

Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

December 29, 1997

(97-110)

In this issue:

- Texas Baptist study plan judged top story of 1997
- Alabama Fellowship names coordinator
- Gambling disorders on rise, according to Harvard study

Texas Baptist study plan judged top story of 1997

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- A Texas Baptist plan distancing the nation's largest state Baptist group from the conservative-dominated Southern Baptist Convention led a ranking of top news stories in 1997 by Baptist state paper editors.

In an informal survey conducted by Associated Baptist Press, editors ranked the November adoption of a Texas Baptist "Effectiveness/Efficiency" report as the top story of the year.

The historic document affirmed "autonomy" of the 2.7 million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas and opened the door for the state group to appoint missionaries, offer options for theological education and publish its own Sunday school literature. Those activities traditionally have been the domain of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Texas conservatives said the plan distances the moderate-led state convention from the SBC and later organized their own alternative state convention, making Texas the second state (with Virginia) with separate groups relating to the national convention.

A Southern Baptist boycott of the Walt Disney Co. came in second in the editor survey. In the 1996 editor's survey, a similar story also held the second spot. That year, the convention passed a resolution threatening a boycott unless Disney changed policies including offering domestic benefits to partners of gay employees and allowing homosexuals to hold "gay days" at theme parks. At its 1997 annual meeting in Dallas, the SBC followed through on that threat, urging 16 million Southern Baptists to "refrain from patronizing" Disney and its subsidiaries.

Editors ranked an assembling of half a million men in Washington at the Promise Keepers Oct. 4 "Stand in the Gap" rally as the third biggest story. The event was said to be the largest religious gathering in American history and one of the two or three largest events ever held on the Washington Mall.

Coming in fourth was a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in June striking down the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Rounding out the top five in the editors' survey was the official establishment of the North American Mission Board, the centerpiece of a denominational downsizing by the Southern Baptist Convention.

Other top stories in the editors' ranking were:

-- A demand by Chinese Christian leaders that Southern Baptists stop "clandestine" mission work in China and work exclusively with the China Christian Council. Officials at the SBC International Mission Board denied that missionaries are in China illegally and said the agency intends to continue a "multi-track" approach in China.

-- Religious persecution overseas. The U.S. State Department issued a report detailing the plight of Christians. Religious groups, including evangelicals, sought to raise awareness about religious persecution abroad and pressured the U.S. to impose sanctions on nations which persecute Christians.

-- Continuing controversy over Mercer University President Kirby Godsey's book, "When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest." One Georgia Baptist committee judged the book to contain heresy while another studied the Georgia Baptist Convention's historic relationship with the Baptist university in Macon.

-- Famine in North Korea and the successful cloning of the adult sheep Dolly tied for ninth in the survey, rounding out the top ten.

-30-

Alabama Fellowship names coordinator

ELBA, Ala. (ABP) -- The Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has tapped Mart Gray of Elba, Ala., as the statewide organization's first coordinator.

Gray, 34, currently is minister of music and youth at First Baptist Church in Elba. He is a native of Wetumpka, Ala. A graduate of Samford University, he is in the process of completing a master's thesis in church music from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Gray was elected unanimously by the Alabama Fellowship's Coordinating Council. The position was created at the Fellowship's General Assembly last March. He begins work Jan. 1.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

Gambling disorders on rise, according to Harvard study

BOSTON (ABP) -- As legalized gambling has exploded during the last 20 years, the number of people with gambling disorders has risen sharply, according to a recent study by Harvard Medical School.

While the number of problem gamblers in the United States and Canada remains statistically small, the incidence of gambling disorders is on the rise among adults in the general population, the study said. Analyzing studies published between 1977 and 1993, researchers estimated that 0.84 of adults were affected by a gambling disorder. Looking at more recent studies from 1994 through 1997, the rate of problem gamblers had grown to 1.29 percent of the adult population.

Surprisingly, rates did not rise for those most susceptible to gambling disorders -- adolescents and persons with psychiatric or substance-abuse problems. Among the general adult population, meanwhile, the number of

compulsive gamblers increased by 1.6 million. Researchers now estimate that 3.8 million adults in the U.S. and Canada suffer from serious gambling disorders.

Researchers cited the increased availability of casinos and state lotteries across America as the likely culprit.

"As gambling has become more socially accepted and accessible during the past two decades, the general adult population has started to gamble in increasing numbers," said Howard Shaffer, a Harvard psychology professor who led the study. "We are now beginning to witness a growth in gambling disorder among this group."

The study, released in December, was funded by a grant from the National Center for Responsible Gaming.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

END