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EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is a condensed version of two stories that ABP distributed last Friday.

Virginia conservatives considering new convention (revised)

By Michael Clingenpeel and Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Virginia Baptist conservatives are weighing the possibility of starting a new state convention as an alternative to the 171-year-old Baptist General Association of Virginia.

The executive committee of Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, formed in 1993 to counter what it called the BGAV's leftward drift, asked the group's president Dec. 8 to appoint a committee "to study the procedures and requirements for the establishment of the (SBCV) as a separate state convention. ..."

If the panel's recommendations -- to be reported to the SBCV executive committee no later than May 1995 -- culminate in a new association of churches, it will be the first formal state schism in Southern Baptists' prolonged theological fight. It would also raise new questions about how state conventions relate to the national Southern Baptist Convention.

Until a decision is made, the SBCV executive committee has "invited" churches to channel funds for the SBC Program unified budget through SBCV, bypassing the traditional route through the BGAV.

"In some ways it would have been good to take this action three years ago," said Terry Harper of Colonial Heights, Va., the SBCV's first vice president and a trustee of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. "But we wanted to be patient and work through the situation to see if there would be any turn in the direction of the BGAV.

"We've seen just the opposite. The BGAV has gone in a more liberal direction. ... It's obvious we

(conservatives) are not wanted in the BGAV, so it's time to go and do our own thing."

Conservatives have long opposed the BGAV's development of financial-giving plans making it easier for churches to support non-SBC ministries -- including the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- through the state convention's budget.

But approval last month of a plan making gifts to Virginia Baptist ministries alone the basis for church representation at BGAV meetings apparently precipitated the SBCV's study. Prior to November churches qualified for "messengers," or delegates, through contributions to both Virginia and national ministries, such as the SBC.

Since conservative churches are reluctant to fund many state Baptist ministries, their ability to amass large numbers of messengers -- and consequently influence -- at BGAV meetings has been seriously undermined.

"The action makes it impossible for conservatives to ever hope to effect change in Virginia through the voting process," said conservative leader T. C. Pinckney of Alexandria, Va. "We have in effect been disenfranchised."

Pinckney, a member of the SBC Executive Committee, said a new state association "is not something that was chosen or desired by conservatives." But he added: "The rules of the game have been changed and we are exploring a new possibility with regret and sorrow."

Regret also characterized reaction from BGAV leaders.

"I'm disappointed that this group feels it necessary to take this action," said BGAV Executive Director Reginald McDonough. "I personally feel that Virginia Baptist leadership is trying hard to give every person in the state an opportunity to stand on their convictions but at the same time be active in the Virginia Baptist program."

Separation would entail the loss of benefits for churches, he added. "There are many, many services to the churches provided by the Virginia Baptist General Board and the other agencies that greatly benefit the churches in their ministry. ... I think a church would stand to lose a lot if it chose not to be a part of the General Association family."

The change would raise new questions about relationships between state Baptist bodies and the SBC.

The national and state conventions are autonomous but work closely together. National boards of trustees are elected by the SBC, but reflect regional representation based on the number of Baptists in each state convention. Churches fund both entities with one check written to the Cooperative Program, which is divided between state and national causes. And retirement programs for ministers are negotiated in contracts between the SBC Annuity Board and state conventions.

It is unclear how these relationships might be affected if a competing state convention petitions for recognition by the national convention.

"If a second convention is organized within a state, it will obviously require more study because all of the questions have not yet been determined, much less the answers," said Morris Chapman, president of the SBC's Executive Committee, in a statement released to the press.

Pinckney believes the SBCV would quickly grow beyond the 15,000 members required for minimum representation on SBC committees. But such tabulations might be unnecessary under an interpretation offered by the convention's legal counsel.

James Guenther, a Nashville, Tenn., attorney, says a state's trustee representation is determined by the number of church members affiliated with the SBC, not the number of members in any state association.

"The way I would understand it is that the SBC would ask itself, 'How many Baptists are there in Virginia who are members of churches which cooperate with the SBC?' It doesn't ask what state convention they affiliate with."

Under that scenario, any member of a Southern Baptist church in Virginia would qualify for service as a trustee -- whether the church was affiliated with the BGAV, the SBCV, both or neither.

How the SBC would relate to two conventions in one state is unclear -- and unprecedented. But Chapman

didn't discount the possibility.

"While I see the need to rethink how the SBC would work within an environment in which there are two state Baptist general bodies, my opinion is that cooperation with a second state convention is not legally outside the parameters of the constitution and bylaws of the SBC," he said.

Similarly, while the Annuity Board has traditionally operated on the basis of legal contracts with state conventions, nothing in the board's governing documents prohibits the agency from signing contracts with two conventions in a single state, said Tom Miller, vice president for communications at the Dallas-based Annuity Board.

Even if the Annuity Board chose not to recognize both groups, the worst they could do is refuse to accept additional contributions from participants. Money already paid into retirement plans are invested in the individual's name and are protected by law, said Ray Pollard, annuity representative for the Virginia Baptist General Board.

For now, the SBCV has recommended that its churches continue to make the \$420 annual contributions to the Baptist General Association of Virginia necessary to remain participants in the Annuity Board's pension plans.

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President asks surgeon general to resign post

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, a frequent target of criticism by conservatives for her outspoken views on condom distribution, abortion and the legalization of drugs, was forced to resign Dec. 9 after suggesting that public schools should promote masturbation as a normal sexual practice.

Citing public statements by the surgeon general that reflect differences with "administration policy and my own convictions," President Clinton said he had asked for and received Elders' resignation. However, he added, those statements "in no way diminish her devotion to her work and the enormous positive impact she has had on the problems she tackled and the people she served."

At the recent United Nations World AIDS Day Conference, Elders responded to a question about whether masturbation remains taboo in teaching about sex education and AIDS prevention. "As per your specific question in regard to masturbation, I think that is something that is part of human sexuality, and it's a part of something that perhaps should be taught" in school, she said.

White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta said the president does not believe that is what schools are for and that is not what the surgeon general should say. Although she has made previous statements at odds with the administration's position, Panetta said this last comment was one too many.

Elders' reputation for outspokenness drew opposition from many groups prior to and after her confirmation.

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said he is delighted at Elders' resignation.

"Her positions on abortion and condom distribution were clearly on the left fringe of the American body politic," he said. "Her comments and bigoted sentiments were a disgrace to the office of surgeon general."

Other groups, including Concerned Women for America and the Family Research Council, released statements applauding Elders' resignation.

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, said the forced resignation "is good news for those of us who favor constructive health-care policy built on core values, common sense and community

consensus."

"The moral from her resignation is that extremist positions only deepen divisions in our rapidly fragmenting culture, ensuring an inevitable backlash," Parham continued. "Both the White House and the new Republican leadership would do well to remember this moral as they push away from the American core in pursuit of far-flung ideological agendas."

Planned Parenthood Federation of America sent Elders a letter of support after hearing of her impending resignation.

"All Americans owe you our deepest appreciation and gratitude for your personal leadership," the letter says. "You brought to Washington a welcome dose of 'real world' wisdom that raised the stature of the office you held with such distinction.

In calling for her resignation, Clinton said his long-time friend "is a physician of outstanding ability, energy and commitment. As a pediatrician, she dedicated her life to improving the health of children. As surgeon general, she worked tirelessly to reduce teen pregnancy and AIDS, and to improve the health of all Americans, especially our children."

Elders, 61, will return to the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock to teach and do research work, school Chancellor Harry Ward said Dec. 12.

Elders was professor of pediatrics at the school 26 years before being appointed state health director for then-Gov. Clinton in 1987.

Her pay will be comparable to the \$105,000 salary she gave up in August 1993 to become surgeon general, school officials said.

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Most Americans believe Jesus will return, poll says

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Six Americans in 10 believe Jesus Christ will someday return to earth and that a Judgment Day awaits, according to a recent survey for "U.S. News and World Report."

Of the 61 percent of Americans who believe Jesus is coming back, 34 percent expect it to occur within a few years or a few decades. Thirty-seven percent think it will be longer than that.

Fifty-nine percent of Americans believe the world will come to an end. Twelve percent of those believe the end is coming within a few years and 21 percent within a few decades. Sixteen percent do not expect the end sooner than a few hundred years from now and 28 percent believe it will come even later than that.

People who describe themselves as born-again Christians and frequent churchgoers subscribe to millennial views much more frequently than others, according to the poll conducted by Market Facts, Inc.

Sixty percent of Americans believe the Bible should be taken literally when it speaks of a final Judgment Day. Forty-nine percent believe the Bible prophesies a literal Antichrist, 44 percent a battle of Armageddon and 44 percent the rapture of the church.

Fifty-three percent of Americans believe some world events of this century fulfill biblical prophecy. Of those, 16 percent cite world wars, 10 percent conflict between Israel and its enemies, 6 percent the establishment of Israel in 1948 and 6 percent the AIDS epidemic as fulfilling prophecy.

The survey polled 1,000 adults. It predicts a margin of error of plus-or-minus 3 percent. Some percentages do not add up to 100 percent because respondents answered, "Don't know."

The poll results are reported in the Dec. 19 issue of the magazine. The cover story explores interest in and recent scholarship concerning the millennium.

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-- By Bob Allen

Ron Chaney elected editor of Maryland/Delaware paper

COLUMBIA, Md. (ABP) -- Ron Chaney was elected editor of "Baptist Life," news journal for the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware, by the two-state convention's General Mission Board Dec. 12.

Chaney, 31, has been associate editor of the Maryland/Delaware paper since 1991 and has served as acting editor since November 1993.

In the past year, the 76-year-old paper has undergone a name change and a redesign emphasizing local news and downplaying controversy. For the last several years the paper was called the "Baptist True Union" and before that, for most of its existence, the "Maryland Baptist."

Chaney is from Meridian, Miss. He is a graduate of Mississippi State University in Starkville and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Chaney is married to the former Karen Meurer, a native of Terre Haute, Ind. She also is a graduate of Southern Seminary.

He succeeds Bob Allen, who left the paper after five years as editor to join the staff of Associated Baptist Press, an independent Baptist news agency in Jacksonville, Fla.

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New GOP agenda drawing mixed reviews

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- As Republicans prepare to run Congress for the first time in four decades, their commitment to reform the welfare system is drawing mixed reviews from Baptist leaders.

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said he favors welfare reform, as well as the tax cut for families endorsed by Republicans.

"We have taxed child rearing and subsidized illegitimacy," Land said.

A \$500 increase in the income tax credit for each child is a "good step in the right direction," he said. The so-called "marriage penalty," which taxes a married couple more for the same income as two single persons, should be eliminated, he added.

Whether or not welfare reform will hurt the poor "depends on how it is done," Land said. There is more agreement on the need for reform than how best to achieve it, he said.

But other Baptists are worried about the impact of welfare reform.

"If welfare reform is built around the primary goal of kicking people off welfare, we are going to have to oppose it because we don't think that is the right goal," said Robert Tiller, director of the American Baptist Churches' Office of Governmental Relations in Washington.

Many Americans resonate with the Republicans' call for reform, but some observers say reform-minded leaders are running ahead of the voters who put them in office.

According to a recent poll for "Time" magazine, most Americans agree it is time to tighten the belt in social programs, but they reject some of the harsh measures suggested by Republican leaders.

Sixty-one percent of the Americans polled said that, because of today's economic climate, people have to worry more about themselves and their families and less about helping others. Thirty-three percent disagreed, according an article in the Dec. 19 issue of "Time."

However, only 38 percent said it is fair to cut off government payments to people who have been on welfare for two years, even if they have no other source of income. Fifty-three percent said it would be unfair to do so.

Asked if welfare reform should start saving taxpayers money immediately, or if it is more important to train welfare recipients for jobs, even if it means the government would spend more money in the short run, 69 percent said the government should spend more, compared to 24 percent saying it should start saving now.

The ABC's Tiller said he will reserve final judgment welfare reform until he sees how it is handled. He said his denomination is also troubled about tax cuts for the rich, because that usually means increasing taxes for the poor.

Welfare reform and tax cuts are two planks in the Republicans' "Contract With America," a 10-part agenda that Speaker-elect Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., said will be passed by the Republican-led Congress in its first 100 days. Most of the newly elected GOP members signed the "Contract" during their campaigns.

Other promises in the "Contract with America" deal with a balanced budget amendment and line-item veto, crime, welfare reform, a nationwide tracking system to find parents who fail to pay child support and the establishment of school voucher programs, reduced security reliance on the United Nations, tax incentives for senior citizens, capital gains tax cut, legal reform/product liability and congressional term limits.

Bennett Smith, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, a predominantly African American denomination, said the "Contract With America" will hurt the African American community.

"The African American church is probably going to have to step in and pick up the slack. The mean-spirited Republican contract is going to affect (many people by) cutting off their benefits."

The new Congressional majority makes it sound like welfare benefits are going to able-bodied minorities who refuse to go to work, Smith said. In reality they help children and the elderly, he noted.

Bennett said the "new power structure in Washington is going to be very mean-spirited. ... I think they are race-baiting.

"It's going to work to America's great harm," he continued. "We need to be healing America, rather than hurting it."

The ABC's Tiller said other portions of the "Contract With America" are troublesome. The ABC opposes the anti-crime initiative, because it would expand the use of the death penalty, and any legislation designed to reduce funding for the United Nations, he said. The denomination would support a balanced budget but opposes cutting spending in programs for the hungry and homeless, he said.

"In general I am concerned that this Congress will be much less receptive to the justice and peace agenda that we have been working on," Tiller said.

The SBC's Land said the shift in political power represented by the Republican landslide is "potentially monumental" for America, signaling that the American people "have entered the 21st century" and are ready for a new way of running government. In that sense, the people are "way ahead of both parties," he said.

President Clinton "got the first shot" at redefining government, Land said, but, "he blew it by governing like an old Democrat. So now the people have turned to the Republicans."

If the Republicans don't deliver, Land said, one of the parties may die or be reincarnated in another form, or a new party may emerge.

Steve McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, warned the nation also may see even worse gridlock between the executive and legislative branches, because the new congressional leadership has more experience in blocking, rather than passing, legislation.

McFarland said the new majority probably means less risk of "an abortion mandate in some scaled down health-care bill," and any such bill that did emerge would more likely have a conscience exemption for religious citizens.

But the shift in power could have a downside for religious Americans, said McFarland. While a conservative Congress may be more sensitive to the interests of conservative faiths, "the religious citizen may relax in the pews and just assume that Newt Gingrich is minding the store and (that) vigilance is no longer as important in this area," McFarland said. "And that could be a fatal miscalculation."

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-- By Pam Parry, Greg Warner and Bob Allen

New Congress may take softer stance on church-state separation

By Pam Parry and Greg Warner

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A new Republican majority in Congress may take a softer stance on church-state separation, say observers on Capitol Hill.

The new Congress may try to pass measures blurring the lines between church and state, such as public-school-sponsored prayer or vouchers for parochial schools, said Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington religious-liberty lobby. Or the Congress may try to amend the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a landmark bill that grants broad protection to religious practice, he added.

Walker cautioned against typecasting an entire political party. Many Republicans, like Sens. Mark Hatfield of Oregon, Orrin Hatch of Utah, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania and John Chafee of Rhode Island, have stood with supporters of church-state separation through the years, Walker said.

However, House Republicans are ready to press the school prayer issue, he said. He predicted that other long-time school prayer advocates, such as Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., might try to attach school prayer riders to education bills that may come before the next Congress.

Some members of the new Congress also may try to amend the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which became law Nov. 16, 1993, by adding a provision to exempt prisoners from its protection, Walker said. The Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion, chaired by the BJC, strongly opposed such a provision when the bill was approved.

American Baptists contest attempts by lawmakers to push organized prayer in public schools, said Robert Tiller, director of the American Baptist Churches Office of Governmental Relations in Washington.

Tiller predicted that school-prayer proponents won't have the needed two-thirds vote for a constitutional

amendment, so he said the question becomes what will they settle for when they realize that goal is unattainable. If they push a moment-of-silence law, the battle becomes tougher, he said.

But Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said a constitutional amendment is the best way to resolve the impasse over school prayer. "We've given the courts 30 years to sort this thing out and they haven't done it," he said. A legislative remedy would prove inadequate, he said, since any new laws would only get bogged down by court challenges.

"Most Southern Baptists who now embrace the right kind of constitutional prayer amendment have done so because they have lost confidence in the nation's court system as being able or willing to protect students' free-exercise rights without such an amendment," Land said.

While he and Southern Baptists oppose the current practice of "government suppression ... and censorship of religion," Land said, they do not favor a return to the practice of teacher-led prayer that existed earlier this century.

"I believe the majority of Southern Baptists are against the government sponsorship of religion which prevailed in our nation's schools prior to the 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court decisions," he said.

The right kind of school prayer, he said, would be voluntary, student led and student initiated, and it would protect the rights of all religions by not favoring one faith over another.

Land recently met with Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., who is designated to draft a suitable school-prayer proposal for Republicans, but Land declined to discuss the specifics of Istook's proposal.

Steve McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, said the shift in power "could go either way. The positive vein is the more conservative Congress may be more sensitive to the religious liberty interest of conservative faiths.

"On the other hand, the religious citizen may relax in the pews and just assume that Newt Gingrich is minding the store, and vigilance is no longer as important in this area," McFarland said. "And that could be a fatal miscalculation."

McFarland said the proposed constitutional amendment for school prayer is a good start but has some problems because it doesn't go far enough.

"If we are going to amend our foundational document, we should make sure that the outcome is worth the risk," he said. "So the amendment should protect more than just what happens in the first 30 seconds of the school day but rather should protect all forms of student religious expression inside and outside the classroom."

Success of the constitutional amendment depends on how much of the GOP's Contract With America is approved, he added. If by April 15 the Congress hasn't passed at least half of the proposed legislation, lawmakers are not going to give serious attention to student prayer, he predicted.

Another religious freedom issue expected to come before the new Congress concerns Native Americans.

Bob Peregoy, senior staff attorney of the Native American Rights Fund, said he does not believe the new Congress will reject efforts to secure religious freedom for Native Americans. In the 103rd Congress, lawmakers approved legislation to allow the religious use of peyote, but other bills to preserve sacred sites and the ceremonial use of eagle feathers have not yet become law.

Peregoy said that Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who is the new chairman of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, is a staunch supporter of Native American religious freedom. Because of the strong bipartisan support for RFRA, Peregoy said he believes most lawmakers support religious freedom for all people.

Another religious liberty bill expected to be reintroduced in the 104th Congress would protect employees' religious freedom.

The Workplace Religious Freedom Act, introduced by Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., that would amend Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, restoring the requirement that employers make a real effort to accommodate the religious practices of employees.

David Lachmann, legislative director for Rep. Nadler, offered no predictions on what the new Congress will do with the bill. Lachmann said that having a large proportion of freshmen lawmakers means the 104th Congress will be "full of surprises."

The bill has broad appeal over the political spectrum, he said, adding that it will come down to whether or not Republicans are true to their "rhetoric" that religious freedom is important.

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'Peace on earth' still elusive
in land where Christ was born

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Peace and Christmas go together. But as the season approaches, peace remains uncertain in the land where Christ was born.

An Oct. 26 accord with Jordan marked the first treaty between Israel and an Arab state since the 1979 treaty with Egypt. But still unresolved in the Mideast peace process are thorny issues related to access to holy sites for the three major world religions which claim the territory as their land of origin.

Perhaps the most contentious issue -- the sovereignty of East Jerusalem, currently under Israeli control -- is not even scheduled for discussion until the third year of the peace process.

Three major world religions -- Judaism, Islam and Christianity -- place claims of religious significance on East Jerusalem. Proponents of the various faiths have fought over it for centuries, mingling competing claims of a divine right to possess the land with blood.

Tempering those ancient hostilities with modern political realities will not be easy, observers agree. But they differ on how best to resolve the conflict.

Bill O'Brien, a 26-year veteran of Southern Baptist foreign missions, said he hopes the recent signing of the peace treaty in Jordan will bring "true shalom -- totally harmonious living."

But the key to peaceful co-existence is "mutual recognition," said O'Brien, adding that proprietary ownership of the old section of Jerusalem by any group could be detrimental to peace.

"I would hate to see Jerusalem become a political capital," said O'Brien, director of the Global Center at Beeson Divinity School of Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

O'Brien, who serves on the steering committee of Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, favors a joint council representing all three religions that would guarantee access for all religious pilgrims to the region.

Regardless of who controls Jerusalem, there should be safe, free and easy access to the holy sites for all religions, said Charles Kimball, associate professor of religion at Furman University in Greenville, S.C.

Both Israelis and Palestinians have legitimate claims to the region in and around Jerusalem, and the issue will not be resolved until some measure of "approximate justice" for all can be found, Kimball said.

"Both sides will have to get enough (from negotiations) that they can live with," Kimball said.

Because sovereignty cuts to the very national identity of both groups, Kimball said Palestinians will not be satisfied simply to visit Jerusalem. "They feel that it is their land."

Peaceful co-existence will depend on trust, and some kind of Palestinian authority related to Jerusalem will be in everyone's interest, Kimball said. He suggested that perhaps Jerusalem could be a joint capital of the

two states, or an international city.

Avi Granot, counselor for interreligious affairs at the Israeli embassy in Washington, said that because of the intensity and divisiveness of the issue, negotiators hope to settle other matters, such as water rights, before tackling a permanent solution to Jerusalem control.

By the third year, the rationale goes, both sides will have too much at stake to fail to settle on Jerusalem.

The Israeli official said history has shown that the only time all the sites have been open to every faith is when East Jerusalem was under Israeli control. Each religion should have the responsibility for maintaining its own religious sites and shrines, which has been the case since Israel reclaimed East Jerusalem in 1967, Granot said.

Israel is committed to freedom of worship for Palestinians as well as Jews, Granot added.

Steve Gutow, executive director of the National Jewish Democratic Council in Washington, said the problem is too visceral for Orthodox Jews to give up control easily.

Arabs, meanwhile, consider East Jerusalem an occupied territory, said Abraham Abu-rabi, a Muslim scholar who grew up in Palestine. Abu-rabi, professor of Islamic Studies and Christian/Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, said theological arguments have been used to justify too many things.

"The Israeli presence is there by force," he said.

The entire issue boils down to a "human question," said Abu-rabi. The main problem in Israel is that Palestinians are suffering economically and politically, he said. Palestinians believe "we are also God's children, and he would never discriminate against us," Abu-rabi said.

The only fair solution for Palestinians, Abu-rabi reasoned, is the establishment of a United Nations interagency council to control and administer access to East Jerusalem and the holy sites.

"We in the Western world are behind Israel," Abu-rabi said. "We do not understand the Palestinian side. ...We should not forget as Americans the human suffering of the Palestinian people, men and women."

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