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IN THIS ISSUE:

COMMUNITY RELATIONS  
Cobb County, Georgia  
August 26, 1993

Baptist influence felt  
in county's anti-gay policy

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Buoyed by support from its heavily Baptist population, Cobb County northwest of Atlanta apparently has become the first county in America officially to condemn homosexuality as a lifestyle.

County commissioners approved a resolution that describes homosexuality as "incompatible with the standards to which this community subscribes." In the resolution, approved Aug. 10 by a vote of 3-1, the county government also pledged "not to fund those activities which seek to contravene these existing community standards."

Two weeks later, commissioners made good on that pledge, voting 5-0 Aug. 24 to cut all funding for the arts in the county -- including a theatre company whose play sparked the initial confrontation.

The much-publicized dispute has pitted Cobb's gays and arts supporters against "pro-family" residents, many of whom were attracted to the county's suburban communities because of the area's conservative reputation.

Almost a fourth of Cobb's residents are members of Southern Baptist churches (98,517 or 22 percent), much higher than the national average. Observers say the conservative character of Cobb County made passage of the resolution more likely than in other parts of Atlanta.

"We are more homogeneous than Metro Atlanta might be on this issue," acknowledged Nelson Price, pastor of the largest Baptist church in the county.

Price said members of his congregation -- the 9,400-member Roswell Street Baptist in Marietta -- were involved in passage of the resolution. "Some attended the commission meeting. Some spoke. Some wrote letters to commissioners."

Christians from a variety of churches and denominations worked to pass the resolution. But Price and others say the campaign was not spawned by anti-gay sentiment, rather by a desire to protect family values.

"Our county commissioners are to be commended for having exercised discretion of expression in avoiding gay-bashing language," Price wrote in

a column in the Marietta Daily Journal.

"They really aren't aiming it at the homosexuals out there," agreed Nancy Schaefer, director of Family Concerns, a pro-family lobby in Atlanta. "They are just trying to uphold the family. You have to come against the homosexual lifestyle when you uphold the family."

Price and Schaefer said opponents of the gay lifestyle aren't usually heard from until they are forced to react to a pro-gay offensive. In Cobb County, however, residents took the first step, they explained.

"This is a positive preventative rather a remedial action," said Price.

But others, including Schaefer and some county commissioners, say the Cobb resolution was in reaction to the city of Atlanta's recent decision to provide medical and other benefits to the unmarried live-in partners of city employees -- both gay and heterosexual.

That "domestic partnership" ordinance, and conservative opposition to it, "definitely" inspired Cobb residents to take a pro-active stand against homosexuality, said Schaefer, a member of First Baptist Church of Atlanta and a trustee of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"They felt they needed to uphold the family" against the advances of the homosexual lobby, she said. "They felt it was coming to their area."

Schaefer's group endorsed the Cobb resolution, which the group said would "protect Cobb County from future homosexual lobby efforts to obtain special privileges at the expense of taxpayers, city employees and families."

Family Concerns also has filed a lawsuit against the Atlanta City Council for approving the domestic-partnership ordinance, which the group says threatens the family by discouraging marriage. "It is like sending a message out to young people that 'you dont have to get married,'" Schaefer said. "It's almost like a free shacking-up policy with free benefits."

In Cobb County, not all residents -- and not all Baptists -- favor the resolution and arts defunding. In fact, a survey published by the Atlanta Constitution Aug. 24 found that only 33 percent of Cobb residents felt the resolution against the gay lifestyle accurately represents community standards. Only 26 percent said arts funding should be limited to groups that uphold family values.

Tommy McDearis, pastor of Northside Drive Baptist Church, is one Cobb County resident who thinks the commission's action was ill-advised.

"I don't see that there is any place in government to attact human beings in an open way like that," he said. "When you attact another human being ... without knowing how they feel, there is no grace in that."

The play that sparked the dispute does not depict gay lifestyles but makes a reference to homosexuality while a married couple discusses the AIDS-related death of the wife's gay brother. The couple voice their disdain for the gay lifestyle but conclude if their own son was gay they "would love him all the same."

A Cobb County couple who saw the play wrote commissioners to protest the playhouse, Theatre in the Square, which was scheduled to receive \$41,000 in county funding this year. Rather than singling out Theatre in the Square for punitive action, which some experts said would be unconstitutional, commissioners cut funding for all nine community-funded arts groups.

Marietta pastor Price said he and other community leaders already have

begun a campaign to raise \$100,000 from local businesses to support local arts groups that uphold family values. "I want to show that Christians are for the arts," he explained. "We're not anti-arts."

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Smyth & Helwys literature  
continues pattern of growth

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Sales of fall Sunday school literature from Smyth & Helwys are up more than 25 percent, according to publisher Cecil Staton. Sales of children's resources are up more than 30 percent from the previous ordering period, Staton said, and youth and adult materials have sold 15 percent more.

Smyth & Helwys is a Georgia-based alternative publishing house formed three years ago by moderate Baptist pastors and professors.

"Obviously we are enormously excited by this," Staton said. "Our resources are maturing. More and more Baptists are turning to Smyth & Helwys for Christian education resources that promote and value our rich Baptist heritage."

Staton reported that an estimated 1,300 churches in 46 states and several foreign countries are using at least some Formations materials, the publisher's Sunday school line.

Additionally, he said, approximately 300 churches used Smyth & Helwys' vacation Bible school resources this summer.

Sales of Smyth & Helwys books also have increased, Staton said.

"By December of this year we will have published 38 books," he said. "We are moving toward producing 50 books per year by 1995."

The publisher's best-sellers are "What Happened to the Southern Baptist Convention?" by Grady Cothen (4000 copies) and "The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms" by Walter Shurden (2,000).

The jump in Sunday school literature sales at Smyth & Helwys comes at a time when Southern Baptists' largest publisher, the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, is experiencing a decline in sales.

Officials of the Sunday School Board concede the growth of Smyth & Helwys has contributed to decline of their own Sunday school literature. "It is somewhat of a factor," one official told trustees recently.

The board faces "some great worries if the decline continues," another official said.

Staton said Smyth & Helwys also is expanding its staff, which now includes 17 employees at the firm's offices on the campus of Mercer University in Macon, Ga.

"We hope to add as many as five additional employees this fall, including a new book editor," Staton said. "We are pleased that we are meeting a need among a growing number of Baptists who are concerned about the future of Christian education in our churches."

Staton also announced that Smyth & Helwys' board of directors adopted a new mission statement for the company during a management retreat Aug. 18.

The statement says Smyth & Helwys "publishes books and Christian

education resources nurtured by faith and informed by scholarship in order to meet the needs of congregations and individuals."

It also affirms "the lordship of Jesus Christ, the centrality of the biblical message, and the right of all persons to read and interpret the scriptures for themselves."

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