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**Yeltsin signs controversial law
restricting minority religions**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Russian President Boris Yeltsin has signed a controversial new law that gives special status to the Russian Orthodox Church and restricts activities of minority religions.

In July, Yeltsin vetoed a similar measure claiming that it violated Russia's constitution. But he had been expected to sign the "compromise" version that was overwhelmingly approved by both houses of the Russian legislature.

The Duma, the lower house, approved the measure 357-6 on Sept. 19, and the upper chamber, the Federation Council, cleared it for Yeltsin's signature Sept. 24.

Despite claims by Russian officials that the compromise law enjoyed broad support from religious groups, Lawrence Uzzell of Keston News Service reported that the revised bill was opposed in Moscow by Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Adventist and Baptist leaders.

The new law gives most favorable treatment to the Russian Orthodox Church but also recognizes Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity as "traditional" religions. The law vetoed earlier by Yeltsin did not include Christianity among recognized faiths. The new law does not define Christianity.

Critics of the law point to a provision that sharply restricts activities by religious organizations that cannot show they have been operating in Russia for at least 15 years.

Under the new law, such groups must register every year and are not allowed to receive tax privileges. They are also prohibited from receiving representatives of foreign religious groups, running seminaries, importing or publishing religious literature and conducting religious services in institutions such as hospitals, nursing homes or prisons.

Groups that fail to meet the 15-year-test also could not have bank accounts or own real estate.

"Our Baptists there do not support it [the new law]," said Wendy Ryan, communications director at the Baptist World Alliance. Russia's population includes 109,000 Baptists, according to the BWA.

Baptists in Russia do not believe the new law signed by Yeltsin is much different than the one he vetoed earlier, Ryan said, particularly in the area of "restricting missionary activities."

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe opposed both versions of the Russian law, a spokesman said. The commission, popularly known as the Helsinki Commission, monitors and encourages progress on human rights issues. It is made up of U.S. lawmakers and Cabinet officials.

The commission spokesman noted that Vice President Al Gore spoke out against the measure in Moscow just before Russia's higher legislative chamber approved the measure.

"It's really an internal Russian matter now that Yeltsin signed it," the spokesman said.

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Romanian mob halts volunteers from distributing the Bible

By Russ Dilday

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- An Arkansas Baptist volunteer mission team was driven from a Romanian village Sept. 21 by a mob led by an Orthodox priest.

The crowd threatened and shoved team members, who left the village when team leaders sensed the mob was becoming "violent." One Romanian Baptist national was beaten by the crowd after the Arkansas team left.

The incident occurred as the 11-member team from Faulkner County Baptist Association, along with an equal number of Romanian Baptists, attempted to distribute the gospel of John to villagers in a field located in Rusi, Dobrovat, in northeast Romania.

Ted Lindwall, a retired Southern Baptist missionary to Guatemala and volunteer with Church Starts International in Romania, said the team was handing out the yellow-bound Bibles when "the village priest brought a crowd of some 40 supporters who shouted at the Baptists and threatened them if they did not leave immediately."

"The Baptists assured the priest that they were not there to speak badly about him or his church but only to distribute the Bible," said Lindwall. "When it became apparent that the crowd was becoming violent, the Baptist group gathered their equipment and left."

Before the confrontation, the group had been met with a "warm reception," said Bill Davis, president of Church Starts International and one of organization's three personnel leading the volunteers. "When we left Dobrovat in the midst of the shouting and jostling and threats by the priest's crowd, our team was shaken by this new kind of experience," he said.

A Romanian Baptist man "who lives in the village was beaten after the American-Romanian group left," Lindwall added. The severity of his injuries was unknown.

Church Starts International is a volunteer organization based in Henrietta, Texas, which works through the Southern Baptist International Mission Board and the Romanian Baptist Union. The group is credited with starting 80 churches in three years in the former communist country.

The Arkansas team was participating in a Sept. 17-30 crusade as part of a multi-year partnership ministry between the Arkansas Baptist State Convention and the European Baptist Convention. The group included members from Happy Hollow Baptist Church in Vilonia, South Side Baptist Church in Damascus and Harlan Park, First and Zion Baptist churches in Conway.

Lindwall indicated that the confrontation may have been planned. "Earlier that Sunday morning, the priest was reported to have called on his congregation to move against the Baptists that afternoon. He reportedly said that he would burn down any house in the village where he found a copy of the yellow book given by the Baptists."

Despite the size of the mob, other villagers "were strongly divided as to whether they should support the priest or not," reported Lindwall, who characterized Romanians as "very hospitable by nature and their culture."

"The priest's actions caused great embarrassment to many in the village who failed to see that Bible distribution was a threat to the people," he added. "The fact that only some 40 people came to support the priest, out of a total population of several thousand, gives some indication of the true sentiments of the village."

In fact, Lindwall added, the priest's actions may have backfired on his intentions. "The priest's actions, more than anything else he could have done, have created great curiosity in the village about the yellow book and the message it contains."

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Annual Brooks Hays Lectures honor statesman, examine future

By Russ Dilday

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- A lecturer in a series honoring Brooks Hays wondered aloud what the legendary Southern Baptist statesman and Arkansas congressman would think if he were alive today.

"We know what Brooks Hays would have thought about an outfit called the Christian Coalition," remarked James Dunn. "Fifty years ago he said, 'Recent events require us to assert again our devotion to the principle of separation of church and state.'"

The Brooks Hays Lectures, held Sept. 19-20 at Pulaski Heights Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., were begun in 1974 to honor the eight-term congressman from Arkansas who served as SBC president from 1957 to 1959.

Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington-based religious-liberty coalition, titled his lecture "Politics is my Parish," the title of Hays' autobiography.

Noting Hays' devotion to his faith while in public service, Dunn told the audience: "Brooks Hays was proof of the power of a faith that took on flesh. His work demonstrated indisputably that one dedicated individual can redirect the flow of history. His life linked personal religion with political reality in a way rarely equaled, never exceeded."

He paid homage to Hays' role in the 1957 integration crisis at Little Rock's Central High School. Hays first brought President Dwight Eisenhower and Gov. Orval Faubus together to attempt to defuse the situation and then opposed Faubus after Eisenhower ordered federal troops to enforce the court-ordered desegregation. That unpopular stand led to his defeat for re-election to a segregationist candidate in 1959.

Dunn said Hays, who died in 1981, would have opposed to the Christian Coalition, a Religious Right organization founded by televangelist Pat Robertson.

"The tendency to use the faith for force flies in the face of everything Brooks held dear," Dunn said. "The tendency to conformity, control and coercion is counter to his deepest beliefs. The egregious arrogance, insufferable self-righteousness and dogmatic certainties of the so-called Christian Coalition stand in virtually every specific exactly opposite Mr. Hays' positions."

In another session, Baptist historian Bill Leonard examined religious trends in a lecture titled, "If Jesus Tarries: American Religion in a New Century."

"It's hard to keep track of the changes taking place in America," said Leonard, dean of Wake Forest University's divinity school.

Leonard said winds of change in American religion -- like recent agreements among three mainline denominations to honor ordinations of the other faith groups and a Texas Baptist proposal to redefine its relationship to the Southern Baptist Convention -- gave him "three theses:"

-- "Religious denominations are in a permanent state of transition and, probably, none of them will stabilize," he said. "We'd better get used to it and we better be careful how deep we put our tent pegs.

Denominations served well by helping Americans build religious identity, but "denominations are only one way," Leonard said. "Fewer and fewer Americans think of their identity as a denominational identity," he said.

-- Baptists must find new ways to pass on an identity. "The SBC was the most enduring 19th century denomination," he said. "Its genius was to pass on its identity," he noted. "The identity was all connected -- from independent churches, to the associations, state conventions and the SBC.

Today, however, "big chunks" of Baptist identity and structure "are falling off," he said. A prime example is the Texas proposal, which would redefine roles traditionally divided between state conventions and the SBC.

"Not since 1845 have Baptist churches had to be as intentional about their identity," he said. "For a long time, the SBC as a system passed on identity. The question is, 'How are you going to pass on an identity to your children or grandchildren?'"

-- That identity should be one of "hospitable traditionalism," he said. "Everybody needs a place to stand that gives you a sense of belonging. We have to learn new ways of networking among churches and individuals and talk about what is important about being Christian and Baptist."

Leonard also analyzed "the forces eroding denominationalism. For years, Baptists followed the corporate organization structure. "Now national structures are moving to more regional structures," he said, because "we are at a time that people don't want a brand-name religion."

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Familiarity, organization helped avert takeover in Texas, Wade says

By Marv Knox

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- The conservative movement that swept across the Southern Baptist Convention in the last decade has failed to take hold in Texas, because personal relationships and an early countermovement minimized division among the state's Baptists.

That's the assessment of Charles Wade, president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and a leader in Texas Baptists Committed, a moderate group which opposes efforts to turn the 2.5 million-member state convention to the right.

Wade offered his analysis at a Sept. 23 gathering in Fort Worth. It was one of 17 rallies being sponsored by Texas Baptists Committed leading up to the state convention's annual meeting, scheduled Nov. 10-11 in Austin.

People frequently ask why the BGCT has not fallen to the conservative movement that captured control of the 15.6 million-member SBC, said Wade, pastor of First Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas.

"First, we know each other well enough that they can't lie about us without having to face up to their lies," Wade said.

Wade said when he ran for the state convention presidency in 1995, political opponents circulated rumors that he does not believe in the virgin birth of Christ. Baptists in Texas knew him well enough to know such rumors were lies, he continued.

But similar tactics worked when another Texan, Winfred Moore, ran for president of the SBC in 1986, Wade continued. Accusations circulated that the longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Amarillo was a "liberal," and messengers voted against him, even though Moore is actually a theological conservative.

In addition to knowing each other, Texas Baptists started early to head off a conservative takeover, Wade said. In 1987, conservative leader Paige Patterson announced intentions to gain control of the Texas convention, as well as Baylor University and the Baptist Standard newspaper.

"Thanks to Paige's threat," Texas Baptists prepared early to resist a takeover, Wade said.

And that led to the third factor, the work of Texas Baptists Committed, he said, which "found out the truth" about the positive work of the state convention and the threats of political takeover.

Texas Baptists Committed's executive director, David Currie of San Angelo, said his group has several "serious" differences with conservatives controlling the SBC, including their view of the nature of God.

"A traditional Baptist believes in the grace of God," Currie said. God freely extends grace to unworthy humans, he said. In contrast, he claimed his opponents have "thrown rocks" at individuals, Woman's Missionary Union, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Texas Baptists for several years.

"Why do they throw rocks?" he asked. "Because they see themselves as morally superior to you and me. ... We don't think that way. We don't have one among us who is better than [SBC leaders] Paul Pressler, Paige Patterson, Al Mohler and [Southern Baptists of Texas President] Miles Seaborn. We're wholly dependent on the grace of God."

Both Wade and Currie affirmed the recent report of the BGCT Effectiveness/Efficiency Committee, which will be considered by messengers to the convention's annual meeting this fall. Both of them said the report and its recommendations frankly acknowledge the differences and challenges facing Texas Baptists.

"I'm pleased with the E/E report," Wade said. "Some people will try to under-sell the report. It does not call for a radical break, but you need to know this document will enable some changes to be made."

Those changes include expanded educational opportunities for bivocational ministers, new options for Sunday school literature, a stronger emphasis on families and "where people live," and increased opportunities for missions education and missions action, Currie reported.

The report developed out of differences, he acknowledged, but he stressed the response is positive.

Currie recalled SBC leaders' response in 1994, when Texas Baptists broadened their definition of cooperative funding for denominational ministries. "The SBC said, 'The sky is falling!'" he said. "But what happened? Gifts to the BGCT and the SBC have soared. When we gave Texas Baptists freedom, they responded and gave more."

The same response will happen again, he predicted.

"What Texas Baptists are saying is we have differences, and we need to be responsible for what God has called us to do," Currie said. "I think God is calling Texas Baptists away from the [denominational] fight. ... We've got a state that needs Christ desperately, and a world that we can never lose sight of."

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Texas Baptist leader named to gambling task force

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- Texas Gov. George W. Bush has named Weston Ware, citizenship associate with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, to a state task force designed to help rid Texas of illegal casino-style gambling machines.

Bush issued an executive order Sept. 25 creating the 12-member Governor's Task Force on Illegal Gambling. The group will study the extent of illegal gambling in Texas and seek ways to clarify ambiguities in the law that make it difficult to prosecute distributors and operators of slot machine-type devices in the state.

"There are few things more dangerous than allowing some people to contemptuously and flagrantly mock the laws of the state for their own profit," said Ware, a 15-year employee at the Texas CLC and a leading opponent of gambling in Texas. "I am honored to serve on this task force to find ways to strengthen the enforcement of existing anti-gambling laws and to find ways to reinforce the state's position against casino gambling."

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-- By Ken Camp

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