



Nashville, Tennessee
**Associated
Baptist Press**

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May 12, 1999

(99-38)

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Miracle overshadows disaster in Mulhall

By Rob Marus

MULHALL, Okla. (ABP) -- A providential malfunction in the hot-water heater of their new home may have saved the lives of Troy and Trena Withey when a massive May 3 tornado decimated the town of Mulhall, Okla.

Only a day after they moved into the parsonage of Mulhall's First Baptist Church, their new home was flattened. The tornado may have reached the level of F-4 -- the second-highest rating on meteorologists' Fujita Scale of tornado intensity.

The Witheys had spent a long Monday cleaning the parsonage and unpacking boxes when they decided to shower and get ready for bed. But, for some reason, the hot water was gone.

"It had been working earlier in the day -- we had done some dishes," the pastor explained. "But it just stopped working. It was just God delivering us."

Church members John and Glenda Lough, who live about a mile north of town, invited the Witheys to clean up at their home. The two couples kept their eyes on local television reports about strong tornadoes striking communities across the state. Just before 10 p.m., Mulhall residents received their first warning about the monster storm bearing down on them. The two couples and a third family took shelter in the Loughs' storm cellar.

The tornado missed the Loughs' property. The men emerged from the cellar at 11 p.m. to head toward town. They were astonished by the destruction they found. A few houses and two public buildings -- the post office and the United Methodist church -- were all that was left of Mulhall. "It took everything -- everything," Glenda Lough said.

The men looked in vain for the parsonage until they recognized a couple of the Witheys' moving boxes on a debris-filled lot. The house had been blown completely from its foundation.

"If we had been in the house, there's no way we would have survived," Troy Withey said.

Withey was also thankful that no church members were seriously injured; though a majority did suffer major property damage.

Other church buildings, though not destroyed, sustained significant structural damage. The sanctuary, built five years ago with volunteer labor, lost all its windows and about half of its roof.

The ceiling in the main hallway entering the church is now open to the sky. Yellowish tufts of insulation hang in mournful strands from the metal grid that once held ceiling tiles in place. The only other church in town -- Mulhall Christian Church -- was completely destroyed.

By May 5, help already was pouring in from fellow believers. Groups from several Oklahoma Baptist churches rushed to Mulhall to help church members with cleanup.

From Coyle, Okla., where Troy Withey previously was pastor of the Baptist church, Assembly of God pastor Scott Gammon showed up in Mulhall to offer extra pews and sound equipment to his old friends.

"We're just going to do whatever we can -- we're all brothers in the Lord," Gammon said.

The Witheys -- as many of their new flock -- have lost several irreplaceable items. Gone are Troy Withey's first shotgun, given to him when he was 15, and Trena Withey's jewelry -- save one earring, which she found a block away from the house. "I cried," she said.

Nevertheless, she's hopeful for nothing but victory from here on out.

"There's going to be an awesome future here," she said. "We're going to rebuild together."

Her husband echoed her enthusiasm. "We still believe in God's call," he said. "That's what we're standing firm in now."

A healthy sense of humor has helped Troy Withey through his dubious inauguration into Mulhall life. Already he is joking with his new congregation about the way they welcomed him to town: "If this is the way you greet new pastors, I'd sure hate to see how you kick one out!"

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Baptists aid in Kansas tornado-relief efforts

By Rob Marus

HAYSVILLE, Kan. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists from Kansas-Nebraska, Missouri and Tennessee are among those helping pick up the storm-scattered pieces of metropolitan Wichita, Kan., after a massive May 3 tornado killed five people and injured at least 100. On May 6, a 16-member disaster-relief team from Missouri set up an emergency food-service unit on the grounds of First Baptist Church in Haysville, Kan.

The Missouri team is feeding hundreds of local residents left homeless by the storm and dozens of other disaster-relief workers from organizations such as the Kansas National Guard and the American Red Cross. The team was mobilized at the request of the Kansas-Nebraska Convention of Southern Baptists and the North American Mission Board.

The Missourians joined a Baptist team from Kansas-Nebraska already stationed at the church. They were joined by a Tennessee Baptist team on May 7.

The Missouri unit is prepared to feed as many as 6,000 residents and relief workers per day for as long as it is needed. Team members cooperate with local officials and the American Red Cross to coordinate how many people they feed each day.

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Kansas tornado victims try to cope with disaster

By Rob Marus

HAYSVILLE, Kan. (ABP) -- Bo Graves says he will never forget 8:29 p.m. on May 3, 1999. That's when he went from being the senior pastor of a fast-growing church in a comfortable suburb to being the shepherd to a grief-stricken flock in a devastated community.

The sanctuary of First Baptist Church in Haysville, Kan., sits just two blocks east of the gash that a quarter-mile-wide tornado carved through the heart of this town of 10,000 just south of Wichita. In a few short minutes, the twister killed five people in Haysville and Wichita and injured more than 100 others. Damage estimates for the area total more than \$150 million in property losses.

Graves lost no church members, and his home and family suffered no damage or injuries. But he grieves with many church members who suffered the loss of friends, neighbors, homes, automobiles, family heirlooms and even pets.

Nevertheless, he is thankful for many small miracles in the midst of the suffering -- starting with his own protection.

"I was here at the church for a meeting when the police department called," Graves related. The church basement serves as a storm shelter for the neighborhood. As about 50 residents crouched on the floor amid the sounds of the mounting storm and the wailing tornado sirens outside, Graves did something that probably would have cost his life if the tornado had veered slightly eastward. "Stupid me. When it actually hit, I was upstairs in the pantry getting some coffee cups for the people downstairs."

The church building suffered no damage except for a 2-by-6 board -- shot more than two blocks from the tornado funnel -- embedded in a wall.

Three other churches in Haysville didn't fare as well. They were completely destroyed, including Victory Baptist Church, an independent Baptist congregation two blocks away. It was swept clean from its foundation, leaving only an upright piano to mark the spot where the sanctuary had been.

After Graves emerged from the shelter and confirmed that his family was safe, he began hearing other stories of providence among his church family.

"We had one church member who was caught right in the middle of an intersection," he said. "It spun her car around three times and shot a two-by-four straight through the windshield. It barely missed her head. God really spared her."

An 84-year-old church member survived by hiding in her home's center closet -- the only part of the house left standing after the storm.

Fran Swor and her son, Marshall, were at their home in the center of the damage path when the tornado struck. Fran woke her son, who was asleep on a living-room sofa, when she heard the tornado sirens. Minutes later, the tornado tore into the house, blowing out the living room wall and dropping the roof on top of the sofa where Marshall had been sleeping. "If I hadn't been home, he would have been killed," she said.

But the Swors' joy of survival was tempered by news that their 83-year-old neighbor died in the storm. And Fran and her husband, Lloyd, lost their home and most of their possessions.

They also lost more than 20 old-growth oaks and birches -- highly valued on the treeless plains of

Kansas. "I didn't care that much about the house, but the trees are what has broken my heart," Fran Swor said.

Her grief was multiplied across the community and elsewhere in the First Baptist congregation. In all, eight families from the church had homes completely destroyed by the storm. Several more suffered damage.

The American Red Cross reported that in the entire community of Haysville and south Wichita, a total of 1,109 homes were completely destroyed, another 2,249 suffered "major damage," and 5,126 sustained "minor damage."

Graves and other church members have busied themselves helping the wounded rather than wasting time asking why such a thing would happen. The pastor has been busy visiting bereaved families and coordinating relief efforts.

Several dozen members have joined Baptist disaster-relief teams and Red Cross volunteers serving meals at the church, which is serving as an emergency-feeding center.

One of those members is Bob Choura, who is taking vacation time from his full-time job to join in the relief. "It's the least I could do," he said. "It's what Jesus would do."

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FIRST-PERSON: Tornadoes raise profound questions

By Rob Marus

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- I used to have a morbid fascination with tornadoes. Their destructive power captured my boyhood imagination as solidly as did my beloved Arkansas Razorbacks. As a child, I even dreamed about growing up to be a meteorologist. I thought it would be a spectacular adrenaline rush to see a tornado, live and in person.

But now, my attitude toward tornadoes is better described as "fearful" than "fascinated." And I definitely don't ever want to see one of these monstrous storms up close.

My trip last week to Oklahoma and Kansas to cover the storms' aftermath has given me a new perspective on what comes after the adrenaline rush -- the lives lost, homes destroyed and dreams shattered. It also taught me how fleeting life is, and how little we measly humans really know of the ways of God.

As soon as I pulled into Oklahoma City on May 5 -- about 36 hours after the tornadoes had struck -- the destruction was evident.

Before I ever saw the part of town affected by the storms, I heard scores of radio announcements from insurance companies giving their customers a claims hotline number to call if they had lost property in the tornadoes. Scanning radio stations, I ran across a number of Christian radio talk shows. Inevitably, those discussions involved whether God had willed the disaster to happen. The hosts seemed assured that God wills only good for believers.

But people professing Christ as their savior -- including a Southern Baptist minister -- were killed in the storm. Churches were destroyed; countless followers of Christ lost their homes and other property.

As is often the case in the world of American evangelical Christianity, the radio hosts tried to give simple answers that would quell doubts about God's love or power. But in the end, there were no satisfactory answers.

Perhaps we should settle for questions. Christians in our society seem increasingly obsessed with finding the "proper" Christian response to every issue or event that comes along -- be it abortion, the tragic school shooting in Colorado or even a proposed capital-gains tax cut. It's about time we admit that humans

don't know God's position or God's response to every issue.

The tornadoes are the best example I have seen in a while. The swirling black clouds, which took so many lives and ruined so many more, remain, as the meteorologists have told us on television countless times, shrouded in mystery and inscrutable to even the most brilliant scientists. They are unpredictable and unpreventable.

Paul reminds us that we "see through a glass dimly" the ways God works in the world. Nobody really knows whether God causes disasters like tornadoes to happen. And as one Baptist disaster-relief worker in Wichita told me, there's no point in worrying about it. "You can go crazy wondering about that. You just have to work in the aftermath."

And that is the only true Christian response to these tragedies -- to share Christ's love in the wretched aftermath. Perhaps in this response we will better identify with a suffering Savior, a man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief.

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Students from Baptist college help with cleanup in Oklahoma

By Stacey Hamby

BRIDGE CREEK, Okla. (ABP) -- About 80 students from Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., helped with tornado-relief efforts in this community devastated by May 3 tornadoes near Oklahoma City.

Senior Angie Clark, who grew up in Bridge Creek, worked with two pastors there to coordinate the trip.

Before she and the others left May 6, she said she was terrified about what she might see in her hometown.

"I've lived there since I was 2," said Clark, whose parents since have moved away. "I'm so thankful that my family members were not hurt or did not lose their homes. But it's a very small community, and we're close enough to be family."

The destruction she saw was devastating, she said after returning to school May 9, but she was prepared.

"The Lord had steeled me and strengthened my heart, so I really didn't have an emotional reaction," Clark explained. "But I am mentally and emotionally spent."

She visited what was left of her home church, Ridgecrest Baptist Church, before a bulldozer cleared it away. "It was good to walk around and have a time of remembrance of growing up there," she said.

The students spent their first night sorting clothes and supplies to put in boxes to give to tornado victims. They spent their days going into neighborhoods to help people sort through the rubble of their homes.

The team worked in conjunction with Southern Baptist pastors Tom Duckett of Ridgecrest Baptist Church and Todd Littleton of Snow Hill Baptist Church. A Free Will Baptist church opened its doors to allow some team members to sleep there.

Clark said she was both touched and excited that so many students volunteered for the trip.

"It was an incredible opportunity to minister to both the church and the unchurched," she said. "We took Bibles and people trained in counseling, too. I know the Lord is going to use this."

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Baptist missionaries offer peace to ethnic Albanians fleeing Kosovo

By Robert O'Brien

SKOPJE, Macedonia (ABP) -- While NATO bombers fly noisily above Macedonia toward Kosovo, the Bible is quietly changing lives below.

Baptist missionaries based in Macedonia are using the gospel to soothe fears among the hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanian refugees fleeing horrors in Kosovo.

Three Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary families have emphasized prayer, listening, and Bible study while using donated money and goods to provide food, clothing, bedding, medicine and hygiene products. The Atlanta-based CBF had received more than \$107,000 in donations by mid May for refugee relief.

For four hours, missionaries Arville and Shelia Earl recently listened as 18 members of an extended refugee family gathered around them in Gostivar, Macedonia, to share their stories of terror.

Then, gradually, family members began to ask their new friends questions about Christianity. "That was a wonderful opportunity, because Muslims don't normally ask questions like these -- and certainly not of Christians," said Arville Earl.

One family member asked for a Bible, saying that he had long searched for meaning in life but still had not found answers.

"He was excited to get a Bible in his own language and began reading the book of John," Shelia Earl said. "What an open door! We pray that the Holy Spirit will guide him to truth."

The Earls had moved 30 miles to Gostivar from Skopje, Macedonia, less than two months before NATO bombs began to fall on Kosovo.

"Many doors are opening, and the people seem to trust us in ways you would think would take months or years to happen," Arville Earl said.

A man named Mejzin said he knew something was different about the Earls the first time he met them. "I want you to know," he told his new friends, "that if you have to leave your house you have another home to come to -- ours."

The Earls are now on a May 8-June 29 home assignment in the United States that will include the CBF General Assembly in June in Birmingham, Ala., and speaking engagements in Texas, Missouri, Virginia, Louisiana and Alabama.

Meanwhile in Skopje, CBF missionaries Rick and Martha Shaw and Darrell and Kathy Smith were finding the same kind of response from refugees.

The Shaws, using Bibles from the United Bible Societies, began what they believe to be the first regularly scheduled Bible study for ethnic Albanians in Macedonia.

Over a period of several months, it has led to Rick Shaw baptizing at least two refugees and involving a growing number in church. A newly arrived refugee, overcome with gratitude, went to church with the Shaws on Easter Sunday to thank God for bringing him and his entire family safely out of Kosovo.

"The Bible is a brand new book for all the people in our Bible study," Rick Shaw said. "Eliza, a Kosovar refugee whom I baptized in December, loves this book. She has read the New Testament now three times, underlining passages and verses that she likes, doesn't like, or doesn't understand."

Another woman, Liria, an ethnic Albanian from Skopje, accepted Christ about three months ago, Shaw continued. She finds study aids in the Bible translated into her native tongue "very helpful," he said.

The missionaries, though strained to the limits of their endurance, have done what they can for the overwhelming flood of refugees.

"We can't do everything, but we can sit and listen to their story, hold a child, try to meet their physical and spiritual needs, and express our sympathy and compassion," Arville Earl said.

"The hardest part has been to see the elderly suffer so much -- not having a place to call home, seeing their children and grandchildren suffer, and many of them losing all their family at once," he said.

"It's heartbreaking. At times like that, all you can do is be there and cry with them and ask God to comfort them."

"We believe the best thing you can do for us is to pray for God's sovereign will to be accomplished and that he will use (these events to) draw people to salvation through Jesus Christ," Shaw said.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is also calling for clothing and toys for Kosovar refugees at Fort Dix, N.J., to be channeled through Raritan Valley Baptist Church in Edison, N.J. (phone: 732-287-5442; email: RValleyBC@aol.com). Earlier calls went out for clothing to be sent to a location in Skopje, Macedonia.

Trennis Henderson elected Western Recorder editor

By David Winfrey and Bob Allen

CEDARMORE, Ky. (ABP) -- The next editor of Kentucky Baptists' Western Recorder newspaper said he hopes to embody the term "Christian journalist."

"Both words are very important to me," 40-year-old Trennis Henderson told the Kentucky Baptist Convention executive board, which elected him unanimously to the post May 3. He is expected to start his new job in mid-July.

Henderson, a Missouri native who has been editor of the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine since 1992, said he would seek accuracy, balance and "to communicate with clarity what we're about." He also said the paper would "serve all Kentucky Baptists."

Henderson said he recognizes that many Baptists today would want a label to identify him. "If you chose to put any label on me, the only one I'm really interested in is Christian," he said. "We can talk about fundamentalist and conservative and moderate and every shade in between. But I think if we're talking about anything other than seeking to glorify the one for whom we're here in the first place, we've already gotten off track."

Henderson said he perceives himself "as a traditional, mainline Southern Baptist," committed to the priesthood of the believer, the autonomy of the local church, the separation of church and state, missions, evangelism and cooperation. "My desire is to seek God's will together," he said.

In addition to publishing the 174-year-old newspaper with a weekly circulation of 49,000, Western Recorder helps five smaller Baptist state conventions produce monthly newspapers and publishes Real Life, a quarterly general-interest magazine for churches.

The Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine is published every other week and has about 37,000 subscribers.

Henderson will succeed Mark Wingfield, who resigned last fall after three years as Kentucky editor to become managing editor of the Baptist Standard in Texas. There Wingfield reunited with Marv Knox, another former Western Recorder editor who hired Wingfield as the Kentucky paper's news director in 1991,

left in 1995 to become the Baptist Standard's associate editor and then became the Texas Baptist paper's editor this year.

Henderson worked briefly for Western Recorder as a staff writer and advertising representative while attending Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville in the early 1980s. Later he was managing editor of Word and Way, news journal for the Missouri Baptist Convention.

A native of Portageville, Mo., Henderson is a graduate of School of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, Mo. He earned a master's degree with an emphasis in Christian journalism from Southern Seminary in 1982. He worked for a weekly newspaper in Tennessee, the Covington Leader, from 1978 to 1980.

Bill Thurman, chairman of the editor-search committee, said Henderson met all the group's criteria. The search committee received several resumes, Thurman said, but "Trennis just stood out above the others."

Arkansas Baptist leaders said they hated to see Henderson go.

"I'm sick that he's leaving," said Greg Kirksey, president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention. "To me, he has such journalistic integrity. Unfortunately, that's rare."

Both Kirksey and Arkansas Baptist Executive Director Emil Turner praised Henderson's fairness and leadership amid political conflict in the state. "Some people are driven by goals, some by politics, others by relationships," Turner said. "He was driven by having a ministry. I'm going to miss his sense of humor a lot, but what I'll miss most is his biblical commitment to journalism."

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-- Russ Dilday contributed to this article.

Mercer theology school graduates first class

ATLANTA (ABP) -- An inaugural graduating class of five women and five men received master's degrees from Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology May 7 in Atlanta.

In addition, university President Kirby Godsey presented honorary doctorates to James and Carolyn McAfee, whose \$10 million pledge three years ago helped launch the theology school named after them.

Frank Stagg, professor emeritus at Southern Baptist Theological in Louisville, Ky., delivered a commencement address that focused on inclusiveness in theological education and ministry.

Stagg said when he attended seminary in the 1930s his wife, Evelyn, was allowed to take classes and exams but not to graduate. Not only women faced discrimination in that era, but African Americans and Native Americans as well, he added.

In response, faculty of the theology school named Evelyn Stagg an honorary member of the first graduating class. They also bestowed that honor on Christi Sanders-Huskison, a member of First Baptist Church in Cedar Town, Ga., a student who transferred to Mercer after earning most of her credits at Southern Seminary.

"This school embodies the historic and intellectual traditions of Mercer while serving to affirm and perpetuate the Baptist heritage which gave birth to this university," said Godsey. Mercer is a Georgia Baptist institution with its main campus in Macon and a second campus in Atlanta, where the theology school is located.

The McAfee School, one of a number of theology schools appealing to moderate Baptists to crop up in recent years, opened in the fall of 1996.

Six of the 10 members of the inaugural class are Georgia Baptists. Other graduates are from Alabama, Indiana and South Carolina, and one is from Brazil.

As part of the exercises, Mercer bestowed university honors on the McAfees. Godsey presented James McAfee with the doctor of laws degree and Carolyn McAfee with the doctor of arts. He is chairman of ValueMark Healthcare Systems in Atlanta and immediate past chairman of Mercer's board. The McAfees are members of Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta.

After the ceremony, the graduates planted the "McAfee Oak," a sapling germinated from an acorn presented to Dean Alan Culpepper at the school's 1997 convocation by Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

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-- By ABP staff

Religious Liberty Protection Act introduced again in U.S. Congress

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bill designed to increase protection for religious freedom was introduced May 5 in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Religious Liberty Protection Act would limit the power of state and local governments to interfere with religious practices. Government would be required to have a compelling reason before burdening any religious practice and would have to use the least-restrictive means of accomplishing that aim.

Rep. Charles Canady, R-Fla., introduced the bill. Other sponsors are Reps. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, Chet Edwards, D-Texas, Asa Hutchinson, R-Ark., Henry Hyde, R-Ill., Gene Green, D-Texas, Collin Peterson, D-Minn., James Rogan, R-Calif., James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., Lamar Smith, R-Texas, and Anthony David Weiner, D-N.Y.

The bill before Congress is similar to a 1993 law, the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled part of that law unconstitutional, saying Congress exceeded its authority in attempting to impose the law on all 50 states.

Unlike the 1993 law, the new bill would be enforced largely through Congress' powers regulating spending and commerce. It also has a separate provision that would protect churches, synagogues and other houses of worship from burdensome zoning laws.

The new bill is H.R. 1691. A House subcommittee hearing was expected to occur this week.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Human rights conference delegates draft religious tolerance resolutions

By Ashlee Ross

GENEVA (ABP) -- Countries should encourage religious freedom and tolerance, urged a document drafted by delegates to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights last month in Geneva.

Delegates to the meeting supported the "Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief." They also urged countries to end religious persecution and embrace religious tolerance.

U.S. Delegate Alexandra Arriaga told the commission America takes "a keen interest in seeing that every person everywhere is free to worship."

"The right to express one's faith freely, without fear of repression or discrimination, is fundamental to our country's legal system and national tradition," Arriaga said. "Our Constitution protects every individual's right to worship freely without the interference by political or religious institutions through our strong division of church and state."

Ambassador Nancy Rubin, head of the U.S. delegation to the commission, said religious discrimination is a violation of basic human rights.

"As the current tragedy in Kosovo all-too clearly demonstrates, religious identity is often intertwined with ethnic identity in the worst human-rights disasters of our time," Rubin said.

Robert Seiple, ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, said religious toleration is not a reality in many countries because of "an inability to live with our deepest differences." Other reasons for intolerance include "a superficial understanding of our faith traditions" and governments that abuse their power in ways that inflame "minority and majority distinctions," Seiple said.

Seiple said "sustainable behavioral change" is the best solution to violations of religious freedom. "A lot of emphasis needs to be put on education that leads to better understanding, certainly education of the young," Seiple said.

In a panel discussion, Firuz Kazemzadeh, secretary of external affairs for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahai's of the United States, said religion is a "psychologically ... powerful force" that "is frequently used for nonreligious purposes."

In another document, commission delegates said protecting the rights of religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities contributes to the larger picture of "prevention and peaceful solution of human-rights problems and situations involving minorities."

In addition to addressing religious-persecution issues, which the panel does annually, the commission approved for the first time a resolution stating every person should have the "right to democracy."

In a statement approved unanimously with two abstentions, the commission said basic rights should include freedom of opinion, expression, thought, conscience, speech and religion.

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END
