned Baptists:

-- Support public-policy initiatives designed to reverse rising rates of hunger and poverty, such as the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and food stamps.

-- Identify where poverty exists within the reach of the local church and respond directly to needs, working with other churches in formulating responses.

-- Support existing associational ministries meeting the needs of the poor.

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-- By Greg Warner and Ken Camp

Ministerial ethics involves more than sex, money, counselors say

By Kathy Palen

NASHVILLE (ABP) -- By the time Mark Jensen sees ministers, often he can do no more than help them with "personal clean-up."

Many of the ministers who come to Jensen, a pastoral counselor at East Tennessee Baptist Hospital in Knoxville, do so after a breach of ministerial ethics -- an extramarital affair, financial mismanagement or one of a host of other lapses.

"I often have to look at the issue of ministerial ethics from the more tragic end," said Jensen, an associate of the Baptist Center for Ethics. "By the time I see ministers, there's often been some kind of tragic breach or lack of clarity. Because of that, I have some investment in saying to pastors, 'Let's think about this. How can you structure your ministry and your relationships in a way that's best for you and best for the people you serve?'"

Although ministerial ethics involves the familiar, and often well publicized, issues of sexual behavior and financial accountability, the subject also encompasses many other ethical dilemmas that ministers face on a day-to-day basis, according to Jensen and other Southern Baptists who work with ministers.

Ministerial ethics includes such things as the relationship a minister has with the people he or she serves, the minister's own family relationships, how a minister goes to or leaves a church, whether the minister is ethical in preaching, how he or she relates to other ministers, and how a minister uses his or her time on the job, said James Carter, director of the church-minister relations division of the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

Ministerial ethics boils down to a question of integrity, said Carter, who has co-authored the manuscript for a book on ministerial ethics with Joe Trull, a Christian ethics professor at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

When one of the large Baptist state conventions did a study of forced terminations of pastors, the data revealed that a vast majority of the firings resulted from two types of ethical failings, reported Bob Dale, director of the Center for Creative Leadership Development of the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

The first category of terminations resulted from "interpersonal clumsiness," Dale said. In these situations, he explained, ministers did not know how to build and maintain relationships with people. "They just did things that human beings who intend to stay together and work together wouldn't do to each other," he said.

The other major theme in the terminations was abuse of power, Dale said. In these cases, he said, a minister took an authoritarian stand on an issue and began to push, but the minister encountered a group of laypersons or even a single key layperson who would not be pushed. An impasse developed, he said, and eventually was broken by the power of the congregation.

Ministers who abuse their power are demonstrating "a low view of human nature," Dale suggested. "What is being played out is a view that sin is always more powerful than salvation.

"The minister looks out over the pulpit and sees folks who need a lot of help, a lot of pushing. This can lead to a kind of abuse or misuse of people.

"While the more gross immoralities of sexual misconduct or stealing money do happen, I think the broader issue in terms of ministerial ethics has to do with the way we value the people with whom we work."

Ray Higgins, an ethics professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, in Fort Worth, Texas, identifies several of the "big ethical issues" that ministers face. Those issues, he said, include:

-- Judging the quality of a ministry by its size and salary.

-- Becoming so married to the ministry that one's family is neglected.

-- Becoming so involved in people's lives that one is tempted to cross the professional boundaries. That, he added, means that ministers either become sexually involved with the people about whom they care or become too controlling and create an unhealthy dependency.

Higgins, an associate of the Baptist Center for Ethics, contends that each of the minister's tasks raises different kinds of ethical questions or presents different kinds of ethical dilemmas.

"For example," he said, "in counseling, the minister has to know the fine line between guiding a church member through their difficulties and making the decision for them. In leading the church, it involves being a leader and having a healthy sense of confidence, but at the same time being aware of one's own sinfulness and limits."

Dale argues that when power becomes an issue in a church, leadership is the area where ministerial ethics is most likely to be a problem. "The minister -- if he or she sets out to do it and sometimes even when they don't deliberately set out to do it -- can create a little closed group, a clique, a cadre. And that group can sometimes hijack the church, which I think is an abuse of power."

Preaching poses a number of ethical decisions, Carter said. Ministers need to be ethical in the way they use materials that are not their own, he said. They need to interpret Scripture so as not to do violence to the text. They need to exercise caution in embellishing stories or illustrations. They need to avoid manipulating the people in their congregation.

One of the most difficult ethical dilemmas facing ministers is the tension between being a prophet and a pastor, Higgins said. It's the struggle between presenting the ideal and loving and accepting people who fall short of that ideal, he explained.

"Pastors can be so idealistic that they cut themselves off from actual ministry to people who know they have fallen short and gotten themselves in

trouble and want help," he said. "But on the other hand, you have ministers who are so pastoral that they don't present the ideal to the congregation, and there is the appearance that whatever you choose is basically OK."

"Ministers are always called on to help people in crisis," Jensen said. "The people they're helping in crisis are people with whom they have multiple relationships. On Sundays they're preaching to them. On Tuesday night they're in a committee with them. On Thursday morning, that person's in their office talking about a family crisis of one kind or another -- everything from problems with an adolescent child to the threat of marital separation to domestic violence or substance abuse.

"The pastor's almost impossible task is to see his or her way clear so that they're being as redemptive as possible and providing as clear and safe an environment for both themselves and the people they serve," Jensen said. "The possibilities for confusion in the midst of all that are just very numerous."

Ministers may need to ask if their own and their institution's needs are clouding their judgment, Jensen said. The tension is between considering what's best for the church as an institution and what's best for an individual or family, he explained.

Ministers don't have the luxury of ignoring either lens when viewing the problem, Jensen said.

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-- This is the first in a series of articles on ministerial ethics commissioned by the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. Kathy Palen is a free-lance writer in New Haven, Conn.

Fellowship's June receipts
more than double last year

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Gifts to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship during June more than doubled the same month last year.

Receipts for June were \$507,897, a 118 percent increase over June of 1991. However, the most recent June figure was smaller than either of the previous two months, each of which added about \$600,000 to the Fellowship's coffers. May receipts were aided by a \$98,133 offering taken at the Fellowship's general assembly.

About half of the money received in June (54 percent) was designated for institutions of the Southern Baptist Convention, while 29 percent was targeted for the Fellowship's own efforts, such as the organization's newly launched missions program.

An additional 7 percent of June receipts went to organizations and agencies supported by the Fellowship and 10 percent was designated for state-level Baptist causes.

So far this year, the Fellowship has received \$3.3 million, a 57 percent increase over receipts for the first six months of 1991. Halfway through the year, the Fellowship is on target to meet the 1992 projection of \$6.6 million established by its finance committee. Last year the Fellowship took in \$4.5 million.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was established last year by Southern Baptist moderate-conservatives displeased with the current

· leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies.

The Fellowship's three giving plans allow churches and individuals to bypass traditional Southern Baptist funding channels, such as the Cooperative Program, and to withhold funds from SBC agencies of which they disapprove.

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-- By Greg Warner

Noriega sentenced to 40 years
on federal drug convictions

MIAMI (ABP) -- Manuel Noriega, the former Panamanian dictator who professed faith in Christ in a Miami prison cell in 1990 while awaiting trial on drug trafficking charges, was sentenced to 40 years in prison July 10.

After his sentencing, Noriega, 58, read a three-hour prepared statement to the court in which he quoted the Bible and maintained his innocence. He accused President Bush of using his power to "subvert the criminal justice system of the United States to condemn me."

U. S. District Judge William Hoeweler denied any political influence on the conviction and said Noriega failed to understand the criminal justice system.

Noriega's attorney, Frank Rubino, told reporters his client will appeal the April conviction, which carried a maximum sentence of 120 years. Noriega could be eligible for parole after he serves about two-thirds of the 40-year sentence.

Noriega professed faith in Christ in May 1990 under the influence of Southern Baptist evangelists Clift Brannon and Rudy Hernandez. He has attested to his newfound faith in several letters from prison.

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