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Clinton sets conduct as test
for policy on gays in military

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Conduct, not sexual orientation, is the basis for a new policy on gays in the military announced July 19 by President Clinton.

Announcing the policy to a military audience at the National Defense University at Fort McNair, Clinton said it strikes a "sensible balance" between the rights of individuals and the needs of the military.

Under the new policy, the practice Clinton ordered six months ago of not asking potential military recruits about sexual orientation will continue. Military personnel who engage in homosexual conduct, though, may be dismissed.

Military personnel who simply disclose that they are homosexual will face a military investigation but will be given the opportunity to show that they do not engage in homosexual acts.

Clinton's proposal was endorsed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, including its chairman, Gen. Colin Powell.

Clinton said the policy "is, in my judgment, the right thing to do and the best way to do it."

"It is right because it provides greater protection to those who happen to be homosexual and want to serve their country honorably in uniform, obeying all the military's rules against sexual misconduct. It is the best way to proceed because it strikes a sensible balance between the rights of the individual and the needs of our military to remain the world's No. 1 fighting force."

Clinton acknowledged the policy will not please everyone, particularly those with the strongest positions on either side of the issue.

"But those who wish to ignore the issue must understand that it is already tearing at the cohesion of the military, and it is today being considered by the federal courts in ways that may not be to the liking of those who oppose any change," he said.

Clinton added that those who wanted him to lift the ban completely must understand that Congress would reverse such an action.

"It is an honorable compromise that advances the cause of people who are called to serve our country by their patriotism, the cause of our national security and our national interest in resolving an issue that has divided our military and our nation and diverted our attention from other matters for too long," he said.

Clinton noted that despite the ban, homosexuals have served with distinction in the military.

"There is no study showing them to be less capable or more prone to misconduct than heterosexual soldiers," he said.

Clinton also said the lifting of bans against homosexual service in police and fire departments across the country and in the military in other nations has produced no discernible negative impact on unit cohesion or performance.

Citing a study by Northwestern University sociologist Charles Moskos, Clinton said the "issue might be tougher to resolve here in the United States than in Canada, Australia and in some other nations because of the presence in our country of both vocal gay rights groups and equally vocal anti-gay rights groups, including some religious groups who believe that lifting the ban amounts to endorsing a lifestyle they strongly disapprove of."

Among religious groups that have strongly opposed lifting the ban is the Southern Baptist Convention, which during its recent annual convention passed a resolution against gays in the military.

Richard Land, executive director of the SBC Christian Life Commission, labeled Clinton's July 19 compromise as "counterproductive and detrimental," though "not as disastrous" as his announced intention to lift the gay ban entirely.

"We felt the best policy," Land said, "was the one that was in place prior to Jan. 29," when Clinton instructed recruiters to quit screening for sexual orientation. "We would urge Congress to restore the previous policy."

Clinton's plan is scheduled to take effect Oct. 1 but will doubtless receive close scrutiny from Congress and other sources before it does.

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-- By Larry Chesser

Fellowship sends relief funds
to Midwest flood victims

ATLANTA (ABP) -- As swollen rivers poured over levees in America's flooded Midwest, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship appealed for an outpouring of support for flood-relief efforts.

The Fellowship's global missions office allocated \$25,000 in hunger-relief funds for emergency aid for flood victims and arranged for rapid disbursement of relief contributions through its Atlanta office July 16. The Fellowship is targeting both immediate and long-term needs, leaders said.

"Our recent experience with Hurricane Andrew in Florida tells us that Baptists respond quickly and generously," said Keith Parks, CBF global missions coordinator. "But it is also a reminder that ministry needs will remain long after the headlines are gone."

The Fellowship allocation will help fund a feeding operation at Edmundson Road Baptist Church in St. Louis, which is being coordinated by the Missouri Baptist Convention.

Gregory Hunt, pastor of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City and

moderator of Missouri's CBF chapter, said the Fellowship will coordinate its relief work with the efforts of the state convention "in every way we can."

The Southern Baptist Home Mission Board likewise has sent \$20,000 in hunger-relief aid to support the feeding operations at Edmundson Road Church, First Baptist Church of Weston, Mo., and public schools in Winfield, Mo. More money from the HMB is expected later.

Local coordinator Bob Nowlin, director of church and community ministries for the St. Louis Metro Baptist Association, said volunteers have been using food provided by the Red Cross to prepare daily meals -- including a hot dinner -- for flood victims and relief workers.

Over a two-week period in July, he said, more than 300 volunteers prepared up to 8,000 meals a day.

The crisis will not end soon, Nowlin emphasized. The flooded region is facing massive clean-up needs once the waters recede, he said. "The Red Cross estimates we'll need food and volunteers in the food-preparation program and to assist with clean-up efforts," Nowlin said. Ideally, he added, volunteers should provide their own housing.

In addition to financial contributions and volunteers, Nowlin said items which may be donated include bottled water and non-perishable food items, furniture, household goods, cleaning supplies and equipment, extension cords and electric fans.

Nowlin has arranged for a vacant K-Mart to be used as a storage facility for donated items.

Some of the financial assistance, he said, will be used to "assist individual families with financial needs that may not be met through other sources. We'll be working closely with the Red Cross and other agencies to try to fill the gaps."

One of those gaps, he said, will be counseling ministries to help flood victims cope with "the chronic emotional trauma created by such a long-term ordeal."

Persons interested in providing volunteer support or donations of materials should contact the association at (314) 569-1190. Financial contributions from churches and individuals should be designated "flood relief" and sent to CBF, P.O. Box 450329, Atlanta, GA 30345.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was established in 1990 by Southern Baptist moderates displeased with the current leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies. It is a loose-knit organization of churches and individuals that operates its own missions program and supports alternative ministries.

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-- By David Wilkinson, communications coordinator for the Fellowship.

Controls on religious liberty
in Russia alarm U.S. leaders

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- New restrictions on religious liberty approved July 14 by the Russian parliament have raised concerns among U.S. religious leaders who see the move as a retreat from advances made in recent years.

Supported by the Russian Orthodox Church, the amendment to Russia's historic law on "Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" would require foreign religious workers to become affiliated with Russian churches

or obtain accreditation from the state.

The Freedom of Conscience law enacted in 1990 ended decades of state-controlled religion and opened the door for a flood of activity by foreign religious groups.

The new restrictions on religious freedom need Russian President Boris Yeltsin's signature to become law. That leaves Yeltsin in an awkward position, according to Michael Ochs, a professional staff member of the Helsinki Commission, which monitors human-rights abuses.

"On the one hand, he would like to have the support of the Russian Orthodox Church, which lobbied for this amendment," Ochs said. "On the other hand, if he signs it into law, he buys himself a lot of trouble with foreign religious organizations and human-rights organizations that have already begun to protest."

Ochs described the parliament's action as a "political response to the flooding of the former Soviet Union by evangelical groups seeking new converts."

Ochs compared the situation to established businesses in a country objecting to new foreign competition. "In a sense, it's sort of a protectionism," he said.

Baptists were among American religious groups expressing concern over the new restrictions.

In a July 14 communication faxed to Mikhail Mityukov, chairman of the Russian parliament's Committee for State Legislation, Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James Dunn said Baptists in America are "shocked and alarmed" by the proposal restricting religious freedom.

Dunn said the new law "would limit the free flow of religious ideas and religiously oriented persons across international boundaries" and would empower the state "to evaluate theological doctrines and to sanction or control religious organizations."

Such measures, Dunn said, would deny religious pluralism, reverse recent advances for religious liberty in Russia, and violate the goals of the Helsinki Accords.

The Helsinki Accords are international agreements among nations in Eastern and Western Europe and North America that protect a range of human rights, including religious freedom. The Helsinki Commission is an independent agency formed by Congress to monitor and encourage compliance with the Helsinki Accords.

"What is at stake is closing the recently opened door to religious expression and the sending of missionaries and messengers of the gospel into Russia," Dunn said.

Keith Parks, missions coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, also expressed concern about the change.

"I am greatly disappointed that the religious atmosphere would move from one kind of control to another," Parks said.

Don Kammerdiener, executive vice president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board said the amended law "doesn't appear to be quite as damaging to us as it might be to others because we are in direct linkage with existing Russian Baptist churches."

He warned, however, that "any government that threatens the religious liberty of foreigners has already taken upon itself the same authority to threaten the religious liberty of its own citizens."

Helsinki Commission urges Yeltsin to reject religious-freedom restraints

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Top officials of the Helsinki Commission have urged President Boris Yeltsin to decline to sign a bill imposing new restrictions on religious liberty in Russia.

The Russian Parliament recently approved an amendment to Russia's 1990 law on "Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" that would require foreign religious workers to become affiliated with Russian churches or gain state accreditation.

In addition to reaction from the Helsinki Commission, the religious-freedom restrictions have been criticized by U.S. religious bodies, including Baptist missions officials Keith Parks and Don Kammerdiener.

The Helsinki Commission, known formally as the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, is an independent agency created by Congress to monitor and encourage compliance with the Helsinki Accords, a series of agreements among North American and Eastern and Western European nations protecting a spectrum of human rights, including religious liberty.

In a letter to Yeltsin, Sen. Dennis DeConcini, D-Ariz., chairman of the commission, and Rep. Steny Hoyer, D-Md., co-chairman, reminded Yeltsin that "freedom of religion is one of the most basic human rights" enshrined in the Helsinki Accords and other international agreements.

Parliament's amendment, the letter said, "undercuts this basic freedom for the citizens of Russian and limits their options."

DeConcini and Hoyer praised Russia's 1990 religious-liberty law as "a milestone in ending the anti-religious discrimination of the communist period and guaranteeing freedom of religion in Russia."

But the new restrictions are a "setback," the letter says, because they would deprive Russian citizens of their freedom to pursue their faith and would punish foreign religious organizations seeking to "attend to the spiritual needs of a population that was for so long bereft of information about religion or outlets for their spiritual yearnings."

Additionally, the restrictions would deprive Russian citizens of the charitable and philanthropic benefits at a time when economic reforms are causing hardship for many citizens, the letter said.

DeConcini and Hoyer praised Yeltsin for his role in opening the political process in Russia, inviting participation by numerous political parties.

"It would be most unfortunate if this healthy and necessary pluralism ceased to apply in the religious sphere," they wrote Yeltsin.

With the breakup of the former Soviet Union, itself a participant in the Helsinki Accords, the Russian Federation and other former Soviet republics became individual signers of the Helsinki agreements.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty agency, said, "Baptists should be pleased that once again an active Baptist champion of religious liberty, Congressman Steny Hoyer, is in the forefront of this battle for religious freedom."

"It is especially significant that the Helsinki Commission has spoken to the proposed change, since the focus of the Helsinki Accords has been largely on the free flow of ideas and communications, including religious thought, across national boundaries," said Dunn.

Two Baptist missions officials in the United States are among the religious leaders who registered concerns about the new restrictions.

"Freedom-loving people everywhere urge President Boris Yeltsin to reject the proposed amendment of the Freedom of Conscience legislation," Keith

Parks, global missions coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said in a communication to Yeltsin.

"This amendment would be a reversal of President Yeltsin's progressive leadership," Parks said. "It would be a return to the oppression of the communist Soviet Union. We urge this amendment to be rejected."

Don Kammerdiener, executive vice president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, also urged Yeltsin to reject the restrictions in a statement to be sent to both Yeltsin and President Clinton.

"We are praying he (Yeltsin) will discern that religious liberty is at stake in Russia," Kammerdiener said. "These restrictive amendments to Russia's freedom of religion law are actually a step back toward the totalitarian control of the communist era."

Kammerdiener also warned that "those who seek to blow out the flames of religious liberty often discover that rather than extinguishing them, they fan them into greater intensity. We do not quake at opposition. Baptists have lived throughout our history with it."

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-- By Larry Chesser

Senate resolution emphasizes
need for human-rights focus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Egregious human-rights violations across the globe make it imperative for the United States to reaffirm its devotion to freedom, according to Senate sponsors of a resolution designating Aug. 1 as Helsinki Human Rights Day.

That date is the 18th anniversary of the signing of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also called the Helsinki Accords. The accords are an international agreement among nations in Eastern and Western Europe and North America that protect a range of human rights, including religious freedom.

On Aug. 1, 1975, leaders of 35 countries signed the Helsinki Accords. Today 53 countries are participants in the Helsinki process.

Sen. Dennis DeConcini, D-Ariz., and chairman of the Helsinki Commission, introduced the resolution (S.J. Res. 111) to commemorate the agreement, which he said launched a dynamic process that contributed to the positive changes in Europe.

"The participating states have recognized that human rights and fundamental freedoms are the birthright of all human beings and that protection and promotion of these rights is the first responsibility of government," DeConcini said.

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, R-N.Y., expressed concern that the principles enunciated in the Helsinki Accords are not being faithfully respected in and by all participating states, with the most dramatic violations occurring in the former Yugoslavia.

Because of that violent backdrop for the 1993 Helsinki Human Rights Day, D'Amato said it is "all the more necessary for us to proclaim our continued devotion to the cause of human rights and our continued support for the Helsinki process."

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-- By Pam Parry

Peace Fellowship targets
NRA for August protest

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Baptist peace group is organizing an Aug. 27 vigil outside the headquarters of the National Rifle Association to protest the "epidemic" of gun-related violence in America's cities.

The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America is targeting the 3 million-member National Rifle Association because of the "powerful lobbying role played by the NRA in opposing even the most modest gun-control legislation," said Ken Sehested, executive director of the Memphis, Tenn.-based Peace Fellowship.

"Our concern is not simply with the NRA but with the larger issue of urban violence," Sehested said. "But the NRA is the most visible, and most powerful, force opposing gun-control legislation. We believe the general public is finally ready to confront this special interest."

"The easy availability of battlefield assault rifles, along with the circulation of as many as 60 million privately owned handguns, are evidence of spiritual corruption and a source of barbarous violence," Sehested said. "Though gun proliferation is not the only source of urban violence, it is clearly an important source -- and it is well within our power to change that."

The 4 p.m. vigil will take place at NRA headquarters in Washington, D.C., one day before the Peace Fellowship's 30th anniversary March on Washington, commemorating the pivotal civil-rights protest march of 1963.

The NRA protest has drawn the endorsement of the American Jewish Committee and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith peace group. The vigil builds on the efforts of the Committee Against All Violence, an ecumenical coalition that has been picketing the NRA's headquarters since spring. The coalition is led by Albert Gallmon, pastor of Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Washington.

Bill McIntyre, spokesman for the NRA, said of the Peace Fellowship's plans, "We support their First Amendment right (to protest) as ardently as we hope they support our Second Amendment rights."

The Second Amendment to the Constitution protects "the right to bear arms." But, the Peace Fellowship countered, that permits a "well-regulated militia," not "free access to guns."

"This provision is in no way a license to unrestricted gun ownership by any and all citizens," Sehested said.

McIntyre declined further comment.

Sehested authored a resolution, or statement of concern, on gun violence that was approved by the biannual meeting of the American Baptist Churches in late June. The statement, which also targets the NRA, urges American Baptists to develop strategies to confront gun violence locally and to work for gun-control legislation at all levels.

The statement also cites statistics that indicate handgun violence is the leading cause of death among American male teens; handgun homicides in the United States are 20 times more frequent than in other industrialized nations; both gun ownership and gun homicides have doubled in the last 25 years; a handgun is 43 times more likely to be used against its owner, family or friends than against a household intruder; and \$4 billion is spent annually to treat the victims of gun violence, with 86 percent of that cost paid by taxpayers.

The nine-year-old Peace Fellowship is a network of Baptists involved in peace and justice issues. Its independent board includes representation from

Baptist conventions and groups in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Puerto Rico.

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-- By Greg Warner

Texas pastor Pleitz
announces retirement

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Prominent Baptist minister James Pleitz, pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, announced to the church's deacon board July 19 his intention to retire Sept. 26.

Pleitz, 64, formally will announce his retirement plans to the 8,400-member north Dallas congregation during worship services July 25.

"Park Cities has been a beautiful climax to my active pastorate," Pleitz said. "Park Cities is a strategic church filled with many gifted people who have responded positively. I've just tried to be a shepherd to the people."

During his more than 15 years at Park Cities, total membership grew by more than 3,200 and the church's annual budget has escalated to \$5.6 million. Currently, Park Cities is the 20th largest church in the Southern Baptist Convention and the third largest Baptist church in Dallas.

Prior to accepting the Park Cities pulpit, Pleitz served about 18 years as pastor of First Baptist Church in Pensacola, Fla. He held two earlier pastorates in Arkansas.

Pleitz's denominational service included a term as chairman of the SBC Executive Committee, 1968-69, and trustee chairman for the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission, 1972-73.

He was elected president of the Florida Baptist Convention in 1971-72, was president of the Southern Baptist Pastors' Conference in 1974-75, and preached the convention sermon at the 1983 Southern Baptist Convention in Pittsburgh.

He currently is on the board of directors of Associated Baptist Press.

In the past decade and a half, Pleitz became one of the best-known ministers in North Texas, in part for the cheery "Thought For The Day" inspirational messages that appeared frequently as public-service television spots.

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-- By Ken Camp

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