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1998 human-rights report details religious persecution

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Too many countries acknowledge the principle of religious freedom yet refuse to respect it as a fundamental right, according to the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1998 released Feb. 26.

The 5,000-page reports, written annually by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, detail threats to democracy and human rights around the globe. This year's reports include an unprecedented emphasis on religious freedom.

"Nearly all states claim to respect the principle of religious freedom," the reports' introduction states. "But in too many, governments refuse to respect this fundamental right, discriminating against, restricting, persecuting, or even killing those whose faith differs from that of the majority population."

Harold Koh, assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, said the reports' goal is "to tell the truth about human-rights conditions around the world."

In recent years, some lawmakers have criticized the State Department for pulling punches on gross violators of human rights. Lawmakers saw the reports only the night before a committee hearing on its release but generally hailed their accuracy.

"I am happy to say that on a preliminary first reading, this year's country reports seem to state more hard facts and to pull many fewer punches than last year's reports," said Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., chairman of the House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights. "On the whole, [the State Department] has done an excellent job on this year's reports."

Smith criticized a report dealing with China, however. He cited "irrelevant and gratuitous statements about the difficult tasks facing the Chinese government" and charged that the report in some cases makes bad conduct "look less bad." The report uses the fact that "unofficial Catholic and Protestant churches in China attract more and more adherents every year as evidence that the policies themselves are not as bad as they might be," he said.

An opponent of abortion, Smith also strongly criticized the report's comments that government policy in China "prohibits the use of force to compel persons to submit to abortion or sterilization."

"This simply is not true," Smith said. "Of course the Chinese government officially claims to oppose coercion, just as the Soviet Union always claimed to support free speech and democracy."

Koh responded to questions from Smith by saying: "I don't think we pull any punches on China. We focused specifically on the coercive planning practice that you mentioned. ... We made it clear that those practices were influenced by the government. We say, 'Intense pressure to meet family planning targets set by the government has resulted in documented instances where family planning officials have used coercion, including forced abortion, sterilization to meet government goals.'"

The 1998 report observes that the Chinese government's human-rights record "deteriorated sharply at the end of 1998 with a crackdown against organized political dissent" and that human-rights abuses there "overshadowed the government's October signing of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

The report details instances of religious persecution in China, finding that unregistered religious groups "continued to experience degrees of official interference and repression that varied from region to region and locality to locality."

"In some areas, authorities, guided by national policy, made strong efforts to control the activities of unapproved churches; religious services were broken up, and church leaders or adherents were detained and, at times, reportedly beaten," the report continues.

The report also says that in Tibet and Xinjiang, the Chinese government intensified controls of religious practices and fundamental freedom and moved to suppress advocacy of independence. The regime renewed its rhetorical campaign against the Dalai Lama and there were reports of imprisonment and abuse or torture of monks and nuns, the report says.

Religious persecution also received mentioned in reports on other countries:

-- In Sudan, a bloody civil war fueled by the regime's intolerance of animists, Christians and some Muslims continued unabated. The report says the regime adopted a strict interpretation of Islamic law and subjected animists and Christians in the South to kidnapping, slavery and forced conversion to Islam.

-- In Egypt, approximately 6 million Coptic Christians face both occasional violent assaults by extremists and legal and societal discrimination. Christians also face job discrimination in universities and throughout Egypt's police, armed forces and government agencies.

-- In India, controversy between Hindus and Muslims continued with regard to three mosques built centuries ago on sites where temples are believed to have stood previously. In addition, violence against Christians increased significantly, linked to extremist groups with ties to the governing Bharatiya Janata Party.

-- In Indonesia, the report notes that "attacks ranging from minor vandalism to arson targeted churches, temples, mosques and other religious facilities." While the number of churches targeted declined in 1998, members of minority religions reported inadequate responses by officials to protect their property or arrest those responsible for property destruction.

-- In Vietnam, religious activities by groups not officially sanctioned are "severely restricted," the report states. Religious organizations needed permission to conduct most activities, and Pentecostal house churches continued to meet despite restrictions on proselytizing.

-- In Russia, a 1997 restrictive law on religion was blamed for limiting citizens' religious freedom. The report says the law makes it difficult for less well-established religions to practice their beliefs through organized religious institutions. "The law's most controversial provisions limit the rights, activities, and status of religious groups that have existed in Russia for less than 15 years," the report states.

House passes legislation protecting Amish work beliefs

By Ashlee Ross

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation March 2 that would permit Amish children to work in woodworking shops and sawmills despite government regulations banning other children from such labor.

The amendment to the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 would permit Amish children who are between the ages of 14 and 18 to work with wood products in supervised environments. Department of Labor regulations currently prohibit 14- and 15-year-olds from doing such work and restrict the work of 16- and 17-year olds.

The amendment requires minors to wear protective equipment and prohibits them from operating power-driven woodworking machines. An adult relative or member of the same sect must supervise the minors.

Traditionally, Amish families are centered on the family farm. After formal education ends at the eighth grade, Amish youths learn how to make a living without outside influences that are against their religion. With rising land costs, many Amish view woodworking as an alternative to farming.

Rep. Joseph Pitts, R-Pa., bill sponsor, said Amish parents want to take their children to work with them in vocational jobs. "The Amish view this work as part of their schooling," Pitts said. "[It is] very similar to an apprenticeship, and they call this learning by doing."

Rep. Tim Roemer, D-Ind., supported the legislation and said it strikes a balance between honoring religion and having a safe workplace. Roemer said the legislation is a good compromise between "respecting the Amish for their cultural and religious differences and on insisting on a safe and healthy work environment."

Not all representatives supported the bill. Rep. William Clay, D-Mo., said the legislation gives preference to religion, a violation of the Constitution.

"I oppose this bill because it violates the Establishment Clause of the Constitution's First Amendment, which forbids preference to one religion over another," Clay said. "This bill, if enacted, will sanction a discriminatory provision of the law for the Amish members against other religions that do not enjoy this preference."

But Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said the legislation is constitutional because it is not restricted to the Amish and therefore does not favor one religion over another.

"This bill is a constitutionally permissible accommodation of the exercise of religion," Walker said. "It is not by its terms limited to the Amish, though clearly passed for their benefit."

Clay also said "inexperience, small size and lack of maturity" could increase the possibility of harm to "children too young to legally smoke, too young to legally drink, too young to defend this country in the military."

The House passed the same legislation in the 105th session, but the Senate did not take up the bill.

BJC creates new foundation to be headed by Dunn

By Larry Chesser

ROSSLYN, Va. (ABP) -- The Baptist Joint Committee approved the creation of a new fund-raising and development arm to be headed by James Dunn after he retires as executive director of the Washington-based religious-liberty agency.

In September, Dunn will assume part-time teaching responsibilities at Wake Forest Divinity School and will also remain with the BJC in the part-time role approved by the agency's directors March 1.

During a two-day meeting in Rosslyn, Va., BJC directors voted unanimously to establish the Baptist Joint Committee Foundation with the assignment of increasing endowment and annual gifts. The foundation will be a subsidiary of the BJC governed by the agency's executive committee.

The foundation will not manage endowment funds but will place them in existing foundations, including those affiliated with American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., the Baptist General Association of Virginia, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Kentucky Baptist Convention and the North Carolina Baptist Convention.

In addition to fund-raising duties, Dunn's new role will include attending meetings other staff cannot cover and accepting speaking and writing assignments on religious liberty.

BJC directors also unanimously approved a recommendation from Dunn that the agency set a goal of increasing its total endowment to \$1 million by the end of 1999. Existing endowment now totals more than \$815,000, Dunn reported. That figure, along with monies already pledged, leaves the agency less than \$160,000 short of the \$1 million goal.

BJC directors also approved recommendations of a transition committee to sponsor a Capitol Hill reception Oct. 3 and a banquet Oct. 4 honoring Dunn for his service as executive director. They also agreed to pay Dunn full salary and benefits for the remainder of 1999 as compensation for unclaimed 1999 annual leave, sabbatical time and other leave not taken.

Following the BJC board meeting, the search committee assigned to recommend a new executive director held its first meeting.

"We are determined to identify and call the best available candidate to assume the executive leadership of the Baptist Joint Committee," said BJC chairman Aidsand Wright-Riggins, executive director of national ministries for the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. "Our process is an open and fair one, enabling us to find, far or near, that special woman or man who will be our chief advocate for religious liberty as we move into the next millennium," he said in a statement issued after the search-committee meeting.

In other actions, the BJC directors:

-- Voted to present the first Barbara Jordan-Mark Hatfield Courage Award to U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, for his leading role last summer in defeating a proposed constitutional amendment sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla. The Istook measure would have allowed government-sponsored prayer in schools and government-funded religious activities.

The award, named after the late Democratic congresswoman from Texas and the former Republican senator from Oregon, will be presented March 22 at a BJC/Truett Theological Seminary-sponsored workshop in Waco, Texas.

-- Named a committee to address how churches and religious organizations can meet community needs without violating church-state separation or compromising their religious mission by accepting government funds. The committee is expected to consider a conference and/or video to promote "the right way to do right" in meeting community needs.

In staff reports:

-- Associate General Counsel Melissa Rogers noted that membership in the Religious Liberty Council, the individual membership arm of the BJC, has increased to 693. Much of the growth in RLC membership is attributable to the addition of 171 seminary and divinity school students paid for with a \$6,500 gift from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

-- Dunn reported that former Tanzanian President Julius Nyerere has been added to the list of speakers for a conference on religious liberty scheduled July 8-10 in London. The conference, titled "Beyond Mere Toleration: Religious Liberty as a Basic Human Right," is jointly sponsored by the BJC, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in cooperation with the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Baptist Historical Society and the Baptist Missionary Society.

Other scheduled speakers include Tadeusz Zielinski, a member of Poland's parliament; Eileen Barker of the London School of Economics; and Larry Uzzell of Keston Institute.

-- Dunn reported that Detroit pastor Charles Adams and Baylor University religion professor Rosalie Beck will be featured speakers at a workshop titled "Pitfalls to Avoid As Seen from the Pulpit: Church-State Issues and the Ministry." Jointly sponsored by the BJC and Truett Theological Seminary, the workshop is scheduled March 22-23 at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

-- Dunn told directors the BJC will print 100,000 bulletin inserts dealing with the issue of vouchers used to attend parochial schools. Dunn said the inserts would be distributed free of charge to churches that request them.

-- General Counsel Brent Walker reported that Smyth and Helwys Publishing of Macon, Ga., plans to release a book in tribute to Dunn by October. Walker is general editor of the book to be written by friends and colleagues of Dunn.

"This will not be a formal academic Festschrift but a from-the-heart tribute to this true champion of religious liberty," Walker said.

-- Administrator Karen McGuire reported that 1998 receipts, including gifts to the BJC endowment, totaled \$947,129.

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'Wounded Heroes' share pain at North Carolina retreat

By Toby Druin

RIDGECREST, N.C. (ABP) -- The kinds of hurts treated at Wounded Heroes retreats aren't visible to the casual observer. A bruised spirit, wounded pride, crushed ambition or broken heart doesn't show on the outside, but the pain they bring is real.

"As a pastor I feel of little worth," said one young man forced from his pulpit.

"My experiences have made me feel small and inadequate," said another who is now on a forced leave of absence from his church.

"Sunday night my 15-year-old daughter, stung by what she is hearing said about her father, stood in the doorway of the church and said she didn't want her daddy to be a full-time pastor any more," said a preacher's wife.

"Last year was one of the worst years of my life," said a younger pastor's spouse. "We felt God's call, but my husband has been fired from two churches; and my family is opposed to what we are doing."

"Our church is growing; we had 100 additions last year, but one old deacon decided it was time for us to go," said another young pastor.

More than 100 people -- 47 couples and six singles -- brought those kinds of feelings to a North Carolina retreat center Feb. 8-12 to the fourth and largest of Freddie Gage's Wounded Heroes Retreats. LifeWay Christian Resources was host to the five-day event at Ridgecrest Conference Center, providing free meals and lodging for 30 of the couples.

Another retreat is tentatively scheduled at Ridgecrest in the spring, said Gage, and others will be held as funds are raised to underwrite them. Gage provides free transportation, meals, lodging and counseling to participants. The average cost is \$52,000 per retreat. "We already have almost 200 couples on the waiting list," he said.

Gage, a popular Southern Baptist evangelist who has battled depression for years, began the retreats in 1998 to offer help to a swelling tide of ministers, evangelists and missionaries and their spouses who for various reasons are experiencing crises in their ministries. Many participants are among the more than 1,200 Southern Baptist ministers forcibly terminated each year.

"We want them to receive help, hope and healing while they are here," said Stuart Rothberg, teaching pastor at Sagemont Baptist Church in Houston, and one of the facilitators for the retreats.

To accomplish that, participants are given group and individual counseling from psychiatrists, psychologists and psychotherapists. They participate in structured group activities that give them a fresh look at their lives and problems and those of others at the retreat. They also take a fresh look at their call to and motivation for ministry and their relationship to their spouses and to Jesus Christ.

They also hear from "encouragers" -- typically fellow ministers and often their spouses who have overcome adversity in their lives and ministries.

Those attending the Ridgecrest retreat were led in examining many areas, including the causes of stress in ministry, effective listening and communications skills and the dynamics of church problems.

They revisited their call to ministry, specifically if they had interpreted it too narrowly by taking on the role of senior pastor.

They were encouraged to ask themselves and others if the ministry was creating or merely revealing the problems in their lives.

In one session they compared their lives at present with what they expected when they entered the ministry. Several said they expected their lives to be "easier," that they would be "free to minister" and "to still be a person and able to speak freely instead of the role player I have been forced to become." Others said they expected to be "normal," "able to minister and see something happen" and "not placed on a pedestal."

Instead, the ministers said, they now feel "empty," "we have no friends," "angry," "sad," "out of control." "Life is chaotic," one said. One said he and his wife feel "lonely." "Although we are in a great church with great people, none of them are real friends."

Many of the participants indicated they were suffering from depression.

"Depression is the common cold of emotional disorders," said Polly Cooper Brown, staff psychologist at First Baptist Church in Dallas and director of the Wounded Heroes counseling program. "Everybody gets depressed; some of us get over it," she said. "If you are never depressed, you might have a cognitive dysfunction or be on drugs."

But genuine depression is more than just being sad, she said, "Depression is a dark cloud that hangs over you ... and prevents you from being the person you want to be. Depression is a sense of carrying the weight of the world."

Deciding to get professional help with depression, she said, depends on the intensity of the episode -- whether it is interfering with life -- and its duration. "If it lasts as much as two weeks to a month, seek help," she said.

A person seeking help for depression should first talk to his or her personal physician, who may detect a chemical imbalance or control symptoms long enough to address other problems. If a need for counseling is indicated, she said, "Don't be afraid to go to more than one."

Participants in the retreat went home to the same problems they had left, but with a new attitude.

"My wife and I came to Wounded Heroes looking for the same thing -- hope," said a Tennessee pastor. "I am happy to say we found that for which we sought. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say we were found by hope."

One couple, whose son recently committed suicide, said, "Neither of us felt we had a future, but with the help of Wounded Heroes, we felt we left with our burden lifted and with a renewed hope."

A Florida pastor said he came to the retreat "totally discouraged, disappointed, depleted and dejected," and had begun to question both his conversion and call to ministry.

"Now, I am happy to say, my wife and I have returned to the church we serve with renewed determination to continue in ministry regardless of the challenge or personal cost. We are committed to God and his call upon our lives. We could not have reached this decision apart from Wounded Heroes."

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God can restart the 'music' in hurting lives, minister says

By Toby Druin

RIDGECREST, N.C. (ABP) -- Divorce, death and disappointment can rob a minister of his song, but God can start the music again, more than 100 beleaguered ministers and their spouses were told at a recent retreat.

Greg Kirksey, president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, used the music analogy while speaking at the closing session of the fourth Wounded Heroes Retreat at Ridgecrest Conference Center.

Kirksey, a chaplain at the Alexander Youth Services Center in Little Rock, lost his 39-year-old wife to breast cancer in 1994 and then the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Benton, Ark., when he announced he would marry a woman who had been divorced before she became a Christian.

After a "dream-come-true" life for 40 years and a ministry that began when he was 16, Kirksey found himself out of the pastorate but exactly where he felt God wanted him -- as pastor to Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden, the youthful shooters in the Jonesboro, Ark., school massacre last year.

"I broke down and cried because I knew God wanted me there," Kirksey said.

"God's presence transformed a desert night into a wonderful place," Kirksey said. "It can do the same for you. His presence in this moment can transform your life and start the music again."

Kirksey was one of more than a dozen "encouragers" who spoke to the 47 couples and six singles attending the retreat for ministers and their spouses, many of whom have also lost loved ones or their places of ministry.

Ike Reighard, pastor of NorthStar Baptist Church in Kennesaw, Ga., lost his first wife in childbirth and had a disappointing experience in an Atlanta church. He was joined on the retreat rostrum by his new wife, Robin. Both rejoiced in the new life and ministry God has given them in a new congregation averaging more than 1,600 in worship.

Gary Miller, former pastor of Sagamore Hill Baptist Church, in Fort Worth, Texas, said the pressures of an inner-city ministry and personal responsibilities drained him and his wife, Dana, physically and emotionally, but the first Wounded Heroes retreat last year in Dallas reaffirmed them.

"I felt like God was saying, 'My hand is still on you,'" Gary Miller said. "God gave me a new heart for ministry while I was in Fort Worth." He is now pastor of Rockdale Baptist Church in Conyers, Ga., and he and Dana are active with Wounded Heroes.

Renee Scheidt, who has her own music ministry in China Grove, N.C., told of losing her husband, a pastor, to suicide more than 11 years ago. "The healing of emotions takes time," she said. "But as friends began to pray I received God's grace."

Psychologist Polly Cooper Brown of Dallas, who heads the counseling program for Wounded Heroes, noted that despite having a doctorate in psychology and her own career, she lost her identity as a pastor's wife when she was divorced after 30 years of marriage. Now remarried, she said she has made a new life for herself but still has a sense of loss.

Millie Cooper, wife of Kenneth Cooper, founder of the Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas, encouraged the participants to become physically fit. "Nothing I know of will help your depression like walking," she said. "It's amazing how many people find time for exercise after their first heart attack."

Jerry Rankin, president of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, and his wife, Bobbie, reminded those at the retreat that "fulfilling God's calling is the ultimate goal of what anyone can do."

The couple said they experienced difficulties in their early days as missionaries in Indonesia, suffering from isolation, serious illness, family crises and even rejection by the people to whom they were trying to minister. But the encouragement of other missionaries and the presence of God sustained them, they said.

When her father was killed and her mother seriously injured in an automobile wreck in Mississippi, Bobbie Rankin said that when she finally reached her mother's bedside she found that "God was there."

"Within my Spirit I saw God was on his throne," she said.

In all of those difficulties, Jerry Rankin said, "Though we sometimes didn't understand at the time, in retrospect we realized that though Satan was attacking us, God was there."

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