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Florida child seeks  
'divorce' from parents

By Greg Warner

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- A Florida judge ruled July 9 that an 11-year-old boy can seek a "divorce" from his natural parents so that his foster family can adopt him.

According to the boy's attorney, the ruling represents the first time a court has recognized a child's "fundamental right" to pursue his own interests in a dependency case. The court ruled the child has the same constitutional right as an adult to protect his interests in court.

"The main thing that is being said here is that a child should be able to go to a judge and tell his side of story," said Jerri Blair, an attorney from Tavares, a small town in rural central Florida. Blair represents the Lake County boy, identified in court documents only as Gregory K.

Circuit Judge Thomas Kirk of Orlando did not rule on the child's suit seeking freedom from his parents, who allegedly abused and neglected Gregory for much of his life. But the ruling cleared the way for the case to be heard and for the boy to pursue his request for adoption against his mother's wishes.

"It's unique because it is the first time a child has gone to court to try to end his parental relationship," Blair said.

The ruling is touted as a major success by child-rights advocates. But others say it conflicts with the rights of parents.

"I don't think it's good for the principle of the integrity and autonomy of the family," said Michael Whitehead, general counsel for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Whitehead said the judge's ruling is intended to make it easier for courts to override the rights of parents in raising children. Since state agencies are capable of protecting children's interests, Whitehead said, it is not necessary to change the child-custody system to give children a basis for filing lawsuits.

"It seems to me it opens the door for frivolous complaints from any child who finds a listening ear...," he said.

But fears of frivolous lawsuits coming from disgruntled children are "exaggerated," said Charles Hodges, vice president of Florida Baptist Family Services, a state Baptist agency that provides residential and foster care for needy and neglected children.

"Children have rights too," Hodges said, "and children's rights are just as important as adults' rights." Hodges said he supports a child's right to seek court action, even against the parents' wishes, "in a limited number of specialized cases."

"This is not a child who has frivolously gone to court to sue his parents," said Blair, Gregory's attorney. "It's just a child protecting himself when the state has failed to do so. It is helpful to families because it places emphasis on individual rights rather than just on the system's rights."

Gregory K. is in the custody of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, which has placed him in several foster homes. Gregory's lawsuit alleges HRS has not adequately represented his interests.

Both Gregory and his mother, identified only as Rachel K., testified during the July 9 hearing which, like most child-dependency cases in Florida, was held behind closed doors. His mother and her attorney declined to discuss the case with reporters.

According to court documents, Gregory told the court he wants no future contact with his mother. He has spent only seven months in the custody of his mother during the last eight years. The boy's parents are divorced and living in Missouri. The father has agreed to the adoption.

Blair told Associated Baptist Press that Gregory lived for a time with his alcoholic father, often in hotels. He spent two months with his mother two years ago but was returned to foster care at the insistence of his mother's female roommate, Blair said.

After living in several foster homes, he was befriended by a Lake County family who asked to assume foster care. He has lived with the family for nine months, during which his mother has not contacted him once, Blair said.

"From the moment he started living with them, he wanted them to adopt him," Blair recalled. Adoption is preferable to long-term foster care, she said, because otherwise "you don't have any stability in your life. You don't have a father figure, a mother figure, all those things that make for strong families. If you stay in foster care, you don't have control over your life."

"This is the first time in this child's life that he's ever had any stability," said Blair, who described the foster family as "a very religious family, a very loving family."

"People who are religious will find this case helpful if they see this for what it really is," she said. "This case gives a child a way to protect himself."

Blair said the problems with the social-services system and foster care in Florida "are growing exponentially," causing concern among many Christians and others. The most vivid example was the recent case of Bradley McGee, a Lakeland toddler who allegedly was killed by his father after being returned to the home by state authorities who were aware of past abuse.

Granting Gregory's request for adoption will mean he won't "have to go back to abusive parents," Blair said. "This is not so much an issue between a child and a parent as between a child and the state social-services system."

"The worry that everyone has is that their child will run down and sue because he doesn't have enough toys," Blair said. Such cases would be dismissed by the courts and the social-services agencies called in to investigate, she said.

Calling Gregory's request a divorce trivializes the issues involved, she said. "We're dealing with a real fundamental right here."

"I don't think the child should have the right to just choose where he wants to go. But he is in a good foster-care situation. He should have the

right to go to a judge...and ask the court to consider that situation."

But Whitehead warned giving children a role in dependency cases could make requests like Gregory's "as easy as no-fault divorce."

"It seems to me the system we have is adequate now, and this ruling just encourages complaints...from discontented children," the CLC lawyer said.

"The suggestion of children divorcing their parents is an angry response of people frustrated with the (social-services) system," he said.

In cases where the social-services system fails to protect a child, Whitehead said, the system provides corrective measures. Courts appoint lawyers as courtroom guardians to look out for the interests of children who are in custody of the state, he said. When the system fails, those guardians should be replaced or bureaucrats removed or prosecuted, he said. Relatives can bring civil lawsuits on behalf of the child, he added.

Blair said Gregory's court-appointed lawyer "never met the child," however, and merely endorsed the position of the state HRS opposing the adoption.

Whitehead said child-rights advocates have been motivated by some "extremely horrible abuses of the system" to press for changes in court treatment of children. But, he said, "to burden all of society with extremely burdensome rules...is the wrong way to go."

Whitehead said it is a mistake to allow children to employ lawyers as "hired guns" in their own behalf. "Twelve year-olds can't represent themselves in court or control their lawyers conduct," he said.

Hodges disagreed. The Baptist child-care official said children in early adolescence -- between the ages of 10 and 13 -- "are at least able to understand the jeopardy of the situation" and to evaluate the positive impact of an adoptive or foster-care arrangement.

While Florida Baptist Family Services does not pursue legal action against parents, Hodges said, FBFM workers have on occasion testified in favor of adoption against parents' wishes. Normally that's not necessary, he added.

"Usually, after we have had time to work with the family and the child, we've been able to win the parent over," he said.

While the agency works for restoration of the child to the family whenever possible, "we would always take the position of advocating what is best for the child," Hodges said.

"In those cases where we don't expect the family to be stabilizing, where there is an absence of positive family factors that would be in the best interest of the child, then we begin to look at other options, such as long-term foster care or adoption," he said.

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Pitfalls avoided when churches,  
clergy clarify expectations

By Kathy Palen

(ABP) -- How can ministers avoid the ethical pitfalls that are trapping a growing number of their colleagues?

The burden of ministerial ethics doesn't fall solely on ministers but should be shared by ministers and congregations, said one Baptist ethicist.

Ray Higgins, an ethics professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, said there are steps both ministers and congregations can take to reduce the likelihood of breaches of ministerial ethics.

His opinion is shared by other Southern Baptists who work with

troubled ministers.

"I think the best way to be pro-active is for congregations and ministers to have very clear understandings with one another about what their expectations of one another are, and then to have ways to continue that conversation as their relationship goes along," said Mark Jensen, a pastoral counselor at East Tennessee Baptist Hospital in Knoxville.

Establishing and maintaining clear expectations is one of the most important steps congregations and their ministers can take, the ethicists and counselors agreed.

Higgins, an associate of the Baptist Center for Ethics, urged congregations to be aware of their own value systems and moral qualities as they determine what they expect in a minister. Church members need to discuss those expectations among themselves and with their ministers, he added, so that there is a common understanding.

Congregations, in fact, need to clarify what they expect from a minister before ever calling that person, said Bob Dale, director of the Center for Creative Leadership Development of the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

A church needs to determine what it is called to be and do before a minister "ever gets stirred up into the process," Dale said. The church then can look for a minister who has the abilities, skills and gifts to lead it in the direction it already feels led to move, he explained.

"We've talked for a long, long time about how God calls people into service, but Baptists have also talked about how God places a minister in a particular place so that a search process is not a politicized process," Dale said. "Ideally, it's a search for the will of God. I think that's an ideal worth holding up."

Ministers also need to clarify their expectations of the congregations they serve, said James Carter, director of the church-minister relations division of the Louisiana Baptist Convention.

Dale emphasized that the joint process of covenant building will require a regular process of renegotiating. "In even the best relationship," he said, "there's always new information and new circumstances arising. An ongoing negotiation process is required so that the covenant is fresh, accurate and alive."

Churches also can help their ministers deal with inevitable ethical dilemmas by providing a group to which the minister is accountable, Carter said. The group -- whether it be a personal committee, a church-pastor relations committee or the deacon body -- should be one with which the minister can share and whose members, in turn, can share with the minister, he said.

This group, Jensen explained, can have regular conversations with the minister about expectations and issues such as compensation and professional involvement outside the church.

Carter acknowledged that such a process of sharing can be difficult for the minister.

"It's difficult for pastors to share their vulnerability simply because many of them feel as though they have an image they have to uphold," he said. "Church people often put a pastor on a pedestal and expect him or her to be something other than human. I think it's important for ministers to understand and to accept their humanness and for churches to understand and accept the humanness of their minister."

Ministers continually face the difficult task of resolving the tension between being human and being the pastor, Higgins said.

"There is a sense in which, in the pastoral role, you have to be larger than life," he said. "What you've got to be careful about is making yourself so much larger than life that you really don't present your real self to the congregation."

Ministers also should meet regularly with a group of other ministers from outside their own congregations, Higgins suggested. This group, he said, provides the opportunity to be "honest about one's own weaknesses, temptations and bloopers" and to receive feedback from other people.

Jensen proposed that ministers also develop a network of relationships with other professionals in and out of their community.

"Pastors have the most impossible job in the world," said Jensen. "They have to be generalists, so they can't know everything about fetal-tissue research and organ donation and everything else in between. But they need to be able to be in touch with people who do understand those issues.

"That's one area in which the Baptist Center for Ethics can help people," said Jensen, who is an associate of the center. "We're working to identify people with particular expertise so that a pastor can call the center and get the names of two or three people who have particular expertise on any number of issues and then call them up and talk to them."

Ongoing training for both ministers and congregations also is important, Dale said. Congregations need to help ministers stay updated through continuing education, thus minimizing the tendency "to go to sleep at the switch," he said.

And, he added, a congregation needs to cultivate its own life so that its members continue to grow spiritually and sharpen their vision and skills.

Such training has been neglected in the past, said Carter, who has co-authored a manuscript for a book on ministerial ethics. The reason for the neglect, he said, is that "people have just generally considered that ministers would be ethical people -- persons of integrity who would know what to do. But we live in a very complex world, and knowing what to do is a very difficult thing to do."

The development of a code of ministerial ethics also can be helpful, Carter said. Such a code can be developed by a local group of ministers and then adopted by the congregation, he said.

Whether through a code of ethics or otherwise, a minister needs to have strong self-definition, Dale said. A minister needs to define "what do I believe, where do I stand and how do I behave," he said.

Such self-definition includes recognizing a distinction between Lord and lordship, Dale said. "Sometimes the minister falls in love with being overlord and forgets that he or she has a Lord over him or her."

"I think a lot of ministers," he said, "either go into ministry with the false notion or develop a corporate mentality that says, 'I'm going to be the boss. I am the authority. I am the only one who knows about these things. I'm the only one God deals with directly on these matters.'"

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-- This is the second 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.

Baptist professors evaluate latest 'big bang' evidence

By Shari Schubert

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- The idea that God created the universe is "a more respectable hypothesis at this point in time than at any time in the last 100 years," astrophysicist George Smoot said in April.

Smoot was announcing the findings of his NASA research team, which was

investigating the "big bang" theory of the creation of the universe. Smoot was the leader of a team of researchers from the University of California-Berkeley that analyzed data from NASA's Cosmic Background Explorer satellite. "If you're religious, it's like looking at God," Smoot said of the findings.

But while the national media made much ado of the Berkeley team's findings, the breakthrough -- if it really is one -- has received a somewhat cooler reception in both scientific and religious communities.

By the time cosmologists met at Princeton University in June to discuss the research team's report, the headlines about the discovery had become a "long-running joke," according to an article in Science magazine.

The reaction of both science and religion professors interviewed by the Word & Way, newsjournal of the Missouri Baptist Convention, suggested the new findings won't impact their faith in God one way or the other.

If anything, the new discoveries would tend to reinforce confidence in creation and in God's "orderliness," said Richard Todd, professor of physics and mathematics at Hannibal-LaGrange College in Hannibal, Mo. But he emphasized, "My faith doesn't rest on scientific calculations; it rests on my personal relationship with him."

"I've always believed in the 'big bang' -- God said it and, bang, there it was," quipped Kyle Guimon, chairman of the natural sciences department at Missouri Baptist College in St. Louis.

The "big bang" theory, first proposed in the 1920s, states that the universe began from a massive explosion, perhaps 15 billion years ago, and has been expanding ever since. The theory has been generally "secure" in the scientific community since the 1970s, according to Don Geilker, chairman of the physics department at William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo.

The "new evidence" was the discovery of tiny temperature fluctuations -- one 100,000th of a degree Kelvin -- in cosmic background radiation. Scientists have theorized that the radiation, originally discovered in 1965 originated in the "big bang" and has been expanding and cooling ever since.

However, until recently the radiation appeared to be evenly distributed, offering no explanation for how matter and energy became clumped together in uneven patterns to form nebulae, galaxies, stars, planets and other cosmic structures. The temperature variations could provide the missing piece of the puzzle, according to some scientists.

In the religious community, the announcement got mixed reviews. George Lindbeck, a professor of historical theology at Yale Divinity School, told Religious News Service that the new evidence "seemed to confirm what I believe as a religious person...creation ex nihilo (out of nothing)."

But Duane Gish, vice president of the Institute for Creation Research in Santee, Calif., said the "big bang" theory, regardless of "proofs," must be wrong because it "contradicts the Word of God."

William Jewell's Geilker cautioned against making too much of the COBE discoveries from a purely scientific perspective. For one thing, he explained, the findings of the Berkeley study cannot be accepted as conclusive until they are verified in independent measurements not taken by the same research team, or using the same satellite. And since there currently is only one COBE satellite, it may be quite a while before that validation is forthcoming.

Also, he pointed out, the research was highly complicated. The study involved processing data from 63 million data points on each of COBE's six radiometers and making sophisticated calculations to compensate for the Doppler effect, radar interference, microwave emissions from the Milky Way, instrument noise and other variables that affect temperature measurements.

However, Geilker emphasized, the work was done by some of the top scientists in their field, using the best methods available, and should be

respected accordingly.

Fact, faith, theory, truth, speculation, revelation -- can they ever come together? How does religion respond to what science has to say about the origins of things?

Southern Baptists "haven't decided yet how to integrate well-founded scientific information with our theology," observed Bill Ratliff, professor of philosophy of religion and theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

"We live in a society that is shaped by scientific research," he pointed out. There is a "sense of indebtedness" to the products of modern science -- medical technology, advanced data processing and so forth. But for biblical literalists especially, there also is a sense of "animosity" toward science because some currently held theories appear to be in conflict with the biblical account of creation.

Among those who hold strictly to the idea of a literal six-day creation, some have offered the hypothesis that God created the universe with "the appearance of age," Geilker noted. He rejects that idea because it makes God "into a deceiver."

Some seek to resolve the tensions between scientific and biblical perspectives by viewing Genesis 1 as a "celebration of creation," emphasizing who and why, rather than a "description of creation," detailing how it occurred, Ratliff noted.

Others, while acknowledging the emphasis on God and his purpose, hold that Genesis 1 is intended as a historical account of creation.

Even among more conservative theologians, "some form of the 'big bang' theory would not be alien to an interpretation of Genesis," noted Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C. He cited three ways in which scholars have sought to deal with the question of the age of the universe:

-- Some understand the Hebrew word "yom," translated "day," to mean a period of time or an age, not necessarily a 24-hour day.

-- "Catastrophism" or the "gap theory" suggests that there is an enormous gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2.

-- Some theologians believe the days of creation were literal 24-hour days and thus believe in a relatively "young" earth. Typically those who hold that view would place the age of the earth at 15,000 to 25,000 years, Patterson added.

"Not a one of those ways is denying the truth of the Genesis record," Patterson said. The important question, said Patterson and others, is "Who caused the bang?"

"There still has to be God causing it to happen," said Gordon Dutille, assistant dean of the Redford School of Theology and Church Vocations at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo. "I don't think it happened by accident."

The process of scientific discovery is not complete, Dutille pointed out. Where science and religion may seem to be in conflict, future studies may provide new information that will help resolve that conflict,

"Science is a self-correcting process," Geilker stressed. Hoaxes and erroneous ideas, over a period of time, will eventually be weeded out and discarded.

"The way I look at it, all truth is God's truth, whether it is discovered in the field of science or the Bible and theology," said Bing Bayer, assistant professor of Old Testament at SBU. "On a day-to-day basis, all I need to know is that God created the world and he's in control of it."

"If God is the creator of the universe, as Christians believe, science cannot discover anything about the universe that is not a part of the process by which God chose to create the universe," said Richard

Cunningham, professor of Christian philosophy at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Dutile, while noting he has "no problem" with people honestly trying to evaluate scientific data alongside biblical teaching in an effort to "resolve some things," cautioned against engaging in non-productive debate. Too often, he pointed out, debate over such issues ceases to be objective and parties attempting to prove a point end up "overstating what they believe."

"Faith has got to be open to all of the best knowledge that is available to us in the 20th century," Cunningham emphasized. "We're living in one of the exciting times in human history. We are learning an enormous amount at a very rapid rate about the universe God created. In my view, it expands my own wonder at the greatness and magnitude of God."

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Russian Baptist pastors remain  
committed despite hardships

By Trennis Henderson

KHABAROVSK, Russia (ABP) -- In a land where most people are either atheists or Russian Orthodox, being a Baptist in Russia means being part of a small minority.

There are fewer than 205,000 Baptists throughout the entire former Soviet Union, according to Baptist World Alliance statistics. By contrast, the population of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the successor to the Soviet Union, is more than 290 million.

In Khabarovsk, a Russian city of 600,000 people, there is only one Baptist church. It has a membership of about 200. What does the future hold for such a congregation?

"It's impossible to live without firm faith and hope," explained Gennady Abramov, chief pastor of Khabarovsk Baptist Church. "We are just servants of God.

"The Bible says you will know believers by their actions," he noted. "It is better to explain the essence of Baptists not only by our works but by our actions. If people see our generosity and love toward our neighbors, it will work better than words."

Abramov and fellow pastor Gregory Tutunik are well aware of the challenges of being Russian Baptist Christians. Both men are third-generation Christians. Abramov's father was a pastor, as was Tutunik's grandfather.

"My grandmother was a strong believer," Abramov said. "Our family prayed every evening and read the Bible. I remember after a talk with my grandmother that God came into my heart."

After completing duty in the Soviet army, Abramov began his ministry by singing in the church choir, working with young people and becoming a deacon. He attended a Bible seminary in Moscow and accepted his first pastorate in 1988 in Irkutsk. Two years later, he moved to Khabarovsk to serve both as pastor and as superintendent of Baptist work in Far East Russia on behalf of the Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists.

Tutunik began his public ministry in a similar way, working with young people and singing in the church choir. A lay preacher since 1969, he graduated from the seminary in Moscow in 1988 and became a deacon in 1990. He was called last year as a pastor of Khabarovsk Baptist Church.

Both men acknowledged they have faced "difficult times" as Russian

Christians and ministers. Prior to Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power, "sometimes we were persecuted by policemen," Abramov said. "It was forbidden to be in small groups for worship."

"There were restrictions even for believers to enter college. It wasn't possible," Tutunik added. "For believers, there were many difficulties to work in some companies."

"Once I was chairman of a trade union committee until they said, 'It is impossible for you as a Baptist to be chairman of this committee.'"

More recently, however, "there are many joys," he affirmed. "Now we have a wide opportunity to share the gospel."

Tutunik works closely with Abramov to help start Baptist congregations throughout the Far Eastern region of Russia, an area with more than 10 million people and fewer than 40 Baptist churches.

Tutunik recalled a worship service in a small town last year in which 60 people made commitments to become Christians. The church had "only 12 to 15 believers at the time," he said. "Now there are 90 Christians there."

"We do much evangelical work," he emphasized. "It is a joy when we visit small villages and towns and many people repent and accept God."

Abramov said 10 new Baptist churches have been started in the region in the past year and 450 new believers have been baptized. "Almost every Sunday some people repent and accept God," he reported.

Abramov hopes eventually to build a Far East spiritual center in Khabarovsk, featuring a 600-seat sanctuary for the church and facilities to train pastors and Sunday school teachers from throughout the region. The Khabarovsk congregation currently meets in a crowded, one-room log cabin which has a piano, an organ and a modest sound system but no indoor plumbing.

Even with the numerous challenges they face, the two Russian Baptist pastors are committed to making a difference for the cause of Christ in Khabarovsk and Far East Russia.

"The Sermon on the Mount says that Christians are the light and salt of the earth," Tutunik remarked. "We must follow this commandment to be the light. We must teach the society the moral principles written in the Bible."

"When Jesus was resurrected and ascended, he said to go and spread the gospel to the end of the world," he pointed out. "We consider our region -- Far East Russia -- to be the end of the world."

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