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Passion for justice leads Baptist
to protest murderer's sentence

By Ken Camp

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- "Controlled outrage" filled the air, according to Southern Baptist Michael Bell, as 10,000 hymn-singing African-Americans marched peacefully through downtown Fort Worth, Texas, March 28, protesting the probated sentence given a white supremacist convicted of murdering a black man.

"We felt that justice had been slain -- or at least left mortally wounded -- on the streets of Tarrant County," said Bell, pastor of Greater St. Stephen First Baptist Church in Fort Worth and chairman of the Coalition of African-American Ministers of Tarrant County.

Christopher William Brosky -- an acknowledged white supremacist "skinhead" -- was convicted of murder in the racially motivated 1991 slaying of Donald Thomas. An all-white Fort Worth jury on March 23 sentenced Brosky to 10 years probation.

"Oh no! Not this! Not here!" was Bell's reaction when he first learned of the sentence. Images of the Rodney King verdict and Los Angeles riots passed through his mind, he said.

On the night the verdict was announced, a fellow black Southern Baptist -- Howard Caver, pastor of World Missionary Baptist Church in Fort Worth -- called Bell, insisting that the religious community find a way to stand against the perceived injustice.

Bell contacted leaders of various clergy groups in Tarrant County, and Caver called the district attorney's office asking that representatives from the prosecutor's office speak to the ministers regarding details of the Thomas case.

Brosky was riding in the back seat of a vehicle when William George Roberts fired from the front seat the shotgun blast that killed Thomas. Roberts struck a plea bargain with prosecutors to accept a 40-year sentence in return for his guilty plea. Joshua Hendry, driver of the car, pleaded guilty to murder in juvenile court.

But Brosky's light sentence -- 10 years probation -- most angered African-Americans.

The ministers' coalition elected Bell as their spokesman and developed a plan to mobilize people of faith in Tarrant County in opposition to the way the Thomas case had been handled. About 350 people attended a March 26 prayer vigil at the Tarrant County Justice Center organized by the coalition.

The coalition joined others in urging U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno to conduct a Justice Department investigation of the case. Brosky still could face federal charges for civil-rights violations.

Bell also met with leaders of the African-American Summit of Tarrant County to pledge the cooperation of black churches in the March 28 downtown protest planned by the summit. Churches dismissed services early to encourage participation in the march, and some congregations provided transportation in church vans.

Ministers were stationed along the perimeter of the crowd and at every corner to limit the risk of confrontation with police, as well as to provide credible witnesses in case any violent incidents did take place. The march was completely non-violent, and no arrests were made.

But black Southern Baptists were distressed to see that the crowd of 10,000 was almost exclusively African-American.

Bell, who serves on the Coordinating Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, had written in the March issue of the Fellowship's newsletter: "It seems that the better part of wisdom says that somehow our partnering makes us more human. And it is really at the level of our common humanity that we find cause to cooperate."

Though the words were written in an appeal for moderate Southern Baptists to "broaden the movement" to include people of color with differing agendas, Bell acknowledged the statement's larger implications following the Brosky sentencing.

"There is no such thing as something happening to me or to you in isolation. We're all tangled up in the same big bundle," Bell said. "This situation is not only an affront to people of color but to all people of conscience."

At the initiation of three local Southern Baptist pastors -- Charles Wade of First Baptist Church in Arlington, Stephen Shoemaker of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, and Gary Miller of Sagamore Hill Baptist Church in Fort Worth -- members of the Coalition of African-American Ministers of Tarrant County met April 1 with a number of Anglo ministers and one Korean pastor to discuss the Thomas case.

The meeting at Pilgrim Valley Baptist Church was scheduled less than an hour after a Tarrant County grand jury indicted Brosky on two new charges in the Thomas slaying -- engaging in organized criminal activity and conspiracy to commit murder.

Following the 90-minute meeting, the ministers released a joint statement urging the repudiation of racism and calling upon Christians "to support legislation which will prevent these injustices from occurring within our judicial system."

Earlier, coalition leaders had delivered 5,000 letters to Texas Gov. Ann Richards calling for swift passage of the Hate Crimes Bill which passed out of state Senate committee.

In light of the tensions demonstrated between Korean-Americans and African-Americans in South Central Los Angeles, Bell said he especially was touched by the presence of Hyo Young Kim, pastor of Bellevue Korean Baptist Mission in Fort Worth, at the clergy meeting.

"That Korean pastor who was present comes from a heritage of hurt also. It can resonate with what has happened to him and his people," Bell said.

The ministers also agreed to hold an April 18 memorial service for Ronald Thomas at Travis Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth and to raise

money for his widow, Carolyn.

Gary Miller, president of the Tarrant Baptist Association Pastors' Conference, was struck by the appreciation the black pastors showed to their Anglo and Asian counterparts at having an opportunity for dialogue.

"I believe a genuine appreciation for one another came out of the meeting," he said. "I don't want to oversell it, but I feel that it did happen."

As a direct result of the April 1 meeting, Miller invited Bell and Caver to join a panel of black pastors for a question-and-answer session at the April 5 meeting of the Tarrant Association Pastors' Conference.

The meeting produced a resolution which characterized the Brosky verdict as a "miscarriage of justice" and called for changes in Texas law to prevent a recurrence. The resolution, passed by the association's executive committee, urged local Baptists to protest directly to U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno.

Though healing comes slowly, Bell said he remains hopeful that the Thomas case can serve as a "wake up call" to awaken a passion for justice and spirit of cooperation among believers of all races in the Fort Worth area.

Bell characterized the inter-ethnic ministers' meeting as "a good first step on a long journey. But we have to realize this is more of a marathon than a sprint. It's more of a dissertation than a term paper."

"We're all involved in this together," he said. "Maybe that's what Jesus was trying to say to us."

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Parks outlines missions plans
to Mississippi Fellowship

By Don McGregor

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship wants to provide all Southern Baptists with a way to do missions, Keith Parks, missions coordinator for the national Fellowship, told the group's Mississippi chapter.

Parks spoke on two occasions to the Mississippi chapter during that group's semi-annual meeting April 2-3 in Jackson.

Parks, former president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, retired last October -- three years earlier than planned -- because of philosophical differences with trustees. Parks told the Mississippians that he retired because FMB trustees would not accept his leadership -- a charge FMB trustees deny.

Parks' impasse with trustees was one byproduct of the 14-year struggle for control of the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies.

While fundamental-conservatives now control the SBC, Parks said, they can't change his identity as a Southern Baptist. "They may try to keep me from voting at the Southern Baptist Convention, but they can't keep me from being a Southern Baptist," he declared.

Parks said the change in the SBC became undeniable for him at the SBC annual meeting in New Orleans in 1982. He said that he and his wife, Helen Jean, determined at that point that "the controlling voice (was) no longer the kind of Baptists that we know."

"I tried to keep on and continue to do what I was called to do," he said, "but the criterion (for participation in the SBC) had been changed. It had become how one voted at the Southern Baptist Convention."

"The litmus test," he declared, "was being a part of the 'conservative resurgence.'"

Parks said he could not stay at the FMB and "let decisions run contrary to convictions." "I couldn't in good conscience support the trustees. And (missionary) candidates began to say, 'We cannot in good conscience serve.' I couldn't fulfill my duties. I couldn't be president."

Despite his retirement, Parks noted, "The Lord said, 'You're not through.'" Earlier this year he was named to the Fellowship post.

"The Lord is moving among Southern Baptists in a remarkable way," Parks continued. "People are saying that the Fellowship is striking a responsive chord."

He said the Fellowship now has 20 missionaries under appointment and hopes to double that number by the end of the year. The Fellowship will concentrate on the 25 percent of the world's population that has not had a chance to respond to the gospel, he noted.

"The first strategy should be praying," he added. "If we could ever discover intercessory prayer and if we could discover the power of it, it would change the direction of the world."

Concerning the decision by Woman's Missionary Union to offer support to the Fellowship, Parks said, "The WMU made the right decision in the right way and in the right spirit, and they are not going to change."

Parks predicted that SBC leaders will initiate a new women's movement, but not for missions. "It will major on Bible study and self improvement," he said.

In business actions, the Mississippi Fellowship adopted a budget of \$15,000 for the year.

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Former Baptist congressman
Fred Schwengel dies at 86

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Fred Schwengel, 86, a former member of Congress, founder and former president of the U.S. Capitol Historical Society and an ardent advocate of church-state separation, died April 1 following a brief illness.

Schwengel, a Republican and a member of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., represented Iowa's 1st Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives for 16 years. He lost a 1972 re-election bid after leading the effort to defeat a proposed constitutional amendment that would have permitted government-sponsored prayer in public schools.

During a three-week period in 1971, Schwengel took the floor every day to argue against the proposed amendment and in favor of church-state separation. The proposal had solid support in the House but fell 28 votes short of the necessary two-third majority needed for passage.

In 1962, Schwengel organized the Capitol Historical Society, supported by a bipartisan group of congressional leaders. Under his leadership the historical society published the best-selling Capitol guidebook, "We the People," and a calendar widely distributed by members of Congress.

Schwengel was an avid student of history and of Abraham Lincoln. His knowledge and love of history were evident in the unsurpassed tours of the Capitol Schwengel conducted for the society.

In a 1991 interview, Schwengel traced his love of history to the day he met Harry Truman. "He put his hand on my shoulder," Schwengel recalled, "and

said, 'Young man, you've gotta know your history if you want to be a good citizen.'

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said: "Fred Schwengel was a symbol and a spokesman for all that is best in Baptists. He stood tall for freedom and never confused the need for separation of church and state with the necessary witness of religion to politics."

Schwengel is survived by his wife, Ethel Schwengel of Arlington, Va.,; a son, Franklin Dean Schwengel of Santa Monica, Calif.; a daughter Dorothy Jean Cosby of Alexandria, Va.; five grandchildren and a great grandchild.

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-- By Larry Chesser

Texas ethics group rejects tough abortion statement

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission rejected a move to make the commission's 1992 statement on abortion more restrictive.

The commission -- the governing board for Texas Baptists' moral-concerns and public-policy agency -- defeated a motion to bring its statement more in line with the strict stance of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

The four-page statement adopted last year states, "Aborting the life of the fetus should be regarded as an extreme act undertaken under extreme circumstances." Abortion might be chosen "as the lesser of evils" only in such cases as rape or incest, pregnancies which severely threaten the mother's physical or emotional survival, or in pregnancies involving severe fetal deformity and disease incompatible with life, according to the CLC position paper.

Archer City pastor Roger Deerinwater, who offered the motion to revise the 1992 statement, argued abortion should be considered only to save the life of the mother. He proposed removing from the CLC document three exceptions -- for cases of rape, incest or severe fetal deformity.

Deerinwater originally asked that the Texas CLC change its abortion stance "to move into agreement with the position of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission." He deleted the reference to the SBC agency when others objected.

Citing Psalm 139, Deerinwater said any abortion exception for severe fetal deformity "ignores the sovereignty of God," implies "God made a mistake in the womb," and opens up the possibility of elective abortions for convenience.

But Dallas pastor George Mason warned against building a systematic theology around a single, poetic passage of Scripture.

The motion failed, with only two commissioners voting in favor.

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CORRECTION: In the April 1 story "Critical condition of health care....," please change Robert O'Brien in the last paragraph to William O'Brien.

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