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Houston church cuts SBC ties
over homosexuality issue

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- A Houston church voted unanimously Aug. 2 to cut ties with the Southern Baptist Convention over the convention's recent actions regarding churches that affirm homosexual behavior.

Covenant Baptist Church in Houston is believed to be the first church to leave the SBC in the wake of the convention's anti-homosexual action in June.

Messengers to the SBC annual meeting in Indianapolis endorsed an amendment to the convention's constitution stipulating that churches approving homosexual behavior are "not in friendly cooperation" with the SBC. The amendment requires approval at two consecutive conventions.

The "test of fellowship" approved by the convention was an abandonment of the traditional Baptist principle of local church autonomy, according to a statement approved by Covenant Church.

"The Southern Baptist Convention said, 'We don't trust our congregations to come to their own decisions,'" James Leach, pastor of the church, told Associated Baptist Press.

"The heart of what it means to be Baptist has been undermined," Leach said.

The small Houston congregation had been dually aligned with the SBC and American Baptist Churches, USA, but is not affiliated with the local Union Baptist Association, the largest association in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Leach called the SBC's constitutional amendment against homosexuality "a single-issue creed." Accepting that decision would be "surrendering to a religious heirarchy," he said, "and we're too Baptist to do that."

Leach said Covenant Church has "never excluded anyone (from

membership) on the basis of sexual orientation."

The statement from Covenant Baptist Church noted the church had disagreed with a number of stands taken by Southern Baptists in the last decade, including women's ordination, the priesthood of believers and church-state separation.

"While we differed from the majority on all of these positions, we could remain in the SBC because those decisions did not bind us. We recognize the right of others to hold opinions different from ours and respect the autonomy of those congregations," the church's prepared statement said.

"The action of the 1992 convention, however, radically changed the relationship between the local congregation and the SBC. Therefore, Covenant Baptist Church hereby sadly chooses to discontinue its association with the SBC."

The congregation further stated: "Covenant Baptist Church affirms the sanctity, dignity and equality of human beings and the value of all life in the universe. We welcome persons of all racial and ethnic heritages, all sexual orientations and all faith perspectives to our Christian community.

"We stand for each individual's right to worship God and to respond to God's call to ministry in her or his own understanding of God's all-encompassing love."

The convention also withdrew fellowship from two North Carolina churches, neither of which sent messengers to the SBC, for condoning homosexual behavior. Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh had blessed a marriage-like union between two homosexuals, and Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill had licensed a gay divinity student to the ministry.

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Barbara Bush pays visit
to Baptist Children's Home

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (ABP) -- First Lady Barbara Bush came to the Florida Baptist Children's Home in Tallahassee for about 45 minutes July 30 with a message hope and possibilities.

"You can be anything you want, if you put your mind to it," she told the group of almost two dozen youngsters after reading them a children's book on that theme.

The story-time setting was a family room of one of the Tallahassee home's three residences. The bright lights, photographic flashes and microphones that attended the First Lady didn't seem to distract the children.

Following the reading time, Bush asked the children what they wanted to be when they grew up. The boys and girls eagerly called out their dreams -- a pediatrician, an animal trainer, a fireman, an electrical engineer, a teacher, a veterinarian, a football player, even president of the United States. The First Lady praised the choice and encouraged the children to go for it.

"It was a good, universal story that applies to any kids," Richard Phillips, president of Florida Baptist Family Ministries, said later, "but it was especially good for our kids who have had so many failures."

The Children's Homes, which are operated by the Florida Baptist Family Ministries, provides residential care and other social services to needy and neglected children.

"She was great. Cool!" said James, who is 8 years old. "I hope she comes again."

"She's nice. I like her," said 10-year-old Erica. "I felt very special. She reminds me of my grandma. And that's what my grandma tells me: 'If you put your mind to it, you can do it.'"

The children presented the First Lady with a tee-shirt that each of them had signed. The shirt displayed a drawing of an American flag and children holding hands, and the words: "One Nation Under God" and "Florida Baptist Children's Home."

Bush assured the children the shirt would remain a treasured memento of her visit. She gave the children a football autographed by herself and one of her escorts for the visit, Florida State University football coach Bobby Bowden. Bowden was Tallahassee-area chairman for a recent campaign to raise money for the Children's Homes.

About 50 adults -- Children's Home alumni, trustees, staffers, foster parents, special friends, news media, Secret Service agents and White House aids -- were there also. During the visit Bush was given a tour of a neighboring residence and also received a briefing by Children's Homes officials.

Her response: "You all are doing such a wonderful thing here."

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-- By Gary Kimler

Bill would lift military
ban against homosexuals

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bill introduced July 28 in the U.S. Senate would repeal the Pentagon's ban on homosexuals serving in the military.

Defense Department policy states that "homosexuality is incompatible with military service." The department says that homosexuals in the military impair the department's ability to maintain discipline, order, morale and mutual trust among soldiers.

Sen. Howard Metzenbaum, D-Ohio, introduced the bill (S. 3084), calling the 50-year-old ban "senseless," "cruel" and "government-sanctioned discrimination."

The bill states that no member of the armed forces or person seeking to become a member of the armed forces may be discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation.

The bill also says that the act may not be construed "as requiring the Armed Forces to modify any rule or policy regarding sexual misconduct or otherwise to sanction or condone sexual misconduct, but such rules and policies may not be applied in a manner that discriminates on the basis of sexual orientation."

Metzenbaum said the performance of homosexuals in the military has been superb and that American taxpayers pay when homosexuals are dismissed from their duties.

He pointed to Lt. Tracy Thorne, a 25-year-old navigator-bombardier, as an example. Thorne finished first in his flight-training classes and received top honors from the Navy. But when the military discovered he was a homosexual, he was dismissed. American taxpayers paid \$2 million to train Thorne as a naval aviator, Metzenbaum added.

"It is the same mindset that resulted in the exclusion of millions of black Americans and millions of women and other minorities from serving

their country in the military for so many years," he said.

"Nothing is better for morale than a military that knows how to get the job done. What is important when the bullets are flying is whether the soldier or sailor or officer is brave, smart and well-trained. Heroes come from every race, gender and sexual orientation."

Metzenbaum's bill mirrors one introduced in the House of Representatives by Rep. Pat Schroeder, D-Colo. (H.R. 5208).

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-- By Pam Parry

D.C. bill faces likely veto
due to abortion provision

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Senate approved July 30 an appropriations bill for the District of Columbia that faces a likely presidential veto because of an abortion-related provision.

The bill (H.R. 5517) also contains a provision requiring D.C. voters to decide whether to allow the death penalty for first-degree murder in the district.

The bill appropriates more than \$700 million for fiscal 1993, including \$30 million for crime-fighting initiatives.

The bill probably will be vetoed because of an abortion-related provision. The bill explicitly prohibits the use of federal dollars for abortions except when the life of the mother is threatened, but it remains silent on the use of district funds for abortion.

The Bush administration has said the president will veto the bill unless language is added to prohibit D.C. from using local funds for abortions, except when the mother's life is endangered. President Bush has vetoed the D.C. appropriations bills in the past three years because it did not contain explicit prohibitions against D.C. funds being used for abortions.

Although abortion has been the focus of controversy surrounding D.C. appropriations in recent years, this year's debate centered on a death-penalty amendment offered by Sen. Richard Shelby, D-Ala.

Shelby, whose aide Thomas Barnes was shot to death on Capitol Hill in January, offered an amendment that would make first-degree murder a capital offense in the district. He said he offered the amendment on behalf of the 248 people who have been murdered in the district in 1992.

"I am not sure that people around here appreciate what it is to murder someone anymore," Shelby said. "That worries me, and it worries a lot of people in America, including thousands in this city."

Reading the names of the 248 victims, Shelby said, "I believe something must be done to stop this carnage."

Sen. Brock Adams, D-Wash., offered a compromise to Shelby's amendment. Adams' compromise, adopted by voice vote, would require the district voters to decide within 90 days after the bill's enactment whether or not to adopt the death penalty. The compromise amendment was approved.

Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss., offered another amendment that would prohibit the district from implementing an act that would extend health-care benefits to non-traditional family members, including co-habituating homosexuals and unmarried heterosexuals.

Lott said the district's program "seriously undermines fundamental family values. It is fundamentally unfair, and there is a cost involved for the federal government if this is allowed to stay on the books of the

District of Columbia."

Adams disagreed, saying that the issue is health insurance. He said the district's policy also would help provide insurance coverage to other non-traditional family members, such as grandparents, grandchildren, senior citizens whose spouses have died, displaced homemakers and the disabled who cannot live alone.

Lott's amendment was approved by voice vote.

The Senate bill was approved by voice vote and has been sent to conference. A conference committee must iron out differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill. The House and Senate bills have similar abortion language, but the House rejected the requirement that D.C. be prevented from implementing its policy extending health benefits to non-traditional family members.

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-- By Pam Parry

Congress sets up commission
to commemorate Jefferson

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Congress has approved a bill that would establish a commission to plan the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth.

April 13, 1993, marks the anniversary. The measure (S. 959, H.R. 5056) notes Jefferson's legacy, including his role in the development of religious freedom.

The bill notes that Jefferson, along with James Madison, "laid the cornerstone of the American tradition of religious freedom and separation of church and state."

The legislation delineated other elements of his legacy: writing the Declaration of Independence; serving as the country's third president; doubling the size of the country with the Louisiana Purchase; promoting government based on the consent of the people; encouraging American science; and championing universal public education.

The 21-member commission would plan and develop programs and activities appropriate to mark the anniversary.

The House of Representatives approved the bill July 28, and the Senate concurred two days later.

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-- By Pam Parry

Postal-rate future uncertain
for non-profit publications

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Non-profit mailers --including most Baptist newspapers -- may have dodged a postage-rate bullet for next year, but they face a perilous future, according to a spokesman for the Alliance of Nonprofit Mailers.

Neal Denton, executive director of the organization, said action by the Senate Appropriations Committee may have rendered only temporary relief to an annual problem.

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"The one-year reprieve leaves us in a terrible position for next year," Denton said.

The Senate committee approved July 31 a postal bill (H.R. 5488) that would appropriate only \$200 million of the \$482 million needed for the non-profit mail subsidy, known as revenue foregone, to maintain current rates.

Revenue foregone reimburses the Postal Service for the non-profit mailers' share of overhead expenses. Non-profit rates reflect only the cost of handling that class of mail.

The \$282 million shortfall would have meant a 30 percent to 35 percent rate increase in fiscal 1993 but the committee also approved a one-year measure that would prevent the Postal Service from raising non-profit postal rates.

The Senate measure mirrors the bill approved July 1 by the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill may come before the full Senate in early August.

While non-profit mailers may be relieved that rates will not increase in the coming year, they were searching for a permanent solution to the annual problem, Denton said. If Congress approves the measure as it is, those publications face a "bloody battle" for sustaining current rates beyond 1993, he added.

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-- By Pam Parry

Involvement in social action
requires ministerial ethics

By Kathy Palen

(ABP) -- Concern about social issues is a must for ministers, said George Reed, a Southern Baptist who works to involve fellow Baptists in social action. And yet, Reed cautioned, such social involvement poses ethical challenges for ministers.

It is not enough for ministers to preach about social issues, Reed said, explaining that ministers need to become personally involved.

"It seems to me that there is a lack of integrity on the part of a minister who might preach racial justice but doesn't have any black friends or colleagues," said Reed, director of the department of citizenship, education and world hunger of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. "The same question of integrity would apply to someone who is concerned about poverty and preaches about concern for the poor but is knocking down a big salary and living in a ritzy subdivision."

Reed argues for a two-step process in which ministers first become aware of and involved in social issues facing their communities and their church members. Ministers then incorporate that concern into their lives in such a way that it is reflected throughout the week, not just on Sunday mornings, he said.

Different congregations tolerate different levels of social involvement by their ministers, said Ron Sisk, pastor of Western Hills Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas.

"It's the pastor's responsibility to know the congregation, to challenge them ethically and with regard to social action, but not to get so far ahead of them that they lose the ability to lead that group of people," said Sisk, an associate of the Baptist Center for Ethics.

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Congregations often become involved in social issues with which they have some point of contact, Sisk explained.

"Our church, like most churches, is being touched by the AIDS issues," he said. "We've had two or three church members who have family members who have died of AIDS or who are presently infected. It is as those personal contacts build that we begin to have the necessary base of dealing with AIDS in a suburban context and moving people into areas of concern to which they can relate.

"My last church got very concerned about a home for AIDS-infected infants that was in our area, and (church members) began to deal with the broader issue as we got them involved with helping those children," Sisk said. "So you look for the point of contact with your congregation and then broaden your action as that point of contact enables you to educate the congregation."

Reed said it is a challenge for ministers to make the shift from specific situation to broader issues. For example, he said, a minister would spend time with a couple who had lost a baby, but it is more difficult for that same minister to become involved in finding solutions to the problem of infant mortality.

One of the biggest obstacles ministers face in regard to becoming involved in social issues is the lack of time, Reed said.

"Part of the dilemma for a pastor on social issues is that in many cases there's nobody in his or her study screaming on behalf of the social issue," he said. "There are people in his or her study facing the break-up of their own marriage or the drug dependence of their own children or perhaps things that are much more mundane or trivial. And it's very easy for the pastor's time to get taken up completely with the immediate needs of his or her congregation."

Another challenge, Sisk said, occurs when a minister feels strongly about an issue but knows that the congregation is either of an opposite opinion or simply unconcerned about the issue. In such a situation, he explained, it is the minister's responsibility to find a way to present the issue to the congregation without breaking the pastoral trust.

One approach to that situation would be to bring in an outside speaker to deal with the specific issue, he said.

"That speaker can be pretty hard-hitting about the issue and say more than you really want to say," he said. "Then you can use your pastoral relationships to help the congregation work through it after they've been challenged by the outside speaker."

Another approach would be to lead the congregation to establish a task force or ad hoc committee to investigate that particular issue, Sisk said. "It's much easier," he said, "for a congregational group to begin dealing with an issue than it is for the minister simply to speak ex cathedra from the pulpit and declare the mind of God and expect the people to come along.

"I think in any church that has a positive relationship between the pastor and the people, you can deal with just about any issue that you feel must be dealt with. But you have to think carefully about the approach that is best for your congregation."

Reed also cautioned about other ethical pitfalls related to ministers' involvement in social issues. He advised ministers:

-- Don't try to force everyone in the church to get on the bandwagon for the pastor's issue, and don't think less of the people within the church who choose not to become concerned or who come out on another side of the issue.

-- Be careful about the question of whether the pastor is representing the entire congregation when he or she becomes involved in a social issue.

-- Don't become so deeply involved in a particular social issue that

pastoral responsibilities at the church are neglected.

"A pastor who is out marching in the streets and not spending time visiting in the hospital or counseling people in the church or preparing well for Sunday morning is going to run into some trouble," he said. "It may take the form of opposition related to an issue, but a whole lot of the time what will be provoking it is the failure to tend to pastoral duties."

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-- This is the final article in a series on ministerial ethics commissioned by the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. Kathy Palen is a freelance writer in New Haven, Conn.

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REMINDER: Associated Baptist Press will move into new offices August 10. We anticipate a little confusion on that day, but the move should not interfere with our August 11 issue. For your information, our new address and phone numbers will be:

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