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Fellowship names first stateside
mission worker, funds other projects

By Greg Warner

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has appointed its first stateside missions worker, who will coordinate the organization's hurricane-recovery work in Miami.

Tony Ponceti, a Baptist layman and commercial printer in Miami, will direct the project as a volunteer. The Fellowship Relief Coalition, as the project is called, will help uninsured and underinsured hurricane victims rebuild their homes. Ponceti estimated that 10,000 to 30,000 of the 80,000 homes damaged by Hurricane Andrew last August fall into that category.

The areas most heavily damaged by the country's worst hurricane are inhabited by low-income and moderate-income families, agricultural workers, retired military personnel and ethnic minorities, Ponceti said. Despite government assistance, many residents are without the resources or insurance to repair the hurricane's damage.

"We are tying God's resources to the needs that are there," Ponceti said. "There's a great need in South Dade County today. Some people have limited their vision of what God can do. But there are an awful lot of folks calling and wanting to get involved."

Ponceti will coordinate the work of individuals, churches and groups who volunteer to come to Miami to help in the recovery. He has hired two construction contractors who will supervise the work, done mostly with donated supplies and volunteer labor.

Office space for the coalition has been donated by the realtor who rents Ponceti space for his printing business. Bayshore Baptist Church in Tampa purchased a 14-foot, 10-ton flatbed truck for the project on behalf of the Florida Fellowship.

The national Fellowship's global missions ministry group approved the

Miami project during its November meeting in Nashville, Tenn., and agreed to contribute \$35,000 to the coalition's 1993 budget of \$100,000.

The national Fellowship will contribute an additional \$10,000 by the end of 1992 to get the effort off the ground.

The project is co-sponsored with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Florida, which will contribute \$15,000, and University Baptist Church in Coral Gables, which will supervise the program and contribute the largest portion, \$50,000.

Earlier the national Fellowship provided \$15,000 to deliver food and other emergency supplies to storm victims in the weeks after the hurricane. Both the Fellowship's Florida chapter and University Baptist were involved in the relief work.

Although the coalition planned to hire a full-time mission worker, Ponceti agreed to lead the project without pay.

"Here is a layman, a businessman, who is committing a significant portion of his life to this ministry," said Pat Anderson, coordinator of the Florida Fellowship. "We're doing a significant work and we're doing it without a bureaucracy."

In the hours immediately after the hurricane hit and for several days after, Ponceti, who is bilingual, worked with Baptist and government disaster-relief organizations to get emergency supplies and services to some of the hardest hit areas in Homestead.

Ponceti also has spent more than a year leading former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega in weekly discipleship lessons. Noriega reportedly professed faith in Christ while in a Miami prison.

Ponceti already has been involved in some Miami rebuilding. Names of needy homeowners come from Miami's interfaith coalition, the federal disaster-relief agency and insurance adjusters, he said.

The coalition also will canvass neighborhoods to find additional people who have "physical, spiritual, and psychological needs," Ponceti said.

One person he wants to help, for instance, is a 77-year-old man whom Ponceti said has been "living in a chicken hut" since his home was destroyed by the storm. "The government wants him to go into a nursing home, but he wants the freedom to continue on his own property," Ponceti explained.

"I don't believe that this work is a 'social ministry' at all," Ponceti said. "The number one priority of this project is sharing Jesus with the people of Miami."

Ponceti said he has had more opportunities to share the gospel since the hurricane than ever before. "This was a powerful storm, but the gospel that is going out is more powerful," he said.

The coalition is looking for more churches and groups to donate their time to the rebuilding. They also need building materials, particularly roofing supplies such as gray or white shingles, tar paper, roofing nails and tin caps.

Anderson said the coalition is asking churches to adopt a house as a mission project, providing the estimated \$3,000 needed to repair the roof of an average house in the area. The coalition is not interfering with the livelihood of local contractors, he said, because it is helping "the poorest of the poor" who can't afford other assistance.

Ponceti added: "We need volunteers, materials, but most of all...we need mature Christians who can come down. No special talents are needed except the desire to share Jesus."

In addition to the Miami recovery project, the Fellowship's global missions ministry group approved several other mission projects for 1993 during its November meeting.

Projects totaling \$1.3 million were approved for Europe in 1993. Among

them:

-- Hunger-relief funds were approved for Croatia and Serbia, where ethnic warfare has killed several thousand people and created an estimated 850,000 refugees. The Fellowship will spend \$38,625 in Croatia and \$12,875 in Serbia for 1992-93. The relief work is in partnership with My Neighbor, a Christian humanitarian organization with offices in both regions.

-- A grant of \$100,000 will be made to the EBF to fund an indigenous mission project in Siberia. The money will support 100 ethnic Russian missionaries, each of whom will spend two years in a remote Siberian village establishing a church. According to Keith Parker, coordinator of Europe missions for the Fellowship, most of these communities "haven't heard the gospel in 80 to 90 years."

-- \$20,000 was allocated as seed money for a church-loan fund to help Baptist congregations in the republic of Georgia buy and renovate buildings in which to meet. Parker said only seven of the region's 23 Baptist churches have places to meet, and most homes are too small to accommodate the congregations. The Fellowship hopes to help 10 churches acquire buildings.

-- A grant of \$15,000 to the European Baptist Federation will sponsor a conference in Romania to help Baptist unions in Eastern Europe develop theological training centers.

-- The Fellowship will spend \$7,000 to buy a bus for a village school Albania.

-- \$1,500 will be spent to send an Estonian pastor to a pastoral training school in Budapest, Hungary.

In addition to these projects, the committee approved assignments for two mission workers previously hired.

Jim Smith of Berlin, Germany, will be assigned to the European Baptist Federation as special projects coordinator assisting Karl-Heinz Walter, EBF general secretary. Paul Thibodeaux of Vienna, Austria, will take a six-month assignment at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, to coordinate the study of a potential relocation for the seminary.

Both Smith and Thibodeaux served as missionaries for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in Europe until earlier this year.

The committee agreed to hire staff to develop the Fellowship's urban ministries and ministries to internationals. A budget of \$100,000 was approved for salaries and support.

One existing urban ministry -- a food pantry in Providence, R.I. -- received a \$2,500 grant.

A study committee was appointed to explore ways the Fellowship can start new churches primarily in the United States. And the committee agreed to develop a furlough policy for missionaries.

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WMU study of future not influenced
by Parks' decision, leaders say

By Jack Brymer and Greg Warner

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- The decision by Keith Parks to lead the global missions program of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship won't influence Woman's Missionary Union's deliberations about assisting the Fellowship, according to two WMU officials.

In fact, the task force appointed to study WMU's future completed its report before Parks' Nov. 30 announcement, said two members of the study

group.

Parks retired as president of the Foreign Mission Board Oct. 31 in a dispute with trustees over missions philosophy. He accepted the Fellowship's offer to direct its fledgling missions program despite objections from Southern Baptist leaders that the Fellowship will drain missions dollars from the SBC.

"Where we're coming from, Keith Parks' decision will not affect us," said Martha Wennerberg, WMU recording secretary and a member of the 17-member special committee.

"The topic of Keith Parks' future was not one we avoided talking about at all," added Joyce Mitchell, associate executive director on the WMU's Birmingham staff. But, she added, the committee's final report was completed Nov. 26, four days before Parks' announcement. "That was so providential."

The report, which will be presented to WMU's executive board in January, is expected to propose how WMU should relate to the Fellowship, if at all.

The Fellowship, a two-year-old organization of Southern Baptists displeased with the more conservative direction of the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies, has asked WMU to promote its new missions program and annual mission offering.

Leaders of the SBC, who consider the Fellowship a threat to the denomination's established mission programs, have suggested the SBC might start a separate women's agency if WMU gives the Fellowship any support.

As an auxiliary to the SBC, WMU elects its own board of directors and raises its own financial support. Agencies of the SBC, on the other hand, are controlled by trustees appointed by the SBC and receive major funding from the convention.

In making his announcement, Parks said the Fellowship would allow Southern Baptists to choose between two mission programs. He said the Fellowship will "supplement" and not compete with the FMB.

Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien and several other WMU officials were traveling to promote the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for foreign missions and were unavailable Dec. 3 to comment on Parks' announcement.

WMU's promotion of the SBC's two annual mission offerings is largely responsible for raising roughly half the budget of the Foreign Mission Board and Home Mission Board.

Both Mitchell and Wennerberg declined to discuss the recommendations coming from the WMU task force, but both said they are pleased with the result.

"I feel certain we are not going to have an official response to Dr. Parks' announcement until our January meeting," added Mitchell, who directs WMU's missions services system.

Wennerberg, of DeFuniak Springs, Fla., suggested WMU is not going to change a great deal as a result of the long-range study.

"WMU plans to keep our focus on missions and will try to serve all Southern Baptist churches," she said. "As long as we have our eyes focused on what we are about, then we are in good shape."

Wennerberg, who served as president of Florida's WMU for five years, said she can understand why Parks accepted the Fellowship position, adding that he will be a tremendous asset to the organization. "His heart is in missions and always will be," she said.

Wennerberg said Parks' intention -- to focus Fellowship efforts on areas of the world where there is little or no Christian witness -- "would not be in competition with the Foreign Mission Board."

Keith Parks' move to Fellowship called both 'betrayal,' 'miracle'

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Reaction to the announcement Nov. 30 that Keith Parks, former president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, will lead the new missions program of the rival Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has been strong and mixed.

Parks' move was described as everything from a "betrayal" to a "miracle."

One of the most respected Southern Baptist leaders, Parks retired from the FMB Oct. 31 in a dispute with trustees over missions philosophy. He accepted the Fellowship's offer to direct its fledgling missions program despite objections from Southern Baptist leaders that the Fellowship will drain missions dollars from the SBC.

The Fellowship is a two-year-old organization of Southern Baptists displeased with the conservative direction of the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies.

In making his announcement, Parks said the Fellowship will "supplement" and not compete with the work of the FMB's 3,900 missionaries.

Bill Hancock, immediate past chairman of FMB trustees, disagreed, saying Parks' decision "undermines" the support of FMB missionaries.

"It's unethical to threaten the security of these missionaries with that action," said Hancock, pastor of Highview Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky. "It's like a pastor being at a church 12 years and going across the road and starting another church."

Hancock said he is "not at all surprised but deeply disappointed" by Parks' decision. "It was my perception Dr. Parks was headed in this direction as early as 1989 in his efforts to control trustee actions."

Although Parks said he only decided to take the job in recent days, Bill Hall, an FMB trustee from Danville, Ky., said trustees considered Parks' decision "a foregone conclusion."

"Keith is a moderate," Hall said. "That's his crowd.... He fits in with the CBF. Keith cannot work with conservatives. The conservative trustees tried to work with him. He began an adversarial relationship years ago, in making his statements against (former SBC president) Charles Stanley and some of the other conservative leaders of the convention."

Daniel Hatfield, a missionary to Panama currently on furlough, said he feels "confused and betrayed." Like other missionaries, he worried Parks' move will hurt Southern Baptist funding of the FMB.

"It's acceptable for him to sever ties and go do something else," said Hatfield, who is teaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. "... But I think he has usurped the support upon which we (missionaries) are dependent."

Charles Hedrick, an FMB missionary on furlough from Nigeria, said Parks' decision might cause a morale problem among missionaries.

"I believe in the long run it's going to have us in competition, with two groups vying for money, for personnel," said Hedrick, who is living in Lawrenceburg, Ky.

Martha Wennerberg of DeFuniak Springs, Fla., recording secretary of Woman's Missionary Union, disagreed. She said Parks' intention -- to focus Fellowship efforts on areas of the world where there is little or no Christian witness -- "would not be in competition with the Foreign Mission Board."

Wennerberg, who served as president of Florida's WMU for five years, said she can understand why Parks accepted the Fellowship position, adding

that he will be a tremendous asset to the organization. "His heart is in missions and always will be."

The Fellowship's chief executive, Cecil Sherman, said Parks gives the organization "enormous expertise in mission strategy and experience" that can help the young organization avoid mistakes.

"We need credibility," added Sherman, Fellowship coordinator. "There are people who are quite unhappy with things in the SBC, but that does not mean that they are confident of CBF. Keith Parks and (his wife) Helen Jean Parks do bring to CBF some credibility. They are faithful people. They are people of character. They are people of transparent commitment.... We need that kind of help because people are trying to sort us out."

One observer who apparently found Parks' credibility attractive was former President Jimmy Carter, a Baptist layman from Plains, Ga. "This decision gives many Southern Baptists renewed confidence in the viability and effectiveness of a comprehensive foreign mission program that will remain true to our Christian principles and those of our Baptist forebears," Carter said in a statement.

Carter, who had lunch with Parks and other Fellowship leaders Dec. 1, offered to help the Fellowship's missions program.

John David Hopper, an FMB missionary in Europe for 26 years who now is supported by the Fellowship, said Parks' experience "will strengthen bonds of confidence between Southern Baptists and European Baptists."

"Dr. Parks is greatly appreciated and trusted by European Baptists as a man of unusual spiritual insight and unquestioned integrity," said Hopper, president of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland, which was defunded by FMB trustees a year ago.

Ben Loring, pastor of a Texas church renowned for its support of Baptist missions, said Parks' decision is an indication God "can take our mess and make it his miracle."

Loring, who serves on the Fellowship committee that hired Parks, described the 13-year SBC controversy as "our denominational mess" and wondered "how God could be in this at all."

"I saw the miracle begin to reveal itself this week as I learned that Dr. Keith Parks accepted the invitation to become coordinator of missions for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship," Loring said in a statement to his church, First Baptist of Amarillo, which has led the SBC several years in money given for missions.

"While some will interpret this action as divisive and disloyal, Dr. Parks is simply staying 'faithful to the heavenly vision' that has been expressed in his lifelong service to biblical missions expressed in a Baptist context."

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-- By Greg Warner, Mark Wingfield and Jack Brymer

Jimmy Carter offers to aid
Parks in mission efforts

By Ed Briggs

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Former President Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist layman, has offered his assistance to Keith Parks in helping the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship get its missionary program off the ground.

Parks, retired president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, confirmed he had lunch with the former president in Atlanta Dec. 1, during

which Carter issued the offer.

One day earlier, Parks, 65, announced he will head the mission arm of the Fellowship.

Since leaving the presidency, Carter has spent much of his time working for the Carter Center in Atlanta, which runs humanitarian and social projects in 26 African countries, China and the former Soviet Union.

Both Parks' announcement and Carter's offer to help come as Southern Baptists are being asked to commit their missionary dollars to both the Foreign Mission Board and the Fellowship.

Parks said that he welcomes not only Carter in the Fellowship mission camp but any other "authentic Southern Baptist who wants to be involved."

He added that Carter, who with his wife, Rosalyn, participates in such hands-on projects as Habitat for Humanity house-building programs, is "an unassuming, genuine Southern Baptist. We are thrilled that he has kept an awareness of what's going on and that he felt the Lord leading him to get more involved."

Parks said that Carter had called him to set up the meeting. "He said he had not been involved in Southern Baptist work as much as he should have, even though he still teaches a Sunday school class each Sunday at his church in Plains, (Ga.)."

"The combination of his overseas work and his Baptist commitment and his feelings that he really didn't fit into the convention the way it was going caused him to make contact," Parks said. "He said he wants to be supportive of what we are doing at CBF and would like us to find a way he can be of assistance in the mission program."

According to sources, Carter called Parks earlier to encourage him to take the Fellowship missions post.

After Parks' announcement, Carter issued a statement commending Parks and applauding his move to the Fellowship. "This decision gives many Southern Baptists renewed confidence in the viability and effectiveness of a comprehensive foreign mission program that will remain true to our Christian principles and those of our Baptist forebears," Carter said.

Parks, who retired Oct. 31 from the SBC mission agency in conflict with fundamental-conservatives who control the trustee board, officially takes over operation of the fledgling Fellowship mission program Feb. 1. In the meantime, he plans to gear up the operation mostly from his Richmond home.

The mission leader said that during the luncheon, which also was attended by Carter's wife, "We talked about his speaking at meetings or writing articles. I asked him about providing consultation on some overseas as well as stateside work."

Stateside, the Carter Center sponsors "Project Atlanta," an ecumenical program that coordinates volunteers, agencies, business groups and religious organizations.

Jimmy Allen, co-chairperson of the Fellowship's mission committee, earlier began talks with the Carter Center to carve out a Baptist role for work among inner-city churches.

But Parks said he talked yesterday with Carter about consulting at a later date as the Fellowship gains strength "about some projects overseas."

"Out of the context of what he is doing, maybe there will be ways that we could work together or he could provide advice to us about the things that need to be done," Parks explained.

Virginia conservatives
soften talk of split

By Michael Clingenpeel

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Conservative Virginia Baptists have softened earlier rhetoric calling for a secession from the Baptist General Association of Virginia.

In four of a series of six meetings across Virginia Dec. 1 and 3, conservative pastors and laity discussed the future of their movement in Virginia.

T. C. Pinckney, a member of the SBC executive committee and leader in the Virginia conservative faction, said there were no votes taken at the six regional meetings. He characterized any talk of a consensus about future action as "premature." He did, however, hint that a majority of people present did not seem to favor a split.

"Some felt that conservatives should pull out," said Pinckney, who attended two of the regional meetings. "A large majority did not feel this. They feel conservatives need a more formal arrangement among ourselves for fellowship but don't want to leave the BGAV at this time."

Pinckney said his assessment was based upon statements by speakers at the regional meetings and replies on written questionnaires filled out by persons attending each meeting.

The meetings were closed to reporters from the Religious Herald, the BGAV's weekly newsmagazine, but a reporter from Norfolk's Virginia-Pilot was permitted to cover one session held in Hampton under background rules.

Pinckney was quick to add no decision was reached at the meetings. "The six meetings are not designed to make decisions, but to allow conservatives a forum and put into process recommendations, suggestions and guidance as to what conservatives should do in light of what the state convention did."

The conservative discussions come in the wake of the annual meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia last month in Virginia Beach, where moderate-backed candidates, resolutions and motions won decisively.

At that meeting Pinckney was defeated in the presidential election, receiving only 24 percent of the votes. Other conservative candidates were defeated by similar margins. At last year's BGAV, conservative-backed candidates received approximately 35 percent of the votes.

Conservatives were further angered by two actions of the annual meeting. One was the approval of the 1993 BGAV budget which allows churches to channel missions gifts to the "Vision 2000 Plan" of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which entirely bypasses SBC agencies.

"It seems as if the BGAV is moving closer to the CBF and farther from the SBC," said Virginia Beach pastor Kelly Burris after Tuesday's meeting at Liberty Baptist Church in Hampton. "We need to establish our own identity."

The second action at the November meeting which angered conservatives was a resolution which did not condemn homosexuality as a sin and called for churches to take a pastoral approach toward homosexuals.

An attempt to amend the resolution by calling homosexual behavior "sinful and unacceptable behavior for Christians" failed, as did a constitutional amendment which would have excluded from the state association any church which approves homosexual behavior.

Twenty-three conservative churches from eastern Virginia paid for a full-page advertisement in the Dec. 1 Virginian-Pilot, which serves the eastern Virginia region, distancing themselves from the BGAV resolution on homosexuality.

Referring to the resolution, the ad stated "this does not reflect the

beliefs of the vast majority of Southern Baptists nationwide." The ad also contains a list of beliefs endorsed by the churches, the text of recent SBC action on abortion and homosexuality, and a list of the 23 churches and their pastors.

Immediately following the annual meeting, rumors surfaced that conservatives were planning a split from the state association. That rumor was fueled by an informal meeting of 30 pastors in Virginia Beach Nov. 25 in which a majority reportedly wanted to create their own Virginia convention.

This did not seem to be the attitude of conservative pastors and laity at four regional meetings held Tuesday in Hampton, Fredericksburg, Rural Retreat and Roanoke, however.

Pinckney congratulated conservatives for their demeanor at the meetings. "The overall spirit of the meetings was not pejorative," he said. While firm statements were made, he said, "nobody was named by name as an object of criticism. We're not out to accuse anybody. Our only purpose ultimately is the salvation of more souls."

Though three of Tuesday's regional meetings were attended by 100 or fewer persons, approximately 450 attended the meeting in Hampton. Burris, pastor of Kempsville Baptist Church, Virginia Beach, described the meeting as positive. "I did not sense any anger, but there was a feeling of grief over directions our state had taken."

Observers have raised questions about the implications of a possible separate conservative state convention in Virginia.

James Guenther, legal counsel for the SBC, last week issued a statement indicating "the SBC would be required to consider a new paradigm" if two separate Baptist bodies from the same state sought recognition from the SBC. Citing the SBC's autonomy, Guenther added that the SBC could relate to one or both of the bodies.

Burris indicated that this question was not raised publicly, but is being discussed among conservative leaders in Virginia.

The other two regional meetings were to be held December 3 in Richmond and Lynchburg.

Information gathered during the six regional meetings will be evaluated, according to Pinckney, and a recommendation about the direction of the conservative movement in Virginia will be made at a statewide meeting on Jan. 28 at Old Forest Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg.

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More than animal sacrifice
at stake in court challenge

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Members of the Santeria religion believe that the ritual sacrifice of animals is an essential part of practicing their faith.

Most Americans would consider that to be a strange, if not repugnant, practice. But, no problem. After all, the religious rights of Americans are protected by the First Amendment.

Not necessarily.

When Santeria adherents showed signs of establishing a church in Hialeah, Fla., city officials took action. For stated reasons ranging from zoning objectives to health and sanitation concerns, Hialeah enacted ordinances that bar animal sacrifice but not the killing of animals for any other purpose.

Today Santeria adherents -- who number between 50,000 and 60,000 in

South Florida -- find themselves waiting for the U.S. Supreme Court to decide whether Hialeah officials went too far in interfering with their right to practice their religion.

But much more than animal sacrifice is at stake in the case, according to church-state specialists, who say the religious practices of all Americans are at risk.

As a result, Hialeah's actions have been condemned by a surprisingly broad range of U.S. religious groups. Lining up to ask the U.S. Supreme Court to strike down Hialeah's ban were organizations representing Baptists, Catholics, evangelicals, Jews, Mennonites, Presbyterians and Seventh-day Adventists.

While these groups do not espouse or endorse animal sacrifice, they voiced strong concern that Hialeah's action against the Santerias singled out a religious practice for discriminatory treatment.

Their concern is twofold.

First, they say, for the First Amendment's promise of religious freedom to have meaning, it must grant that freedom to minority religions as well as more popular religions. They believe that if government is allowed to restrict religion, it had better have a convincing reason.

Second, they realize their own freedom is on the line too. They worry that if a city or state can ban an unpopular religious practice like animal sacrifice, government could ban a more widely accepted practice, such as communion or baptism.

While on the surface such fears may seem far-fetched, church-state specialists say they are justified because of a U.S. Supreme Court decision in 1990. The decision in *Employment Division vs. Smith* virtually discarded the court's longstanding view that government can restrict religious practice only if the restriction serves a compelling state interest and the least restrictive means is used.

Under the 1990 decision however, the government no longer needs a compelling reason to restrict religion but only a "rational basis." As long as the restriction is generally applicable and does not single out religion, it doesn't have to meet the higher standard of a compelling government interest.

The reduced level of protection for religious practice announced in *Smith* has led to a string of court losses by religious parties, prompting many church-state leaders to argue that the free-exercise clause effectively has been deleted from the U.S. Constitution.

It is not surprising that those leaders asked the Supreme Court to use the *Santeria* case to reconsider the lower standard adopted in the *Smith* decision.

Whether or not the court decides to reconsider *Smith*, church-state advocates say Hialeah's restrictions on the *Santeria* faith are unconstitutional -- even under the *Smith* decision -- because they single out one faith group for discrimination.

University of Texas law professor Douglas Laycock, who argued the *Santerias'* case before the Supreme Court, told the justices that Hialeah's actions amounted to "open discrimination against a minority religion."

Laycock attacked Justice Antonin Scalia's suggestion that Hialeah's ordinances could be viewed as neutral because they could be applied, for instance, to a secular fraternity that occasionally practices animal sacrifice.

Under that logic, Laycock reasoned, government could ban communion if a fraternity or some other non-religious group decided to practice communion. If Scalia's argument is persuasive, Laycock told the court, then the free-exercise clause really has been deleted from the Constitution.

While minority religions may be the most likely to suffer under the high court's new test, there is already evidence that all religions now have less protection.

For instance, churches in Berkeley, Calif., suddenly found themselves facing a threat of taxation earlier this year. City officials decided to include churches among non-profit organizations taxed under a 1979 city ordinance.

Under protest from area church leaders, Berkeley officials recently appeared to back away from applying the tax to churches. But under the Supreme Court's current view of the First Amendment, there is little constitutional restraint keeping Berkeley or any other city from opting to tax the collection plate.

Or consider Cornerstone Bible Church's brush with a Hastings, Minn., zoning ordinance that excluded churches from commercial and industrial zones. Applying the relaxed standard announced in Smith, a trial court dismissed the church's claim. While the parties eventually settled this case, it highlights the diminished protection now afforded religion.

Cases such as these and the Santeria dispute help explain why American religious bodies are working overtime both in the courts and in Congress to restore the former high level of protection for religious practice.

The threat is clear, according to James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee. "When anyone's religious liberty is denied, everyone's religious liberty is endangered."

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Miami pastor helps Russians
put Christmas tree in Red Square

By Jack Brymer

MIAMI (ABP) -- A 60-foot Christmas tree will adorn Moscow's Red Square this year, signaling the start of a new tradition in Russia, which has not observed Christmas as a national holiday for 73 years.

The project, which was approved recently by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, is primarily the work of Baptist pastor Tommy Watson of Miami.

Yeltsin is expected to speak during the tree-lighting ceremony in late December, and his wife will proclaim the Christmas tree a new tradition for the orphaned children of Moscow.

Watson, who has worked on mission projects in Russia and other East European countries for years, paid for the \$63,000 tree in part with money from an insurance settlement on his house in Miami, which was damaged by Hurricane Andrew.

"Since 1917, Russia has marched its armies and paraded its war machinery through Red Square to demonstrate its military might while millions have come out to view it," said Watson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Perrine in Miami. "I predict that more people will come to see this tree than ever viewed their war machine."

The artificial tree will be decorated with 4,300 lights and topped off with a six-foot Star of Bethlehem. A life-size mechanical manger scene will be under the tree.

Christmas Day in Russia is celebrated Jan. 7. The tree will be lit Dec. 29, beginning the two-week holiday. The tree ceremony will coincide with a massive advertising-information media campaign, Watson said.

A special "Red Square Christmas" program is planned exclusively for 5,000 orphans Dec. 31, during which Mrs. Yeltsin is expected to give each

child a Christmas gift and a special pictorial New Testament.

Beginning Jan. 1, a theatrical children's program, "Christmas Tree," will take place daily on a special stage near the tree.

In addition to these special events, Watson said there will be different programs every day during which he hopes to distribute more than a million gospel tracts and Bibles. He predicts that tens of millions of Russians will visit the tree.

Another special event will take place on Christmas Day. For the first time since 1918, the Russian Orthodox Church will present a program relating to the celebration of the birth of Christ. The celebration will include traditional Christmas folklore and will be telecast throughout the country.

Watson said the idea for the Christmas tree came to him last July. He contacted Deneen Alexandrow, a member of the Perrine church and a business partner who was in Russia at the time, to start working on the project. Final approval, with the signature of President Yeltsin, came only Nov. 19.

"We have worked and waited all this time," Watson said.

Watson was in Russia working on the project when Hurricane Andrew struck Miami. His house and property in Homestead were damaged. He said he used insurance money to make the down payment on the tree, which cost \$63,000.

The entire project cost \$125,000, Watson said. He hopes individuals and churches interested in the project will contribute to offset the cost. A special commemorative certificate with the signatures of Moscow's mayor and other officials is being offered to donors.

Among those endorsing the project are Yuriy Luzkov, the mayor of Moscow; Alexandre Borisov, president of the Russian Bible Society; the Moscow Trade House, which oversees all buying and selling for the city; and Archbishop Solnechnogorskiy, chairman of the Department on Church Charity and Social Service of the Moscow Patriarchate.

Watson and his wife, Mollie, will travel to Russia Dec. 27 for the historic event. "Don't you know the Russian Christians who have longed for years to see a Christmas tree will be rejoicing?" he said.

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Whitsitt society seeks history's
answer to moderate structures

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- The newly formed William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society will look to the past to find the future of the organizations being started by moderate Southern Baptists, according to its president.

"Our society wants to make a contribution to the present search for how moderate organizations will be relating to each other," said society president Walker Knight of Decatur, Ga. "This is an important moment in history, full of great promise."

"At the present time, we have more than 10 independent, autonomous organizations, most serving a specific need or filling a vacuum in moderate Baptist life," Knight said.

"The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is the largest, and many are asking: Will they follow the society, congregational, conventional or some new way of relating to the others who have a narrower focus? We want history to speak to the present and to the future."

The society's findings will be presented to its first annual meeting May 13, 1993, in Birmingham, Ala.

Knight said a major presentation will look at historical models of Baptist organizations, "the way things were." Other speakers will then give their visions of the future structures. The society meeting precedes the annual meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Birmingham.

The Whitsitt society was formed Oct. 9 in Macon, Ga., by those attending a presentation of history papers on the moderate movement. The meeting was sponsored by Mercer University under the direction of history professor Walter Shurden.

The society, according to Knight, "seeks to raise the historical consciousness of Baptists in a treasured and threatened heritage."

"We will especially stress the Baptist themes of soul freedom, church freedom, Bible freedom, civic freedom and human freedom," he added, "in addition to stressing the preservation of important historical documents."

Other society officers are Loulie Owens Pettigrew of South Carolina, vice president, and Shurden, secretary/treasurer. Membership is open to anyone who pays the \$15 annual fee; the fee for organizations is \$25. Knight said charter memberships will be open until June 1, 1993.

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Dispute over Fellowship divides
longtime friends in Mississippi

By Don McGregor

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Program, once the common bond of missions support for two Mississippi friends, has become an issue between the two.

Gene Triggs, a former major official with the Mississippi Baptist Convention, was denied appointment to a key committee recently by his longtime friend and now convention president W. W. Walley because of Triggs' involvement with the state's chapter of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Triggs, vice president of Mississippi Chemical Corporation, the largest private business enterprise in the state, is moderator of the Fellowship chapter in the state.

Walley, a Waynesboro physician, had planned to name Triggs to the Committee on Committees for the state convention. But Walley either rescinded the appointment or reconsidered it, depending on whose version you believe.

Triggs declares that Walley asked him to serve and he agreed. Walley says the appointment was considered but never made.

Walley says that his reason for backing out on the appointment is because Triggs is an officer of the Fellowship in Mississippi. The Fellowship promotes diverting contributions from the Cooperative Program, the traditional funding channel for the Southern Baptist Convention.

"I am sold on the Cooperative Program," Walley said, "and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship competes for Cooperative Program funds."

"The Cooperative Program is messed up now, like a lot of other things, but I am sticking with it," Walley added.

He mentioned the close friendship that he and Triggs had shared for "years and years" and said he "hated to do it."

Triggs, on the other hand, said that the action had hurt and depressed him. He also mentioned the years of friendship, which had grown out of volunteer missions endeavors in which the two had served together. In years past, both Walley and Triggs served as trustees of the Foreign Mission Board; Triggs was chairman.

The dispute is one of the first times the SBC controversy, which has engulfed the national convention for 13 years, has surfaced on the state level in Mississippi.

"I will continue to be a Mississippi Baptist and a Southern Baptist," Triggs said. "I had no intention of creating a problem."

He noted the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship merely offers alternatives for mission opportunities.

"All the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is trying to do," he said, "is to make another avenue of missions available for those who are unhappy with the way Cooperative Program funds are being used."

The Cooperative Program supports about 20 SBC agencies, most of which are controlled by fundamental-conservatives.

According to some sources, Walley said he received a great deal of opposition to his appointment of Triggs. But Walley told Associated Baptist Press he takes sole responsibility for his decision.

Walley said he has received letters protesting his failure to follow through on the Triggs appointment, though "they have been few," he said.

One letter-writer, Meridian attorney Greg Snowden, said Walley's action "smacks of exclusion and division, not love and cooperation."

"You must be very cautious as to the precedent you are setting," Snowden wrote. "If you really mean to exclude otherwise qualified persons from places of service merely because of their support for the CBF, then this frankly is no better than telling all of us that we are not wanted in the state convention."

Walley told ABP he would take the same approach to appointing fundamental-conservatives, who started their own organization in Mississippi recently. He said he would not appoint any member of the new fundamental-conservative organization to any position for which he has the responsibility for appointment.

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Texas anti-gambling group
names Dan Martin director

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Veteran Baptist journalist Dan Martin was elected executive director of Texans Who Care, a statewide anti-gambling coalition, at the group's board meeting Dec. 2 in Dallas.

Martin, 54, who was fired as news editor of Baptist Press in July 1990, will assume the executive post for the Austin-based, non-partisan organization Jan. 1.

He succeeds longtime anti-gambling activist Sue Cox, who resigned to become director of the non-profit Texas Council on Problem and Compulsive Gambling.

"Gambling significantly impacts the quality of life for all Texans, but especially the poor," said Martin. "I look forward to working with Texans Who Care in combating this growing problem."

A native of Wichita Falls, Texas, Martin is an award-winning news writer who spent 17 years working for daily newspapers in Texas and Colorado before entering denominational journalism in 1973.

Martin worked for the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and served nearly a decade as news editor of Baptist Press, official news service of the Southern Baptist Convention.

He was fired, along with BP director Al Shackelford, after refusing to

bow to the pressure of the fundamentalist-dominated Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Martin was interim news director for Associated Baptist Press for several months when the alternative news service was launched in September 1990. Most recently, he has worked as a free-lance writer and pastor of Ledger Baptist Church in Ledger, N.C.

He is a graduate of Midwestern University in Wichita Falls and attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"I look forward to building on the solid leadership of Sue Cox and anticipate working not only with Texas Baptists, but also with other religious, business, corporate and community groups who share our concerns about gambling in Texas," Martin said.

"I believe we have the opportunity to stop the efforts of those who wish to continue to go down the road of legalizing every form of gambling, including casinos, riverboats, video poker and increasing the number of dog tracks.

"This is both a significant opportunity and a significant challenge. I am grateful I've been given the chance to make a contribution to the quality of life in my native state."

Texans Who Care chairman Dick Graves of Plano said, "We are excited to have as our executive director a person with the skills and experience that Dan Martin brings to the position."

Graves praised Martin's expertise in media relations, his familiarity with churches of all denominations, and his ability to communicate fast-breaking information about gambling-related legislation to TWC members.

Martin should be "the spark needed to energize Texans Who Care" as it seeks to mobilize opposition to the continued expansion of gambling, Graves said.

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