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**Southern Baptists roll back
numbers on Chicago blitz**

CHICAGO (ABP) -- A year after calling for 100,000 volunteers to spread Christianity in Chicago, Southern Baptist officials admit they set their sights too high.

About 1,200 out-of-town volunteers have committed to coming to Chicago for a July 8 blitz that was supposed to climax the major evangelism effort. A similar number has promised to work in the city's suburbs, according to a story June 7 in the Chicago Tribune.

Local Baptist officials said they planned to release at least 6,000 hotel rooms that had been booked for the event.

A North American Mission Board official told the newspaper the agency was probably too bold in taking on a major city for its first effort, particularly with just a year to plan. NAMB vice president Phil Roberts said he probably would not push for last-minute commitments at next week's Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Orlando, Fla.

Roberts said the agency is already moving on toward 2001 "Strategic Focus" cities. "Our emphasis will be on Boston and [Las] Vegas for next year," he said.

A group of interfaith leaders that last fall asked Southern Baptists to reconsider coming to Chicago said they no longer oppose the effort. Not only is it smaller than predicted, a spokesman for the group told the Chicago newspaper, but Southern Baptist officials have said they will not target specific faith groups for witness.

Fellowship-related schools report 310 total graduates

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Seminaries and divinity schools aligned with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship graduated 310 ministerial students this spring, according to the CBF newsletter "fellowship!"

Eleven schools that share just under \$500,000 in grants and scholarships contributed by the Atlanta-based Fellowship reported enrollments totaling 1,271. The 1,800-church Fellowship provides partial support but does not own or control the schools in the consortium. All the schools but one were started in the last few years.

In comparison, the six seminaries owned and operated by the 41,000-church Southern Baptist Convention enrolled more than 12,000 students in the 1997-98 academic year, with about a fourth of those in off-campus programs.

The SBC spends about \$34 million a year on theological education, a fifth of its total unified budget.

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-- By ABP staff

Truett Seminary names professor of preaching

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- A former Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary faculty member has been named professor of preaching at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

Hulitt Gloer, who taught at the Southern Baptist Convention seminary in Kansas City, Mo., from 1983 to 1996, will join the Truett faculty July 1, officials of the school in Waco, Texas, announced.

Gloer, a 1972 graduate of Baylor, has been pastor of First Baptist Church in Corpus Christi, Texas, since 1997. He has a doctorate in New Testament studies from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

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-- By ABP staff

Iowa Southern Baptist leader announces retirement plans

DES MOINES, Iowa (ABP) -- Iowa Southern Baptists' top leader has announced plans to retire at the end of next March.

O. Wyndell Jones, executive director-treasurer of the Baptist Convention of Iowa for 15 years, announced retirement plans to the organization's executive board in May.

Numbering 101 churches, the Iowa convention is one of 42 state and regional conventions in the United States that are affiliated with the 15.8 million-member Southern Baptist Convention. Formerly called the Iowa Southern Baptist Fellowship, it organized as a convention in 1995.

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-- By ABP staff

Supreme Court strikes down law allowing non-parental visitation

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In a ruling viewed as a setback for grandparents' rights, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a broad Washington state measure that permits non-parents to petition for visitation rights.

Despite a 6-3 ruling, the June 5 decision prompted six written opinions, including three dissents. Associate Justices John Paul Stevens, Antonin Scalia and Anthony Kennedy each wrote a dissenting opinion against the majority.

Writing for the court's plurality, Associate Justice Sandra Day O'Connor pointed to the "sweeping breadth" of the law.

In a decision signed by Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Associate Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer, O'Connor said that the "interest of parents in the care, custody and control of their children" is "perhaps the oldest of the fundamental liberty interests recognized by this Court."

Associate Justices David Souter and Clarence Thomas wrote separate concurring opinions.

In his dissent, Scalia said that the high court's majority is "ushering in a new regime of judicially prescribed, and federally prescribed, family law."

According to court documents, Tommie Granville and Brad Troxel shared a relationship that ended in 1991. The two never married but had two daughters.

After they separated, Troxel lived with his parents, Jennifer and Gary Troxel. He regularly brought his daughters to his parents' home for weekend visitation, before committing suicide in 1993.

The Troxels continued to see the children regularly immediately after the death, until Granville informed the couple in late October 1993 that she wished to limit their visitation to one short visit per month.

The Troxels filed suit two months later under a state law that allows "any person" at "any time" to petition for visitation rights that can be granted if courts determine it is in the best interest of the child.

While Granville did not oppose all visitation, a superior court granted the Troxels more than she desired. Granville appealed, and in the meantime got married. Nine months after the superior court issued its final ruling, her husband formally adopted the children.

The Washington Court of Appeals reversed the superior court's visitation order, however, holding that non-parents lack standing to seek visitation under the law.

Washington's Supreme Court agreed with the appeals court ruling but for different reasons.

The state's highest court said that while the Troxels had a right to bring the claim, the law violated the U.S. Constitution by infringing on the fundamental right of parents to rear their children.

Christian advocacy groups applauded a decision they said affirms parental rights.

James Dobson's Focus on the Family organization and its legal arm, the Alliance Defense Fund, said the ruling "clarifies and re-establishes parents as the authority in their child's life with a God-given duty and

right to oversee their care and custody."

The Christian Legal Society, which filed a friend-of-the-court brief in the case, also praised the ruling. Carl Esbeck, director of the CLS Center for Law and Religious Freedom, called it unthinkable that the "sacred" bond between parents and child "could be breached by third parties or that a civil magistrate could decide who does and does not have access to one's child, even over a parent's objections."

The Southern Baptist Convention issued a press release in which an official said the high court could have gone further in affirming parental rights.

Shannon Royce, legislative counsel for the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said, "I am pleased with the result of the case, but I wish the court had gone farther."

Royce pointed to the opinion written by Thomas who said the state "lacks even a legitimate government interest -- to say nothing of a compelling one -- in second guessing a fit parent's decision."

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Religious-persecution panel elects Abrams new chairman

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A former State Department official has been elected chairman of a year-old commission established to monitor religious persecution around the world.

Elliott Abrams, who served as an assistant secretary of state during the Reagan administration, is new chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Abrams, who now is president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C., succeeds David Saperstein as chairman of the 10-member commission. Saperstein, who works for the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, will remain on the commission as a member.

Firuz Kazemzadeh, who recently retired as secretary for external affairs of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States, is the commission's new vice chairman.

The new officers will serve until May 14, 2001, when the terms of all the current commissioners expire. The bipartisan commission was established under a 1998 law enacted by Congress to curb religious persecution abroad.

The panel recently released the first of what will be an annual report recommending to the president and Congress policy changes to promote religious freedom abroad.

Congress rejected a panel recommendation to deny permanent normal trade relations to China, awarding the status in May. But commission officials say that the administration appears open to some of the panel's dozens of recommendations.

Abrams said the commission "has had a real impact on U.S. policy toward Sudan this past year." He said the commission's strong position on China "also demonstrates that we can play a real role in the debate over American foreign policy."

He said the commission would seek to have a broader impact in the coming year by looking at a larger number of countries.

Steve McFarland, executive director of the commission, told Associated Baptist Press the panel will soon target about five new countries in which the United States should address religious-freedom abuses.

McFarland also said the commission will recommend in July countries that the State Department should designate of "particular concern" in restricting religious freedoms. Once the countries of concern are

officially designated, the president will have three months to detail his responses, if any, to those countries.

Saperstein said the commission has "been an extraordinary success." He said the fact that the State Department has issued a religious freedom report on 194 countries and has enlisted the help of all U.S. embassies to monitor the issue and nurture relations with religious leaders "in and of itself is a major advance."

Saperstein said the commission had a productive meeting with top State Department officials about its report issued in May. "Even though there were differences of opinions," Saperstein told ABP, "the administration really bent over backwards to work with the commission." He said the administration has already implemented some of the panel's recommendations in recent months.

And he said State Department officials seem open to other recommendations in the recent report. However, he acknowledged that some recommendations, such as providing "non-lethal" aid to rebels in Sudan as a last resort to thwart the nation's civil war, might not be implemented.

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Supreme Court majority up for grabs in presidential race, activist predicts

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON -- Top prize in the 2000 elections will be the likely appointment of at least two Supreme Court justices during the next president's term, according to officials from People For the American Way, a leading civil liberties group.

PFAW President Ralph Neas said the upcoming election is the most important since 1932. "Today the far right is one election away from winning its entire political agenda," he said. Right-wing religious and political leaders including Pat Robertson, Trent Lott, Jerry Falwell and Charlton Heston "all agree that the Supreme Court is the top prize in this election year," he said.

At an annual gathering of the organization June 1, Neas said GOP presidential candidate George W. Bush has announced he would appoint justices that share the philosophies of Supreme Court Associate Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas.

Neas said a Scalia-Thomas majority would be "devastating," putting at risk such issues as abortion and minority rights, gun restrictions, campaign-finance reform and the separation of church and state.

The organization, founded by "All in the Family" creator Norman Lear, presented its infamous "equine posterior" award to National Rifle Association officials Charlton Heston and Wayne LaPierre. The dubious award is given as a joke annually to "leaders whose abilities to misrepresent an issue and pander to our baser instincts have reached such ridiculous levels that we don't know whether to laugh or cry."

Leaders said the award -- a sculpture cast in bronze -- went to Heston for his extreme statements in defense of gun rights and to LaPierre for charging that President Clinton was willing to accept a certain level of gun-related crime to further his administration's political goals.

Presenting the award was Democratic political strategist Paul Begala, who quipped about a Texas law that he said would "make it easier to carry guns in church and at football games."

"There's no sense in preferring one religion over another," Begala joked. "You know, I think it would help with the collection plate, I suppose, if the preacher were armed. 'Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition' is just a figure of speech, governor," said Begala referring to Texas Gov. George W. Bush, who signed the law.

The 1997 law altered previous measures that prohibited individuals from bringing guns into churches. The new provision says that unless churches specifically post a sign banning firearms, individuals have the same right to carry guns into houses of worship as anywhere else.

A Bush campaign aide addressed charges made by PFAW. Speaking to Associated Baptist Press, the aide said that Bush "has made it clear that he will appoint people who will strictly interpret the Constitution and will not make law from the bench."

Scott McClellan, the aide, also addressed gun control. The governor has "consistently supported and signed tough anti-crime legislation including requiring automatic detention for juveniles who are caught carrying a gun or committing a crime with a gun."

McClellan said Bush "recognizes that solving the problem is about more than just laws; it's about changing our culture and making sure our children are taught the difference between right and wrong."

PFAW presented other awards recognizing "defenders of democracy" to siblings Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., and presidential adviser Ann Lewis. Also receiving democracy awards were the mother-son duo Rep. Carrie Meek, D-Fla., and her son Florida state senator Kendrick Meek.

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American Indian blends heritage with Christian faith

By Laura Johnston

CAPE GIRARDEAU, Mo. (ABP) -- For many years Robert Francis couldn't accept his Cherokee Indian heritage because he didn't think God would accept him as a non-white person.

For centuries American Indians have been treated unfairly and unjustly by white Europeans, he said. They've been told that God's chosen people were Jews and then white Europeans and Africans, but never American Indians.

Because of those stereotypes, "I couldn't accept myself as an Indian because I didn't see God accepting me as an Indian," he said. "I thought I had to be a white person for God to love me."

He tried hiding his features by keeping his hair cut short and hoped to blend in with the mainstream. Yet he found assimilation to be "just a road to frustration."

Now, as a consultant for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Missouri, he embraces his braided hair, drums and shaker as part of his ancestry. He works with Missouri's more than 20,000 American Indians to start home-fellowship and worship groups.

Francis and his family live in Butler, in western Missouri. He was the pastor at Perkins Baptist Church near Advance, Mo., before attending seminary in Kansas City.

Francis returned to southeast Missouri this spring to speak at First Baptist Church in Cape Girardeau during an emphasis on home missions.

Francis doesn't consider himself a missionary. Using words like "missionary" and "Christian" has negative connotations among American Indians, he said.

His official title is catalytic consultant with the CBF of Missouri. It reminds him of a person who teaches others how to start fires.

And maybe that's what he's doing with the fellowship groups.

Three groups have started since January 1999 in Joplin, Butler and Callaway counties. Another group is likely to begin in Cass County.

Francis hasn't ruled out starting a fellowship in the southeast. He's just waiting; it's sort of like spontaneous combustion, he said.

Francis hasn't actively worked to get any of the groups started. Instead, he waits to be approached. "When I hear that, I know that it's the Creator leading these people," he said.

The fellowships meet in homes much as the early Jewish believers did. On occasion the groups get together for a powwow.

"We love to fellowship," Francis said. "We like to have fun and laugh."

Most of the meetings begin by cooking a meal, often just fry-bread, juice and coffee. After the meal there is a ceremonial fire or smudge. His eldest son, Peter is the fire-keeper.

The white smoke from burning cedar leaves soaked in spring water is a way "to visualize our prayers going up to heaven," Francis said.

The service includes singing, drums, Bible reading, preaching and sharing stories. As many as 12 tribes are part of the fellowships, which link them spiritually and socially, he said.

"All Indian people have to live in two worlds and find a way to relate to both," Francis said.

When Francis talks about Jesus and the Creator, he doesn't bring Jesus to the American Indian culture. Instead, he looks for Jesus in the culture. When American Indians talk about the cedar and its red bark, they remember the blood of Jesus. The smoke from the fire is also a symbol of healing and purity that comes from the Holy Spirit, he added.

Francis said people are often surprised at the number of American Indians in the state. Census figures from 1998 put the population at 20,644.

When people ask where American Indians live, he tells them they may be next door or just down the street.

Francis has met at least two American Indians while working as a substitute teacher in Butler. Students often ask him to sing or "do a rain dance."

One time he took out a cassette tape of stomp music, which is a traditional Cherokee dance, and showed a photo of the dance to the students as he explained the event. He told them about shell shakers, women who wore bracelets on their ankles that were made of terrapin. Today the bracelets are made from Pet milk cans, he told them.

One young girl said that was what hers were made from, much to the surprise of Francis and the students.

"Most didn't even know this about her. Some will make fun of her for it, and some will respect her for that," Francis said.

Another time he was teaching students some songs when the school's DARE officer told the students what a valuable lesson they were learning.

It turned out that the blond-headed officer, who was nicknamed the Great White Dope Hunter by his colleagues at the sheriff's office, was of American Indian ancestry. Not many people knew this because "he was just trying to fit in," Francis said.

The deputy's mother was American Indian, and he wore his hair braided as a teen. But years later he cut his blond hair short and had nearly forgotten all the songs until he heard the drums and joined Francis' class.

The deputy is likely to come to fellowship, Francis said.

Francis said his work "is not something I'm doing but the Creator using me to help in it."