

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Flooding hits Baptist churches, displaces families in Midwest**

MACEO, Ky. (ABP) -- The pews at Dawson Memorial Baptist Church near Maceo, Ky., have survived three floods before, but the Flood of '97 may have done them in, Pastor Steve Boyd said.

"Those old pews are the originals," he said by telephone March 5, as water in the church sanctuary stood 4-foot deep and was still rising. "They went through the 1937 flood, when they were found out in a field afterward, the 1945 flood and the 1964 flood. But I don't think they'll make it through this one."

At least 25 Kentucky Baptist churches were hit by the state's worst flooding in 60 years, after record rainfall amounts up to 13 inches March 1-2 swelled the Ohio River from Martinsville, W.Va., to Cairo, Ill.

More than 4 feet of water surged into Buck Run Baptist Church's 2-year-old \$2 million sanctuary and educational facility near Frankfort. Water also filled the church's old sanctuary built in 1817, which is now used for Sunday school and houses the congregation's kitchen and banquet hall.

The flood ruined pews and carpet in the new building and most office furniture, said Evelyn Gardner, business manager and a lifelong member of the church. Pews in the old sanctuary were solid wood and may be salvageable, she said. All hymnals in both buildings were lost.

Like most homeowners in the area, the church did not own flood insurance but plans to get it now, Gardner said. "We were supposed to be above the 100-year flood mark," she said. As of March 20, damage estimates at the church had not been totaled.

While church offices were moved to the second floor, worship services had to be relocated to Franklin County High School. Gardner estimated it would be two or three months before worship services could return to the church. "I guess it depends on how fast the drywallers and all those [others] work," she said.

About 20 families in the church had homes or businesses damaged by the flood, she said. Two weeks after the rains, a trailer park near the church remained nearly deserted, she added.

Tornadoes in Arkansas and flash flooding in six other states killed at least 61 people and left hundreds homeless. Counties in Arkansas, Indiana, Kentucky, West Virginia, Ohio and Tennessee were declared federal disaster areas. President Clinton asked Congress for \$2 billion in emergency funds March 19 to clean up after recent storms.

As usual, Southern Baptists were quick on the scene, working alongside the American Red Cross and the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide relief to disaster victims.

Disaster-relief workers from Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina and Tennessee prepared 122,000 meals and helped flood victims "mud out" in 11 cities in Kentucky.

First Baptist Church in Elizabethtown, Ill., was thought to be the only Baptist church in the state to be hit directly. No description of damage was available as of press time March 20.

Shelters and cooking sites were set up at Baptist churches in Golconda, Metropolis and Shawneetown in extreme Southern Illinois.

No Southern Baptist churches in Indiana were known to have been affected by flooding, although several reported damage to church members' homes, said John Yeats, editor of the Indiana Baptist newspaper.

Most Southern Baptist work in the state is near Evansville, which was protected by a levee, he said. Most churches in smaller river towns along the Ohio are located away from downtown business districts which were hit by high water, Yeats said.

"Our work is new enough here that we couldn't afford the downtown sites," he said.

Disaster-relief work in Indiana centered in Clarksville, just across the river from Louisville, Ky., Yeats said. After workers ran short on rubber boots and gloves, churches in Indianapolis bought entire supplies of the items at stores in the central part of the state and delivered them to flood workers.

A week before the flood, participants in a women's evangelism retreat collected food, clothes and medical supplies to be distributed at three social-ministry centers around the state, one of them, ironically, in Clarksville.

In Ohio, Southern Baptist churches were also spared. "I don't think we had damage in our churches," said Will Pollard, state Brotherhood director and editor of the Ohio Baptist Messenger. "I think they all survived pretty well."

Rising waters from the Little Miami River, a tributary to the Ohio, flooded much of Newtown, Ohio, near Cincinnati, Pollard said. An automobile dealer moved cars to high ground on the parking lot of First Baptist Church, which became a center for distribution of clothing and food.

A disaster-relief portable kitchen owned by Illinois Baptists served 55,000 meals at the church and was expected to close March 21. An Ohio Baptist unit in Portsmouth served 13,000 meals before closing March 14 Pollard said.

Southern Baptist churches in West Virginia were spared from flood damage, a spokesperson at Baptist state convention offices said March 20.

Two weeks after a series of tornadoes devastated Arkadelphia and other Arkansas towns, the last Southern Baptist disaster-relief unit pulled out March 17 after serving more than 80,000 meals, the Brotherhood Commission reported.

Two weeks into the flood-recovery effort, Kentucky Baptist Brotherhood Director Bob Simpkins worried that volunteers might not last as long as the damage.

"One of the greatest concerns I have is that my people are wearing down," Simpkins said. "Normally we have a sufficient volunteer bank to handle it when we're working in one or two given sites. In this one, we're working the whole state, and it spreads us out so thin."

Along with offering hot meals and work, Baptist volunteers sought to comfort flood victims. "A lot of people who come in here break down and cry, and we cry with them," said Terry Schinkle, who directed Baptist cleanup efforts in Falmouth, Ky.

Dale Meehan, crew chief for Missouri Baptists' feeding team, drove 13 hours to get to Kentucky, he said, for one reason: "I want to be able to find people and lead people to Christ."

Meehan recalled talking to one resident of Falmouth, a Catholic, who remarked, "I don't see how anybody could stand to go through this without Christ."

Meehan agreed. "I guess that's one of the reasons I keep going," he said.

American Baptist Men dispatched volunteers and a new 34-foot disaster-relief trailer to Cincinnati. Diane Steelman is pastor at two American Baptist churches in areas hard hit by flooding. Neither church was seriously

damaged but 10 American Baptist families were forced from their homes and were staying with friends or relatives, said Allen Abbott, executive director of ABMen in Valley Forge, Pa.

The volunteers planned to cooperate with American Baptist churches, FEMA, the Red Cross and Church World Services to help 500 families in the community displaced by flooding, Abbott said, calling it "the most comprehensive effort to date for ABMen Disaster Relief."

Just as life began to return to normal along the Ohio River, the National Weather Service warned March 19 that melting heavy snows in the northern Midwest could cause the highest floods in 150 years this spring.

"You're going to see hundreds of square miles under water," Elbert Friday of the National Weather Service told USA Today.

No snow is on the ground in the Ohio Valley but the ground is saturated and streams and rivers are still high. Heavy rain could bring more flooding there, the weather service warned.

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-- By Bob Allen. With reporting by David Winfrey, Mark Wingfield and Tim Ellsworth.

## **Soviet Jewry effort cited as model to address Christian persecution**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The campaign two decades ago to save Soviet Jews could be the model for an effort to end persecution of Christians in remaining Communist nations and Islamic regimes, said speakers at a March 18 seminar in Washington.

The campaign to save Soviet Jewry "is the only example of a religious community redirecting American foreign policy on behalf of oppressed co-religionists overseas," said Chris Gersten, director of the Center for Jewish and Christian values, sponsor of the conference on persecution of Christians worldwide.

"Unless the American Christian community launches a similar effort, the plight of persecuted Christians will only worsen," he added.

A spokesman for the conference said Christians are the most widely persecuted religious group today.

Sens, Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., and Arlen Specter, R-Penn., also spoke at the seminar. Specter plans to introduce legislation titled "Freedom From Religious Persecution Act of 1997," which would establish a presidential advisory office on religious liberty to coordinate and assess reports on religious persecution presented by churches, governmental agencies and international organizations.

Last year, President Clinton established a State Department advisory committee on religious liberty abroad over the opposition of some religious groups that called for a presidential adviser on religious liberty.

Participants at the March 18 meeting complained that the committee is inadequate, and some said they still would prefer a special adviser to the president.

The conference focused on input from Jewish leaders on ways to effectively end religious persecution.

David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said one lesson to be learned from the American effort to save Soviet Jews is the fact that the Jewish community spoke with one voice.

Among fundamental human rights is the right of proselytization, Saperstein said, but he counseled against making that right central to any anti-persecution campaign. "Tactically, you have to recognize that if the focus of the campaign focuses on proselytization, it will hurt in terms of the coalitional efforts you want to build." He added that "people will still stand up but there will be a queasiness" about the group's agenda if proselytization becomes the main focus.

He suggested that those concerned about persecution "humanize the issue," and let people learn about those who are being persecuted.

Saperstein also noted that several Christians "who didn't wait to be asked" greatly helped the American effort to save the Soviet Jewry.

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, agreed that proselytization should not be the major focus of the campaign to address Christian persecution.

"The major focus of this effort is not the freedom to proselytize," Land said. The major focus of this effort is the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion without the fear of torture, imprisonment or death, as stated in the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he said.

"If Baptists made a particularly unique contribution to the Reformation, it was the concept of soul liberty and freedom from government persecution on matters of religious faith," Land said.

Land suggested that there be an "interfaith" approach to solving the problem of Christian persecution. "Those issues that unite your friends and divide your enemies are good issues. Those issues that divide your friends and unite your enemies are bad issues."

Responding to questions following his remarks, Land said there is a secular bias in America and especially in the media. He said that Christians are not persecuted in America but are discriminated against.

The Christian Coalition and other groups feel they are being "bullied" as opposed to bullying others, as critics charge, he said.

The media gave more credibility to Stephen Carter's "The Culture of Disbelief," Land asserted, because Carter is a lawyer and an Episcopalian. "Episcopalians are not evangelicals as we understand the term," he said.

After an Episcopalian in the audience told Land he was an evangelical, Land said that just like a liberal church can be found in the Southern Baptist Convention, there are "evangelicals in an Episcopalian denomination that is not evangelical."

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## **Supreme Court turns away church-state separation cases**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has refused to halt a lawsuit against a New York prosecutor who agreed to drop sex-abuse charges on the condition that a suspect swear her innocence on a Bible in her church.

The court refused to disturb lower-court rulings upholding a lawsuit charging Orange County prosecutor Gerald D'Amelia with coercing religious practice in violation of the First Amendment.

In the case, a suspect identified in court records as Jane Doe was charged with sexual abuse based on allegations by her 14-year-old son and estranged husband. During the investigation, D'Amelia began to question the evidence against the suspect and offered to drop charges only if she would swear on the Bible at an Orange County Roman Catholic Church that she had not sexually abused her son.

The High Court upheld judgment of the 2nd U.S. Court of Appeals that conditioning the dismissal of charges on the suspect's willingness to swear to her innocence in a church "was manifestly beyond" the prosecutor's authority and "patently forbidden" by the Constitution.

In a second church-state case considered March 17, the High Court said a 103-foot-tall cross in a San Francisco park built with public funds in 1934 violates a no-preference-to-religion clause in the California Constitution.

At first, a federal district court ruled the cross atop Mount Davidson did not violate the state Constitution. The 9th U.S. Court of Appeals reversed that decision, however, finding that the cross "carries great religious significance."

The presence of the cross on public land violates the California Constitution, the appeals court ruled, but did not address whether it would be permissible under the federal Constitution.

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## **Richmond Seminary trustees elect Old Testament professor**

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond trustees elected Mark Biddle as associate professor of Old Testament at a board meeting March 17-18.

Biddle, associate professor of Old Testament at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn., since 1988, will begin teaching at the Virginia seminary this fall.

He is an M.Div. graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and holds a Th.M. from Ruschlikon Baptist Theological Seminary and a doctorate in theology from the University of Zurich.

Also at the meeting, the board elected five new trustees. They are Thomas Chewning of Richmond, Va.; Walter Parrish II of Laurel, Md.; Charles Pond III of Suffolk, Va.; William Tuck of Lumberton, N.C., and Joseph Womack, a pastor in Floyd, Va., and a 1994 graduate of the seminary, which opened in 1991.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Baptist Center for Ethics launches resource division**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Baptist Center for Ethics has announced formation of a new division called Acacia Resources which will promote family initiatives.

Robert Parham, executive director of the independent Baptist ethics agency, announced the new unit during a BCE-sponsored "Family Summit" in Nashville, Tenn., March 18.

The first project of Acacia Resources will be publication of an undated Sunday school curriculum on topics related to the family. The 19 lessons in the "Families in 3D" series could be adapted for use in a variety of settings, Parham said.

The series, to be available this fall, will cover topics such as time, money, sex, parenting, stress and health.

Parham said while a curriculum series is the first offering of Acacia Resources, BCE does not intend to become a full-service curriculum provider.

The name Acacia is taken from a type of wood described in the Old Testament. Acacia wood was used to build the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the tabernacle altar.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

## Presbyterian Church reportedly adopts ban on ordaining gays

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has voted to make its ban on the ordination of homosexuals part of church law, according to news reports.

Associated Press reported March 19 that a majority of regional bodies voted to amend the church's constitution to require chastity of single ministers.

Presbyterian News Service refused to confirm the story, saying the votes had not yet been formally tallied. The official count as of March 19 showed 72 of the 172 presbyteries voting for the so-called "fidelity and chastity" amendment and 51 opposing the change.

The Presbyterian General Assembly, the church's chief legislative body, previously affirmed past church policies forbidding the ordination of non-celibate homosexuals, but those decisions did not involve the church's constitution, called the Book of Order.

Last year, after a three-year study, the General Assembly sent out a proposed amendment to the Book of Order allowing ordination only of individuals who live "either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage of a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness."

As Presbyterians sought to take a firm stand against homosexual ordination, another denomination, the United Church of Christ, appointed its first national staff minister for lesbian and gay concerns, Religion News Service reported.

William Johnson, who has been HIV/AIDS ministries specialist for the United Church Board for Homeland Mission since 1990, will now add lesbian, gay and bisexual concerns to his portfolio, the news service reported.

He is believed to be one of the first national staff members of any major mainline Protestant denomination to be specifically in charge of ministry to homosexuals.

The 1.5 million-member UCC is the only major Protestant denomination to permit the ordination of homosexuals.

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-- By ABP staff

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CORRECTION: In the March 14 ABP story, "Alliance of Baptists revisits its founding covenant," please correct the fifth-from-final paragraph to read as follows:

During a business session, Hastey announced new conversations with leaders of the United Church of Christ, generally regarded as among the most liberal Protestant denominations in the United States. The 1.5 million-member UCC, based in Cleveland, Ohio, joins the predominantly black Progressive National Baptist Convention, the Canadian Atlantic Baptist Fellowship, the Roger Williams Fellowship of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and the Fraternity of Cuban Baptist Churches in ongoing dialogue with the Washington-based Alliance.

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