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Judge rules against
SBC leader, church

By Bob Allen

SANFORD, Fla. (ABP) -- A judge in Seminole County, Fla., has ruled against a member of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, demanding that his church's financial records be opened for inspection by a former member.

The member, Ann Haynes, was kicked out of First Baptist Church of Markham Woods in Lake Mary, Fla., first by the church's deacons and later by vote of the congregation. Prior to the congregation's decision, her pastor, Bob Parker, denied her access to church records, telling her she was no longer a church member.

Haynes sued, claiming the deacon action to exclude her violated the church's articles of incorporation. Circuit Judge Newman Brock agreed. He ruled Jan. 18 that her initial request to view records should have been honored and ordered that all books and records be opened for her inspection within 10 days.

In a Dec. 20 trial, Haynes said she believes the church never received a proper accounting for a \$416,334 bequest given to the church. She also alleges Parker deeded personal property into the church's name to obtain tax-exemption privileges and that he obtained interest-free loans from the church.

John King, an accountant who plans to inspect the books on Haynes' behalf, said he believes that by deeding his home to the church and accepting interest-free loans, Parker violated tax codes. Also, King said, "We want to make sure all the money from the estate made it into the church."

Haynes' attorney, Tim Askew of Sanford, Fla., said he was "extremely pleased" by the ruling. "I hate to say this, but it was really what I expected," he added.

The judge also ordered the church or Parker to pay court costs, including Haynes' legal expenses. Askew said he will submit his fee to Judge Brock, who will give the defendants time to respond before he assesses legal costs.

Parker's attorney, Louis Conti of Orlando, said Jan. 20 he did not know if the church will appeal the ruling. "It's not our call. It's the client's

call," he said.

A staff member at Parker's church said the pastor could not be reached before Associated Baptist Press' Jan. 20 deadline.

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Baptists express concern
about health-care reform

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- No issue will have higher priority for the Christian Life Commission in 1994 than helping Southern Baptists understand various health-care reform proposals, the CLC executive director said at a Jan. 19 press conference in Washington, D.C.

Richard Land said the CLC believes it has "a special responsibility to address health-care reform" because the agency opposes many elements in the Clinton administration's plan and because President Clinton is a Southern Baptist.

The press conference followed a one-day consultation on health-care reform that was hosted by the CLC. Twenty-one people attended the invitation-only meeting, including seven CLC staffers. Reporters were denied access to the meeting.

The consultation resulted in a "moral preamble and a statement of concerns that will be used as an interpretative and evaluative grid through which all proposed health-care reform legislation will be analyzed and critiqued," the statement said.

And the president's plan doesn't pass muster, according to the CLC.

Funding for abortions tops the list of CLC concerns.

"Without question, the inclusion of abortion on demand in the final version of any health-care reform would be the most devastating setback for the pro-life movement since Roe vs. Wade," the statement says. "In 1973, the pro-life movement was caught by surprise when the Supreme Court decided Roe vs. Wade."

"The decision about health-care reform will not be by judicial fiat but will be decided by a democratic political process. And this time the pro-life movement is ready."

No response was immediately available from the Clinton administration.

The statement listed five other concerns:

-- The radical revision of the physician-patient relationship.

The intrusion of health-care alliances into the relationship between a doctor and a patient can erode trust, the CLC said. "A physician's best efforts to preserve human life must never be impeded by harmful government intrusion."

-- Religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

"It is embarrassing that a president who claims the Baptist heritage of religious freedom would consider so violating the consciences of millions of pro-life Americans by forcing them to pay for abortion with their taxes.

"This destroys the essence of true religious freedom.

"Southern Baptists still maintain, through their state conventions, some oversight of denominationally operated hospitals. Most of those hospitals do not offer elective abortion services. We are concerned about the Clinton proposal's impact on the religious liberty of those facilities that refuse to perform abortions."

-- Allocation of finite medical resources.

The agency will oppose any form of "restricted access based on age, quality of life or disability."

-- Interference with families.

"Again, as the Clinton plan presently exists, it includes so-called 'family planning services.' We will resist any plan which will fund abortion counseling, contraceptive distribution to minors, medical care without parental consent and school-based clinics which facilitate these activities."

-- Impact on Southern Baptist entities and agencies.

Every Southern Baptist individual, church and organization will be "impacted significantly by any of the health-care reform proposals currently under consideration."

Acknowledging that health care is a new area of concern for the moral-concerns agency, CLC officials said the statement will provide a foundational, moral framework from which they will operate.

Presenters at the consultation included: Nigel M. de S. Cameron, director of the doctor of philosophy program, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Ill.; Scott Daniels, director of the Ethics and Health Policy Project of the Family Research Council, Washington, D.C.; Glenn Dewberry, family practice physician, Oklahoma City, Okla.; James Herod, senior vice president/legal and benefit services, SBC Annuity Board; John Kilner, ethics consultant, Wilmette, Ill.; and Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla.

In addition to CLC staff, participants were Burke Balch, state legislative director, National Right to Life Committee, Washington; Don Buckley, Spanish Trail Family Medical Center, Pensacola, Fla.; Mark Coppenger, vice president for convention relations, SBC Executive Committee; Thomas Elkins, department head, OB/GYN, Louisiana State University Medical Center, New Orleans; Clyde Freed, member of SBC Executive Committee and pastor of Trinity Baptist Church, Hyattsville, Md.; Vi Galyean, CLC commissioner and Crisis Pregnancy Center director, Reiner, Va.; Daniel Heimbach, assistant professor of ethics, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, N.C.; and Rod Mays, pastor, Woodruff Road Presbyterian Church, Simpsonville, S.C.

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Church crosses cultural barrier
to reach out to Romanian Gypsies

By Greg Warner

BUCHAREST, Romania (ABP) -- A Baptist church in Romania is educating and caring for Gypsy children, overcoming a cultural prejudice against the nomadic ethnic group.

Ferentari Baptist Church in Bucharest began an after-school program for Gypsy children last May. About 40 attend each day. Each afternoon from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m., the children play games and are instructed in academics and the Bible. They also receive food and clothing if needed.

"Most of the children come from very poor situations," said Otniel Bunaciu, who serves as co-pastor of the church with his father, John. "Some have both parents but some don't. ... Our main purpose was to see that they don't end up as street children."

That's the fate that awaits many Gypsy children, whose families are traditionally poor and ostracized. Some teenage children have never attended school. The Gypsies' underclass status, which has been their lot for centuries, is the source of much of the prejudice that confronts them.

"When you talk about Gypsies, people in Europe agree on one thing: they don't like them," said T. Thomas, a Baptist missionary focusing exclusively on Gypsies, who Thomas said number about 20 million in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. "There is a lot of fear and prejudice."

Thomas said the Romanian church's program is probably the most successful Christian outreach anywhere to Gypsies, whose culture is traditionally hostile to outsiders.

"This is one of the most amazing things I've seen in my years of being a missionary," said Thomas, who served in Romania and France for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board for 17 years before joining the new missions corps of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1992. Thomas and his wife, Kathie, now direct the Fellowship's work with Gypsies worldwide from a base in Paris.

"This is a unique program in that a non-Gypsy church is reaching out to Gypsies in their neighborhood and doing a good job," Thomas explained. "This is more remarkable than a white church in America starting a black church in the 1950s."

"If you knew the culture, you would say this is a miracle," he said.

Thomas said reaching out to Gypsies in non-judgmental love can have an impact. "They've been hated and despised by everybody, and if someone shows up who doesn't treat them with prejudice, they are overwhelmed."

The impact of the Ferentari program was demonstrated to members of the sponsoring church Jan. 9, when the Gypsy children presented a program of Christian songs and Bible quotations.

The contrast between the orderly, well-prepared children's group and the normal "urchin" image of Gypsy children was not lost on the audience, said Pat Anderson, a mission volunteer from Lakeland, Fla., who attended the program.

"Their mouths just dropped open. They couldn't believe what was happening. This cuts across all stereotypes," said Anderson, a college criminology professor who works with Resources for Romania, an independent missions and economic development organization.

Romanian organizers used the Jan. 9 program to pay tribute to Thomas, whom they say came up with the idea for the Gypsy outreach while serving in Bucharest. A producer and crew from Romanian television videotaped the event, with plans to feature the program on a later broadcast.

Despite the rave reviews, the Ferentari program is admittedly small. About 100 children are enrolled and less than half that number attend daily, Bunaciu said.

Although a large segment of the district's population is Gypsy, he said, the children who attend come from only three streets near the church. If many more came, he added, "I don't think we could cope with our facilities."

Only about 10 or 15 of the children have begun attending church regularly, he said. So far the impact on their parents has been minimal, he said, although some are now "more open to the church."

The church first tried to reach the Gypsy children in the summer of 1992 by starting a special program for them prior to Sunday morning Bible study. "But we realized many of the Gypsy children didn't know how to read or write, and many of them didn't go to school," Bunaciu said.

Although education is compulsory in Romania, many Gypsy children don't attend, and Romanian officials have looked the other way, he said. The after-school program, though designed to supplement the public schools, is for about half of the children who attend the only education they receive.

Some of the teenagers have never attended school and are for the first time being taught to read and write, said Bunaciu, a graduate of Oxford

University who taught missions last fall as a visiting professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

What about the future?

"We have two or three things we would like to do," he said. "We would like to integrate those children who can read and write into the school system. And we may try to do an elementary school."

The elementary program would be for all poor children, not just Gypsies, he said, and it too would serve as a feeder program for the public schools.

Those plans may be thwarted by lack of funds, however. An Englishman who has been underwriting the after-school program is leaving the country and no other source of funding is in sight, said missionary Thomas. He said he hopes to convince the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to adopt the project.

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Focus on the Family urges
social action by churches

By Mark Wingfield

HOPKINSVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A branch of James Dobson's Focus on the Family organization is leading one-day seminars in churches nationwide urging Christians to become more involved in social action.

The organization urges churches to form social action committees to influence culture and make a difference on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, education and pornography.

The group recently sought allies at a Southern Baptist church in Kentucky, where seminar leader Alan Crippen explained: "The church needs to be a place where people are informed and educated about social issues. We need to give our people a social vision. ... We need to be training centers, teaching people how to relate to their neighbors in a responsible way."

Crippen and his teaching partner, Greg Jesson, will devote 48 weekends this year leading the seminars. The pair spoke Jan. 15 at First Baptist Church of Hopkinsville, Ky., in the second of their "Cultural Impact Seminars" held in the state in recent months.

Social action committees -- or community impact committees, as the organization's literature suggests -- should elicit action by evangelical churches in the same way missions committees have for years, Crippen asserted.

"Every evangelical church in America has a missions committee. Why? Because you think missions is important. We think social action is an important part of the Great Commission."

No estimate is available as to how many churches have formed such committees. But Jesson said Focus on the Family, based in Colorado Springs, Colo., hopes to find a way to keep in touch with such committees as they form.

Focus on the Family, headed by Christian psychologist James Dobson, is best known for Dobson's nationwide radio program of the same name and for Dobson's numerous books on family issues.

However, in recent years the independent organization has delved more into political and social issues related to "family values." It has spun off a separate entity, the Family Research Council, to act as a political lobbying force in Washington, D.C.

Jesson described the purpose of the seminars as two-fold: to show

participants a vision of how Christianity can influence culture and to suggest practical things Christians can do to make a difference.

Through the community impact committees, churches can make a difference on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, education and pornography, the leaders said. However, what issues each church chooses to address will vary depending on local needs and interests, they explained.

Churches with such committees should be willing to cross religious lines to cooperate on social issues of common concern, Crippen said.

On certain issues, evangelicals can "hold hands" with others, such as Jews, Mormons and even feminists, he explained. "If we restrict our labor to only those with whom we agree on every little issue, then we will never accomplish anything."

Focus on the Family's approach parallels a recent emphasis by the Southern Baptist Convention's official moral-concerns agency, said Christian Life Commission staffer Louis Moore.

Moore said the CLC has been promoting Christian life committees in SBC churches for over a year, since a change in the agency's program statement permitted direct contact with congregations. A first printing of 40,000 instructional brochures has been completely depleted, Moore said, and a second printing has been ordered for 60,000 more.

Moore said the CLC is sympathetic to Focus on the Family's concerns. "We don't see them as competition," he said. "We see them as people working along the same lines, although admittedly they are outside the denomination."

The Dobson seminar's content sounds themes similar to those of the Religious Right but without the hardball rhetoric often associated with figures such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson. It also lacks the emphasis on "stealth candidates" for public office that has been associated with Robertson's Christian Coalition.

The two speakers at the Hopkinsville seminar repeatedly called for "responsible" action by Christians. They discounted the effectiveness of common Religious Right rhetoric, such as claims that America is a "Christian nation" and that the nation's moral ills stem from the 1963 Supreme Court ruling outlawing mandatory Bible readings and prayer in public schools.

But the speakers did say the ACLU and other liberal forces have fostered a too-strict view of separation of church and state in America. And powerful forces such as the media, academia and the American Bar Association have furthered a liberal agenda, they said.

"Many of us are here today because we feel disenfranchised, we feel we have no voice," Crippen said. Forming social action committees in churches is one way to find a voice and exert influence, he suggested.

But such an effort requires more than just getting Christians elected to public office, Jesson said. Nor is the answer to be found in calling forth America's "moral majority" to rise up in outrage, he said.

The great danger facing American society is that Americans don't believe firmly in anything, Jesson said. "When people don't believe in anything, they're very, very dangerous," he declared. "This is not just a crisis at the top, but a crisis in the culture itself."

The problem, he said, is that "nothing now stands as authority in our culture." Yet laws must be based on some idea of morality, Jesson said.

"Every law is based on someone's morality. The question facing our nation right now is, 'Who's morality will that be? Whose morality will lead us into the next century?'"

***** END *****