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American Baptists kick out four churches over homosexuality

By Bob Allen

DES MOINES, Iowa (ABP) -- The American Baptist Churches, USA, General Board has voted to expel four churches from the denomination over their "welcoming and affirming" stance toward homosexuals.

Meeting on the eve of the convention's June 22-25 biennial meeting in Des Moines, Iowa, American Baptist leaders narrowly voted to deny separate appeals by four California churches that were earlier dismissed from their regional body.

The churches -- First Baptist Church in Berkeley, Lakeshore Baptist Church in Oakland, New Community of Faith in San Jose and San Leandro Community Church in San Francisco -- all belong to the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. The association, organized in 1993, has about 30 member churches that open their membership to gay, lesbian and bisexual persons.

The General Board, however, granted the appeal of a fifth Welcoming and Affirming congregation that was kicked out of its region, First Baptist Church in Granville, Ohio. The group voted 79-73, with one abstention, to keep the Ohio congregation in good standing with the national denomination while it seeks membership in a new region.

Traditionally, American Baptist churches cannot affiliate with the national body unless they are also members of a region. Standing rules, however, allow a church dismissed by its region to appeal to the national body.

An executive committee that had administered the appeals process cited a concern "not to establish polity precedents which are inconsistent with the way we have chosen to live together as a denomination" in considering the appeals.

"We believe it is important for local congregations to be constituents of both a region and ABC/USA," the executive committee said.

The General Board's ruling recognized the rights of regions to determine membership in accordance with common criteria and said no ruling of the General Board should be construed as overruling a region's decision regarding its own membership, according to a report by American Baptist News Service.

Leaders of the ousted churches were stunned by the news. Some General Board members said the vote might lead to a major rift in the 1.5-million-member convention, long identified by its tolerance and a commitment to social justice.

Welcoming and Affirming Baptists said they may try to bring the matter up in a business session Wednesday and planned to sing nightly outside the entrance to the convention hall.

The impromptu choir will remind 3,500 delegates "that we are still part of the family," Daniel Pryfogle, a member of Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, told the Des Moines Register.

The close votes reflected sharp differences that exist over the issue. After narrowly sustaining the Ohio church in its first vote June 20, the General Board expelled First Baptist Church of Berkeley by one vote, 77-76. The vote against Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church grew to 83-70. The other votes were 83-71 and 82-72.

A motion to reconsider the vote on the Ohio congregation was tabled, meaning the Granville church remains in the convention, at least until the General Board's November meeting.

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Leader asks Missouri layman to cease 'attacks' on CBF

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The head of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has written an open letter asking a Missouri layman to stop distributing materials that link the Atlanta-based group with pro-gay and other liberal views.

The June letter by CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal, also asks Roger Moran, a businessman in Winfield, Mo., who was recently elected to the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, to "apologize publicly" for his actions and "seek reconciliation" with "Christian brothers and sisters."

Moran says he started the Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association in 1991 to combat liberalism in the Missouri Baptist Convention. The group published a 16-page newsletter in April with a lead article titled, "The CBF circle of friends: Religious voices advocate homosexuality."

The article details so-called links between CBF partner organizations and groups that support gay rights, abortion on demand and pornography. It also quotes CBF-friendly individuals, churches and organizations with pro-gay views and questions why the Fellowship has not taken a strong stance against homosexuality.

After a series of private correspondence, Vestal issued a public letter denouncing Moran's "unwarranted attacks" on the CBF. The Fellowship also produced a seven-minute video and a pamphlet featuring Vestal's response to specific allegations.

Vestal said the Fellowship, like several other well-known Christian groups, does not make official pronouncements on homosexuality or other issues that are outside its stated mission.

"The repeated insinuation and insult contained in your materials is that the real mission of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is to promote the gay-lesbian lifestyle, abortion on demand and even child

pornography," Vestal wrote in his open letter to Moran. "You constantly suggest that CBF has ulterior motives and hidden agendas of all kinds, rather than the one we boldly declare in our mission statement."

"These tactics are misguided, harmful and wrong," Vestal continued. "I appeal to you now, as I have done previously in private, to stop. I urge you to put an end to these attacks, to apologize publicly for the harm you have done and to seek reconciliation with these Christian brothers and sisters."

Moran said he would retract the material if it were shown to be inaccurate. "If I have wronged somebody, if I have said something that's wrong factually, I have an obligation to make it right, but I would like a list of factual errors," he said in a telephone interview.

But Moran said he believes his information is factual and in context. "You want an apology for what, beliefs that I hold very dearly?" he asked.

Moran said he has never said the Fellowship has a pro-gay agenda, but he believes there are "fundamental differences" between moderate leaders of the CBF and conservatives who support the Southern Baptist Convention. "My intention is to try to win those folks who are in the middle," he said.

Vestal also disputed Moran's "bold statement that liberalism has found a place within CBF."

"That simply is not true," Vestal responded in his open letter. "What is true is that there are Baptist Christians who have found a place of ministry and fellowship in CBF whom you would call liberal." Vestal said there are many other CBF supporters whom Moran "would call conservative" and many others in between. "For you, this kind of diversity around a common mission is seen as a weakness. I see it as a God-given strength."

Moran's critics dismiss his methods as guilt by association. He said he believes, however, that CBF leaders have a pattern of "systematically" aligning themselves with the religious left and in opposition to conservative groups. "It's not guilt by association but guilt by whom you choose to align with and whom you choose to condemn," he said.

While Moran insists his group's sole interest is in electing conservatives in Missouri, his material has a wider circulation. The Baptist General Convention in Texas established a special committee in February to defend the state convention against "slanderous" allegations that selected moderate leaders support homosexual rights and abortion on demand.

Moran said his materials have been circulated in other states but he didn't distribute them. "We have made our materials available to anybody that wants to use them," he said.

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Choir director's daughter dies of crash-related injuries

By Trennis Henderson

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- The tragedy surrounding the June 1 crash of American Airlines flight 1420 continued to expand as 14-year-old Rachel Renee Fuller died from crash-related injuries.

Rachel, the daughter of Charles and Cindy Fuller, was traveling with her parents and two sisters, Becky and Sarah, when the plane crashed in Little Rock, Ark. The Fullers were among 25 passengers from Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia who were returning home following a choir ministry tour in Europe. Charles Fuller, director of the Ouachita Singers, was leading the choir tour.

Nine of the 145 people aboard the flight died at the crash site, including James Harrison, 21, a member of the Ouachita Singers. A 33-year-old passenger died the following week. Rachel's death on June 16 increased the number of fatalities to 11.

"For the second time in two weeks, our hearts are broken through the loss of another member of our campus community," said Ouachita president Andrew Westmoreland. "The burden of Rachel's death is great, but we know that her spirit transcends the boundaries of this world through her faith in God. We extend our love and prayers to the Fuller family and we pledge to stand with them and to embrace them in the days ahead."

Rachel had been hospitalized for two weeks in critical condition with severe burns. She was a patient at Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock at the time of her death.

According to information released by her family, "Rachel lived in the fullness of her faith in Jesus Christ from the age of six, and to the end of her life, she testified to God's grace."

A 4.0 student at Arkadelphia's Goza Junior High School, she was a member of the National Junior Honor Society, a Student Council officer, an All-Region Band oboe player and drum major for the school band. She also was an active member of First Baptist Church in Arkadelphia, where she was a member of the church orchestra, youth choir, youth drama team, youth council and Acteens. She also was active in basketball, volleyball and softball.

"During these difficult weeks, the family has experienced the sustaining strength of the prayers of hundreds of thousands of Christians around the world," her parents shared in a prepared statement. The statement expressed "deep gratitude for the faithfulness of so many who shared in their grief."

A June 19 memorial service held on the Ouachita campus was described in a printed program as "a worship service celebrating the life of Rachel Renee Fuller." The program included a poem Rachel had written two years ago, which said in part: "I know where I'm going when my life is through ... To a place of no worries, a place of no fear, a place of joy, a place of cheer ... "

In an emotional tribute, Greg Jones, her junior high band director, remembered Rachel as funny, spiritual and academically gifted. Also describing her as "a young woman of faith, integrity and wisdom," Jones added, "She is the person we would all like to be. ... We must follow her example; we must be Christlike."

Also speaking at the memorial service, Arkansas Baptist State Convention president Greg Kirksey said Rachel was known as a young person who was able to "see the big picture" in life.

"That's what we all need to do. That's what God will enable us to do," he shared. "How did she see the big picture? The eyes of her heart knew the presence of God."

Although Rachel's death "seems painfully premature," Kirksey added, "Death is not an exit as much as it is an entrance. It is not an ending as much as a beginning."

Affirming God's presence, plan and power, he concluded, "Rachel is really seeing the big picture now. She is experiencing the big picture. She is living in the big picture."

In addition to her parents and sisters, Rachel is survived by her grandparents, H.Y. and Alice Odom of Grand Prairie, Texas, and C.H. and Edna Fuller of North Little Rock, Ark. Memorials may be made to the Rachel Fuller Memorial Scholarship Fund at Ouachita.

Missionary, three others die in swimming accident

TAPACHULA, Mexico (ABP) -- A Southern Baptist missionary, his 11-year-old daughter and two summer missionaries drowned in a swimming accident in Mexico June 18.

Gary Sloan, 37, his daughter, Carla, and summer missionaries John Weems, 21, of Nacodoches, Texas, and Joy Murphy, 19, of Pelham, Ala., were reportedly caught in undertow while swimming in the ocean near Tapachula on Mexico's southern coast.

The Sloans were appointed as missionaries to Mexico by the International Mission Board in June 1998. A native of Lufkin, Texas, Sloan was pastor of Community Baptist Church in Crosby, Texas, prior to becoming a missionary. He was a graduate of Stephen F. Austin University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

He is survived by his wife, Gloria, and three other children.

Weems would have been a senior this fall at Delta State University in Cleveland, Miss. Murphy had just finished her freshman year at University of Montevallo in Alabama. They were part of a team of college students who had just arrived to work in a summer evangelism project.

The Sloan family and three summer missionaries had gone swimming to celebrate a family birthday.

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-- By Mark Kelly

Interim global-missions coordinator named while search for Parks' successor continues

By Robert O'Brien

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Gary Baldrige, a 20-year veteran of Baptist missions, has been named interim global-missions coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, effective July 1.

Baldrige will administer the Atlanta-based missions program until a successor is found for Keith Parks, who retires June 30, according to CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal.

A search committee had hoped to recommend a candidate for the post to the CBF Coordinating Council at the Fellowship's June 24-26 general assembly in Birmingham, Ala.

But the committee members, who began their search in late 1998, announced June 21 they were "disappointed but not discouraged" that they must delay their recommendation. "All along our focus has been on finding the right person for this critical leadership position, rather than committing ourselves to a specific deadline," said a statement released by the group.

Baldrige, 47, joined CBF's global-missions staff in 1996 as associate coordinator for career personnel, with responsibility for long term-missionary selection, pastoral care of missionaries and issues related to World A, the one quarter of the globe with little or no access to the gospel.

Last year, he also became the endorsing official for chaplains and pastoral counselors approved by the Fellowship's Council on Endorsement. The council had endorsed 57 persons as of June 3.

"CBF's global missions team will participate in some critical decisions this autumn and launch some important strategic initiatives," Baldrige said. "We all intend to move forward without hesitation while at the same time looking forward to a new global-missions coordinator's election later this year."

Baldrige and his wife, Barbara, both natives of Houston, spent 17 years as Southern Baptist missionaries before resigning from the Foreign Mission Board (now International Mission Board) in 1994.

Before resigning he was associate to the area director for Cooperative Services International, supervising 100 missionaries in restricted-access countries among several dozen unreached people groups from Morocco to Western China.

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House lawmakers add religion amendments to juvenile bill

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- As part of legislation to curb juvenile violence, the U.S. House of Representatives voted June 17 to permit states to post the Ten Commandments in government-owned buildings.

The House added the Ten Commandments provision and three other religion riders to the Consequences for Juvenile Offenders Act, which was approved on a 287-139 vote.

House leaders pushed the act as an attempt to address cultural, moral and spiritual issues in response to recent school shootings. It would authorize \$1.5 billion in grants to states and local governments to curb juvenile crime.

The Ten Commandments amendment, sponsored by Rep. Robert Aderholt, R-Ala., recognizes states' authority to display the Ten Commandments on government-owned or -administered property. It passed the House 248 to 180. Forty-five Democrats voted for the measure and 15 Republicans against.

"Our nation was founded on Judeo-Christian principles," Aderholt said. While "simply posting the Ten Commandments will not change the moral character of our nation overnight," he said, "it is one step that states can take to promote morality and work toward an end of children killing children."

The Aderholt amendment also declares the expression of religious faith by individuals on public property as being protected by the First Amendment.

Should the measure pass, it will likely face a constitutional challenge in light of a 1980 U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down the posting of the Ten Commandments in Kentucky classrooms.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., spoke against the Ten Commandments measure. "I think most people who talk about them do not really know what they say," he said.

Nadler asked which version of the Ten Commandments would be posted -- Protestant, Catholic or Jewish. "They are different you know," he said. "The Hebrew words are the same, but the translations are very different."

In other religion-related amendments, House lawmakers voted:

-- 238 to 189 to bar the payment of attorney's fees for plaintiffs who successfully challenge school policies that violate church-state separation.

"Public schools are being intimidated into suppressing religious expression by the threat of costly litigation," said Rep. Jim DeMint, R-S.C., sponsor of the amendment. "How can schools take this risk? It is much easier just to tell the students not to pray than to risk spending this amount of money," DeMint said.

-- 300 to 127 to state the House's view that religious activities as part of a memorial service on campus honoring slain students do not violate the First Amendment.

Sponsored by Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., this amendment says Congress "finds" that religious activities as part of a memorial service on campus honoring slain students do not violate the First Amendment. It also requires that in any lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of school memorials or memorial services, each party would pay its own attorney's fees and court costs.

Nadler criticized the proposal, saying that Congress "cannot declare what the Constitution means and what violates the Constitution and what does not."

-- 346 to 83 to add a "charitable-choice" provision that would make pervasively sectarian organizations eligible to provide tax-funded social services to juveniles.

Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., who sponsored the measure, said it would allow faith-based groups to be treated fairly. "They do not have to change their internal operations," he said. "They cannot proselytize with any of the money or they would lose the grant."

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, opposed the measure, predicting, "Five years from now we will have the Baptists arguing with the Methodists, with the Catholics, with the Jews, with the Hindus, with the Muslims, over who got their proportional share of the almighty federal dollar."

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Lawmakers say response to shootings should include God, not gun control

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Heading into floor debate on the root causes of juvenile crime, U.S. House of Representative leaders focused on God instead of guns.

The "big problem in America is not gun ownership," said House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Texas. "The big problem is the abandonment of God in the public arena."

Republican House leaders joined religious leaders at a press conference June 16 to contend that religion must return to the classroom in order to stop events such as the school shootings in Littleton, Colo.

At the event, House leaders expressed support for Mildred Rosario, a former public school teacher in the Bronx who was fired after leading her class in a Christian prayer. School officials said Rosario was fired only after she refused to comply with a policy against school-sponsored prayer.

Asked if a Wiccan teacher should be allowed to engage students in witchcraft, DeLay said, "Sure."

"I would hope that the school would have a foundation and the kids would have such a foundation to reject such religion," he said. "But at the same time, if they do it ... kids can go home and talk about it and hopefully it generates a discussion as to how witchcraft is not the right religion."

Some lawmakers have been critical of military bases around the country that have decided to accommodate the Wiccan religion.

DeLay also spoke to reporters about his comments that God cannot get into public schools.

At the press conference, DeLay read an e-mail he received in which a student writes to God, "Why didn't you stop the shootings at Columbine High School?" DeLay said the answer was, "Dear student, I wasn't allowed in the school."

Asked whether God could enter the public schools on his own power, DeLay said: "God can only work through people and when people are working against God, it's very difficult ... for him to be brought into

the school -- when you're using law and legalisms and threats of lawsuits to intimidate people from standing up for what they ought to be standing up for."

After the press conference, House members debated numerous proposals to combat juvenile crime. Lawmakers ultimately voted down a gun-control bill but approved four religion-related amendments as they approved the Consequences for Juvenile Offenders Act.

They voted to permit states to post the Ten Commandments in government-owned buildings and approved a measure that would bar the payment of attorney's fees for plaintiffs who successfully challenge school policies that violate church-state separation.

The House also approved a "charitable-choice" provision that would make pervasively sectarian organizations eligible to provide tax-funded juvenile social services. And lawmakers agreed to a finding that religious activities as part of a memorial service on campus honoring slain students do not violate the First Amendment.

A press release from Americans United for Separation of Church and State called the flurry of church-state votes "one of the most deplorable assaults on religious liberty in recent memory."

Barry Lynn, AU executive director, said the House action "is one more sad example of religion being used as a political football by members of Congress, who obviously cannot find a real solution to a problem."

"Government-forced religion is never the answer," Lynn said.

Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., said the House vote to post the Ten Commandments in schools "cheapens biblical morality" and "gives credence to magic."

"Believing that the mere presence of the Ten Commandments in public schools will create a force field of morality and safety is a commitment to magic," not faith, Parham said. "It reflects an idea born in paganism."

Parham said it is the responsibility of families and religious institutions, not the government, to teach religion. "America needs real help addressing youth violence, not the promotion of a watered-down religion diluted by ambitious politicians," he said. He urged House members to "reason carefully through social-policy initiatives and stop offering false solutions to the problem of youth violence."

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Supreme Court invalidates ban on broadcast casino advertising

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A federal ban on broadcast advertisements for casino gambling violates the First Amendment in states where such gambling is legal, a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court ruled June 14.

In an opinion written by Justice John Paul Stevens, the high court said a 1934 communications law cannot be used to bar "advertisements of private casino gambling that are broadcast by radio and television stations located in Louisiana, where such gambling is legal."

The ban was challenged by a group of Louisiana broadcasters who wanted to carry advertisements promoting for-profit casinos in Louisiana and neighboring Mississippi.

Six years ago, the Supreme Court said the 1934 law prohibited advertisement of Virginia's state lottery by a radio station located in North Carolina, which had no lottery. That broadcast restriction was justified by Congress' policy of balancing the interests of lottery and nonlottery states, the court noted.

But in this case, justices said the government's interests were not "directly advanced" by the broadcast restriction.

Justices said the government's justification for the ban is undermined by Congress' failure to regulate the activity of casino gambling rather than commercial speech about it.

"There surely are practical and nonspeech-related forms of regulation ... that could more directly and effectively alleviate some of the social costs of casino gambling," the court said.

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Witnesses say 'sect' investigations hurt faith groups in Western Europe

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Minority faith groups in Western Europe face government restrictions and investigations, according to testimony by religious leaders before U.S. lawmakers on the Helsinki Commission.

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, popularly known as the Helsinki Commission, held hearings June 8 on "growing government intolerance" of religious minorities in Western Europe.

Participants named France, Belgium, Austria, Germany and Greece as countries that have begun investigations into "dangerous sects" or restricted religious freedom for minority faiths.

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., termed the action by several Western European governments a "very dangerous trend."

Smith noted that on a recent trip to Russia, he was surprised how often Russian officials pointed to similar practices in Western Europe to justify a recent Russian law restricting religious minority groups. Smith said the hearing was the beginning of the effort to scrutinize Western governments.

Pastor Louis Charles DeMeo, founder of a Baptist Bible college and seminary in France, told lawmakers that "religious discrimination has been increasing in France over the last few years."

"Since 1996, the country of France has neither kept its part of the Helsinki agreement, nor followed its own constitutional commitments to religious liberty," he said.

DeMeo's 17-year-old Institute de Theologique de Nimes (ITN) was one of 172 groups placed on a list of "possibly dangerous cults" in a report released by the National Assembly of France in 1996.

"Since the publication of the cult list, ITN has experienced undeserved and we believe illegal harassment and persecution by French officials and the private sector that is taking its cue from the French governmental policies," DeMeo said.

DeMeo said phones are being tapped, license plates of church attendees are written down and ITN and its members have trouble securing bank loans.

He also said that recently every religious group on the sect list received a 30-page questionnaire concerning the income and financial details of the organization.

"We agree that the government has a legitimate right to investigate criminal activity, but we do not adhere to the principle that the government has the authority to control religious thought," he said.

Willy Fautre, director of Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers, said this new fear of sects has been triggered "by the collective suicides, homicides and attacks perpetrated on the initiative of leaders of religious movements or movements claiming to be religious."

He said that while 11 of the 15 European Union member states determined that the "sects" did not harm society to the point of having to create new institutions to combat their influence, four have taken such steps: Austria, Germany, France and Belgium.

Fautre also cited Greece, where he said religious tolerance and discrimination "is closely connected with the status of its minority religions that must live in the shadow of the powerful Greek Orthodox Church."

Fautre told U.S. lawmakers that minority religions applaud recent actions by the U.S. government on the issue of religious freedom, including the final report released by the State Department's Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad.

"These people feel at last that someone is finally listening to them -- a powerful state," Fautre said.

Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell, R-Colo., said the U.S. panel may be criticized for "trying to force our views on unwilling European states," but that "just doesn't stand up to examination."

"What we are doing is asking our European partners to live up to the commitments they have already made to abide by these well-established international standards," he said.

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