

Associated Baptist Press

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June 16, 1998

(98-45)

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Missouri town fights ACLU over use of Christian symbol

By Rob Marus

REPUBLIC, Mo. (ABP) -- Critics say the small Southwest Missouri town of Republic is trying too hard to live up to its name -- even pretending it is more sovereign than the U.S. Constitution. Many city residents say a group of outside agitators is ruining the peace and quiet of their little community.

It's all over a fish.

The Ozarks Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union is proceeding with plans for a lawsuit against the Springfield suburb. ACLU officials say the suit will be filed on behalf of a Republic resident who has complained about the city's logo, designed in 1990. The logo, which adorns city stationery and police cars, among other things, contains a representation of the ichthus, the fish symbol used by ancient Christians as a sign of their faith.

In February, the ACLU asked the city to remove the fish from its logo and replace it with a secular symbol. The organization says use of an overtly Christian symbol to represent a government entity violates the First Amendment's clause against establishment of a religion.

"I think most of the churches here that I know of come at it with the idea that we're not establishing a religion by the symbols," said Russell Winkler, pastor of Republic's First Christian Church. "The religion has already been established; it's just that we're using the symbol in the logo."

Winkler said using public money to pay for use of such a logo is no different than a municipality using public money to pay for Christmas lights.

On May 15, the city's aldermen voted to retain the symbol. ACLU officials say the city has never responded to their requests directly.

"We requested in February that the city of Republic remove the symbol," said Gay Revi, a member of the board for ACLU of the Ozarks and the ACLU's larger regional body. "We never mentioned the term 'lawsuit;' all it was was a polite request to Republic.

"The city never responded. They never considered the fact that there was someone in the community who might be offended by this."

Revi and the ACLU have not released the name of the plaintiff on whose behalf they are filing suit. She said the ACLU office received several complaints about the ichthus from Republic residents and others in the months prior to the request to remove the symbol.

City officials have rallied around the aldermen's refusal to dump the fish. Mayor Douglas Boatwright told the Kansas City Star and other media outlets that the symbol is not an unconstitutional government endorsement of Christianity but rather a depiction of the community's general religious values.

Many of the Christians who have contributed to the massive public outcry against the symbol's removal view the city's action as a direct defense of Christianity. Bill Laffoon is immediate past deacon chairman for First Baptist Church of Republic. "Of course it represents a Christian symbol, but I don't think there's maybe but one or two people in the whole city opposed to it," he said. "I don't go along with the ACLU's opinion that it needs to be removed because it's going to hurt someone's feelings, because the vast majority of the people here support the symbol, and the vast majority of the people aren't too fond of the ACLU."

ACLU board member Revi said residents opposed to the symbol are afraid to speak up. "I think it's safe to say right now there's a climate of fear for anyone who is different from the majority in Republic," she said. She said the Ozarks ACLU office has received two threatening phone calls and several more harassing ones.

"Both of them had almost the exact same wording: 'Stay out of Republic; we know what you look like. Remember: Jesus loves you.'"

Revi said Christians should be on the ACLU's side rather than against it on this issue, because their religious liberty would not exist but for the First Amendment. "I lived in a Muslim country for 11 years, and I've seen what happens when government favors one religion over another. I have probably defended more Christians from persecution than most people in this country.

"And I am not even a Christian."

But Laffoon says Revi and other ACLU supporters are making a mountain out of a molehill. "I don't have much use for the ACLU's argument, personally," he said. "It's such a penny-ante thing."

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Armed Forces Chaplains Board approves CBF as endorsing body

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A joint board for the armed services has approved the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as an endorsing body for chaplains in the military.

The executive director of the Armed Forces Chaplains Board, U.S. Navy Capt. M.R. Ferguson, wrote a letter reporting the board's June 3 vote to recognize the Atlanta-based Fellowship as "an ecclesiastical endorsing agent to nominate clergy for the military chaplaincy."

Fellowship leaders received the letter June 12.

The Fellowship, a group for moderate Southern Baptists, voted last year to begin endorsing chaplains, counselors and ministers in other specialized settings who either could not be or do not desire to be endorsed by the Southern Baptist Convention.

A CBF council on endorsement established last November has nominated four military chaplains who are now in the process of applying with their individual branches of the service, said Gary Baldrige, associate global-missions coordinator. Baldrige said their endorsement by the CBF will be announced when that process is complete.

To date, the council has endorsed 10 chaplains and pastoral counselors for posts mainly in the health-care field. More than 200 other applications are in various stages of the endorsement process, Baldrige said.

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-- By ABP staff

Ruth School: Baptists salvage young lives in Romania

By Robert O'Brien

BUCHAREST, Romania (ABP) -- Nothing distinguishes cold, hungry Romani (Gypsy) children from cold, hungry children of any description.

Except the way they're treated as the children of society's outcasts.

Most of the world despises Gypsies. They are the poorest of the poor -- existing on life's fringes; battered by high rates of death, illiteracy, crime and unemployment; and threatened by extreme persecution, from citizenship restrictions to mob violence.

That situation prevailed in Bucharest, Romania, until the people of Providence Baptist Church there became inspired by a challenge in 1992 from Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionaries "T" and Kathie Thomas.

Overflowing with happy Gypsy children, the Ruth School now stands as "a tribute to how love has overcome prejudice in one of many places around the world populated by Gypsy people," says "T" Thomas.

Fellowship Coordinator Daniel Vestal, main speaker at the school's May 16 dedication, told 400 participants from around the world that the Ruth School represents the kind of partnership and team ministry it takes to reach the world's neglected people.

Vestal praised the work of various missions, churches, individuals and organizations that contributed to the completion of the four-story facility to house an accredited primary school for Gypsy children and serve as a base for other ministries to Gypsies.

"Our church was moved by the dedication and commitment of brothers and sisters in America, the United Kingdom, Austria and elsewhere who wanted to share in our vision in a practical way," Providence Pastor Oti Bunaciu said. He calculates that \$73,000 of some \$145,000 needed to build the facility came from CBF or CBF-related individuals, churches and organizations.

The dedication ceremony celebrated a spiritual breakthrough in a community whose most neglected citizens once floundered in illiteracy and despair and were shunned -- even by local schools.

Teams of Baptist volunteers from Georgia, Virginia, South Carolina and North Carolina have returned from Project Ruth construction and ministry projects impressed by what they saw arise from a hole dug in the ground near the church in early 1996.

In addition to a building which now houses a 150-student elementary school, volunteers report seeing lives change and take on new meaning -- lives not only of Gypsy families but also of Providence Church members and of the volunteers themselves.

"Volunteers from our church came back with a greater passion for missions," said Jimmy Lewis, pastor of First Baptist Church of Morrow, Ga. The church sent the first two construction teams to Bucharest in 1996. The North Carolina Baptist Men's organization later coordinated other teams. Help also came from other countries.

"As we worked alongside Romanian Baptists and Gypsies, our volunteers gained a tremendous sense of vision for reaching unreached people in partnership with others," Lewis said.

That translated into action back home, not only in a \$6,000 contribution to the construction project but in other ministries. Moved by their experiences in Bucharest, volunteers stepped forward quickly to assume major roles in a subsequent effort by their church to resettle Kurdish refugees, Lewis said.

Gypsy children and volunteer Ellen Sechrest of Anderson, S.C., "fell in love with each other," Sechrest said. She now runs a program to find sponsors to help Ruth School students with hot lunches, snacks, medical-dental exams, school supplies and clothing.

"The sponsorship program is a way for me to get involved and feel like I'm doing something for these poor children who have so little and are so grateful for love," said Sechrest, minister of youth and children at Boulevard Baptist Church.

She marvels at what has taken place in Bucharest since the school struggled into existence in 1992 in the church basement with 15 students. Then it operated mainly as a day-care center run for several hours a day so children could learn, play and eat a basic meal.

Enrollment reached 50 in the first two years, and Romania's Ministry of Education agreed to grant formal accreditation. Since then it has operated as a fully recognized elementary school (ages 7 to 11, plus older problem children) that prepares children for further education -- and life.

Ruth School also offers day care for students and others, basic medical care and food. For some children, it's the only meal they get each day. Local church leaders plan to expand facilities and enrollment and conduct other spiritual and physical ministries to the Gypsy community.

The first eight years of school are compulsory in Romania, but many children in the area, especially the Gypsies, don't attend due to poverty, illiteracy or lack of encouragement and expectation in the struggling Gypsy community. Prejudice against Gypsies and family problems also contribute to truancy among Gypsy children. Many families have single parents or parents with criminal records.

Amid such forces, another Baptist volunteer marvels at how members of Providence Baptist Church, led by their pastor, "have grown spiritually as they have touched the lives of the outcasts."

They have had to learn to put aside their own prejudices, the volunteer said, and buck the attitude of a community accustomed to standing by while their children throw rocks at Gypsies and their schools often refuse to admit Gypsy children.

"Pastor Bunaciu didn't have the enthusiastic support of the entire congregation of Providence Church in the beginning," said the volunteer, who asked not to be identified.

The volunteer compared the situation to negative response by many white churches in the United States to ministry to blacks in the 1950s and added:

"Project Ruth speaks eloquently to the conviction and leadership of the pastor in helping his people to minister to and to love scorned, persecuted human beings. Consequently, the tide has changed in that church from opposition to support.

"That, in turn, has brought literacy, joy and hope to children as they get a new start in life and as they and their families begin to turn to Jesus Christ."

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COMPASS ministries points the way for prisoners' families

By Ken Camp

BONHAM, Texas (ABP) -- For many church members, leading a vacation Bible school one week a year is enough to tax their endurance and patience. But a group of North Texas volunteers has operated a four-hour long, VBS-style ministry every Saturday for more than two years inside a state prison.

A half-dozen volunteer teams from Fannin Baptist Association rotate Saturdays teaching Bible stories and crafts to prisoners' children in the visitation room at the Choice Moore Unit of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, near Bonham.

Inmates may be housed at the 1,300-bed transfer facility for up to two years. They are permitted four-hour contact visits on Saturdays if family members travel more than 300 miles, or two-hour visits if the distance traveled is shorter.

"That's a long time for children. Besides that, the husband and wife need some time alone for adult conversation," said Ava Barlow, a volunteer from First Baptist Church, Leonard, Texas.

That realization led a group of Christians in Fannin County, who already had been praying for a way to touch the lives of prisoners and their families, to form COMPASS (Compassionate Organized Ministries Pioneering in Action and Serving our Savior).

The desire to launch a local criminal-justice ministry developed when Barlow and Mary Pumphrey, a pastor's wife from Duplex Baptist Church in Ivanhoe, Texas, attended the Texas Leadership Conference in Waco several years ago.

"God planted the seed in my heart there," Pumphrey said regarding the conference, sponsored annually by Woman's Missionary Union of Texas.

At the time, the state was making plans to open two prisons in Fannin County. After learning about criminal-justice ministries, the women returned home with a dream of starting some type of ministry in those facilities.

After some construction delays, the prisons neared completion. The women approached other church leaders about their vision and received their support.

In the fall of 1995, a dozen people from Fannin Association participated in the intensive, 42-hour training for volunteer chaplaincy. Those twelve volunteers formed COMPASS as an interdenominational ministry, but its base for leadership and volunteers continues to be local Texas Baptist churches.

COMPASS "not only gets God's word into our prisons, but goes home with us to plant seeds with other loved ones," one recipient of the ministry said. Bible stories that volunteers teach to children make an impact on whole families, according to a letter from a mother who regularly drives three hours one-way with her children to visit a family member in the Bonham prison.

Scriptural teachings are "taken into our homes where we have lost loved ones who haven't seen the word of God in years. But when a child or grandchild has something to show you, most of the time you will listen," she wrote.

Children who are too young to participate in crafts and stories receive small pillows, handmade by women in Baptist churches, which they often used for naps during the visitation times and on their long treks home. On each pillow a message such as "Jesus Loves You" is written in permanent marker.

Volunteers give older children an activity booklet and a packet of crayons, stickers and candy. Their mothers are given a "care packet" of tissues and mints, along with an evangelistic tract.

The Choice Moore Unit averages about 200 visitors each Saturday, said Chaplain Jerry Newton. Many travel long distances, such as a woman from Iowa who drives 12 hours one way, once a month to visit her family member in prison. Some have to choose between paying for gasoline or paying for food and lodging during their visits.

To meet that need, COMPASS plans to open a hospitality house which would provide overnight lodging to families visiting loved ones in prison.

The "Happy Jubilee Singers," an interdenominational gospel music group, has performed a series of benefit concerts to help COMPASS raise funds to buy property for a hospitality house in the Bonham area.