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- * Executive Committee votes to keep 2000 SBC in Orlando
- * Supreme Court refuses to hear abortion-related cases
- * High court rejects professor's bid to choose class materials, subjects
- * Too many church-recreation programs leave ministry on sidelines, experts say
- * European Baptist missionaries establish new church in Russia
- * Arkansas Baptist Children's Home provided refuge for Vietnamese girl

Executive Committee votes
to keep 2000 SBC in Orlando

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Despite its boycott of the Walt Disney Co., the Southern Baptist Convention will not pull its 2000 annual meeting out of Orlando, Fla., the SBC Executive Committee voted Feb. 23.

Three separate motions at last summer's convention asked that the group move its annual meeting elsewhere in light of a 1997 resolution urging Southern Baptists to refrain from patronizing Disney theme parks, stores and subsidiaries. The motions, which were referred to the Executive Committee, said it would be hypocritical for Southern Baptists to meet in Orlando after boycotting Disney for alleged anti-family and pro-gay policies.

But the Executive Committee will recommend to this year's convention in Atlanta that Southern Baptists move forward with plans to meet in Orlando, noting that messenger involvement in witnessing efforts while observing the boycott would "be a profound testimony for the cause of Christ."

The Executive Committee also decided against a study on feasibility of changing the name of the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group. In September, the committee deferred action on two motions concerning a possible name change pending a preliminary study by staff. In a written report, Augie Boto, the Executive Committee's vice president for convention policy, concluded a name change would be neither practical nor popular.

Supporters of a new name say the current regional designation hurts Southern Baptists' image in pioneer areas of the North and West. Opponents, however, argued that any bias against

Southern Baptists is more likely due to the convention's policies than its geography. A new name might weaken the convention's hard-won image as a bastion of conservatism, they said.

While a new name might "afford a modicum of relief" to Southern Baptists in new-work areas, "the Executive Committee finds no compelling rationale for changing the name of the convention nor for underwriting a study of the same," the report concluded.

Blaine Barber, a Michigan pastor who pushed for a name-change feasibility study at the Executive Committee meeting last fall, cast the lone dissenting vote. Earlier he told a subcommittee he planned to make a substitute motion that would have renamed the SBC the "International Baptist Convention" if approved by a two-thirds majority at annual meetings in 1999 and 2000. He told a reporter he changed his mind about the substitute motion after it failed to win support in the subcommittee.

"I felt like the issues that we raised were significant, but I just don't think it [the motion] will get anywhere," Barber said.

One of the three motions asking the SBC to relocate its Orlando meeting appealed, in addition to the boycott, to a decision by Orlando's city council allowing 363 rainbow flags to be flown from downtown light poles during the June 1998 "gay day" event held at nearby Disney World.

In written materials provided to Executive Committee members, Jack Wilkerson, vice president for business and finance, cited a letter he received from Orlando Mayor Glenda Hood explaining the situation. Council members at first opposed the request, Wilkerson said, but the city's flag-display policy did not permit them to deny it without risking a discrimination lawsuit. The council since has passed a new policy allowing the city to prevent light poles from being used for political or social activism.

Wilkerson said the SBC has signed contracts with three hotels adjacent to the convention center. No contract has been signed with the Orange County Convention Center, but space has been reserved for the 2000 SBC meeting since 1991, and intensive negotiations have been going on for a year. Backing out now could create "adverse financial and/or reputational consequences" for Southern Baptists he said.

In other business at the Feb. 22-23 meeting in Nashville, Tenn., the Executive Committee:

-- Declined to act on a motion to amend Article I of the "Baptist Faith and Message" after referring the matter to a council of seminary presidents. The proposal would have amended a sentence describing the Bible as "truth without any mixture of error" by adding the phrase "in every area of which it speaks."

-- Approved an almost \$160 million Cooperative Program allocation budget to be recommended at the June 15-16 convention in Atlanta.

Half of undesignated receipts in the budget would go to the International Mission Board while just less than 23 percent is earmarked for the North American Mission Board. Seminaries would receive 21 percent, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission 1.5 percent and "facilitating ministries" including the SBC operating budget and Annuity Board just over 4 percent. The SBC operating budget includes \$425,000 for the Baptist World Alliance, a global network of Baptist groups.

The Executive Committee is proposing a 1.6-percent increase in its staff salary structure, effective Oct. 1.

-- Extended for two more years a policy requiring the Southern Baptist Pastors'

Conference to reimburse the Executive Committee \$38,000 for meeting expenses.

-- Approved a \$9,000 contract hiring Barry McCarty as chief parliamentarian for this year's annual meeting.

-- Recommended that the 2004 annual meeting be held in Indianapolis. Scheduled dates are June 15-16, 2004.

-30-

Supreme Court refuses
to hear abortion-related cases

By Ashlee Ross

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear two abortion-related cases Feb. 22, leaving intact a ruling against a police officer who asked to be exempted from guarding an abortion clinic based on his religious beliefs and a decision upholding a Virginia parental-notification law.

The high court refused to hear an appeal from Chicago police officer Angelo Rodriguez. He alleged the city discriminated against him on the basis of his religion by refusing to exempt him from an assignment to stand guard outside an abortion clinic.

The city often posts guards at the abortion clinics on Saturdays during demonstrations and following clinic violence in other areas.

Rodriguez, a Roman Catholic, asked two of his superiors to exempt him from guarding abortion clinics in Chicago's 14th district because he opposes abortion.

The police department offered Rodriguez a transfer to a district with no abortion clinic with equal pay and benefits. Rodriguez refused, saying he was entitled to stay in the 14th district and still avoid clinic duty.

In 1995, Rodriguez filed a suit charging discrimination in violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. He also claimed the city violated his religious liberty under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and asked for an injunction prohibiting the police department from assigning him to clinic duty.

In 1998, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals dismissed Rodriguez's claims under RFRA, since the 1993 religious liberty law was partially invalidated by the Supreme Court in 1997.

The 7th Circuit ruled that the city made reasonable accommodation in offering Rodriguez a transfer, holding that the Civil Rights Act "requires only 'reasonable accommodation,' not satisfaction of an employee's every desire."

In the Virginia case, the Supreme Court let stand the 1997 Virginia Parental Notice Act, which requires minors to notify their parents at least 24 hours before having an abortion.

The law exempts girls who can show abuse by a parent or guardian.

The Supreme Court has upheld parental-notification statutes in the past. But the high court has invalidated laws that require parental consent, because they allow a third party absolute veto of the abortion.

"Although we have held that a state may not constitutionally legislate a blanket, unreviewable power of parents to veto their daughter's abortion, a statute setting out a 'mere

requirement of parental notice' does not violate the constitutional rights of an immature, dependent minor," the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said.

-30-

High court rejects professor's bid
to choose class materials, subjects

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has refused to review lower-court rulings affirming a public university's right to tell a professor to stop injecting religion into school courses.

The case was one of nearly 400 cases the high court refused to review Feb. 22. Left standing was a ruling by the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that a college professor at a public university "does not have a First Amendment right to choose classroom materials and subjects in contravention of the university's dictates."

Dilawar Edwards, a tenured professor at the California University of Pennsylvania, taught a course at the university titled "Introduction to Educational Media." Syllabi from the early 1980s indicate the course initially focused on how teachers can effectively use classroom tools, such as projection equipment, chalkboards and films.

Later syllabi prepared by Edwards included a new emphasis on issues of bias, censorship, religion and humanism. He listed numerous publications concerning those issues as required or suggested reading.

In May 1989, a student complained to university officials that Edwards was using the media class to advance religious ideas. In November, the university's vice president for academic affairs, Nancy Nelson, wrote to Edwards and directed that he "cease and desist" from using "doctrinaire" materials of a religious nature.

Edwards appealed Nelson's directive to the president of the university, John Pierce Watkins, who also ordered Edwards to avoid advancing religious beliefs through his lectures and handouts.

After being named chair of the university's education department in 1992, David Campbell also expressed concern that Edwards was "interjecting something that didn't belong" in the media course. Campbell accused Edwards of "a distinct bias on religion and religious questions."

The two engaged in a series of disputes over classroom-reading choices and an additional course assigned to Edwards. At a September 1993 faculty meeting Campbell called Edwards an "embarrassment to the department" and made comments to the effect that Edwards might be better suited for a "fundamentalist college" than a public university.

In October 1993, Nelson suspended Edwards, with pay, pending a discussion of concerns mailed to him by school administrators. Edwards remained on suspension for the remainder of the semester, returning to the classroom for the spring 1994 term to teach three classes.

Edwards initially sued the university in 1991. After his suspension, he filed an amended complaint, which included a free-speech claim.

A jury ruled in favor of the university, but Edwards appealed, arguing the district court did

not properly instruct the jury on the First Amendment claim. But the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals deemed it unnecessary to judge whether the instructions were adequate because “as a threshold matter, we conclude that a public university professor does not have a First Amendment right to decide what will be taught in the classroom.”

Citing a 1995 Supreme Court decision in *Rosenberger vs. University of Virginia*, the appellate court said the university was entitled to make content-based choices in the education it provides.

“Although Edwards has a right to advocate outside of the classroom for the use of certain curriculum materials, he does not have a right to use those materials in the classroom,” the court ruled.

-30-

Too many church-recreation programs
leave ministry on sidelines, experts say

By David Winfrey

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- If all you want is a good game of basketball or softball, sports-ministry specialists have a word of advice. Leave the church out of it.

Too many churches simply compete with city recreation leagues and don't use sports as an effective ministry or outreach tool, say three men with more than 75 years of experience among them.

“Most churches just throw it together and don't think it through,” said John Garner, director of the church-recreation program at LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention.

“A rec ministry can be one of the best ministries you can have in your church, or it can be one of the worst,” Garner said. “It all goes back to that intentionality.”

Robbie Speer, director of Sports Reach in Campbellsville, Ky., and David Lewis, former director of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's recreation and aerobics center, agreed.

“Many, many of our churches have a sports program and don't have a clue what ministry is,” said Speer, who has organized teams to take both sports and Christianity to Europe and the Far East.

But Speer said sports don't have to go overseas to be a ministry. In fact, he thinks churches should give more thought to what he calls the “theology of competition.”

“Some churches have stronger requirements to play on their sports teams than they have for their deacons,” he said

Too many church people focus on the game rather than the people playing it, Speer added. “It always amazes me. If I bring somebody to play on the church-basketball team, and he's not any good, it's outreach. If he's good, it's recruiting.”

Lewis, a former adjunct professor at Southwestern in Ft. Worth, Texas, and now a recreation minister in Atlanta, said ministry depends on one-on-one relationships.

"If a church is an evangelistic church, then their recreation ministry will be evangelistic," he said. "If they're building a building to have their own country club, ... it probably isn't worth it."

Many churches build a gym or other sports facility before they start a recreation ministry, Garner and Lewis said. They suggest that churches instead begin by focusing on the ministry and use the social hall for aerobics or rent school courts and fields until the program grows large enough to require a new building.

"It's like starting a new church," Garner said. "You start where you are and grow to the point where you need a new recreation facility."

Equally important is to have someone with vision to constantly remind church participants that the main reason for a sports ministry is outreach, Garner added.

Americans today have a "leisure ethic" that's ripe for Christian influence, Garner said.

"That's where they spend their money. That's where they spend their time," he said, quoting a Gallup poll reporting 70 percent of Americans participate in sports every week. A sports ministry can be a front door to reach prospects and introduce them to other ministries of the church. "When they find something that's meaningful, they're going to want to plug into it," he said.

Furthermore, Speer added, Christianity is a lot more genuine when modeled on the basketball court than in Sunday school.

Unfortunately, competition doesn't bring out the best in everyone. Speer said he'd like to see pastor and deacon ordinations postponed for all candidates until they've spent a season playing church-league softball and basketball. "There'd be some people who would not become deacons," he said.

"In sports, you don't have time to paint the picture pretty for everybody," Speer said. "The real me comes out."

The flip side, he added, is that an authentic sports ministry can use people with maturity to provide guidance when a fellow Christian doesn't turn the other cheek on the court or field.

"That's what sports ministry in church should be all about, because that changes lives," he said. "That helps Christians. But all that involves work and a lot of patience."

-30-

European Baptist missionaries
establish new church in Russia

By Trennis Henderson

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- Sensing a burden to plant a Baptist church in St. Petersburg, Russia, David Pettis told the Lord he was "willing to go if it was his will."

That was nearly three years ago. Today, Pettis and his wife, Kandy, serve St. Petersburg Baptist Church as missionaries of the European Baptist Convention.

Pettis, a native of Hot Springs, Ark., is among several European Baptist ministers whose Arkansas Baptist roots have been affirmed during the Arkansas Baptist State Convention's six-year missions partnership with the EBC.

Two Arkansas Baptist churches -- Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock and Emmanuel Baptist Church in Paris -- have joined the EBC in supporting the Pettises as church planters. They also work closely with the Russian Baptist Union.

"What's happening in St. Petersburg is God's activity," David Pettis said. "He called us there, but he also called out intercessory prayer teams in Paris and Little Rock. These people are as called to this ministry and are as involved as Kandy and I are."

Pettis said Arkansas Baptists have been "responsive and positive" throughout the partnership, which officially closes at the end of the year. "They are willing to work and are flexible and have a servant attitude," he said. "It's a true partnership, because they come together for the work of the Lord under the lordship of Christ."

Reflecting that spirit, a team of volunteers from Immanuel Baptist Church recently traveled to St. Petersburg to evaluate ongoing ministry opportunities there.

David Napier, Immanuel's senior associate pastor, said the congregation voted 18 months ago to become the primary financial sponsor for the new work in Russia. "The objective," Napier explained, "was to start a church for internationals coming to St. Petersburg."

Stan Parris, Immanuel's associate pastor for missions and evangelism, also participated in the recent trip. "It was a wonderful experience," he said. "We saw immediately what God had accomplished through David and Kandy in 18 months. There is a definite touch of the Lord on their ministry."

Napier described the survey trip as "a humbling experience."

"We have it so good over here and accomplish so little," he said. "So little goes so far over there. I felt like I was walking in the middle of something God is doing."

What has been accomplished through the Pettises' ministry efforts in the past year and a half? After arriving in Russia in August 1997, they began leading worship services the following month and soon developed a core group of participants.

"The first 10 months were primarily getting accustomed to the culture and praying for vision and direction," Pettis said. Since then, the congregation has grown to include more than 40 members, ranging from Russian and African students to American, British and Scottish teachers and businessmen.

With five different Bible-study groups under way, "the Lord is in the process of allowing us to move into almost every dimension of the international culture," he added. "We're watching the Lord absolutely put this thing together in a beautiful way -- bringing all these avenues of ministry together."

Despite growth in their ministry, the Pettises still face extensive challenges. Although "we were not kidding ourselves about what we would find here," Kandy Pettis explained, "I don't think anything adequately prepares you for what you see in the East. The living conditions, you don't get used to it, but you come to expect it. It becomes a part of the routine of your day."

"As a Westerner, you want to fix things," she said. "You have to trust God as things go unfixed, knowing he is working on a bigger plan."

David Pettis, who was in the military for several years before serving as pastor of Baptist churches in Baumholder and Bitburg, Germany, noted that the poverty, hunger and other needs in Russia "are overwhelming to us." He added, however, that those needs help provide "a magnificent opportunity for people to hear the Lord."

Half a world away, Parris agreed. "There are opportunities right now to make an eternal

difference" in St. Petersburg, he said. "When anybody gets an opportunity to see, touch, taste and feel missions, it changes their lives," he remarked. "To have an opportunity like that in Russia is a great privilege."

Those ministry opportunities, Pettis said, are what prompted the couple to move to St. Petersburg "trusting the Lord."

"It's hard, but it's where we belong," he said. "We're honored and privileged to be there."

-30-

Arkansas Baptist Children's Home
provided refuge for Vietnamese girl

By Russ Dilday

MAGNOLIA, Ark. (ABP) -- Chau Stone knows how precious life is, because hers was in danger most of her life -- until she found an "island of refuge" at the Arkansas Baptist Home for Children in Monticello, Ark.

Stone, born Chau Troung, was a resident of the home from 1991 to 1994. A native of Vietnam, her first brush with death came just minutes after she was born.

Abandoned at birth by her parents, an elderly couple found the baby girl wrapped in a cloth under a tree and covered in fire ants. The couple raised the infant as their own for 13 years.

When she was 13, her adoptive parents told her about her birth family, which included four brothers in Vietnam and a father living in America. She contacted her brothers, who included her in their plans to flee Vietnam in a homemade boat with five other refugees.

The 10 set out into the Pacific Ocean. After 13 days, they became lost and ran out of food and hope, said Chau. "I was going to die, because I didn't know how to swim, the boat was sinking and sharks were eating on our boat. We had no more food left, no compass, no more clothes, no nothing."

"I decided I was going to kill myself," she said. "I jumped in the water to commit suicide. I was praying to my God at that time, which was Buddha. When I jumped in the water and that minute, I felt a wing scoop me up and throw me back on the boat. I laughed because my god didn't have wings, he had a big old fat belly and long ears."

Just minutes later, she said, the group was rescued by the crew of a Panamanian oil tanker who fed them, fixed their small craft and directed them to safety through Malaysian-government refugee camps, where they were interred almost two years.

The five siblings contacted their father, who lived in Blytheville, Ark. He agreed to sponsor the five at a cost of \$70,000. First Baptist Church in Blytheville heard of the need and helped raise the funds to sponsor the children, who made it there in 1990.

In America, though, she found life wasn't much better. "I lived with my daddy for seven months and went through nothing but hell and back," she recalled. "My daddy would abuse me and there was alcohol. I lived with five men in the house and I didn't know how to speak English. ... He didn't think I was his kid. He brought me to this country to be a maid for the family."

First Baptist Church became another place of refuge for Chau. She recalls the names of families who supported her and witnessed to her. Most notable among that support group was the late Jewel Lee. "She was my adopted grandmother who had helped my biological dad and witnessed to me about Christ."

The abuse by her father, she noted, continued. "In Vietnam, it's normal for your mom and dad to beat you when they're ready to."

"I had tried to get some help. I had told Jewel about the incidents, but she didn't believe me," Stone recalled. "She didn't accept it very well, because she knew my daddy for 12 years. She told me I needed to pray about everything. I was so sick of her telling me to pray and pray."

But those prayers, along with the ministry of Lee and others, had a lasting effect, leading Chau to accept Christ, which "really enraged my dad."

Lee finally was forced to take action when Chau showed her bruises and she witnessed a beating. That incident led to Chau's relocation to the children's home at age 16.

It was a life-changing move. "At the children's home, I learned how to walk closer to God," she said. "They sent me to counseling at the children's home. At first, I didn't like to talk, and Delores Grisham (her house mother) helped me open up."

"I look back and thank God that he brought me to the children's home. It was always a home for me," Chau said.

Her close tie to the home led her to study nearby at the University of Arkansas at Monticello after high school graduation.

There she met her husband, Wesley, who is a biologist for a Magnolia forestry-consulting firm. Chau, who works as a beautician in Magnolia, and Wesley have a 3-year-old daughter.

The couple and their daughter have lived in Magnolia only a few months and are continuing their search for a church. They presently are members of Second Baptist Church in Amity, Ark., where they previously lived.

Though she has made a career and a home in Magnolia, she continues to see a need for giving back to the place she once called home. She said she wants to become a sponsor for children living there in the future.

In the meantime, though, she finds ways to help out. "I don't have money, but I go back and do little things like talk to the girls or cut hair for the kids."

Chau's life journey has been dangerous and geographically long and continues to unfold. But, even though she has made a home with her husband and daughter, she said she still remembers a place she once called an island of refuge -- the Arkansas Baptist Home for Children.