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**Religious leaders ask Clinton  
for death penalty moratorium**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Claiming "the death penalty, as applied in America today, threatens to shed innocent blood," a group of religious leaders has signed a letter asking President Clinton to halt federal executions.

The religious leaders joined Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., in asking Clinton to follow the lead of Illinois Gov. George Ryan by placing a moratorium on the federal government's use of the death penalty.

Ryan, a Republican, recently suspended executions and appointed a commission to study the state's implementation of the death penalty after reports that as many as 13 innocent people were on death row in Illinois.

Most death-penalty cases occur at the state level. The federal government has not executed anyone since 1963. But one death-row inmate recently exhausted his appeals, meaning his execution could be scheduled any day.

More than 600 people have been executed through capital punishment since 1976, the religious leaders stated in the March 9 letter. "But 79 persons on death row have been proven innocent and released."

The religious leaders said they are particularly concerned about the poor and minorities who have been sentenced to death without a chance to prove their innocence through DNA testing or without competent legal counsel.

In too many cases, they said, "questions remain -- or even arise -- after the execution has occurred."

Standing alongside religious leaders, Feingold, who introduced a bill last fall to abolish the death penalty at the federal level, cited instances of injustice that he identified in death-penalty cases. They included a lack of DNA testing, racial disparities in prosecution and sentencing, and incompetent defense counsel.

"Any one of these injustices could put an innocent person on federal death row," Feingold said, noting that 75 percent of federal inmates sentenced to death are minorities.

Feingold said Clinton recently stated that if he were in the shoes of the Illinois governor, he would consider doing the same thing as Ryan. "Well, with all due respect, the president is standing in the governor's shoes," he continued.

The White House did not return phone calls requesting comment.

Phil Wogaman, senior minister of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, said many people disagree on the merits of the death penalty. "But surely we can all agree, if it is to be used, it should be used fairly."

"It is abundantly clear that mistakes have been made," Wogaman said.

Signers of the letter include: Stan Hasteley, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists; Daniel Weiss, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.; Ken Sehested, director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America; Robert Edgar, general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ; Elenora Giddings Ivory, director of the Washington office of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.; and others.

In addition to signing the letter to Clinton, several Jewish leaders also sent a letter urging governors of every state that currently has the death penalty to follow Illinois' lead and issue a moratorium.

"How many currently go to the death chamber for crimes they did not commit?" asked the letter signed by Rabbi David Saperstein of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and others.

"We are, to be sure, opposed to the imposition of the death penalty, but we also believe that the system for administering capital punishment is seriously broken, to the disadvantage, too often, of poor and minority defendants who are unable to mount a defense which would result either in acquittal or in the imposition of a lesser sentence," stated the letter to the governors.

Hasteley told Associated Baptist Press that he has also signed a letter calling for a worldwide end to the death penalty.

"It is becoming increasingly evident that the death penalty in too many cases is being imposed arbitrarily and capriciously," Hasteley said. He pointed to a study by students and faculty at Northwestern University that uncovered the high numbers of innocent people who were sentenced to death in Illinois.

"Here is a noble example of a conservative governor who decided to buck the political tide and do the right thing, and other governors should do the same thing," Hasteley added.

Weiss said the American Baptist Churches have adopted resolutions against the use of the death penalty.

First adopted in 1977 and modified in 1998, the ABC resolution states that "the majority of those on death row are poor, powerless and educationally deprived. ... This reflects the broad inequalities within our society, and the inequity with which the ultimate penalty is applied. This alone is sufficient reason for opposing it as immoral and unjust."

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## **Fellowship reports increase in mid-year giving totals**

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Mid-year giving totals to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship were up 13 percent this year, boosted by designated gifts for refugee relief.

Gifts to the Atlanta-based Fellowship's general budget were up 10 percent through the first six months of the fiscal year, said Gary Skeen, coordinator for finance and administration, in an article in the Fellowship's newsletter.

CBF ministries received \$4.04 million between July and December of 1999, compared to \$3.61 million for the same period in 1998. An annual Global Missions Offering took in another \$1.36 million, up nearly 5 percent from \$1.3 million last year.

The largest increase came in designated gifts, which grew 43 percent from \$792,946 to more than \$1.14 million. The increase is primarily because of money earmarked for Kosovo refugee relief ministries in Albania, Skeen said.

Skeen said 1,526 churches contributed to the Fellowship in the first six months of the fiscal year, 48 more than the first half of last year.

The figures reflect only gifts to Fellowship ministries and do not include money sent to CBF to be directed to partner organizations. This year's Fellowship ministry budget is \$15.5 million. The Global Missions Offering goal is \$5.25 million, but most of that money typically comes in the second half of the fiscal year.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Gardner-Webb launches campaign for divinity school**

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. (ABP) -- Gardner-Webb University has announced the launch of a three-year, \$5 million fund-raising campaign for the 150-student M. Christopher White School of Divinity.

The campaign will seek to fund faculty recruitment, student scholarships and financial aid, and grants for study abroad, according to officials at the Baptist-affiliated university in Boiling Springs, N.C.

The launch of the campaign, which began with a silent phase last year, coincides with a recent announcement that the divinity school has received full accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Conservative SBC leader dies after long illness**

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- A pioneer in the "conservative resurgence" movement that shaped the Southern Baptist Convention has died after a long battle with Alzheimer's Disease.

William A. Powell, 74, who died March 9 in Bremen, Ga., left a job with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board to found the Baptist Faith and Message Fellowship in 1973. As editor of a newspaper called the Southern Baptist Journal, Powell led charges of liberalism in seminaries and other institutions in the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

In Paul Pressler's 1999 memoir, the retired Texas appeals court judge credits Powell with recruiting him into the movement and introducing him to the trustee-appointment process that conservatives used to gain power over moderates in the 1980s.

The Journal, though published only sporadically, is credited with galvanizing conservatives with its often-strident articles. Later, a group of faction leaders sought to tone down the paper and have Powell removed. When that failed, they started a second publication, the Southern Baptist Advocate, in 1980.

Pressler pointed out in his book that Powell never knew how successful the movement he helped launch would become. He came down with Alzheimer's in the 1980s.

The family reportedly is planning a memorial service in a couple of weeks instead of a public funeral.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Missionaries shaken but grateful after attack**

By John Loudat

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (ABP) -- An American missionary family was car-jacked in Zambia last month, another reminder of the dangers missionaries face around the world.

The attack on Southern Baptist church planters Steve and Shirley Taylor and their daughter, McKelvey, happened in Lusaka, Zambia, Feb. 17 in the driveway of the Baptist guesthouse.

Taylor was pastor of Sandia Baptist Church in Albuquerque, N.M., from 1985 to 1991.

The couple's other daughter, Purity, is married to Talon Noh, pastor of Mountain Valley Baptist Church in Edgewood, N.M., and the Taylors' son, Rye, is a student at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo.

In a message from the Zambezi River Valley, where they serve, Taylor recounted the harrowing incident in an e-mail to "prayer partners, family and special friends."

One of the recipients, Frank Haley, a Sandia Baptist Church member and "good news director" of KFLQ radio in Albuquerque, shared the story on his newscast and forwarded the e-mail to the Baptist New Mexican religious newspaper.

"Upon our return (from dinner) at about 8:40 p.m., we pulled into the drive ... and blew our horn for the guard to open the gate," Taylor wrote. "At the same time, we saw a vehicle pull directly behind ... ."

Four men promptly jumped from the vehicle, carrying automatic weapons, Taylor said.

"Two of the men were at my window yelling for me to open the truck, and another man was aiming a rifle at my family on the passenger's side," he said.

When the men threatened to kill the family, "I realized there was only one thing to do," Taylor said. "I had to surrender the truck."

Taylor's wife and the couple's 9-year-old daughter complied with the attackers' order to get out of the truck and lie on the ground face-down, and Taylor was pushed to the ground by a man with a gun to the back of Taylor's head.

The man took Taylor's wallet, and the other three attackers jumped in the family's truck and drove away.

As the man who had taken Taylor's wallet was getting back into his car to leave, Taylor said, "For some reason known only to the Lord, I shouted, 'At least let me have my wallet back. It only has pictures of my grandbaby inside.'"

"Much to my surprise, he threw it at me and jumped into the car," Taylor said.

The missionary said that when his face was in the gravel, he had honestly forgotten about the cash and credit cards he also had in the wallet.

"If I ever meet that thief again," he said, "I'll be sure to tell him I was mistaken about the wallet containing only baby pictures."

Taylor said he was able to roll out of the way of the vehicle when, while leaving, the final assailant tried to back over him.

In the e-mail, Taylor then told his readers about ways they could pray.

"Please pray for McKelvey," Taylor said first, noting that the experience was "very traumatic for her, as you might imagine."

Taylor also requested prayer for their ministry, which not only lost a new mission vehicle but a substantial amount of cash hidden in it for emergencies, as well as groceries and ministry items they had purchased earlier in the day.

"Please pray that we can either recover this vehicle or replace it right away," Taylor wrote.

Taylor also asked for prayer "that we will be able to maintain the right 'attitude' during these days of recovery."

"Satan invents many schemes to discourage us," Taylor explained, "but we have learned that it is the Lord's desire for us to take the fight to the evil one. We want to be a part of God's faithful force, storming 'the gates of hell' to rescue the souls of men."

Not forgotten by Taylor were fellow missionaries serving throughout the world, many in "very dangerous places."

He also requested prayer for the salvation of the thieves, noting that the truck was full of gospel tracts and books. "Pray that the Lord will use those tools to reach people who otherwise would neither hear nor listen."

Taylor said that he and his family are praising God for the peace he gave them during the robbery, as well as the fact that the robbers tossed back his wallet and did not notice his wife's purse that she dropped beside the truck in the bushes. It contained their personal and ministry money for the next month.

The Taylors are also grateful that none of them was physically injured and for other missionaries who ministered to them after the attack.

"We praise God that his plans for our lives are significant enough to involve suffering for his glory ... (and) the work we are doing is critical enough that Satan targets us for his attacks."

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## **Missionaries safe after Nigeria riots**

By Mark Kelly and John Loudat

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (ABP) -- Dozens of people -- including a Baptist seminary student -- were killed when riots between Christians and Muslims broke out Feb. 21 in Kaduna, Nigeria.

The next morning, a mob breached the wall of the Baptist seminary compound there and set buildings ablaze. Dale and Brenda Gray of Albuquerque, N.M., the only Southern Baptist missionaries on campus at the time, were able to escape safely.

The student died when violence broke out between Muslim youths and thousands of Christians peacefully protesting calls for strict Islamic law to be implemented in the northern Nigerian state. Neighboring state Zamfara implemented "Sharia" law in January, and other northern states are considering similar moves.

The seminary campus was attacked the morning of Feb. 22, and the Grays and 500 men, women and children of the seminary community fled the campus. Eleven church buildings in Kaduna -- including four Baptist buildings -- reportedly were burned during the Feb. 21 riots. Two other seminary students also were injured.

The Grays, medical missionaries in Nigeria, told the Baptist New Mexican via e-mail Feb. 27 that they arrived at the seminary Feb. 21 and soon found themselves trapped.

Gray explained that he and his wife had left their truck at the seminary before flying from Kaduna to Nairobi, Kenya, to attend a conference. When they returned Feb. 21, the campus was under assault but being successfully defended by students and Christian youths from the area armed with sticks, stones, garden tools, slingshots and homemade bows and arrows.

Police dispersed the crowd with tear gas, Gray said, but attackers regathered in reinforced numbers early the next morning, overwhelmed the defenders and broke through the wall.

"Shortly after the wall was broken and the fires were burning, Brenda and I went over (the eight-foot wall at the back of the compound) and were led by a young Nigerian ... about two miles on foot to the air force base."

Armed Nigeria air force security personnel were later able to keep attackers away from the three mission homes and three faculty houses on campus, Gray reported.

Gray's unexpected stay was "a definite boost for those at the seminary," he said, since he was able to treat the injured who came to the nurse's office.

Accompanied by armed security, Gray returned to the seminary the morning after the attack to witness the devastation.

Two days later, Gray and his wife were able to deliver food to an estimated 5,000 refugees at the air base and pack the trucks with belongings of a fellow missionary, Gray said.

Money is being provided from the International Mission Board's disaster-relief fund, Gray said, and more funds and food are being donated by missionaries and churches in Nigeria.

"We are trying to get enough money to seminary students to return to their homes and villages," Gray said.

"We do ask your prayers for all who have been so terribly affected and for the whole of northern Nigeria," Gray wrote. "The inner peace and calm that I have felt, even as we were climbing the wall and walking through areas that were unknown as to safety, have to be the result of all the prayers that were being lifted.

"Also, please pray for our families who are still in the States, who did not know our whereabouts for some time, nor that we were safe," Gray requested.

## Minister chooses God over baseball career

By Sheila Ann Bender

LAS CRUCES, N.M. (ABP) -- On Craig Smith's desk sits a rock. It is very symbolic to the young pastor who once played professional baseball for the Milwaukee Brewers.

"A fan made this for me while I played for the Brewers," he explains as he places the rounded and flat, painted rock into my hands. One of his baseball cards is superimposed into it, and delicate hand-painted flowers and other artistic patterns surround it.

"It's one of my most prized possessions," says Smith. "When it was first given to me, it said, 'Craig, you're somebody in this world. You have a golden opportunity for fame, wealth and success ... you've achieved your lifelong dream!'"

Smith's passion for baseball began at his first tee-ball practice, and continued on through high school.

"It wasn't that I was incredibly gifted at playing baseball," he modestly shares. "I just loved the game and was willing to work hard at it."

He received a scholarship to play baseball at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces while pursuing an engineering degree.

"I roomed with some guys while I was in college," Smith says. "None of us were Christians at the time, but I did have a Bible. All I do know is that I was always compelled to read that Bible, and that God used his Word to create a spiritual hunger within me. You see, even though life was good -- even though I was 'on top of the world,' I felt this continual emptiness within me. So one night, I finally prayed, 'Invade my life, God.'"

"A day or two later, I was on the practice field at NMSU. The director of Campus Crusade ministries approached me. He told me to call or come see him if I had any spiritual questions, so I did. We met for lunch the next week, and I prayed to receive Christ during our meal together. Shortly thereafter, this man -- my spiritual mentor -- invited me to live with him, and he literally poured his life into me for three years."

In the summer of 1992, during Smith's junior year of college, he was drafted to play shortstop for the Milwaukee Brewers. He had only been a Christian for a few months.

"I'll always remember how warm the sun felt against my skin on the day I heard the news, and I thanked God right then and there for fulfilling my lifelong fantasy," says Smith.

During baseball's off-season, Smith continued his studies at New Mexico State. He was disappointed that there were no ministries on campus to target athletes, so he started an athletic ministry in a tiny dorm room. Four months later, 25 athletes were attending regularly. That ministry developed into the university's first Athletes in Action and continues to this day.

"God used that experience to capture my heart for ministry and to give me a passion to evangelize and discipleship others," he says. Smith continued to play with the Brewers for three professional seasons, and also completed his engineering degree. He also married his wife, Lenee.

"Although my baseball career was going well, and even though I had wonderful potential to make great wealth, I just couldn't shake this inward desire to win souls to Christ. I knew that I had to give up my baseball dream and pursue God's call upon my life," Smith says. "I'll always remember Lenee's unforgettable words to me: 'Whatever you give up on Christ's behalf, He'll replace with something better.'"

"When the opportunity to go to Spain for a year presented itself to us, we both agreed to go.

"Lenee's earlier words to me certainly rang true for me through the Spain experience. Giving up baseball opened up doors for Lenee and I to live in Costa Rica and Spain for a time, and we've learned how to speak a foreign language fluently. We've seen so much of the world now, and have watched so many lives -- including our own -- be deeply touched by the hand of God."

Smith feels that the things he learned while serving in Spain prepared and equipped him to pastor in the local church.

"I had a regular line of communication between Lance Witt and Tim Johnson, senior co-pastors of Calvary Baptist Church in Las Cruces, and I became excited about the cell-group philosophy they were sharing with me," Smith said. "When Lance told me that the cell-group ministry was something he felt to be in line with my spiritual gifts, Lenee and I began to fast and pray about coming to Calvary to serve after our year in Spain had ended. God clearly showed us both that this is where God wanted us to come and serve."

Since September 1998 Smith has been pastor for Calvary's growth and discipleship areas of cell-group ministry, and still invests ministry time in NMSU's Athletes in Action. "While serving here, God delightfully surprises us. We have a real sense of belonging and know that this is where he wants us to be -- for now, at least."

Again pointing to the precious gift-rock from his fan, Smith says, "This rock doesn't symbolize wealth, fame and the fulfillment of personal dreams to me any more. Now it reminds me of what God has called me to and all that he's given me since I gave up my own aspirations in order to serve him.

"I'd take a day in the ministry over a day in baseball anytime. I love it!"

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