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Hate groups increasing presence in cyberspace

By Pat Cole

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (ABP) -- The number of Internet sites promoting racial hatred rose by more than 55 percent in 1998, according to a report issued by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

The Montgomery, Ala., -based SPLC counted 254 hate sites on the Internet in 1998 compared with 163 in 1997.

The organization defines a hate site as one that uses "racist or anti-Semitic content or promotes a group known to be racist or anti-Semitic," said SPLC spokeswoman Laurie Wood.

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., said use of the World Wide Web is increasingly popular among hate groups for two reasons. Web sites allow hate groups "to hide in cyberspace, providing them with shelter from the public eye," he said, while allowing people who feel marginalized to seek out material "to feed their anger and prejudice without being observed by their family and neighbors."

Parham said parents should monitor their children's Internet use for sites that promote hate as closely as they do for pornography.

In addition to their growing visibility in cyberspace, hate groups are experiencing an upsurge in numerical strength, the SPLC reported. It identified 537 hate groups or hate-group chapters in 1998, up from 474 in 1997. Much of the increase was due to the addition of 33 chapters of the Conservative Citizens Council.

In recent months, U.S. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.) and U.S. Rep. Bob Barr (R-Ga.) have come under criticism for speaking to CCC groups. While the CCC portrays itself as a mainstream conservative group, national news organizations have documented racist statements on its Web site and in its literature.

"The CCC is a reminder that organized racists are not always identifiable by their Klan hoods or swastikas," the SPLC report said. "In fact, they come from all walks of life and often wear business suits rather than brown shirts."

Racist groups also are receiving encouragement from the halls of academia, the SPLC report said. "Race scientists, contending that blacks are inherently less intelligent than whites and more prone to crime,

have fueled extremist groups that use the scientists' work to justify their hatred and demeaning of non-whites. Like the CCC, these scientists have created a 'safe haven' for views that are repugnant to most."

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Black Baptist leader convicted of fraud

LARGO, Fla. (ABP) -- A jury in Largo, Fla., found Baptist leader Henry Lyons guilty of racketeering and grand theft Feb. 27 following a six-week trial.

Lyons, the 57-year-old president of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., faces up to eight years in prison for bilking more than \$4 million from companies who viewed him as a gatekeeper to a nation of black Baptists.

Prosecutors portrayed Lyons as a swindler who traded the Good Book for a bankbook.

Lyons' lawyers, meanwhile, argued the prominent African-American preacher was guilty of bad business decisions but is not a criminal.

The same all-white jury that convicted Lyons acquitted his co-defendant, Bernice Edwards, the convention's former public-relations director who was also charged with racketeering.

Lyons and Edwards were accused of using the convention's good name to swindle more than \$4 million from companies which bought bogus mailing lists for a purported 8.5 million National Baptists. The convention's actual membership is probably closer to 1 million, prosecutors said.

Lyons was also charged separately with two counts of grand theft for pocketing most of the \$244,500 given to him by the Anti-Defamation League in 1996 to distribute to burned black churches.

Defense attorneys said Lyons, who is also pastor of Bethel Metropolitan Baptist Church in St. Petersburg, Fla., had returned the money meant for burned churches. They also said Lyons heads a group that gives broad discretion in the handling of church funds to its president.

"The president of the convention really doesn't answer to anyone, but perhaps his maker," lawyer Grady Irvin told jurors during opening statements.

Lyons and Edwards now face federal charges in another trial scheduled to begin in April.

Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Judge Susan Schaeffer allowed Lyons to remain free on bail pending a presentencing investigation. Sentencing is expected within six weeks.

It is unclear how the conviction will affect Lyons' presidency of the Baptist group. He would not say whether he planned to resign his term, which ends in September. Lyons' opponents have called for him to step down in light of his conviction. The NBC board of directors was expected to meet in early March to discuss his leadership.

Lyons' troubles with the law started in July 1997 when his wife, Deborah, set fire to a \$700,000 home he is alleged to own with Edwards. Deborah Lyons admitted to arson, telling police she found a deed to the home and presumed her husband and the 42-year-old woman were having an affair. She later said she no longer believes Lyons and Edwards committed adultery.

After a series of investigative reports by the St. Petersburg Times and an investigation by state prosecutors, Lyons was charged with racketeering and grand theft. A year after the fire, federal prosecutors also indicted Lyons, accusing him of fraud, extortion, money laundering, conspiracy and tax evasion.

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-- By ABP staff

Supreme Court sidesteps Hare Krishna requests

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has refused to review a ruling barring members of the Hare Krishna religious sect from soliciting funds or selling literature at Miami International Airport.

The high court's Feb. 22 refusal leaves intact a ruling by the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. That ruling upheld airport restrictions on the Florida arm of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. The ban does not prohibit the distribution of free literature. The ruling applies to airports in Florida, Georgia and Alabama.

In accordance with the importance of scripture to the Krishna faith, adherents are required to venture into public places to distribute religious literature and solicit support for the religion.

The 11th Circuit Court decision relied on 1992 Supreme Court rulings that airports may bar solicitation of donations in terminals but must allow the distribution of free literature.

The appeals court noted that airports are "nonpublic" forums where government is allowed to restrict speech as long as the limits are reasonable and viewpoint-neutral.

"Port authority management considers the purpose of the terminals to be the facilitation of passenger air travel, not the promotion of free expression," the appeals court said, citing the Supreme Court rulings as precedent.

The appeals court said the ban on solicitation is reasonable, because the normal flow of terminal traffic can be impeded when passengers alter their paths to avoid solicitation.

"As residents of metropolitan areas know from daily experience, confrontation by a person asking for money disrupts passage and is more intrusive and intimidating than an encounter with a person giving out information," the appeals court ruled. "One need not ponder the contents of a leaflet or pamphlet in order mechanically to take it out of someone's hand, but one must listen, comprehend, decide and act in order to respond to a solicitation."

Earlier Supreme Court rulings banning the sale of literature are less clear, the appeals court said, but the "same problems that justify a governmental restriction on solicitation in a nonpublic forum may render a similar prohibition on the sale of literature reasonable."

The appeals court noted that the airport restrictions do not totally prohibit solicitation or sales of literature. The group "is still free both to solicit funds in the airport by pamphleteering and asking travelers to mail in their contributions and to offer their literature for sale through mail order or in other locations," the appeals court said.

The appeals court tightened the airport restrictions beyond earlier Supreme Court decisions by allowing the ban on solicitation and literature sales to extend to sidewalks and parking lots surrounding the Miami airport.

The Hare Krishna organization had asked the Supreme Court to review the 1992 rulings "in light of recent significant developments in the airport industry involving the increased commercialization of airport terminals." Miami's airport has been turned "into a prominent shopping center" where half of all visitors stay at least two hours, the appeal argued.

The Supreme Court did not comment on its refusal to hear the appeal.

Singing at Grammy Awards is vocalist's dream come true

By Stella Anderson

TEXARKANA, Ark. (ABP) -- Four months ago, Ashley Guilbert barely knew of gospel singer Kirk Franklin, let alone dream of performing with him. But that unlikely scenario came true for the 22-year-old Arkansan who sang backup for the popular artist at the 41st Grammy Awards.

"I've always wanted to sing, but if anyone would have told me a few months ago that I would be singing at this year's Grammys, I would have laughingly told them, 'Yeah, I don't think so,'" said Guilbert.

"I definitely would have never imagined it," said Guilbert, a member of Trinity Baptist Church in Texarkana, Ark.

Musically talented from childhood, Guilbert said in an interview before the Feb. 24 program she "had always watched the Grammys, but to actually have the chance to be there is unreal."

Guilbert, who joined Franklin's "The NuNation Tour" last November, performed at the nationally televised event with One Nation Crew (1NC), a young hip-hop group that sings alongside the three-time Grammy winner. Their performance included Franklin's latest hit, "Lean On Me," which was nominated for song of the year. Franklin won the Grammy for "Best Contemporary Soul Gospel Album" and also was nominated in two other categories.

Noting that few Christian groups are invited to sing at the prestigious music event, Guilbert said she hoped their presentation of "Lean On Me" would offer an evangelistic witness to viewers and other performers. The hit's lyrics, she said, encourage "a critically ill patient, a homeless person and another who is searching for a long-lost father that they have someone to 'lean on' in friends, fellow Christians and Jesus."

"Many people may not listen to a religious song about God or Jesus, but they might listen to one like this that deals with problems facing our world today," she said. "It is a song of encouragement and could make a difference."

Guilbert has loved music since an early age. From the time she was 2 years old, she was singing along with recordings of her favorite Christian artists and at age 6 began performing with her brother at their church. Throughout her teens, she performed and traveled with her youth choir and won a tri-state vocal contest sponsored by Sparrow Records.

But it was during a family concert in 1997 that Guilbert's dream of becoming a professional vocalist came true, though she wouldn't realize it until two years later. Unknown to her, a sister of Franklin's manager attended the concert and was so impressed by Guilbert's musical abilities that she purchased a video of the group and gave it to her brother.

Meanwhile, Guilbert was studying music at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Ark., where she was a member of the Ouachita Sounds and hostess of "Tiger Tunes." She also participated in the Miss Arkansas and Miss Texas pageants, winning in the talent competition. "I knew God had a plan for me to sing; that was my top priority," she said. "I didn't know where I would be singing or when, but I knew God had a plan."

Several months later, Guilbert said, Franklin approached his manager and inquired about adding "color" to "NuNation," which is made up mostly of African-American performers. In their search for a new vocalist, the duo viewed Guilbert's video, and Franklin remarked that he had "never heard a white girl sing like that."

The next day, Franklin's manager contacted Guilbert, and within one week she joined the "NuNation Tour." "It has happened so fast," she exclaimed. "It will take a while for all of this to sink in."

Since joining the tour in November, Guilbert's travels have taken her to new heights in her musical career. She has been part of performances with Franklin and popular artist CeCe Winan to sell-out crowds in Philadelphia, Washington D.C. and New York.

She has also performed at the Motown Music's Image Awards, the gospel Stellar Awards and Dove Awards.

Describing her musical career as a "ministry," Guilbert said she hopes God will use her as a witness to the crowds who attend the NuNation concerts. "You never know how God will use you," she said. "I may be the one person at a concert who can relate to a fan. I just know God may be able to use me to speak to them."

Guilbert's family and friends agree. "Ashley is a wonderful Christian young lady and she has characteristics of Christ that reach out and grab everyone," said Wallace Edgar, her pastor. "We are really excited to see how the Lord is going to open avenues to use her for his glory, like he used her here with us."

Being a part of the group will "be a tremendous opportunity for Ashley to use her voice for the Lord and to live a life and set a tremendous testimony for the Lord," Edgar added.

"The circumstances surrounding her new career could have only been of God," said Guilbert's father, Chuck, who is minister of music at the Texarkana church. He said God "laid all the pieces in place."

Although her leap into a musical career has moved her into "a whole new world," Guilbert said she is trying "to take it one day at a time. I owe it all to the Lord. I give him the glory."

"I know the Lord has me here for a purpose -- to build me into what he wants me to be," she said.

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