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Supreme Court won't review ruling
against Louisiana abortion law

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Louisiana has lost its bid to criminalize most abortions.

Without comment, the U.S. Supreme Court declined March 8 to review an appeals-court decision striking down Louisiana's comprehensive abortion ban enacted in 1991 over the veto of then-Gov. Buddy Roemer.

The law criminalized the termination of a pregnancy except to save the life of the unborn child or mother, or in cases of rape or incest that were properly reported to law enforcement officials.

The refusal to review the lower ruling is consistent with the high court's stance of allowing states to place some restrictions on abortion but not to criminalize it or place an undue burden on a woman's right to an abortion.

In rejecting the Louisiana statute, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals cited the Supreme Court's position in a 1992 Pennsylvania case (Planned Parenthood vs. Casey) that says states may not impose an undue burden on a woman's right to seek an abortion before the fetus develops to the point of being able to survive outside the womb.

In Casey, the Supreme Court said an undue burden is created if a law's "purpose or effect is to place a substantial obstacle in the path of a woman seeking an abortion before the fetus attains viability."

The Louisiana law, the appeals court said, "is clearly unconstitutional" under the standard set by the Supreme Court in Casey.

In that case, the high court held that Pennsylvania restrictions such as a 24-hour waiting period and parental-consent requirement did not impose an undue burden on a woman's right to choose an abortion. But Pennsylvania's spousal-notification requirement, the court said, was an undue burden.

In recent months, the Supreme Court let stand other lower-court rulings that were consistent with its stance in Casey. In November, the high court refused to review a ruling that struck down a Guam law that would have made most abortions felonies. The next month, it declined to disturb a ruling that

upheld Mississippi regulations requiring abortion counseling and a 24-hour waiting period.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The following four stories about African-Americans may be run as a series.

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African-American Southern Baptists
feel pressure from two sides

By Ferrell Foster

CHICAGO (ABP) -- African-Americans who serve as pastors of Southern Baptist churches sometimes feel caught between two worlds, a black one and a white one.

Because their churches are involved in the previously all white Southern Baptist Convention, some of their fellow black pastors view them with suspicion. And within the SBC, some whites are not comfortable with the black presence.

At least, that's the perception of a handful of African-American pastors in the Chicago area, an area where Southern Baptists have made more inroads among blacks than they have elsewhere.

"We're in a Catch 22 situation," said Gene Gibson, referring to the book title that has become synonymous with no-win circumstances.

Black churches aligned with the SBC draw "the alienation of some of our brothers," said Gibson, pastor of Mission of Faith Baptist Church in Chicago. And yet they do not feel "fully accepted" in the SBC.

Why would black pastors brave that criticism to affiliate with the Southern Baptist Convention?

The main reason is because of the financial support and proven programs the SBC offers, according to Willie McPherson of the SBC Home Mission Board. "When black churches use Southern Baptist programs, the churches do grow," said McPherson, director of black church extension for the HMB.

African-American churches outside the Bible Belt have been more accepting of the Southern Baptist label than churches in the Deep South. While many Baptist state conventions boast a few black churches, a disproportionate number of them are in states like Illinois, California and New York.

Of the estimated 1,300 black Southern Baptist churches, about 300 of them are in California, where Southern Baptists themselves have a relatively short history. About a third of the Southern Baptist churches in California are African-American, according to the HMB, including 15 of the 25 churches that lead the state in baptisms.

One reason Southern Baptists have found more acceptance outside the Bible Belt, McPherson said, is that the history of discrimination and segregation, which played such a central part in the formation and life of the Southern Baptist Convention, has less influence on blacks outside the South.

"Many churches put that aside because to use Southern Baptist materials and programs contributes to faster growth," said McPherson. Even churches in

the South have found that true, he said, citing the example of Glendale Baptist Church in Miami.

Still most African-American churches that align with the SBC retain their affiliation with historically black conventions, allowing them to participate in both.

Gibson of Mission of Faith said he studied Baptist history before joining with Southern Baptists. What he discovered was that in 1841 one-third of Baptists in the south were black. From 1863 to 1950, African-Americans were outside Southern Baptist ranks. Now they are back.

"They're not new; they are back," Gibson stated emphatically.

Contributing financially to the work of the Southern Baptist Convention also draws criticism from both sides, the Chicago pastors said.

"We have to do a lot of justifying as to ... why we're giving money to the white folks," said Frank Thomas, pastor of New Faith Baptist Church in Matteson, south of Chicago.

While other blacks ask why they are sending any money at all to the SBC, whites in the SBC wonder why most African-American churches give relatively little to the SBC.

In their defense, pastors of black SBC churches say the needs in their local communities are much greater than in many white areas. They give to missions, they say, but it is primarily channeled through local ministries to the poor and needy.

"We're just coming through our first generation of Southern Baptist blacks, and there's still not a lot of identification," said Don Sharp, pastor of Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church in Chicago and a former IBSA president. "It's a process that's going to take time. ... Simply because we've joined does not mean that we've fully embraced everything."

What bothers the African-American pastors about Southern Baptist life is that, like in the broader society, they often feel ignored.

"I don't think that many of our white brethren even recognize that we exist," said Gene Gibson of Mission of Faith. "To be totally ignored is one of the highest insults."

It's impossible for an African-American to grow up in America and not come in contact with white people, Gibson said. But the opposite is not true about whites.

For blacks who feel isolated from a white-dominated world, Sharp said, "We can always relate to Jesus at the point of being ostracized." Jesus, though not an African, is "symbolic of a person repressed but who emerges victorious. ... Somehow in our theology Jesus transcends race."

Sharp of Faith Tabernacle said racism still exists within Southern Baptist circles. "It's not overt, but it's there."

But the pastors agreed they are more concerned with developing good relationships between the races than with settling old scores.

"One of the most forgiving people on earth is the African-American," Gibson said. All they want to know from whites is: 'Are you really my friend?'"

Clarence Hopson of Broadview Baptist Church added: "Prejudice is not a one-way street. ... Black people have an idea of having always been taken advantage of."

The controversy that has rocked the SBC in recent years is of little concern to the pastors. Frank Thomas of New Faith called it a "white folks fight." Blacks have been reluctant to get involved in the denominational battle, he said, because "black people have so much (other) stuff going on in the community to fight over."

The HMB's McPherson agreed most black pastors nationwide have not been affected much by the controversy. "It's not a black issue, so most of them

don't pay that much attention to it. There's never been a question in black churches about whether or not the Bible is inspired. ... Most pastors are very conservative when it comes to the Word of God."

But some black churches have been labeled liberal, McPherson said, because of their traditional commitment to social justice and ministry, which have been hallmarks of the African-American Baptist experience.

Such labeling blurs an important distinction. "From a biblical perspective, blacks are conservative," McPherson said. "From a political perspective blacks are liberal."

Of the values stressed in the African-American community, Sharp said, "certainly the most prominent one was one of justice." Black Baptists believe in a God who is "going to make wrong right," he said, "and it's not just going to happen in the by and by."

New Faith Baptist Church in Matteson has a full-time minister of social justice, said Pastor Frank Thomas. That person helps the middle-class church connect with people in need of food and clothing.

While New Faith Church is in the suburbs, Faith Tabernacle and Mission of Faith Baptist churches are among the many black congregations ministering in the midst of great social needs on the southside of Chicago.

But African-Americans do more in the social realm than minister to individual needs. They also have a keen interest in politics.

"Government has been the only means ... by which we could have access to equality," said Sharp. Equality did not come from the private business sector. That's why we're more political" than most white churches.

Broadview Baptist Church, west of Chicago, takes a different approach. Pastor Clarence Hopson does not endorse candidates or allow political speakers to use the pulpit.

"You ought to exercise your constitutional right to vote," he said, but on Sunday "we have an appointment with the God of the universe."

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African-American churches
worship with freedom

By Ferrell Foster

CHICAGO (ABP) -- There is a rhythm to it all -- in the music, the preaching and the service as a whole. It catches up feelings and emotions to convey truth and substance.

It is worship in an African-American Baptist church.

The most obvious distinctive of black Baptist churches is their worship. African-American pastors refer to it as "freedom in worship."

Music provides the framework. It elicits hand-clapping, arm-raising, body-swaying participation. And that frame surrounds the centerpiece: the sermon, delivered with a cadence and encouraged by the congregation.

The services seem to reach out to the spirit, mind and emotions of worshippers. And the process takes time, about two hours in many churches. But no one seems to mind.

African-American worship is "unpredictable," said Don Sharp, pastor of Faith Tabernacle Baptist Church in south Chicago. "You're never quite sure what's going to happen each Sunday."

And that's why people keep coming back, Sharp explained with excitement rising in his voice. People tell their friends, "Let me tell you what happened this past Sunday."

"It's that kind of thing that energizes. To miss out on that is to miss out on a piece of glory."

Delivery of the sermon illustrates the dynamic nature of the service. The pastor not only speaks to the congregation, the people in the pew speak back, encouraging him and at times anticipating his next statement.

"Go ahead, preacher."

"Yes, Lord."

"Alright now."

"Come on, preacher."

"Preach that."

Those phrases and many others, spoken with a softer passion than the sermon, expressed the congregation's involvement during a recent service at Broadview Baptist Church in the suburbs west of Chicago.

"When we worship, we worship," emphasized Clarence Hopson, pastor of Broadview Church.

Hopson said he doesn't agree with everything that happens in African-American worship. But he contrasted it to the typical worship service in white Baptist churches. "White churches are so casual in their worship. Black churches are not casual."

The black worship experience is "not incumbered by rules and regulations," said Gene Gibson, pastor of Mission of Faith Baptist Church in south Chicago. "We leave room for the Holy Spirit to act."

Anglos will "scream and shout" at a football game but not at church, noted Frank Thomas, pastor of New Faith Baptist Church in Matteson, south of Chicago. African-Americans, on the other hand, have a more "holistic" approach, seeing "less of a distinction between the sacred and secular."

All four of the pastors have preached in white Baptist churches in the state. Sharp said he has been "overwhelmed with the receptivity" of white lay people. "Many of the lay Anglo people are desirous of freedom in the worship experience."

In African-American churches, some people raise their hands in praise while others do not. Some cry out with shouts of joy or appeal to God while others remain silent. Some speak in tongues in some churches while others do not. And the pastors said people accept one another despite the differences in personal worship.

"Everybody has a right to worship the way they want to worship and not be judged by a few people who claim to know the Bible," said Gibson.

The New Testament says worship should be orderly, and the pastors insist their churches meet that criterion. "There's no question that we understand things must be done decently and in order," Sharp said. That principle is applied, he said, by means of an unwritten code that determines "when enough is enough."

Thomas said appropriate worship is "not disruptive."

Does the emotionalism result in changed lives?

"Yes indeed," responded Sharp. "That's the attraction. ... Our people do really want something to happen in their lives to make a difference. It's not a one-time experience. It's an on-going experience. ... It's not escapism."

The emotionalism of African-American worship is rooted in the Bible, the pastors said. "The New Testament is filled with appropriate emotions of joy and celebration," Thomas asserted. "... I believe the gospel has legitimate emotions that go with it. How can you have good news without joy?"

There is celebration in African-American churches, Sharp said, because worship services mark another week of "overcoming obstacles."

Each of the pastors also cited another reason for the unique nature of African-American worship -- slavery.

Under slavery, Hopson said, blacks "weren't allowed to say what they

thought."

Then the pastor switched to the present tense, as if slavery still existed. In church, he said, the slave "let's all of that out. ... When he gets to church he is a free man."

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African-American pastors
get respect, carry burdens

By Ferrell Foster

CHICAGO (ABP) -- The title of pastor in an African-American church carries with it great respect and great responsibility for the man who holds it.

He is honored, protected, cared for, listened to and followed. The typical black pastor is leader, preacher, organizer, community spokesman and surrogate father.

The great respect shown to African-American pastors by their congregations is one of the distinctives of the black Baptist experience.

"The African-American church gives its pastor the type of respect that a pastor should have," said Gene Gibson, pastor of Mission of Faith Baptist Church in Chicago. And the church, in turn, makes sure the pastor is "comfortable."

Not that the pastor carries an arrogant demand for respect. Gibson himself speaks to church members in a kind, unassuming manner that expresses great concern for people.

Clarence Hopson put it another way. "Reverend is not a title; it's an honor" -- an honor given by others, not by one's self, said the pastor of Broadview Baptist Church, west of Chicago.

"I'm just a little shepherd boy here," stated Hopson, a big man who speaks with the confidence of someone secure in his calling. He has been pastor of the church for 20 years.

Hopson illustrates one of the apparent reasons for pastoral respect in African-American churches -- long tenures as pastor.

The laypeople "know the pastor is not going to leave after two or three years," said Gibson, who started Mission of Faith in 1978. "He's going to be there ... through thick and thin."

Because of the lengthy tenure, a pastor's ministry is liable to span much of a member's lifetime and cross generational lines in that family.

Don Sharp, pastor of Faith Tabernacle Church in Chicago, has numerous pictures of church members throughout his office. And he can tell stories about how the Lord has worked in different lives.

Gibson tells of ministry to four generations in one family. "The African-American pastor ministers to the flock in every aspect" of life -- in birth and death, in sickness and health, in jails and hospitals.

And because of the black pastor's influence in the community, "you're not just the pastor for your members but for your community," stated Frank Thomas, pastor of New Faith Baptist Church in Matteson, south of Chicago.

Becoming a part of so many families, however, creates great demands.

"We are chauffeurs, baby sitters, surrogate fathers," said Gibson.

And with the added societal problems related to drugs, economics, gangs, murder and marital problems, Thomas said, "the needs are so great."

"African-American people are very tribal," Thomas continued. "They want to see the leader." The demands on the pastor's time are substantial, Thomas

said, "and it kills you." Literally.

Black pastors live an average of 56.4 years, said Gibson, who is 57 and has undergone major surgery in recent years.

Thomas is 37. "I feel 45 or 50," he said. "This place takes every ounce of energy I have."

The respect given pastors is one reward for their service and sacrifice. There are others. Broadview and Mission of Faith churches purchased homes in the suburbs for their pastors. Broadview buys Hopson a new car every other year.

Churches also have committees to look after the needs of their pastor and his family. A certain possessiveness and protectiveness is therefore exhibited by congregations and enjoyed by pastors.

What do they expect of the pastor? Leadership.

"The people expect the pastor to walk with God on a consistent basis, and as a result he reveals God's vision for the church," said Sharp.

"Vision" is a word that surfaces often when African-American pastors talk about their role.

"God sends a vision through the pastor," said Thomas. "The leadership catches the vision and passes it to the people. When the people catch the vision, there's a rearrangement of priorities. When you rearrange your priorities, you discover that you cannot build God's vision on fund-raising. And once you see a vision and rearrange your priorities, you're ready for sacrifice."

That process takes strong leadership, the Matteson pastor continued, but power and authority doesn't equal vision. "If it's God's vision, I think it will be confirmed in the people, not as your vision but as God's vision."

Despite the emphasis on vision, not all black churches handle decision-making in the same manner.

Thomas leans heavily on New Faith's executive board, which "regulates the resources for the vision."

At Faith Tabernacle, on the other hand, the people view the pastor as "prophet, priest and proclaimer," Pastor Sharp said, and they expect him to provide the vision. "You don't take a vote on it."

Church is not a democracy, Sharp stressed. "You're not going to find that in the Bible."

That puts increased responsibility on the pastor. But he is aided in such a role by the people's willingness to forgive, Sharp emphasized. "We're a very forgiving people. ... We're much more tolerant of leaders."

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Role of blacks in Bible
downplayed, scholars say

By Jim Jones

ARLINGTON, Texas (ABP) -- Blacks in the Bible have been ignored for centuries because of ignorance, apathy and racially biased teachings, a group of African-American biblical scholars contends.

"We can no longer accept the idea of a blond, blue-eyed Jesus that has been taught in America," said Dwight McKissic of Arlington, Texas, who is among biblical researchers calling for greater recognition of the African presence in ancient Bible texts.

His book, *Beyond Roots: the Search for Blacks in the Bible*, which has sold 60,000 copies, disputes the white view of biblical interpretation that

has dominated much research.

It says that well-known Bible characters such as Ham, the son of Noah; Solomon; Moses' wife, Zipporah, described as "a Cushite woman"; Joshua; David's wife, Bathsheba; and the Queen of Sheba were black or of black descent. McKissic cites evidence that the wise men who visited Jesus were North African blacks and that Jesus, while not black, had four African ancestors.

McKissic says he's not trying to put a black stamp on the Bible.

But clarifying the black role in Bible history is exceedingly important for African-Americans because they've been pictured in inferior roles, he said. Black Americans should understand that their religious heritage did not stem from "slave religion" but goes back to the beginning of recorded history.

"They told us there was a curse on Ham," said McKissic, 36, founder of the 500-member Cornerstone Baptist Church, the first black Southern Baptist church in Arlington, a suburb between Dallas and Fort Worth. "That was the extent of what was told us about our black heritage. We were descendants of Ham and all black folks were cursed and that's why we were slaves."

Cain Hope Felder, professor at Howard University in Washington, D.C., says in his book "Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family" that blacks have never been given their proper place in biblical research.

"Despite the fact that the Bible has a favorable attitude about blacks, post-biblical misconstruals of biblical traditions have created the impression that the Bible is primarily the foundational document of "the white man's religion," Felder said.

Failure to teach about the black presence in the Bible has caused many African-Americans to defect to Islam, which some bill as the natural religion of black people, McKissic said.

"The Muslims teach that Christianity is the white man's religion," he said. "But I've proven that there were Christians in Africa 400 years before Mohammed (the founder of Islam) was born," McKissic said.

While disputing McKissic's conclusions, many respected white scholars agree that the African role in the Bible has been given short shrift.

"I think it's true that not enough attention has been paid to blacks in the Bible, mainly because of Christianity being so strong in Europe," said biblical antiquities expert William Tolar.

Bible characters have been "Europeanized" when they were neither white nor black but of various Middle Eastern hues, said Tolar, vice president for academic affairs at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

Artists in Europe painted biblical scenes, such as da Vinci's "The Last Supper" showing pale disciples eating with a white Jesus. "We need to say these aren't Anglo-Saxons, but we need objective, serious scholarship not slanted toward blacks or whites."

Warning against putting a racial stamp on Bible interpretation, Tolar added: "Whether you are black or white, you need to be honest about what the Bible says and not read too much or too little out of these texts."

Walter Brueggemann, immediate past president of the mostly white Society for Biblical Literature, agrees that Bible studies have had a bias toward Caucasians.

"What we thought was objective scholarship was obviously quite slanted," Brueggemann, professor of Old Testament at Columbia Seminary in suburban Atlanta, said in a telephone interview. "Since it all came from the same (white) slant, we didn't notice it."

Both secular and religious scholars are finding greater evidence that Africa was the home of the earliest civilizations, McKissic said.

Much of the argument for a greater black presence centers on the

biblical kingdom of Cush, which was named for one of Ham's three sons. The area is now known as Echiopia and Somalia.

Black biblical scholars contend that the black presence in Egypt was pervasive, and indeed many Egyptian paintings in tombs show black people, believed to be Nubians from the area of Cush.

Tolar and other scholars question the premise of McKissic and some other biblical scholars that Ham, one of Noah's three sons, was black.

"I don't think Noah and his wife had one black, one yellow-skinned son and one white," Tolar said.

But that was the standard teaching 100 years ago. After the flood, some Bible scholars said, Noah and his wife had three sons who established the white, yellow and black races. "Ham was (said to be) the black," Tolar said. "And some taught that the curse on Ham justified slavery. But that's been totally repudiated."

Tolar gives more credence to the argument that one of Ham's sons, Cush, founded the land of Cush.

Some use the fact that Cush was black to say Ham had to be black, too," Tolar said. But he believes diet and climate may have caused those in Cush to develop darker skins.

Aside from the Ethiopian eunuch mentioned in the New Testament, and a man believed to be black, Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross, many other African references have been downplayed, McKissic says.

McKissic came to Texas in 1983 from a church in Pine Bluff, Ark., convinced that God was calling him to attend Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Although he had a college degree, he said, the only job he could get was mowing lawns. But that was divinely ordained, he says now, because it allowed him to meet a member of Tate Springs Baptist Church who introduced him to Charles Clary, the pastor.

"We both had a vision of starting a black Southern Baptist church in Arlington," McKissic said. The church grew from a handful of members in McKissic's garage to the five-and-a-half-acre site now occupied by Cornerstone Church in one of the fastest-growing sections of south Arlington.

McKissic said he stumbled into researching about blacks in the Bible while preaching a series of sermons on Genesis in 1988.

"I was amazed about what I learned about the black presence in the Bible and (what) I had never heard about in college or seminary," he said.

After his book was published in 1990, he began receiving invitations to speak at churches and universities. He has spoken at Harvard, Syracuse, Cornell, Morehouse University and Spellman University, both in Atlanta, and the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

He addressed students at Dallas Theological Seminary in February, and earlier he spoke in chapel at Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth, where he is completing a master of divinity degree.

If African-Americans knew more about their biblical backgrounds, they would be prouder of their history, he said.

"If this had been taught, in just a matter-of-fact way, it might have prevented the racial tensions of another era and of today," he said.

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-- Jim Jones is religion writer for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. This story is reprinted with permission.

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