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IN THIS ISSUE:

- * Sunday School Board cancels women's enrichment conference
- * Religion grabs headlines in secular, Baptist press
- * Religious leaders commend Clinton's call to end violence
- * Tragedy mars Christmas for 4 Kentucky churches
- * Florida resort minister to head Olympics ministry
- * Baptist governor balances faith with public service
- * Federal government OKs first fetal-tissue research
- * Church members drop suit in dispute over Masonry
- * Callers seeking marriage help got offer they likely refused

Sunday School Board cancels
women's enrichment conference

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A national Christian women's enrichment conference, scheduled March 24-26 in Atlanta, has been canceled by the Baptist Sunday School Board because the dates conflict with a similar event sponsored by a nearby church.

The "Panorama of Purpose" conference was to be the second annual event co-developed by the Sunday School Board and Woman's Missionary Union. Last year's conference, held March 5-7 in San Antonio, Texas, was attended by about 800 women.

Primary to the decision to cancel this year's meeting was the fact the dates overlap with a women's conference at First Baptist Church in Snellville, Ga., about 25 miles from Atlanta. The church's conference, scheduled March 25-26, is expected to draw more than 2,000 participants, according to Jay Johnston, acting field services director in the Sunday School Board's adult discipleship and family enrichment department.

"The sponsoring church is an active Southern Baptist church supporting the programs and resources in the convention. It is the role of the Baptist Sunday School Board to support the local churches and not compete with them," Johnston wrote in a letter to conference personnel.

Johnston's letter was reprinted in a newsletter for WMU staff at Baptist state conventions with the notation that WMU leaders "were not involved in making the decision" to cancel the conference.

"The bottom line of it was we just didn't want to go competing head-to-head the same weekend," Johnston told Associated Baptist Press.

"I think they'll be doing them in the future. It's just off for this year," he said.

While the event was being co-developed by the Sunday School Board and Woman's Missionary Union, a WMU spokeswoman confirmed the decision to cancel

was made unilaterally by the Sunday School Board.

Trudy Johnson, WMU mission involvement specialist, said Jay Johnston called her first to say he was thinking about canceling the conference and later to say he had made the decision.

She described her reaction as "shock and disappointment." "I hurt for the women who are not going to be able to have this experience," she said.

Last spring's conference in San Antonio "was a very significant event," she said. "It was the only national conference for women with no agenda other than to meet their needs."

As co-developer, Johnson said, WMU helped with promotion and development of general sessions and conferences and provided some conference personnel. She said it is "significant" for WMU to remain involved in the planning, since WMU's program statement calls for promoting missions involvement and support among Baptist women.

"We want to help all women become all Christ wants them to be," she said. "That can't happen without seeing missions as part of a Christian lifestyle."

In November the Sunday School Board announced it is starting its own women's enrichment ministry, which some observers worried would compete with WMU programs.

The staffs of both WMU and other SBC agencies were looking forward to Atlanta event for spiritual and professional development for female employees, Johnson said.

About 100 staff members at the Atlanta-based Home Mission Board had planned to take a day off, with pay, to attend the conference, said HMB spokesman Martin King. The board was in the process of freeing up funds to pay registration costs for employees.

"Our folks were very disappointed it was canceled," King said. He said the board plans to put together its own one-day conference for its female employees in its place.

-30-

Religion grabs headlines
in secular, Baptist press

By Greg Warner

(ABP) -- Religion made headlines in 1993, with stories both tragic and promising.

World attention focused on two key religion-laden stories in 1993 -- the deadly assault April 29 that ended a 51-day standoff between federal agents and members of the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas, and the historic peace plan signed Sept. 13 by perennial combatants Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Both those events had implications for Baptists and others of faith.

The Davidian episode raised questions about not only the performance of federal agents, whose raid of the Waco compound sparked the standoff, but how religious cults are defined and how they are treated by the government.

Independent studies showed the government misunderstood the Davidian sect and ignored the advice of experts, contributing to the carnage that left 86 Branch Davidians dead when they set fire to their compound.

The Branch Davidians, led by self-styled messiah David Koresh, were ranked as the top religion story of 1993 in Religious News Service's annual survey of religion writers.

People of all faiths watched with keen interest in September as Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, lifelong enemies, signed a framework for Mideast peace. The plan calls for interim Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho.

The event, described by supporters as the first step toward lasting peace in the region, was called "the opening of a door that cannot be closed" by former President Jimmy Carter. Baptist World Alliance head Denton Lotz likened it to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Baptists played only minor roles in those two key stories of 1993, but they made headlines of their own during the year on a variety of fronts.

Church and society

Southern Baptists began the year by watching one of their own take up residence in the White House. But longtime Baptist Bill Clinton, who was moved to tears during a pre-inaugural prayer service Jan. 20, soon angered many conservative Southern Baptists by relaxing government policies against abortion and homosexuality in his first days in the White House.

-- Clinton signed executive orders Jan. 22 that repealed a ban on abortion counseling at federally funded family planning clinics, lifted a ban on medical research using tissue from aborted fetuses, reinstated the right of overseas U.S. military hospitals to perform some abortions, and ordered a re-evaluation of the ban on importation of the abortion pill RU-486. He later eased the government's ban on homosexuals in the military and appointed gays and lesbians to government offices.

-- Clinton later opened dialogue with a broad range of religious leaders, hosting liberal, mainline and conservative Protestants at the White House and traveling to Denver to meet with the Pope.

-- Southern Baptist Convention leaders said in August they were "snubbed" by not being invited to the White House gatherings. Although Clinton later met with SBC president Ed Young and top executive Morris Chapman, neither that change of heart nor Clinton's year-end adoption of the "family values" rhetoric did much to endear him to SBC leaders, who remained skeptical of his social policies.

-- Messengers to the annual Southern Baptist Convention in June adopted a resolution to "separate" the convention from Clinton's social agenda, most notably his gay-rights and abortion policies. Clinton's inclusion of some abortion services in his health-care reform package later drew the ire of SBC ethics leader Richard Land.

-- The national debate over abortion took on a more somber tone in March when a pro-life protester shot and killed Pensacola, Fla., abortion doctor David Gunn. While a few anti-abortionists justified the shooting, most tried to distance the pro-life movement from such extreme tactics.

-- Southern Baptists made national headlines in September when a Home Mission Board study, which offered a county-by-county estimate of the number of people bound for heaven or hell, drew the attention of secular reporters. A story that appeared in Birmingham, Ala., said 46 percent of Alabama residents are hell-bound, prompting articles by the Associated Press and others and leading HMB administrators to respond to charges of denominational arrogance.

-- Headlines of a more favorable nature followed the Sunday School Board's campaign called True Love Waits, a program to encourage youth and young adults to abstain from sex until marriage. The campaign attracted a blitz of media attention and an offer from Roman Catholics to link arms in the abstinence effort.

-- Arguably one of the year's most far-reaching public-policy events was

passage of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a legislative antidote to the Supreme Court's 1990 abandonment of the strict standard against government intrusion into religious practices. Baptist church-state attorney Oliver Thomas of the Baptist Joint Committee, who helped write the legislation, led the religious coalition that pushed for passage.

Agencies in transition

Two Southern Baptist agencies elected new chief executives during the year, and both leaders promised to bring their organizations in line with the conservative transition in the SBC.

-- Veteran missionary Jerry Rankin, 51, overcame complaints about his charismatic leanings to be elected president of the Foreign Mission Board June 14. Rankin, who pledged to give the agency's 4,000 field missionaries more say in the FMB's streamlined administration, succeeded Keith Parks, who retired early in a dispute with trustees over missions philosophy.

-- Inerrantist Albert Mohler was elected president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary March 26, the SBC's oldest seminary, with a promise to restore the school's devotion to its doctrinal statement, an 1858 document that critics fear will be used to root out moderates on the faculty. Evangelist Billy Graham, speaking at Mohler's installation, said the 34-year-old scholar is part of "a new generation" of Christian leaders.

-- Critics of controversial Southern Seminary professor Paul Simmons, under fire from conservatives since at least 1987 for his views on abortion and homosexuality, took early retirement Jan. 6 as seminary trustees prepared to open heresy hearings against him.

-- Downsizing was the yearlong theme at the Sunday School Board, which eliminated 45 jobs in August in a continuing effort to cut overhead by \$4 million. Church literature sales, which account for 40 percent of board revenue, were down almost 4 percent after nine months, on the heels of an 8 percent drop in 1992.

-- Woman's Missionary Union, ignoring the counsel of SBC leaders, adopted a long-range plan in January that permits the mission-support auxiliary to provide non-financial support to the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which SBC leaders say is in competition with the SBC's own mission agencies.

-- The Home Mission Board, on the other hand, broke long-standing policy in order to appoint missionary Rebecca Waugh of New York City without her husband -- Fellowship leader David Waugh. The HMB's policy requires husbands and wives to be appointed missionaries together, but trustees objected to David Waugh's Fellowship ties.

-- Much of the traditional work of the Home Mission Board was overshadowed by the ongoing dispute over Freemasonry. The HMB succeeded in getting SBC approval for its Masonic study, which concluded that some of the fraternity's teachings are incompatible with Christianity but that membership should be left to individual conscience. Masonry opponent Larry Holly later renewed his criticism of the study, and the HMB later fired the staff member who conducted it, Gary Leazer.

Baptist money and politics

For the third year in a row -- and third year ever -- contributions to the SBC's central budget, the Cooperative Program, fell during 1993. Southern Baptist leaders blamed the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which expanded its own denomination-like program during the year.

-- By mid-year, the Fellowship had taken in \$5.7 million -- a 72 percent

increase over 1992 -- and was well on its way to its year-end goal of \$10 million, still a pittance in comparison to the SBC's annual \$136 million.

-- The September meeting of the SBC Executive Committee, which oversees the Cooperative Program, was preoccupied with pumping new life into the SBC budget, which fell 1.2 percent last year on the heels of drops of .36 percent and 1.4 percent in the two previous years.

-- Denominational leaders, led by retired SBC figures Lloyd Elder and Herschel Hobbs, looked for ways to reverse the downward trends by seeking common ground and recommitment among SBC factions, but the ad hoc movement gained little momentum during the year.

-- Meanwhile, conservatives failed to gain ground in their attempt to repeat the SBC's national rightward swing in state conventions. Presidential candidates backed by conservative forces lost in at least seven large Baptist conventions -- Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia. But conservative strategist T. C. Pinckney said the ultimate success of the "conservative resurgence" is simply a matter of time.

-30-

Religious leaders commend
Clinton's call to end violence

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Nearly 50 U.S. religious leaders -- including more than a dozen Baptists -- have commended President Clinton's use of the moral power of his office to tackle "the swelling tide of violence sweeping America."

In a December letter responding to Clinton's remarks at Mason Temple Church of God in Christ in Memphis, Tenn., the religious leaders said they were moved and challenged by the president's call for the religious community to play a central role in solving the crisis.

"We welcome your emphasis on 'the values and the stirrings and the voices that speak to us from within,'" the letter states. "We want to convey to you our own commitment to continue to mobilize our respective religious communities to combat the violence and moral decline you spoke of in your address."

The letter notes that anti-violence efforts by religious groups stress several themes:

-- A call to practice ethical values and virtues that form the basis of real community. "Religious faith offers vital moral resources for replacing fear and violence with hope and reconciliation in our homes, communities, and nation," the leaders said.

-- Halting gun proliferation in the nation's streets, schools and homes.

-- Countering the "culture of violence" that legitimizes violence as a means of resolving disputes.

-- Building strong neighborhood anti-violence coalitions supported by churches, synagogues and mosques.

-- Protecting children from violence through effective and equitable law enforcement, as well as through private and governmental efforts to provide education, social programs and job opportunities.

Signers of the letter offered to meet with the president and pledged to encourage the nation's 350,000 churches, synagogues and mosques to use their resources in meeting the challenges posed by violence.

The religious leaders signed the letter as individuals, not as official representatives of their various organizations and faith groups. Signers

included mainline Protestants, Jews, Catholics, Muslims and representatives of other faiths.

Baptist signers included Charles Adams, president, Progressive National Baptist Convention; John Binder, executive director, North American Baptist Conference; Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary, National Council of Churches; Benjamin Davis, National Missionary Baptist Convention of America; James Dunn, executive director, Baptist Joint Committee; Marvin Griffin, historian, National Baptist Convention of America Inc.; T. J. Jemison, president, National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Inc.; Edward Jones, president, National Baptist Convention of America Inc.; Franklyn Richardson, general secretary, National Baptist Convention, U.S.A. Inc.; Bob Ricker, president, Baptist General Conference; James Scott, president, American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.; Cecil Sherman, coordinator, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; and Daniel Weiss, general secretary, American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.

-30-

-- By Larry Chesser

Tragedy mars Christmas
for 4 Kentucky churches

By Mark Wingfield

KENTUCKY (ABP) -- Tragedy stole the joy of Christmas for at least four Kentucky Baptist churches this year.

Baptists in Cadiz, New Concord and Monticello ushered in the new year believing 1994 has to be better than the way 1993 ended. It couldn't get much worse, they surmised.

In Cadiz, three of the seven teenagers killed in an automobile accident 10 days before Christmas were members of Kentucky Baptist churches. Virtually every church in the close-knit community was hit hard by the loss of seven young lives all at once.

Then on a single night exactly one week later, Baptist churches in Monticello and New Concord felt the pain of unrelated church van accidents that killed four people and injured others.

Among the dead were two members of Sandusky Baptist Church in Monticello and the daughter and son-in-law of the pastor of Blood River Missionary Baptist Church in New Concord. The couple had been delivering Christmas presents to needy families.

The Cadiz accident happened the afternoon of Dec. 15 as the seven teens were taking a break from their after-school jobs at Knight & Hale Game Calls. For some unknown reason, the Honda Civic into which all seven boys had piled crossed the center line on U.S. 68 and crashed into another vehicle, killing all involved except the driver of the other car.

The driver of the boys' car was 17-year-old Steven Wallace, a member of Liberty Point Baptist Church. Two of the other teens killed -- Dale Garner, 16, and David Lawrence, 16 -- were members of Canton Baptist Church.

"When you take seven young high school men out of a community, it's a tragedy that most communities have never dealt with and hopefully will never have to deal with," said Bob Martin, director of missions for Little River Baptist Association. "It affected not just one church, not just Baptist churches, but all the churches."

Most churches reported increased attendance the Sunday after the funeral, Martin said, and more people are asking spiritual questions.

"You don't hear the questions coming from the adults, but you do hear it

coming from the young people. They are really asking questions about life itself and its meaning."

Royce Dukes, pastor of Canton Baptist Church, said one way his congregation responded was by being among the first to offer help the next week to Blood River Church after the van accident there.

The financial contribution sent from Cadiz to New Concord was one of many received there after the Dec. 22 accident which killed Bryan and Carol Luffman.

Carol Luffman, 21, was the daughter of Jerry Norsworthy, pastor of Blood River Church. She met Luffman, 23, while working with the van ministry. They dated and fell in love.

On the night of the fatal van fire, the Luffmans had packed the church's 1974 Dodge van with Christmas presents and food they were to deliver to the families of the bus ministry children. Carol Luffman had collected and wrapped the gifts over the previous two weeks.

They were delivering the presents while the children were at church so the children would think the gifts were from their parents. Most of the parents couldn't afford to buy presents.

The van burst into flames after being hit head-on by another vehicle. The couple and all the gifts they were delivering were lost immediately.

"Our church really is devastated," Norsworthy said in an interview.

However, other churches and concerned citizens rallied to the cause and provided new gifts for the children. "It's been a blessing to see how people have responded," the pastor explained.

The second van accident happened as members of Sandusky Chapel Church were traveling near Monticello. According to press reports, the driver, Pastor Anson Perkins, pulled the van onto the shoulder when it started smoking.

After the engine caught fire, the 10 or so passengers on board got off without incident. However, some of those passengers were hit by a small fire truck which later arrived on the scene and broke loose when its emergency brake failed. The fire truck careened down a hill into the crowd of bystanders.

Killed were church members David Troxell, 51, and Dorothy Worley, 64. Several others were injured.

In the areas impacted by all three tragedies, grief still hangs heavily in the minds of pastors and their parishoners.

Norsworthy described Blood River Church as a congregation with a broken heart. "I've seen poor, old, tough men who never cried a tear in their lives stand there and cry."

-30-

Florida resort minister
to head Olympics ministry

ATLANTA (ABP) -- An Orlando, Fla., resort minister has been chosen to head a coordinated Southern Baptist ministry for the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

Linda Johnson, director of resort ministries for the Greater Orlando Baptist Association, was elected Jan. 4 to direct Atlanta International Ministries (AIM '96) by the group's steering committee.

Johnson, 35, is a career missionary under appointment by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. A native of Oklahoma, she came to Florida in 1981

as a US-2 missionary. She has worked in various jobs related to resort ministries at the associational and state-convention level. She has directed resort ministries in the Orlando association since 1991.

AIM '96 was organized in 1992 to coordinate the efforts of the various Baptist entities wanting to be involved in ministry projects related to the Olympics. Members of the steering committee represent the Georgia Baptist Convention, the metro-Atlanta associations and the Southern Baptist Home and Foreign Mission boards, Sunday School Board, Brotherhood Commission, Woman's Missionary Union and various ethnic groups in Georgia.

Johnson said she believes the ministry "gives Southern Baptists an opportunity to impact the world. You can do foreign missions from your doorstep."

Search committee chairman Clarence Drummond, director of the Georgia convention's special missions department, said Johnson's "sense of calling to this kind of ministry is profound."

"Our strong perception of divine leadership convinced us completely that she is the one to lead the Southern Baptist ministry for the Olympics," he said.

Bill Lee, a longtime acquaintance of Johnson's who works with the Home Mission Board, said: "Linda Johnson has been an outstanding resort missionary. She is an effective communicator, has strong administrative abilities and knows how to utilize all types of volunteers. Georgia Baptists are indeed fortunate to have her direct AIM '96."

Details of ministries related to the Olympics and how out-of-state volunteers can become involved will be shared through a newsletter, which can be requested from the AIM '96 office. Correspondence can be sent to P.O. Box 78005, Atlanta, Ga., 30357. The AIM '96 phone number is (404) 872-0086.

-30-

-- By Bill Neal and Barbara Denman

Baptist governor balances
faith with public service

By Pam Parry

ROLLA, Mo. (ABP) -- Missouri Gov. Mel Carnahan, a Southern Baptist, rejects the notion that separation of church and state means separation of Christians from civic duty.

The first-term governor, a member of First Baptist Church in Rolla, Mo., said he views public service as a "noble profession." And he comes by that view naturally.

His father, the late A. S. J. Carnahan, served in the U.S. Congress for 14 years and was the first U.S. ambassador to the African nation of Sierra Leone, appointed by President Kennedy in 1960.

"Politics and elections and public service have been a part of my family really ever since I can remember," said Carnahan, the state's first Democratic governor in 12 years.

Carnahan said church-state separation is a bedrock principle that should be safeguarded, not a principle that precludes political activity, as some claim.

The concept of separation of church and state is "one of our treasures, one of our strengths," he said. "When we see what is going on in Bosnia and Northern Ireland, we see that many parts of the world simply cannot abide the

toleration of someone believing differently than we do, and they think it's something to go to war over.

"I think we ought to cherish our heritage and not surrender it to some temporary leanings."

Carnahan said his Baptist faith influences the way he governs. "A lot of the decisions that one makes are very delicate ones on matters of policy," he said. "I would hope that I inject some very basic beliefs in my decision process."

He has weighed, for example, the severity of life-and-death issues when grappling with death penalty cases. So far during his first term, some 80 people have occupied Missouri's death row and four have been executed. Carnahan commuted one sentence and stayed two others for further proceedings.

"I support the death penalty in extreme cases," he said. "I think for some crimes there is no penalty other than the ultimate penalty."

However, he added, "I think it should be reserved for the very worst of crimes, the very worst of circumstances."

While his belief about the value of human life influences such decisions, "I have never been one ... to wear religion on my sleeve as an excuse to (avoid) thinking through problems. And I think sometimes religion is used as just a badge or a shield, which it really isn't suited for."

Reflecting upon his first year in office, Carnahan said it was the "busiest year of my life without question."

And busy it was. Three days after the election he began preparing the state budget to present by January. Four days after his Jan. 11 inauguration, a state court discarded the state's funding mechanism for public education, requiring an immediate solution.

Leading the Missouri legislature to adopt major school reform that resolved more than the financing dilemma, Carnahan worked through the legislative period ending in May only to be struck by his greatest challenge -- the flood.

Rains began in the Midwest in June and by July things were bleak. Missouri was the hardest hit of the nine Midwestern states damaged by the 1993 flood -- a reality that hurled Carnahan into the national spotlight.

Approximately one-third of Missouri's row crop production was lost. The state's two major cities -- St. Louis and Kansas City -- were protected by levies but portions of their suburbs and surrounding communities were inundated. St. Charles County near St. Louis, smothered by both the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, was like a lake.

Town after town had to be evacuated, with approximately 20,000 people displaced and hundreds of roads and railroads in need of extensive repair.

The Red Cross and Salvation Army were quick in their response, Carnahan said, along with many Baptist churches which also pitched in during the relief effort. Community after community, church after church, people pulled together.

"There was really a good face on the devastation of the flood. The best in human beings came out where we were having the worst apparently of Mother Nature. We had what started out as strangers helping strangers, and they ended up neighbors and friends," he said.

"It's an experience I'll never forget of human beings just digging in and being at their best."

The flood crisis gave Carnahan a unique platform to be a spokesman for the Midwest to government officials in Washington. He was a natural contact point because Missouri was the hardest hit and he was elected to office in the same year as President Clinton.

His message was plain: let's work together across partisan lines. Aired as a top news story across the country, the message worked and help came

quickly.

Offering another reflection, Carnahan regarded education reform as his most important accomplishment. The reform initiatives include preparing students for higher education and upgrading vocational education, making it a true career track. The bill also will retrain and update teachers.

"I am a great supporter of the public school. I am a proud product of it. My parents taught in the public schools. ... I believe we can enrich the school experience for children. We can get them to reach much higher levels of performance, and that is what I am after."

Carnahan rejects the school-voucher concept of channeling public tax dollars to private schools.

"It's not out of any penalty to alternative schools. I believe that it will diminish the opportunity for public schools to achieve quality. That's where my emphasis is."

That dedication to public education led Carnahan to serve five years on the Rolla Board of Education -- two years as its president -- during a period when he was in private law practice.

Carnahan entered public life at 26 when he became a municipal judge in Rolla. Two years later, he was elected to the Missouri House of Representatives. While in the legislature, his colleagues voted him majority floor leader, and twice he was awarded the St. Louis Globe-Democrat's Meritorious Service Award.

He left the House after his second term, returning to private practice in Rolla and focusing on his family. He and his wife, Jean, have four children. In addition to a stint on the local school board, Carnahan was an active church member. He has served in several areas, including Sunday school superintendent, deacon, trustee and chairman of the building committee.

He didn't hold political office again until 1980 when he was elected Missouri state treasurer. After an unsuccessful bid for the governor's mansion in 1984, he rebounded in 1988 to win election as the state's lieutenant governor.

Blending public and private service has helped him maintain perspective, Carnahan said.

"It helps remind you that life doesn't begin and end with politics, with getting elected. There's another life. There's a wonderful other life. So it helps you to make better decisions. ... There is an awful tendency for elected people to cling on, to hold on at all costs.

"That's a corrupted attitude even if it is not financially corrupt."

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Federal government OKs
first fetal-tissue research

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The federal government has awarded a \$4.5 million grant to study the use of cells from aborted fetuses as a treatment for Parkinson's disease.

The grant is the first since President Clinton lifted a five-year-old ban on federal funding for fetal-tissue research.

The grant funds a program at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center and other study sites to determine the effects of implanting fetal tissue into the brains of Parkinson's patients.

Parkinson's is a progressive brain disorder affecting about 500,000 Americans, most over 60. It causes tremors, an inability to walk and difficulty in speaking. The disease is caused by the gradual loss of nerve

cells which produce dopamine, a chemical which aids brain communication.

Currently Parkinson's is treated with drugs such as L-dopa, which provide substantial relief for most patients but tend to lose their effectiveness over years of use.

Scientists believe fetal implants will replace dopamine-producing cells, restoring more normal movement and providing better response to drug treatments.

Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush prohibited federal funding of research with fetal tissue from elective abortions. In one of his first official acts as president, Clinton lifted the ban.

The Southern Baptist Convention has gone on record in annual meetings as opposing fetal-tissue research. In a resolution adopted at last June's convention in Houston, SBC messengers stated they "remain morally opposed to the use of electively aborted fetal tissue in all experiments conducted by the federal government and urge President Clinton to reconsider his decision to advance such reprehensible research."

-30-

-- By Bob Allen

Church members drop suit
in dispute over Masonry

LINCOLNTON, N.C. (ABP) -- A lawsuit against a North Carolina Baptist church, reportedly stemming from a dispute over Freemasonry, has been settled out of court.

The Lincoln Times-News reported that a group of seven members filing the suit determined Jan. 3 -- the scheduled trial date -- it is improper to ask a secular court to intervene in a congregational dispute.

The suit, filed in November in Lincoln County District Court, alleged a September deacon election at Westport Baptist Church violated church bylaws. It charged that a slate of nominees was changed and put up for congregational vote without proper notice. The lawsuit had asked a judge to declare the deacon election invalid and prohibit the deacon body from a rewrite of the church's bylaws.

In exchange for dropping the suit, church leaders have agreed to allow the 860-member congregation to vote on whether or not to hold a new election, said Tom Bush, the church's attorney.

Bush said the dispute centers on Pastor Mark Cooke's outspoken opposition of Freemasonry. A number of long-time members and church leaders are Masons, he said.

-30-

Callers seeking marriage help
not offer they likely refused

ALEXANDRIA, La. (ABP) -- Readers calling a toll-free phone number printed in the Baptist Message of Louisiana knew immediately they were getting more than they expected from their Baptist state paper.

"Hi. Hot and kinky sex, that's what we do best," a sultry, recorded

female voice said in answer to calls placed to the number published in recent issues of the newspaper.

Readers of the Louisiana Baptist Convention newspaper thought they were calling for information about Marriage Encounter weekends, which had been touted in a series articles by syndicated columnist Mike McManus. The series is taken from McManus' book, "Marriage Savers," and has been used in several Baptist state papers.

However, during typesetting the paper's staff misread one digit in the phone number written by hand on the column manuscript, 1-800-795-LOVE. (Don't worry. We checked it.)

"This has been my most embarrassing moment of publishing," editor Lynn Clayton said. He said he received "numerous" calls about the error. After hearing an explanation, all the callers chuckled good-naturedly, he said.

"We often wonder if people read what is printed in the paper," Clayton said. "This was an unfortunate way of discovering that they do -- and that many of them call the numbers listed."

People calling the mistyped number received a few seconds of PG-rated innuendo for free, but they didn't get to the "good" stuff unless they were willing to pay.

"It's only \$1.49 per half-minute," the message concluded. "If you don't have a credit card, call 1-900- ... "

Seriously, you don't expect to read it here, do you?

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-- By Bob Allen

***** END *****