



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

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Courts consider recounts, ballot issues in closest U.S. presidential race

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- As Florida's Supreme Court considered what could be Vice President Al Gore's last effort to overtake Texas Gov. George W. Bush in the electoral vote, religious and civil-rights leaders weighed in on issues of fairness raised in the closest presidential election in American history.

While Republicans called on Gore to concede, Democratic supporters fought to get roughly 10,000 punch-card ballots that did not register in voting machines hand counted.

The Florida Supreme Court completed oral arguments Dec. 7 in Gore's appeal of a lower-court ruling against his contest of election results.

Meanwhile, two other Florida judges heard pleas to throw out thousands of absentee ballots, because Republican officials were allowed to alter ballot-request forms. Either case could change the outcome in Florida.

Although Gore has not joined the absentee-ballot suits, his critics say they contradict his earlier argument that all votes should be counted. Democrats, meanwhile, counter with charges of hypocrisy against the Bush campaign for saying technicalities should not be used against them with full knowledge that Gore might have won had machines counted all legally cast votes in the state.

The controversy has sharply polarized Americans.

While Dec. 1 oral arguments inside the U.S. Supreme Court were cordial and orderly, loud protests went on outside.

Seeing Bush supporters holding "Sore-Loserman" signs, Baptist pastor Michael Bledsoe, said, "I can come up with something better than that."

Bledsoe, pastor of Riverside Baptist Church in Washington, said he was not acting on behalf of his church but as a concerned citizen seeking to get all the votes counted. He had a sign made that read, "We've Been BUSHWHACKED."

Bledsoe and his sign were photographed and carried in major newspapers the next day. Interviewed by CNN, the pastor said, "It's not a special pleading to ask that they manually recount the votes."

Bledsoe said he was surprised after the CNN interview to find a phone message at his office from someone who claimed to be a pastor of 35 years in Kentucky. The message asked how Bledsoe could be a pastor "and a servant of God," while supporting a vice-presidential candidate "who is still looking for the first advent of Jesus."

The reference was to Gore's running mate, Sen. Joseph Lieberman, who is Jewish.

"It was disconcerting," Bledsoe said, adding that he thinks the media may have missed an anti-Semitic undercurrent in the national debate.

Jesse Jackson of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition and Kweisi Mfume of the NAACP charged that civil-rights laws were violated in the Florida election. At a rally in Tallahassee Dec. 6, Jackson said a private Texas company has admitted to wrongly helping Florida officials purge not only felons from the voting records, but also people who had been charged with misdemeanors. As a result, Jackson said, many minority voters were wrongly turned away at the voting booth.

Baptist leaders contacted by Associated Baptist Press offered their insight on the situation.

Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, said the highest priority in the immediate situation is to assure voters that their votes are counted. "If we don't do that, then we increase the already high cynicism that exists about the political process," he said.

But Gaddy said that at this point in the legal process, "I'm not sure voices from the religious community are needed."

"Our major concern," he said, "should be about the obvious deep divide that runs through the nation."

Gaddy said the alliance has asked religious leaders across the nation, "How can people of faith be a source of healing and understanding and help the nation move beyond this period of deadlock?"

When the election is over, Gaddy said the faith community should help "move the nation toward a unified support for whoever is elected president so that we can get on with the crucial work of government."

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said the election has turned into a "mess."

"There's never been a perfect election in the United States," Land told Associated Baptist Press in a phone interview. "But what we have insisted upon is a fair election."

Land said a fair election is one in which everyone has an equal chance to vote and everyone's vote is treated the same way and evaluated by the same standards.

Land has not publicly endorsed Bush but favors his stance on issues such as abortion. He echoed arguments made by Bush supporters, however, in disagreeing with the liberal standard used by Broward County officials to count votes and criticizing Gore for wanting recounts in only selected counties.

"If you're going to do a manual recount -- it should be all ballots statewide," Land said.

Land accused Gore of trying to "introduce class warfare" by saying the counties he is protesting were predominantly poor or minority. Palm Beach County, he observed, has "plenty of golf courses."

Land also disagreed with charges by Jesse Jackson that minorities were targeted in attempts to purge felons from the voting rolls. "Their intention was not racist," Land said. "Their intention was to clear the rolls of felons."

He said in Miami Dade news reports say rapists, child molesters and killers were wrongly allowed to vote. "I would think that would balance out anything that would have been done by this company."

Land supported, however, the decision of Florida Gov. Jeb Bush to return the voting rights just weeks before the election of Prison Fellowship Ministries founder Chuck Colson, who was a convicted felon after the Watergate scandal.

Land said he would support whoever is sworn in as president Jan. 20 as the rightful winner. "We need to pray for our nation," he said. "We need to pray for our nation's leaders. We need to respect the rule of law."

Asked if Gore was being a sore loser, Land said, "No comment."

But he did add, "I've said all along that the best solution for the country is for there to be an objective, verifiable, hand recount of all the ballots in Florida."

Agreeing with Land at least on that one point was Henry Green, pastor of Heritage Baptist Church in Annapolis, Md. Green ran an unsuccessful 1996 bid in Florida to become a U.S. congressman. In hindsight, he said, Gore should not have "cherry-picked counties," and Bush should have agreed to a statewide hand recount. "They should have gotten together," he said.

Green said no matter who wins, "There will be a problem if all the questions about the votes are not adequately and thoroughly dealt with."

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Auto crash kills students at Baptist-affiliated school

BOLIVAR, Mo. (ABP) -- Three students at Southwest Baptist University in Bolivar, Mo., died Dec. 3 in an automobile accident. Two other students were seriously injured in the one-car crash.

Killed in the wreck were Gregory Germany, 22, a junior from Rogersville, Mo.; Mary Miller, 20, a junior from Niangua, Mo.; and Bryon Phillips, 27, a sophomore from Anna, Ill.

Germany and Miller were both varsity basketball players. Phillips' wife, Leslie, is a varsity volleyball player.

Tyler Wasmer, 20, a sophomore from Independence, Mo., and Jamie Roszell, 19, a sophomore from Neosho, Mo., were both listed in serious condition in Springfield hospitals after the accident.

The Missouri Highway Patrol reported that Jeep Cherokee driven by Wasmer was northbound on State Highway 13 when it ran off the road and struck a tree. The collision occurred about 10 miles north of Springfield near the Greene-Polk county line.

Germany and Miller were pronounced dead at the scene, and Phillips was later pronounced dead at Springfield's Cox Medical Center South. Wasmer, a member of the SBU football team, was taken to Cox Medical Center. Roszell, a member of the women's basketball team, was taken to St. John's Regional Health Center, where she underwent surgery Sunday.

The news of the wreck spread quickly across the campus.

"We are stunned by the tragedy," university President Pat Taylor said. "Our hearts go out to the families and our students at SBU. Words cannot express our grief."

The accident occurred just before the last week of classes before final exams.

Preliminary reports said that alcohol may have been involved, but results of toxicology tests had not been received. Drinking either on or off campus is prohibited at the Missouri Baptist-related university.

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Duke announces chapel policy allowing same-sex unions

DURHAM, N.C. -- Duke University will permit the celebration of same-sex unions in Duke Chapel, top administrators announced Dec. 5.

The policy, recommended by a committee of faculty, staff, students and trustees, honors "a wonderful tradition of religious diversity" at Duke, President Nannerl Keohane and Dean William Willimon said in a letter announcing the decision.

While the United Methodist Church, with which Duke is affiliated, does not permit such unions, Keohane and Willimon said the chapel is not tied to any particular denomination. Staff represent 20 different denominations, and some, including Unitarians, the United Church of Christ and some Baptists, have been developing liturgies for same-sex unions and wish to perform them in the chapel, the administrators added.

A similar decision at Wake Forest University prompted efforts by the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina to sever ties with the school in Winston-Salem. The new Duke Chapel policy also comes as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship studies how a new organizational value banning funding of institutions that "condone, advocate or affirm homosexual practice" might impact a "Baptist house of studies" that CBF currently supports at Duke.

The Duke policy opens the chapel for same-sex ceremonies only for alumni, students, faculty, employees and their adult children.

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Dallas church votes to sever SBC ties

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- A prominent Texas congregation has voted to "terminate" its 49-year relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Wilshire Baptist Church in northeast Dallas approved a resolution of separation from the SBC by unanimous vote with two abstentions during two business meetings held Dec. 6.

The 1,451-member congregation has affiliated with the SBC since the church was founded nearly 50 years ago.

"From the outset, Wilshire's members realized that they could not fulfill their role in publishing the good news of Christ if they limited their focus to their own church and their own neighborhood," the resolution's preamble states. "They understood that they needed to join their resources with other Baptists to support domestic and global mission initiatives, universities and seminaries, hospitals and numerous other endeavors that are far beyond the means of even the most affluent of congregations."

Affiliation with the SBC was "entirely consistent with (the church's) founders' commitment to Baptist principles or distinctives," the resolution says, until recently. Now, it continues, SBC leaders "have become increasingly intolerant of beliefs and opinions that differ from their own as they have become less inclusive in their decision-making process."

"We are uncomfortable with alliances that dictate that participants be identically minded Christians," the resolution states.

The church will continue affiliation with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Cooperative

Baptist Fellowship, Dallas Baptist Association and the Greater Dallas Community of Churches, organizations that the resolution says "reflect our fidelity to Baptist principles."

"Through these partnerships, we are able to pursue our mission without compromising the Baptist principles to which we adhere," the statement reports.

The move is not intended to confront SBC leadership, the statement says, but recognizes "that the continuation of our formal association with the Southern Baptist Convention is incompatible with the manner in which we intend to realize our goals as a church."

The recommendation to sever ties with the SBC had been discussed within the church for several months and was crafted by a deacon study committee.

Pastor Emeritus Bruce McIver was among those speaking in favor of the action, although he said it was painful to do so. McIver and others in the congregation said they cherish what the SBC has meant to them in the past but realize it is time to acknowledge the future is elsewhere.

The church has a resident membership of 1,451 and averages about 900 in Sunday school. It gave about \$225,000 through the Baptist General Convention of Texas Cooperative Program last year, mainly earmarked for BGCT ministries. The church was the state's top-giving church to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship last year, contributing \$217,850 to the national body. George Mason, a former member of the CBF Coordinating Council, is pastor.

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Texas Baptists visit prison Death House

By Ken Camp

HUNTSVILLE, Texas (ABP) -- A contingent of Baptists studying capital punishment recently got a close look at the Texas facility where more criminals are put to death than any place in the Western world.

Since 1982, Texas has executed 236 convicted murderers by lethal injection at the Huntsville Death House. The Dec. 5 execution of convicted child-killer Garry Dean Miller set a new record of 38 executions in a single year.

Members of a committee authorized by the Baptist General Convention of Texas in 1999 toured the Huntsville Unit to gain a clear understanding of how the death penalty is carried out.

"None of us involved in this enjoy the job we have to do," Warden Jim Willett, who is also a Baptist, told the group. "We just try our best to do it professionally. We want to conduct it with all the dignity that is within us, and treat everyone involved with dignity."

Huntsville once housed Death Row inmates. Today, 436 men awaiting execution in Texas are held at the Terrell Unit in Livingston, about 40 miles to the east. Females sentenced to die are held at a separate facility.

Willett, Chaplain Jim Brazzil and Assistant Warden Tim New took the committee step-by-step through the execution process.

It begins when a prison van transports the condemned prisoner to the "Walls Unit," a nickname that describes the facility's 30-foot-high red brick exterior. The vehicle backs through a series of gates and down a long alley to the Death House door at about 1 p.m.

The prisoner is moved to one of eight holding cells inside the small brick building. He spends the afternoon passing time with Brazzil.

"I let the inmate set the pace," the Baptist chaplain said. "Sometimes we play chess or checkers or dominoes. Some tell jokes. Some want to talk or read Scripture or sing. I've led several to the Lord right here," he said, resting a hand on the bars of a cell.

The prisoner is allowed a 30-minute visit with his lawyer at mid-afternoon. He then is allowed 30 minutes with a spiritual adviser of his choosing.

During that time, Brazzil travels a few blocks to the Hospitality House, a safe haven for inmates' families sponsored by Texas Baptists. There he visits with family members. It's an opportunity for the inmate and family to relay messages, since they are not allowed to visit.

"I walk through the process with them," Brazzil said. "I tell them what he is doing. It helps prepare them and give them a sense of bonding with their loved one."

Late in the afternoon, the condemned man is served his last meal. "I always eat dinner with them," Brazzil said. "I don't think a man ought to eat by himself, especially when it's his last meal."

Sometime after 4 p.m., the inmate is offered a chance to change clothes. He has the option of being executed in his white prison uniform or in street clothes. Most prefer the latter.

"That period after 4 p.m. is a very intense time," Brazzil said. Some inmates grow very quiet. Others want to talk about spiritual matters.

"There have been many times when we've all been down on our knees -- the prisoner and me, with correctional officers kneeling on either side," Brazzil continued. "It's a very spiritual place back here."

One inmate accepted Christ and asked to be baptized less than two hours before his execution. Brazzil explained the Baptist understanding of baptism by immersion. There was no place in the Death House to perform the rite, but the inmate insisted that he wanted to be baptized in obedience to God.

"I struggled with it, but I took a cup of water and did it the old Methodist way," Brazzil said. "In spite of my reservations, it was one of the most meaningful spiritual experiences I've ever had."

At 6 p.m., Warden Willett's office receives two phone calls -- one from the governor's office and one from the attorney general -- instructing the prison personnel to proceed with the execution.

Willett walks to the Death House with his hands in his pockets, calls the inmate by name and says, "It's time for you to get out and come with me."

The journey to the death chamber is nothing like the Hollywood image of a prisoner walking his last mile down a long, narrow corridor. At the Walls Unit, it's just a few steps from the holding area to the adjacent death chamber. The prisoner is neither handcuffed nor shackled with leg irons.

The death chamber is eight feet wide and 10 feet long. Its brick walls are painted a pale green.

A padded steel gurney takes up most of the room. It resembles an examining table in a doctor's office, except for two stationary arm rests extending from either side and eight wide, tanned leather straps that hold the inmate in place.

The inmate lies on the gurney, and a tie-down team secures the restraints within half a minute. Four minutes later, a medical team inserts the needles and hooks up IVs containing \$176 worth of lethal chemicals.

Medical personnel leave, usually within three minutes. Just three people remain in the death chamber. The inmate lies on the gurney. The warden stands at the head of the table. The chaplain stands at the foot of the gurney with his hand resting just below the inmate's knee.

"I keep my hand there the whole time, giving a squeeze every now and then, just to let them know I'm there," Brazzil said.

At 6:09 p.m., officers escort witnesses into two small viewing rooms, separated from the death chamber by thick glass. In addition to five media witnesses, the inmate is allowed up to five witnesses, and the victim's family is allowed five witnesses. A solid wall separates the inmate's and victim's families.

With the witnesses in place, the warden asks the condemned inmate if he has any last words. They are delivered to witnesses through a microphone suspended overhead.

The warden then signals to begin the execution. Plungers on syringes are pushed not by prison workers but by physicians contracted by the state.

The first injection is sodium pentathol. It is administered at five times the dosage that would be given to a surgical patient.

"One inmate went out singing 'Silent Night,'" Brazzil recalled. "You want to know how long it takes? 'Silent Night. Holy Night. All is calm. All is bright. Round yon virgin. Mother and child.' He choked out the word child, and that was it."

The second chemical is pantrimonium bromide, a muscle relaxant. The final chemical is potassium chloride, which stops the heart.

The warden waits precisely three minutes before calling for a medical examiner, who checks for respiration and pulse and shines a light in the inmate's eyes before pronouncing the time of death.

Witnesses are escorted out of the viewing room. IV's are unhooked and the straps are unbuckled. The body is transferred to a funeral-home gurney and wheeled out.

Time in the death chamber typically is less than half an hour.

The family sometimes makes special arrangements with the funeral home to visit immediately.

"On Death Row, there are zero contact visits," Brazzil explained. "The funeral home will allow a family member to be there, quite frankly, to hold the body while it is still warm."

After the execution, Brazzil joins the family at the Hospitality House. Since 1987, directors Bob and Nelda Norris have made the Hospitality House a place of refuge for inmates' families through 145 executions.

The Norrises and Brazzil help the family members process what they have experienced and begin working through their grief.

"It seems that the one who hurts the most is the mother," Norris said. "When you hear the scream -- the wail -- of a mother whose son has just died, it will change your life forever. There is a victim at every level."

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Baptists react to Death Chamber visit

By Ken Camp

HUNTSVILLE, Texas (ABP) -- When he was a younger man, Charlie Wise would have described himself as "adamantly, vocally" in favor of the death penalty.

Two decades of serving alongside his wife, Mary Alice, in prison ministry -- including several years of weekly visits with women on Death Row -- has changed his view.

"It puts a different face on capital punishment when you get to know the people," said Wise, a layman at Trinity Baptist Church in Gatesville, Texas.

But even all that experience didn't prepare him for his first visit inside the death chamber. As a member of a capital-punishment study committee of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, Wise recently toured the Death House at Huntsville, Texas.

"It was chilling," Wise said, describing his first glimpse of the padded gurney in the tiny death chamber as "very sobering and disturbing."

As deputy chief of the civil division for the U.S. Attorney General's district office in Fort Worth, Mattie Compton has been in prisons frequently. But it was her first visit as well to the Walls Unit and its Death House.

"For me, it was hard to separate my impressions of the death chamber itself from my overall thoughts about everything we saw and heard when we were in there," said Compton, a member of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Fort Worth. "By the time we got to the death chamber, anyone could see I was very emotionally distraught. It was a cumulative thing for me."

Jim Young, who set up the tour, found visiting the Death House holding area with its eight narrow cells "very comfortable" and familiar. Before joining the BGCT staff as coordinator of restorative-justice ministries, Young worked 10 years as chaplain at the Gatesville Hughes Unit and the Huntsville Wynn Unit.

And while it was his fourth visit to the death chamber, Young found walking into that particular room anything but routine.

"Each time, it has been an oppressive feeling -- an eerie feeling -- walking into the death chamber itself," he said.

After learning about the clinical precision with which the executions are performed, and being reminded of their frequency, Wise said he was disturbed to think that Texans have grown comfortable with the news of executions. He believes that executions desensitize society and devalue life in general.

"In Texas, especially, we've got an assembly line for killing," he said. "Every time we kill a person in Texas, it takes away from our own character and our sense of values."

Compton agreed that each execution take its toll on society in general. "Every time there is an execution, I have a horrible feeling that we as a society have failed."

Even though death by lethal injection is less grisly than hanging or electrocution, Wise rejected the notion that it is a humane means of execution. "There's nothing humane about killing a person."

Looking into the adjoining viewing rooms from the death chamber itself, Compton reflected on the family of the condemned killer and the family of his victim.

"I thought about these two sets of people, divided by a wall but connected by a shared measure of grief and loss," she said. But they were not the only group with whom she sympathized.

"I left with the impression there is an entire population of people who are broken, who have been thrown away and forgotten by society -- not just the inmates, but also the staff. I had never thought about how administering the death penalty might impact the staff."

They are, indeed, the forgotten victims of each execution, Young noted. "I thought about the medical people behind the glass and wondered who ministers to them."

When he worked for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Young supervised the three chaplains involved in each execution -- those who minister to the inmate, the inmates' family, and the victim's family.

"These are generally men who have been in the pastorate. They may have stood beside a hospital bedside as life-support tubes were disconnected. But it's different when you are standing there as tubes are inserted with the intent of taking a life," Young observed.

At least the chaplains have other chaplains with whom they can talk, to help process the experience of witnessing an execution. But regulations prohibit chaplains from anything other than "casual-contact visits" with correctional officers -- including those who serve on the death chamber tie-down team.

"It's broken," Compton said. "The whole thing seems terribly broken to me and badly in need of fixing."

The Baptists who visited the Death House in Huntsville left with a renewed appreciation for those who serve on society's behalf in the death chamber.

"They do it out of a sense of duty, but you get the idea they wish they didn't have to do it," Wise said. "As a society, we're forcing it on them."

Young noted that the personnel working in the Death House are professionals who take pride in doing a good job. But that does not mean they think the job itself is good.

"They would not be heartbroken if there were no executions. That's just one component of the job they do, but it's not one they relish," Young said.

"They are surviving in the middle of what is reality now. But if that reality changed, it's not something they would miss."

News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Pope says all who live just lives are saved

Pope John Paul said Dec. 6 that persons who live a just life will be saved even if they don't believe in Jesus Christ.

Addressing 30,000 pilgrims at the Vatican, the pope affirmed inclusive teaching from the Second Vatican Council and softened comments in a September document describing Roman Catholicism as the only "true" church and other faiths as "deficient."

The earlier statement drew criticism both from Catholics interested in expanding interfaith and ecumenical efforts and evangelicals, who believe salvation comes by believing in Jesus and not by belonging to the Catholic Church.

"The gospel teaches us that those who live in accordance with the Beatitudes -- the poor in spirit, the pure of heart, those who bear lovingly the sufferings of life -- will enter God's kingdom," John Paul said Dec. 6.

"All who seek God with a sincere heart, including those who do not know Christ and his church, contribute under the influence of grace to the building of this kingdom." (ABP)

Couple settles lawsuit with Mormons

SALT LAKE CITY, Utah -- Two former Mormons whose ministry is helping others to leave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have agreed to remove copyrighted LDS materials from their Web site in a legal settlement.

Jerald and Sandra Tanner of Utah Lighthouse Ministry signed settlement terms of a lawsuit filed by LDS officials in 1999 but insisted they did nothing wrong. "We have and will continue to comply with copyright laws," Sandra Tanner said in a statement. Jerald Tanner added they agreed to settle out of court "only to end unnecessary and expensive litigation."

The LDS sued the couple for posting 17 pages of the Church Handbook of Instruction on a Web site. The Tanners argue that the posting is protected by a "fair use" doctrine in copyright law that permits excerpts from copyrighted materials to be published for educational purposes and criticism. (ABP)

Pastors cite religious persecution as major problem

PHOENIX -- In a nationwide study of Protestant pastors, 91 percent said persecution of Christians is a major problem in today's world and 77 percent called for U.S. sanctions against governments guilty of such persecution.

China was the country most likely to be criticized for persecution of Christians based on their faith, according to a study by Ellison Research, a marketing research company located in Phoenix. Researchers polled 518 current pastors this spring. The margin of error is 4.3 percent.

Republican clergy felt stronger about the issue; 68 percent said they felt "strongly" that Christian persecution is a major problem. While eight of 10 Democrats agreed with the statement, just 33 percent said they agreed "strongly." The rest said they agreed "somewhat." (ABP)

North Carolina CBF hires missions coordinator

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. -- A religious educator has been named first missions coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.

Jim Fowler, minister of education at Ardmore Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, was born in Paraguay to parents who were medical missionaries for the Southern Baptist Convention. In the new position, Fowler will promote volunteer and CBF Global Missions in the state, said North Carolina CBF Coordinator Bob Patterson.

The North Carolina CBF chapter, which formed in 1994, has about 130 churches, Patterson said. (ABP)

Divinity school to launch urban-ministry program

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. -- Wake Forest University's divinity school is establishing a new urban-ministry program, thanks to a \$50,000 grant from the Tannenbaum-Sternberger Foundation in Greensboro, N.C.

The grant will fund internships for second-year divinity students to learn pastoral care at Greensboro Urban Ministry, a nonprofit organization that provides food, clothing, counseling and shelter to people in crisis.

"We are delighted that the foundation is helping us develop a partnership with Greensboro Urban Ministry," said Bill Leonard, dean of the divinity school that opened last year with 24 full-time students. Twenty-eight new students -- 14 men and 14 women -- enrolled for a second year this fall. (ABP)

Professor sees possibility of religious resurgence

WACO, Texas -- Secularization of American society will likely increase in the 21st century if prosperity continues, says a Baylor University theology professor. If that happens, church attendance and support could follow a path of decline already seen in European countries.

However, Chip Conyers of Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, said history seldom proceeds without crisis, and tough times are often associated with religious revivals.

"In the case of economic decline, war, widespread disease or other occasions that remind people of their mortality and the fragility of existence, we are likely to see a resurgence of faith and revitalization of religious practice," he said.

Such times could create a "profound reconsideration of our public philosophies," he said, including political, economic and other ideologies that dominated the 20th century. (ABP)

Gifts brought to Jesus symbolize his acceptance as a king, scholar says

By Vanessa Willis

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Gifts that the Bible says the Wise Men brought to the baby Jesus were fit for a king, says a professor at Wake Forest University.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh were traditional gifts given in antiquity to royalty in the Middle East, said Fred Horton, a Bible professor at the school in Winston-Salem, N.C. "Most Palestinian Jews of the first century would have been unable to afford such gifts," Horton said.

Their mention in the story of Jesus' birth in Matthew indicates that Christ was to be revered as a king not only by Jews but by Gentiles as well, he said.

Gold is frequently mentioned as a gift for kings in the Old Testament. While less valued today, frankincense and myrrh, fragrant gum resins extracted from trees in south Arabia and Ethiopia, were during Jesus' time used to make fine perfumes and anointing oils.

"Oils were used extensively in the Middle East to restore moisture after bathing and to protect skin from the dangerous rays of the Middle Eastern sun," Horton said.

Frankincense was a valued commodity long before Jesus' era. Ancient Egyptians used hundreds of pounds of it per funeral. When scientists opened King Tutankhamen's tomb 3,000 years after his death, the smell of frankincense filled the air.

Greeks used the resin to honor heroes. The Romans gave it to soldiers to treat skin infections and bruises. The Chinese sent precious porcelain by boat to Africa to trade for frankincense, which they used to improve respiratory health.

Sweet-smelling frankincense also had religious importance. It was one ingredient in incense that was burned in the Jewish Temple and other holy sites. Some religions today still believe the smoke from incense carries prayers to God.

Myrrh was more rare in the ancient world but valued for perceived curative powers. Arab men drank it as a cure for baldness. In India, it was used to fight obesity and to prolong life. The Chinese mixed it with breast milk to cure diaper rash.

Because frankincense and myrrh were used by so many ancient cultures, scholars speculate they may have been at the height of their value during Jesus' time. In estimates using today's dollars, frankincense would have cost about \$500 a pound and myrrh as much as \$4,000.

More is known about the gifts than their mysterious bearers described as the Wise Men or Magi.

"The Gospel of Matthew, which is the only biblical document that tells us about the Magi, does not mention how many there were, nor how they got from place to place," Horton said. "We do know something about Magi in the ancient world, however. Often the word 'Magi' refers to wandering Mithraic priests."

Archeological excavations at Caesarea, a coastal city in Israel, have uncovered clues about the possible identification of the biblical Magi. A group digging there in 1973 found a "mithraeum," or place for worshipping the God Mithras, said Horton, who has led several digs in Caesarea during the past 25 years.

Horton said Matthew's mention of the ancient religious group is no accident. "The author makes it clear that the birth of Jesus was an event not just for the Jews but for the whole world," he said.

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--Vanessa Urruela Willis is a writer for the Wake Forest University news service.

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