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Ethics panel criticizes magazine for articles on 'unisex' NIV

By Bob Allen

ASHEVILLE, N.C. (ABP) -- A conservative Christian magazine which sparked a controversy with stories alleging Bible translators were planning a "unisex" translation of the New International Version has been charged with ethics violations by a peer-review panel.

World magazine "falls seriously short of upholding" ethical standards of the Evangelical Press Association, ruled an ad-hoc ethics committee investigating complaints against the Asheville, N.C.-based magazine by Zondervan Publishing House and the International Bible Society.

Findings of the three-person panel do not yet constitute official action by the organization of editors and publishers of Christian periodicals but are a report to the group's board of directors.

World's editor hinted the magazine would drop out of the association unless the board of directors repudiates the ethics report. Ron Wilson, executive director of the press association, said the group's board of directors is in the process of calling a special meeting to consider the report, scheduled for July 22.

Issues of World magazine dated March 29 and April 19 carried articles alleging the Bible society's Committee on Bible Translation had voted to produce a "unisex" version of the NIV, motivated by a feminist agenda.

Officials at the Bible society, which owns rights to the NIV translation, and Zondervan Publishing House, the NIV's North American publisher, said the articles were "filled with innuendo and sensationalism."

When the controversy erupted, the Bible society defended the work of the translation committee, saying some "gender-accurate" revisions were needed because of changes in English usage.

In May, however, they announced they were abandoning all plans for gender-related changes in future editions of the Bible, citing "significant response" to the reports about potential updates to the NIV.

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The Evangelical Press Association panel said World magazine violated the association's code of ethics, which requires reporting "characterized by sincerity, truthfulness, accuracy and an avoidance of distortion and sensationalism."

The critical articles were "one-sided and dismissive of responsible alternatives," the ad hoc committee reported. The panel criticized the articles for what it called unbalanced presentation of complex issues related to Bible translation and for inadequate response from Zondervan and the Bible society.

"Accuracy demands that those who are cited in an article be contacted and given a chance to set the record straight, particularly when serious charges are being leveled," the ad-hoc committee reported. "No philosophy of journalism sets writers free from this basic responsibility. This committee believes World's prominent linking of Zondervan Publishing House and 'a feminist seduction,' in view of World's failure to contact Zondervan for comment or explanation, is inexcusable."

The committee also found World "remiss" with reference to a commitment in the EPA ethics code to avoid distortion and sensationalism.

"The author employed inflammatory language, insinuation and a blatant appeal to anti-feminist sentiment," the committee wrote. "Poor writing is a deeply troublesome aspect of these articles. The use of terms such as 'feminist seduction,' 'unisex language,' and 'stealth Bible' detract from a reasoned discussion of an important issue. The committee agrees that the more serious a charge or accusation a journalist makes, the more care and restraint the journalist needs to take in exploring it."

Another section of the ethics code urges members to "be conscious of their duty to protect the good name and reputation of others."

The magazine "did not attempt to protect Zondervan's name or reputation," the committee said. "Instead, its articles engage in a set-up job: they draw spurious connections between feminism and Zondervan, the International Bible Society and the Committee on Bible Translation."

"In conclusion, the committee finds in World's two articles unwarranted inferences attributed to Zondervan and the CBT and faulty conclusions which do not follow from the data presented."

In a response in the July 12 edition of the magazine, World editor Marvin Olasky said the ad-hoc committee "erred by implicitly setting up new requirements for EPA membership, by making recommendations that would suppress competition among publications and by trying to push their own journalistic and ideological values under a guise of judicious ethical examination."

"Is it within the province of the EPA to tell members what they should publish?" Olasky asked.

"If the EPA board does not repudiate the findings of the ad hoc committee, then we have obviously been mistaken in our understanding of what EPA membership entails, and we are no longer able, in good conscience, to be a member of the EPA," Olasky wrote.

In the same issue, World publisher Joel Belz, who recently completed a two-year term as president of the Evangelical Press Association, called the report "a professionally sloppy performance by people we have regarded as colleagues and friends."

One charge, that World did not include any opposing views, is "demonstrably false," Belz said.

"So why are World's wrists being slapped like this in public?" Belz continued. "It is because of perverse assumption now so dominant among evangelicals that feelings, attitudes and relationships are all more important than truth. Unity is a higher priority than orthodoxy. Division, even for truth's sake, becomes the most offensive of heresies. Church officers who call for church discipline are thought to be more guilty than those who need to be disciplined."

World magazine's mission statement says it will accompany reporting with commentary written from a perspective of "the final authority of the Bible as the inerrant Word of God" and intended to "assist in developing a Christian understanding of the world, rather than accepting existing secular ideologies."

The magazine employs standards for what it calls "directed" reporting, meaning journalists have a responsibility only to promote viewpoints consistent with the Bible.

In response to criticism that the articles' use of inflammatory terms detracts "from a reasoned discussion of an important issue," Olasky wrote, "If 'reasoned discussion' means the assumption that there are a variety of valid positions on the issue of quoting God accurately, we reject that."

"We believe that the Bible teaches that women should not be ministers, and that husbands and fathers should have headship within their families," Olasky wrote. "This is not a politically correct position, but we do not believe that EPA membership requires allegiance to some contemporary trends."

Members of the ethics committee included Mark Fackler, journalism professor at Wheaton College; Wesley Pippert of the University of Missouri's School of Journalism; and Beth Spring, a journalist and author based in Washington.

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Mission 'fields' becoming missions force, planners of global consultation say

PRETORIA, South Africa (ABP) -- Continents traditionally viewed as mission fields -- Africa, Asia and South America -- are now taking the lead in a new push to send Christian missionaries to unreached peoples, said organizers of a June 30-July 5 strategy meeting in Pretoria, South Africa.

Sponsors called the Global Consultation on World Evangelization the "most significant conference ever held in Africa."

"For years Africa has been seen as a mission field," said a brochure. "However, with the expansion of the church on the continent, Africa has become part of the mission force that will complete the task of world missions."

The meeting was convened by AD2000 and Beyond Movement, a coalition aimed at coordinating an estimated 2,000 separate plans for global evangelization being carried on simultaneously by organizations around the world.

Nearly 80 percent of the almost 4,000 conference delegates came from countries that were formerly viewed as missionary-receiving countries. Nearly two-thirds (62.3 percent) came from Africa, indicating the world's missionary leadership base is now firmly established there, organizers of the conference said.

Only 20 percent of the delegates came from the traditional missionary-sending countries in Western Europe, the U.S.A., Canada, New Zealand and Australia. More than 8 percent came from Asia and 7 percent from Latin America.

Citizens of Africa, Asia and Latin America also paid for 64 percent of conference costs through registration fees. Participants from the West contributed the rest.

Luis Bush, founder and leader of the AD2000 and Beyond Movement, told delegates that people had come from around the world to learn from Africa.

Bush said South Africa may be the fastest-growing exporter of Christian missionaries. The number of missionaries exported from South Africa doubled between 1991 and 1995 and then doubled again in 1996, he said.

An estimated 338 million Africans are born-again Christians, he said, comprising 17 percent of the global Christian community. At the turn of this century, the African continent was home to only 2 percent of the world's Christians.

Bush described the conference goal as "a church for every people and the gospel for every person by the year 2000."

In addition to plenary sessions, participants chose from 10 consultations specializing in concerns including meeting human needs, worship and the performing arts and ministry to children.

At one such consultation, business executives pledged to establish a worldwide network of businesses aimed at presenting the gospel to unreached peoples in countries otherwise closed to missionaries. In another session, white

South African businessmen responded to an invitation to come forward and in tears asked for forgiveness from black South Africans for past injustices under the country's old apartheid system.

Another initiative called for training church planters to handle rapid growth in Christianity. The number of Christians worldwide is growing by 6 million a year, one speaker said.

Such training should not be limited to formal seminary instruction, said Chris de Wet, leader of AD2000's task force for training for church-planting movements. "There is no biblical foundation for that," he said, adding that programs for church planters should focus on end results. "We need to be more user-friendly."

Despite overall growth in Christianity, missionary activity has stalled in relation to Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist blocs of unreached peoples, said Ralph Winter, founder of the U.S. Center of World Mission in Pasadena, Calif.

"We cannot reasonably expect to achieve the goals of the marvelous AD2000 Movement without a significant change in strategy," he said. "More of the same will not be enough."

Winter argued for a "de-Westernized" gospel message that would more easily penetrate and spread to peoples traditionally resistant to evangelization.

The task of global evangelization is too large for any one group, said George Verwer, founder and international coordinator of Operation Mobilization, a ministry of evangelism, discipleship training and church planting. It will require large groups, like the Southern Baptist Convention, as well as newer and smaller missions agencies, working in partnership with local churches and para-church organizations, he said.

A consultation for presidents and academic deans representing theological schools from 53 nations called for ministerial training rooted in concern for world evangelization and upholding "the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the necessity of personal faith in him as Lord and Savior."

"This is especially imperative in the light of the increasing pluralistic environment which has been brought about by the resurgence of non-Christian religions hostile to the advance of the gospel, by the erosion of historic Christianity in the West and by the increasing prevalence of secularism almost everywhere," the educators stated in a resolution.

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Hong Kong's leader says religious freedoms intact

HONG KONG (ABP) -- Hong Kong's religious freedoms will remain intact under Chinese rule, Hong Kong's new chief executive assured an international group of Christians July 9, nine days after the former British colony came under control of mainland China's communists.

Hong Kong administrator Tung Chee Hwa spoke to the Lutheran World Federation, the first major international body to meet in Hong Kong since the July 1 handover. "The government of the People's Republic of China has granted Hong Kong a high degree of autonomy and a lifestyle that will not change for a long, long, long time to come," Tung told the 900 Lutheran delegates, according to Ecumenical News International.

Tung, a Shanghai-born Hong Kong businessman appointed by China to govern the island region which borders the mainland, praised the "one country, two systems" approach adopted by the Chinese, which allows Hong Kong to keep its economic and religious openness while accepting Chinese sovereignty. Religious freedom in mainland China is severely restricted.

Tung, greeted with a standing ovation, read Article 141 of the Basic Law of China which protects the beliefs, activities, financial transactions, property rights and foreign associations of religious groups. About 8 percent of Hong Kong's 6.4 million people are Christian. Most others are Buddhists.

Most Hong Kong citizens are reportedly cautiously optimistic about China's promise of freedom, although others are taking a wait-and-see attitude.

The handover culminated a 99-year lease between the Chinese and Great Britain, which won control of Hong Kong in the Opium Wars of the mid-1800s.

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-- ABP staff

Annual study of church statistics shows modest growth, declines

By Bob Allen

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Denominations in the United States generally experienced either modest growth or decline last year, according to the 1997 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.

"Denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention which have experienced growth over the last decade continued to grow. However, they grew at a more modest rate than in many past years," wrote editors of the annual compilation of statistical data by the National Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

"Denominations like the United Methodist Church who have declined in recent years continued to decline, but they lost fewer members this year than in some previous years."

Overall, U.S. church membership increased by about a quarter of a million members. Most of that growth was accounted for by three groups: Mormons, Catholics and Southern Baptists.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints grew more than any other religious group last year, registering a membership increase of 98,400, or 2.39 percent. Mormons comprise the seventh-largest faith group in the U.S., with 4.7 million members.

The Roman Catholic Church showed the second-highest numerical increase, with membership up by 89,849 (.15 percent). The Southern Baptist Convention was third, growing by 49,236 members, a percentage change of .32 percent.

Other groups reporting significant growth are the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.), up 4.25 percent; Assemblies of God, 1.7 percent; Jehovah's Witnesses, 2.14 percent; Seventh-day Adventist Church, 2 percent; American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., 0.63 percent; International Pentecostal Holiness Church, 4.68 percent; and the Presbyterian Church in America, 3 percent.

More than half of America's church membership is in the three largest denominations: The Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church. The 30-largest faith groups comprise 95 percent of the total church membership.

Roman Catholics are by far the largest denomination, with 60.2 million members. Southern Baptists are second, numbering 15.6 million. United Methodists number 8.5 million.

Those groups are followed by: National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., 8.2 million; the Church of God in Christ, 5.5 million; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 5.1 million; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 4.7 million; Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 3.7 million; National Baptist Convention of America, Inc., 3.5 million; African Methodist Episcopal Church, 3.5 million; Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 2.6 million; and Episcopal Church, Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc., and National Missionary Baptist Convention of America, with about 2.5 million each.

An estimated 151 million U.S. adults, or 86.2 percent of the population, belong to Christian faith groups, the Yearbook reported. The estimated adult Jewish population is 3.1 million, or 1.8 percent of the population.

Muslim/Islamic adults number 527,000, or 0.3 percent. Unitarian Universalists number 502,000. Buddhists number 401,000 and Hindus 227,000.

While cautioning that changes in membership reported to the Yearbook for one year cannot be used to determine changes in long-term trends, the editors noted that this year's data "raises a question about the assumption that conservative churches grow while liberal denominations decline."

"If liberal is understood to mean denominations that either allow or encourage diversity within the denomination and conservative means those denominations that strive for uniformity in belief and practice, then the Canadian data ... support the theory. However, in the United States the data is not so clear.

"... Included in the list of denominations that are growing are the Roman Catholic Church which may not encourage diversity but tolerates it. Also the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. showed growth. This is a denomination that encourages diversity within its congregations."

"The list of denominations reporting the largest decline in membership includes several denominations that encourage strict adherence to set beliefs."

Among groups with the largest membership declines were conservative groups like the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) which lost nearly 5,000 members -- less than 1 percent of total membership; the Pentecostal Church of God, which dropped nearly 7 percent; the Pentecostal Free Will Baptist Church, Inc., and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church.

Still, the year showed no reversal to decline in denominations "with largely white membership and liberal approaches" known as "mainline" churches. "Again this year most of the mainline denominations that reported to the Yearbook registered decline. While these decreases are less than 2 percent of the membership of these denominations, the decreases follow years of steady decline."

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) declined 1.22 percent. The United Church of Christ dropped 1.94 percent. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America dropped 0.12 percent. The United Methodist Church registered the largest numerical loss, more than 45,000, a half-percent drop.

"Reducing the rate of decline in several of the denominations is a step toward turning around the decline, but it should not be read as an indication that the mainline denominations are no longer declining," the Yearbook concluded.

A total of 114 denominations in the United States and 53 denominations in Canada reported statistical data to the 1997 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.

Fewer denominations report financial data, the Yearbook authors said, but overall "financial news is good."

Only one denomination in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention, reported a decline in giving, and the editors said even that decrease was insignificant.

Total contributions for the SBC exceeded \$6 billion, a decline of 0.17 percent, the Yearbook reported. "This very small decline is insignificant given the fact that in the previous year they reported almost a 13 percent increase in giving."

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Professor, dean named at Gardner-Webb school

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. (ABP) -- Religious educator Bob Fulbright has been elected to the faculty of Gardner-Webb University's school of divinity.

Fulbright, former education minister at Kirkwood Baptist Church in St. Louis, is now professor of Christian education at the school in Boiling Springs, N.C. He has taught at Gardner-Webb as a visiting professor for a year.

In another faculty move, Mary Alice Seals, associate professor of church music, has been named assistant dean for the divinity school. She will continue to teach while working with new dean Wayne Stacy to lead the school.

The divinity school also recently held a consultation on the future of Christian education in Baptist churches.

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-- ABP staff

Georgia educator honored for ministry excellence

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Georgia minister Frank Granger has been honored for "excellence in Christian education" by Smyth & Helwys Publishing.

Granger, minister of Christian education at First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., received the Smyth & Helwys Award for Excellence in Christian Education at a June 27 banquet in Louisville, Ky.

"Frank Granger's leadership in Christian education at First Baptist Church of Athens sets an example of excellence for others to follow," said Cecil Staton, president of the independent Christian publishing firm based in Macon, Ga. "His educational leadership is making a tangible difference in the faith of children, youth and adults."

The award honored Granger for developing creative educational programs in his church and for his role in forming the Christian Educator's Network, a national think-tank for educators, said Robert Fulbright, last year's award recipient.

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-- By ABP staff

Baptist scholar doubts existence of 'Bible code'

By Bob Allen

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A recent book's contention that the Bible contains a secret code predicting future events runs counter to the nature of Scripture, says a Southern Baptist scholar.

"The Scriptures are very clear in the language of the people, intended to be understood. It is very unlikely there is a hidden code," said Paul House, professor of Old Testament interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In "The Bible Code," a book published by Simon & Schuster, journalist Michael Drosnin claims the Hebrew text of the Old Testament contains encoded predictions of events including both Kennedy assassinations, the Oklahoma City bombing and the election of Bill Clinton.

Drosnin, a former reporter for the Washington Post and Wall Street Journal, claims he found a prediction of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and tried to warn the Israeli leader through a friend before his death in 1995. He also claims to have predicted the 1991 Gulf War weeks before it started and the collision of a comet with Jupiter months before it took place in 1994.

The code also warns of an "atomic holocaust" and "world war," possibly in the year 2000 or 2006, Drosnin contends.

Drosnin claims the 3,000-year-old code could not be broken until the invention of the computer. "What Moses actually received on Mt. Sinai was an interactive data base, which until now we could not fully access," Drosnin wrote.

To read the encrypted messages, Drosnin used "equidistant-letter sequencing," also called "skip codes." After arranging the Torah into a continuous string of 304,805 Hebrew letters, a computer program skipped every 10th, or 100th or 1,000th letter.

Skipping every 4,772nd letter, for example, the computer plotted the text in lines 4,772 characters across. It then scanned the resulting grid for words -- up and down, diagonal, forward or backward.

In that instance, Drosnin says, the computer found letters spelling "Yitzhak Rabin" intersecting crossword-style with "assassin who will assassinate." Drosnin says he tried to warn the Israeli leader but was unheeded. After Rabin's assassination in November 1995, Drosnin says, he found encoded just above Rabin's name the word "Amir," the name of the Jewish extremist who confessed to killing Rabin, and the phrase "name of assassin."

Drosnin says other events predicted in the Bible code include Abraham Lincoln's assassination, World War II and the holocaust, the moon landing and Edison's invention of the light bulb.

He says the code might foreshadow more chilling events. The words "atomic weapon" cross "Jerusalem," he says. The best match for a possible nuclear world war, he says, are the years 2000 or 2006.

Drosnin's book piggybacks on a 1994 scholarly article by three Israeli mathematicians who claimed to have unlocked a "Torah code" hiding the names of a number of Jewish sages, some who were not born until centuries after the Bible was written.

One of those scholars, however, said Drosnin takes their work too far. "All attempts to extract messages from Torah codes or to make predictions on them are futile and of no value," said Eliyahu Rips, a mathematics professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Other critics said the fact that the Hebrew text contains no vowels makes it more likely that random letter groupings would result in apparent words or phrases.

Hebrew word structure and a "specialized vocabulary" make it plausible that random groupings of letters from the Old Testament might appear to form words, House said.

Drosnin says he used a Hebrew translation of "War and Peace," as a control in the experiment and that it did not contain hidden messages. He claims the odds of the Bible's random pairings occurring by chance are one in 10 million.

Another critic applied the method to the U.N. Convention Law of the Sea and found several "hidden" statements, including "Hear the law of the sea."

Drosnin defends his book. "When my critics find a message about the assassination of a prime minister encrypted in 'Moby Dick,' I'll believe them," he told Newsweek.

Drosnin believes events described in the Bible code can be altered. Rather than predestined events, he says they may be only "probabilities" intended as a warning. He says Armageddon may have been averted or delayed when current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu backed out of a scheduled trip to Jordan on July 25, 1996.

While Drosnin claims the Bible code proves the existence of an outside, non-human intelligence, he doubts the encoded message is from God.

Drosnin, who describes himself as a religious skeptic, says the intelligence that dictated the hidden messages, while benevolent, apparently was able only to foresee, not change, future events.

Drosnin says the first hint of the Bible code was 50 years ago when a European rabbi noticed that if he skipped 50 letters, then the next 50, then another 50 and so on, the word "Torah" was spelled out in the Book of Genesis. Applying the same skip sequence, the rabbi also found the word "Torah" spelled out in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, Drosnin claims.

Some scholars believe the first five books of the Bible were written more than 3,000 years ago by Moses while others say the books were compiled by several sources over hundreds of years.

Drosnin terms that argument "irrelevant" to the existence of a Bible code. The Hebrew text has been settled for at least 1,000 years, and not a single letter has been changed. "A hoax is simply ruled out because it would have required a forger who could see the future," he wrote.

House said there is nothing new about finding "hidden messages" in the Bible. The discipline of drawing symbolic applications from numerical equivalents to Hebrew letters is called "gematria," he said.

"Jewish mystics have been doing it for many years," House said. "Very few responsible Hebrew scholars are going to pay attention to gematria today," he said.

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