

Associated Baptist Press

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Texas Baptist study committee suggests publishing venture

DALLAS (ABP) -- A Texas Baptist committee is recommending that the state convention publish its own church literature emphasizing Texas missions and Baptist distinctives.

The material could supplement or replace products of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, which the committee claims are increasingly geared and marketed toward a non-Baptist audience.

The 20-page report of a committee named to study "efficiency and effectiveness" of the Baptist General Convention of Texas calls for increased emphasis on reaching the state's growing non-Christian population.

A huge population influx has turned the traditional Baptist stronghold from "the missions base" to "a mission field," the committee reported. The unchurched population of Texas is greater than the total population in 42 of 50 states and in 143 different countries.

To address the growing unchurched population, the report calls on Texas Baptists to magnify multicultural and family ministries, theological education and "partnership missions" involving volunteers to travel abroad for hands-on international missions experience.

It also notes that growing numbers of people who join Texas Baptist churches come from non-Baptist backgrounds. They need "literature that is rooted in Scripture, that emphasizes missions and that honors Baptist distinctives and history," the report adds. But it notes, "It is unrealistic to expect such material from those who must provide for the entire nation and who increasingly focus on a non-Baptist market," an apparent reference to material produced by the Sunday School Board.

The committee recommends "that literature and other resources for Sunday school, discipleship training, missions organizations and other Bible study groups be developed as either a supplement to existing materials or a substitute for existing materials."

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It urges that the literature "provide information on Baptist missions (with a special emphasis on Texas missions), Baptist distinctives, stewardship, ethics and other subjects." And it calls for the literature to be delivered "as inexpensively and soon as possible."

Jimmy Draper, president of the Sunday School Board, objected to parts of the Texas report.

"While the report does not specifically name the Sunday School Board, it suggests that the best possible biblically based materials to meet the needs of Texas Baptists cannot be provided by a national entity. We take exception to that," he said in a prepared statement. "We have the ability to customize resources for a geographical area such as Texas and even for individual churches."

"The report also suggests, without naming us, that we are 'increasingly' focusing on a non-Baptist market," Draper continued. "That is not accurate. Serving Southern Baptist churches is our No. 1 priority. Our conservative, biblically based materials, including their references to Southern Baptists, are increasingly appealing to non-Baptist churches because they are relevant to life needs, high in value and quality, and assist churches in making disciples better than any other resources available."

Draper noted sales of Sunday School Board materials to Texas churches are increasing and lamented the fact his agency was not consulted by the Texas committee before the report was issued.

The full efficiency and effectiveness report will come as a recommendation at the state convention annual meeting Nov. 10-11 in Austin.

In addition to Texas' growing and changing population, the report says "dramatic change is occurring in the way Baptists worship and relate."

"Some recent changes in Baptist life have raised questions that Texas Baptists must address," the report says. It cites the recent reorganization of the Southern Baptist Convention, which "some view as centralizing authority."

It also claims: "Efforts to control state conventions are obvious. Vital issues are at stake that must not fall prey to a mindset of control. One of the most important issues is that the BGCT continue to function as a servant, not an authoritarian, organization. Texas Baptists must continue to embrace historic Baptist principles that honor local church institutions and individual religious freedom."

The committee clusters its recommendations for convention messengers in six primary categories: ministry to families, multi-cultural ministries, theological education, partnership missions and "biblically based, Texas-focused literature."

Among specific recommendations, the report calls for the state convention to:

- Appoint missionaries for outreach to different cultural groups, especially in cities.
- Emphasize multicultural hirings for staffs of the state convention and agencies.
- Develop programs of theological education for lay church members and ministers unable to attend seminary.
- Establish a system to permit "lay envoys" to be trained to minister on international mission fields.
- Expand partnership missions to include not only the SBC's International and North American Mission boards but also the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist World Alliance.
- Explore membership in the Baptist World Alliance, an organization of national Baptist bodies worldwide.
- Affirm the convention as "an autonomous body which will support mission causes in Texas, the nation and the world" that will "cooperate reciprocally with organizations and affiliations that complement its mission and its statement of purpose."

Committee chairman Darold Morgan called the report "a tremendous vote of confidence in the work and ministry of the Baptist General Convention of Texas."

"The recommendations we're making are based on the strength of the denomination, not its weaknesses," said Morgan, former president of the SBC Annuity Board.

Some observers have claimed the committee's study has been conducted merely as a Texas response to the Southern Baptist Convention's rightward shift. Morgan said that's only partly true.

"In light of the SBC controversy, in light of the obvious sociological changes and trends of the day, in light of peculiar denominational attitudes -- it's time for a massive vote of confidence in the BGCT and the way they do denominational business," he said.

Still, the study's context includes SBC developments that have left many Texas Baptists feeling disenfranchised, said BGCT president Charles Wade.

"There's no question Texas Baptists have seen what has happened in the SBC and said this won't happen in Texas," he said. "We're going to protect Texas from a control mentality. We're going to do our very best to maintain an openness to every Texas Baptist who wants to participate and help. We're going to do our best to see that everybody has a part."

Even in that context, the committee's report does not conflict with the SBC, Wade added.

"This document says we are not in opposition to the SBC," he said. "We want the SBC to do what it does as well as it can. We're not in opposition to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. We're willing to help them where we can.

"But Texas Baptists will go their own way. We'll work with those who want to work with us, but we will not be held hostage to the demands of those who would tell us how we must operate."

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Will Jesus ruin Deion's game? Don't count on it, athletes say

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Flamboyant sports star Deion Sanders' much-publicized decision to become a Christian has sparked a debate: will his devotion to Jesus turn Neon Deion into Deion meek and mild?

Don't count on it, warn four Texas football legends who also happen to be Christians.

"That's absolutely ridiculous," said Bill Glass, a Baylor University standout who played defensive end in 12 seasons with the Cleveland Browns in their glory years.

"I was always irritated, from the time I was in college and especially in pro ball, by the inference that you're a weakling if you're a Christian," Glass recalled.

But since Sanders, a two-sport professional athlete who plays baseball for the Cincinnati Reds and football for the Dallas Cowboys, recently announced he had turned to Christ, Spirit-inspired softness has been a recurring theme of media reports.

One of his baseball teammates predicted Sanders' effectiveness as the Cowboys' cornerback would drop off, now that the All-Pro wears a diamond-encrusted gold cross instead of his signature gold necklace with his jersey number "21" on it.

"Deion won't intercept as many passes," the baseball buddy told reporters. "He doesn't want to hurt people's feelings."

Those words may have been said in jest, but they beg a question: Can an athlete be a good Christian and still excel in a violent sport?

"This question is as old as the game of football," responded Grant Teaff, former Baylor coach who now directs the American Football Coaches Association in Waco, Texas.

"And the answer is extremely simple," he added. "As Christians, we believe God gives us certain talents. We treasure them because they're a gift from God, and we use them to the best of our ability."

"I don't see any contradiction there at all," added Neal Jeffrey, who quarterbacked Baylor to a Southwest Conference championship under Teaff in 1974.

"A man that is possessed by the Spirit of the living God and wants to reflect Christ plays well," said Jeffrey, who played two years in the National Football League with the San Diego Chargers and now is associate pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas. "He plays hard, aggressive and tough, yet he plays within the rules."

"He's a light in what can be a dark sport. A guy can do that, and there have been great examples through the years," Jeffrey said, citing a roster of committed Christian football stars, including Hall of Fame quarterbacks Bart Starr of the Green Bay Packers and Fran Tarkenton of the Minnesota Vikings.

In fact, Christian ballplayers live under a biblical mandate to excel, noted Glass, who now lives in Cedar Hill, Texas, and heads an evangelistic ministry aimed at prison inmates. "The Scripture says that whatever you do, do it with all your might," he said. "If you don't play with all your heart, you better get out, or you'll get killed."

"You don't play dirty or illegally, but you play with all your heart," added Glass, who played in four Pro Bowls. "I prided myself on being very aggressive and very tough."

Like Jeffrey, Glass pointed to premier NFL stars who aren't shy about expressing their faith.

"Reggie White [defensive end for the Packers] is a committed Christian, a minister and a very effective leader," Glass said.

"Mike Singletary [former Baylor standout and retired linebacker for the Chicago Bears] is probably one of the toughest individuals I've ever met -- All-Pro for 12 years -- and he goes with us into prisons to minister. He gets a standing ovation every time he stands up and sits down when he speaks at Cook County Jail. And certainly he's one of the roughest, toughest people to play the game."

An infusion of faith actually can be good for a football player, stressed Gordon Wood, who won nine state championships in 43 years as a head coach of Texas high school football teams.

"I personally think Deion could be a better football player and be a Christian," said Wood, a graduate of Hardin-Simmons University and an active Presbyterian layman in Brownwood.

"A guy could be a better player" by turning his life over to Christ, Wood insisted. "If the Dallas Cowboys were all Christians, they would be an unbelievable force in football. They wouldn't have lost last year, and they wouldn't lose this year."

That's not to say God will favor believing ballplayers, Wood and Teaff said.

Wood recalled his teams -- led by the athletes themselves -- often prayed together on the field after games. "I would never stop them," he said. "I don't think the Lord has time to think about who wins a ballgame. But it solidifies them as a team and makes them better."

"People would ask me, 'If you're a Christian, why doesn't God let you win?'" Teaff remembered. "Well, the answer is that on the other side of the field are coaches and athletes that God loves too. God doesn't give a hoot and a holler about who wins. He cares about who plays the game."

And God cares about the witness of Christians who play the game, the players and coaches said.

"For a man to play a sport like football which is highly competitive and yet stay in control physically, emotionally and spiritually is a great testimony," Jeffrey said. "A true champion stands up humbly and says, 'I serve a great God, and he has blessed me, and I want to honor him.' And he does it in a way that brings honor to God."

"Excellence is an important testimony to the gifts God has given us," Teaff stressed.

In that light, "it's very important for Deion to be the best he can be" as a high-profile Christian athlete, said Glass, who offered Sanders advice from a big brother in Christ: "Don't get weird on us; Christianity is not for weirdos. You want to be wonderful, not weird. Be better because you're a Christian; you're representing Jesus Christ. And don't become a wuss on us now."

Louisiana Baptist factions agree on consensus presidential pick

BATON ROUGE, La. (ABP) -- Hoping to end bitter infighting that has divided moderate and conservative Baptists in Louisiana, leaders of both factions are supporting a compromise candidate for the state convention's presidency this fall.

"Every one of us needs every one of us," said Bob Anderson, pastor emeritus of Parkview Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, who will be the nominee. Anderson founded and directs Antioch Affection Ministries, a conflict-resolution ministry for churches.

Anderson has received endorsement of both Friends of Louisiana College, a moderate group, and Louisiana Baptists Speaking the Truth in Love, a conservative group.

"It's a miracle, an absolute miracle," said John Alley, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Alexandria and president of the Louisiana Baptist Convention executive board.

Louisiana moderates and conservatives have been locked in a bitter dispute over efforts by conservatives to gain control of the state convention. Much of the debate has focused on Louisiana College, a convention-owned school in Pineville.

Agreeing on a consensus candidate was considered a key to a reconciliation process initiated at last year's state convention meeting.

In early discussions, the two groups could not agree on a consensus candidate. Later, Anderson's name was discussed informally, then he consented to be nominated.

Louisiana Baptists Speaking the Truth in Love endorsed the nomination Aug. 12, followed by Friends of Louisiana College Aug. 18.

The next morning, members of both groups and an ad-hoc group seeking reconciliation joined in a press conference to present their nominee.

"I want to see peace and harmony and togetherness," Anderson said. "I'm really praying for that. ... We need to get behind our leadership and get back to really being the Baptists that God wants us to be."

Anderson said he has made no commitments regarding presidential appointments to key leadership positions in the convention.

"I made it real clear at the beginning that I was really going to saturate every one of the appointments in prayer, and I did not want to be leaning toward any group or controlled by any group -- only by the Spirit of God," he said.

"My appointments will be people that God would lead to those places of service," he said.

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-- By Bob Allen and Lacy Thompson

Boyce professors under closer scrutiny

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Adjunct faculty members at Boyce Bible School are drawing closer scrutiny to ensure conservative teaching at the undergraduate division of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Danny Akin, vice president for academic administration at the seminary in Louisville, Ky., said administrators intend to require that teachers at Boyce affirm the same doctrinal and theological beliefs required of the seminary's regular faculty.

Those requirements include signing both the seminary's 1859 Abstract of Principles and a "Covenant Agreement" developed between seminary trustees and administrators in 1991. They also require prospective faculty to affirm biblical inerrancy, oppose abortion and homosexuality, affirm Jesus as the only way to salvation and oppose women as senior pastors.

"We expect all our Boyce faculty to be able to affirm the Abstract, to affirm the Covenant and give affirmation to the general theological convictions our trustees have asked us to affirm and follow," Akin said.

While Akin acknowledged some "confusion" in communicating the new standards, he said no current teachers had been turned down.

"Every single contract that has come over to me this spring and fall, that has been submitted from the dean of the Boyce school, I have signed," Akin said.

Boyce Bible School Dean Bob Johnson said two teachers confronted with the new requirements withdrew, saying they could not affirm them all in good faith. After discussion, one was reinstated. The other chose not to be.

Akin said he would have approved both contracts.

"We're moving in a direction where we want to have, even as our adjuncts, people who agree with the direction of the seminary," he said. "But we are trying to be gracious."

Boyce Bible School is a division of Southern Seminary that provides theological training for individuals without undergraduate degrees. Boyce students may complete work toward a diploma or the associate of arts degree.

Boyce's main campus in Louisville and its 26 extension centers around the nation are staffed by adjunct faculty members, often current or retired pastors of area churches.

Johnson confirmed that confusion over the process resulted in rumors flying around the seminary community, including rumors that he had been ousted as dean.

"Those rumors never were true," he said. "There was confusion about communication. That is true."

Johnson said he has received numerous phone calls from Boyce extension centers across the nation seeking clarification of the new policy.

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Will Campbell named recipient of Religious Freedom Award

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Farmer, philosopher and preacher-at-large Will Campbell has been chosen to receive the 1997 Religious Freedom Award presented by Associated Baptist Press.

Campbell, the inspiration behind the comic character Will B. Dunn, is noted for his role in the civil rights movement and his continued advocacy for human rights.

He is an author, best-known for his 1977 autobiography, "Brother to a Dragonfly," which the New York Times recognized as one of the year's finest books.

Campbell is a 1952 graduate of Yale Divinity School. A self-described "steeple dropout," he became known as an at-large preacher for his biting critique of traditional churches. "It is doubtful that the church will ever do anything significant until we proclaim the gospel," he once wrote.

Other books he has written include "The Convention," "Glad River," "Forty Acres and a Goat," and "The Stem of Jesse."

"Will Campbell has demonstrated in both word and deed an unswerving commitment to the highest principles of religious freedom, including the sacredness of truth and the freedom of the soul," said ABP Executive Editor Greg Warner.

The ABP award, established in 1994, is presented by directors of the news service based in Jacksonville, Fla. It honors individuals whose achievements advance the principle and practice of religious freedom, particularly in the field of journalism.

Previous recipients are former Florida Baptist editor Jack Brymer, the religion staff of the Dallas Morning News and New York Times correspondent Gus Niebuhr.

Campbell will accept the award at a Sept. 19 banquet in Memphis, Tenn.

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-- By ABP staff

Wisconsin appeals court invalidates voucher plan

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The push to fund parochial education with tax dollars suffered a setback Aug. 22 when a Wisconsin appeals court ruled that religious schools participation in a Milwaukee voucher program violates the state constitution.

Milwaukee started a school-choice program in 1990 after state lawmakers enacted the plan the previous year. Under the plan, a small percentage of public school students from lower-income families could use tax dollars to attend the private nonsectarian school of their choice.

But by expanding the program in 1995 to include religious schools, the state legislature trespassed the church-state separation requirements of the state constitution, the 4th District Court of Appeals said.

Wisconsin's constitution bars the compelled support of any place of worship or ministry and prohibits use of state funds for the benefit of religious groups or schools.

The expanded voucher program was challenged by Wisconsin taxpayers and several organizations, including Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and People for the American Way.

Dane County Circuit Judge Paul Higginbotham ruled that the expansion of the program violated the state constitution, a decision upheld by the appeals court.

The appeals court noted that total state payments under the expanded program could reach \$60 million annually, with over \$40 million going to religious schools.

"We thus conclude that a 'primary effect' of the amended program is the drawing of money from the state treasury for the benefit of religious schools," the appeals court said.

Steven Green, legal director for Americans United, said the appeals court ruling is "in line with what other courts have held. We now have four different courts in four different states and territories saying vouchers are unconstitutional when they apply to religious schools."

In addition to Wisconsin, courts have invalidated religious school-choice plans in Puerto Rico, Vermont and Ohio.

In May, an Ohio appeals court struck down the nation's only active program that allowed students to use tax-funded vouchers to attend religious schools. Reversing a lower court ruling, Ohio's 10th District appeals court said the voucher program violates both the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution and provisions of the Ohio Constitution.

The Ohio legislature enacted the voucher program after a federal court ordered the state to take over the troubled Cleveland City School District.

The Milwaukee case, along with the Ohio school-choice dispute, are being closely watched by opponents and supporters of vouchers.

"These two are the lead cases and most likely one or the other will find its way to the [U.S.] Supreme Court in a couple of years, or both," Green said.

The next stop for both cases are the respective state supreme courts.

"Both are on the same track," Green said. "Chances are we will have a decision by both supreme courts by a year from now."

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-- By Larry Chesser

Voucher opposition softening, new Gallup survey shows

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Opposition to public funding of private education appears to be softening, according to a new Gallup survey released Aug. 26.

Commissioned by Phi Delta Kappa, a professional educators group, the survey showed a continuing decline in the percentage of Americans who "oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense" -- down from about three fourths of Americans four years ago to about half.

In 1993, less than one fourth (24 percent) of respondents favored public funding of private education, while 74 percent opposed it. This year, 44 percent of respondents favored the idea, while 52 percent opposed it.

In this year's survey, when the question was changed from support of private education at "public expense" to support at "government expense," more respondents (48 percent) favored the idea.

Respondents were also divided (49 percent in favor, 48 percent opposed) when asked about a "proposal that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private or church-related school they choose," with the government paying for all or part of the tuition at private and church-related schools. Last year, 54 percent of respondents opposed this proposal while 43 percent favored it.

The 1997 survey also found that 78 percent of respondents think nonpublic schools that receive public funding "should be required to accept students from a wider range of backgrounds and academic ability than is now generally the case."

About two-thirds of those surveyed (65 percent) indicated it would be "higher-achieving" students who would take the opportunity to attend private schools.

Thirty-six percent of respondents said home schooling is a "good thing" for the nation, while 57 percent said it is a "bad thing." Eighty-eight percent said home schools should be "required to guarantee a minimum level of education."

Asked to rate measures that would improve academic achievement of public school students, 71 percent of respondents said allowing students to attend the public school of their choice would help "a great deal" or "quite a lot."

Other measures rated highly were placing a computer in every classroom (81 percent), establishing national standards for measuring academic performance (77 percent), moving persistent "troublemakers" to alternative schools (75 percent), using standardized national tests to measure academic performance (67 percent), grouping students in classes according to ability level (66 percent), establishing a national curriculum (66 percent) and providing health-care services in schools (61 percent).

The Gallup Organization surveyed 1,517 adults during June. The poll's margin of error was plus-or-minus 3 percent.

The survey was released less than a week after a Wisconsin appeals court struck down state legislation expanding the Milwaukee school choice program to include religious schools.

Voucher opponents cautioned against reading too much into the poll's voucher results and against ignoring them.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the poll results showing an increase in support for vouchers "reflect an incredible degree of superficiality on the part of respondents who've not been asked the hard questions or asked to deal with the substantive issues involved."

In contrast, he said, "in state referenda, where voters have taken a more in-depth look at the issues involved, they have consistently turned down spending public money for parochial purposes," he added.

National Education Association President Bob Chase said that public school supporters "should heed the warning bell rung by the number of people who advocate 'alternatives' to those public schools."

He said the NEA endorses the concept of public school choice but is "convinced that taxpayer-funded vouchers to send a select few children to private or religious schools are not a viable alternative. Vouchers are not a magic pill that will make public schools better."

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Kyrgyz Baptist visits U.S., discusses faith, freedom in breakaway republic

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Victor Grigoryevich Butkeev of Kyrgyzstan, a former republic of the Soviet Union, said he and his wife were "pleasantly surprised" when they told each other they had become Baptists while temporarily apart.

Butkeev now works for "Ray of Hope," an umbrella organization of Baptist groups in the independent Kyrgyz Republic. The group offers literature, building materials, organizational skills and other tools to Baptist groups.

Butkeev is on a trip to the United States with three other residents of the Kyrgyz Republic, including two Muslims and a member of a Kyrgyz commission on religious affairs. The trip is sponsored by the United States Information Agency and its purpose is to provide leaders from other countries with access to their American counterparts and to give them exposure to American society and culture.

Butkeev said that unlike many others, he did not become active in religion due to economic problems in Kyrgyzstan. "I believe the Lord God himself brought me to the realization," he said through an interpreter after meeting with leaders of the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty watchdog agency. "It cannot be said of me that hardship brought me to this faith."

He said that due to his occupation, he was about 300 kilometers (186 miles) from his wife and children for a time period. "My wife and children were away from me, and, not knowing, we both became Baptists within a three-day period of each other. When two weeks later we told each other, we were pleasantly surprised."

He is concerned that religious freedom in his country is beginning to be limited. He said religious groups must have at least 10 people to register as a legal entity. He also said there exists a lot of tension between the religions.

The Kyrgyz group's trip was organized by the Meridian International Center, an international education and cultural exchange group.

Malcolm Peck, program officer at Meridian International Center, said the Kyrgyz group came to look at the role religion plays in American society. "Many people come with fundamental misconceptions about religion in America and what the separation of church and state means."

Peck said the group was surprised at how religious America is in contrast to European countries. He also said the group was intrigued by the freedom under which American religious groups practice.

Peck said that at least 80 percent of the people in Kyrgyzstan are Muslims. He said there are approximately 100,000 Baptists, noting that most Baptists, like Butkeev, are of German descent.

Kyrgyzstan is a small land-locked state in central Asia bordered by Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the People's Republic of China. It is one of 15 republics that made up the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and one of 11 republics in the Commonwealth of Independent States, formed in 1991 following the collapse of the U.S.S.R.

The Kyrgyz Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right of all citizens to choose and practice their religion, but the government does not fully protect those rights, according to the U.S. State Department's 1996 analysis of human rights around the world.

According to the department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1996, the Kyrgyz Republic does not support any religion and expressly forbids the teaching of religion or atheism in public schools.

The country recently created a state commission on religious affairs in order to promote religious tolerance and oversee laws on religion. "In its early months, the commission was not active and the government appeared to resist calls by some Orthodox and Muslim leaders to limit the activities of 'sects' and 'nontraditional religions,'" according to the report.

"By fall, however, the commission became more active," the report continues. A decree requiring all religious organizations to register with the commission was signed by the president. Each congregation registers separately and must register as a legal entity with the Ministry of Justice to own property.

The report says that Muslim leaders complain that the religious commission makes decisions about religious events without consulting them.

It also states that a congregation of Baptists was denied registration by both the religious commission and the justice ministry. Courts rejected the appeals by the Baptists in Naryn, an ethnic area in Kyrgyzstan.

The State Department report says that in October 1996 Baptists claim that "police broke into their services and threatened worshippers. The chairman of the commission acknowledged that he was aware of the problems of the Naryn Baptists and said that he had informed the authorities that they were to allow Baptists to worship in peace but was noncommittal on whether they would be allowed to register."

The State Department's July report on religious persecution with a focus on Christian persecution said that the U.S. Embassy has urged senior Kyrgyz officials to stop the harassment of the Baptists in Naryn.

Baptist Peace Fellowship mediates Naga peace talks

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Fourteen Naga leaders left Baptist-initiated mediation talks in Atlanta hopeful of reconciliation for people involved in a 50- year civil war in northeast India.

One leader called the July 28-Aug. 3 summit "the most historic and hopeful meeting of Naga leaders in the last half century."

The talks, proposed by Naga Baptist leaders and approved by the four principle Naga political factions, were held at Emory University and mediated by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

The group adopted a statement calling for unity among the Naga people and listing several initiatives to promote dialogue among Naga factions.

The 3 million Naga people have opposed the government of India since Great Britain relinquished control of the area in 1947 and their traditional homeland was divided unilaterally between India and Myanmar (formerly Burma). Nagaland is now a state within India.

Armed resistance to Indian rule began in 1954. Following a series of failed cease-fire attempts, fighting has spread over the years to clashes between Naga factions and against other indigenous people in the region. Death-toll estimates in 50 years of fighting are as high as 300,000.

The Nagas, first reached by missionaries 125 years ago, are estimated to be 90 percent Christian, with Baptists comprising 90 percent of the Christian population.

The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America became involved in the mediation effort after establishing informal relations with Naga Baptist leaders in 1993, said Ken Sehested, executive director of the network linking Baptists involved in peace and justice issues in the U.S., Canada, Puerto Rico and Mexico.

"Our friends recognize there is still a long way to go -- that this process is very fragile," Sehested said. "But everyone seemed very encouraged that these meetings mark a hopeful new beginning on the journey toward a lasting peace."

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-- By ABP staff

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