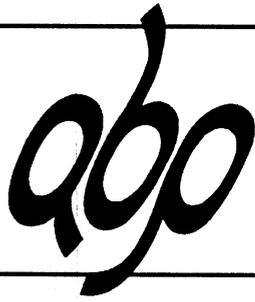


Nashville, Tennessee



Associated
Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

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

January 2, 2001

(01-01)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- NBA star Dikembe Mutombo: Big man, big contract, big heart**
- News briefs from Associated Baptist Press**
- Baptist editors rank faith statement, Texas response, as year's top stories**

**NBA star Dikembe Mutombo:
Big man, big contract, big heart**

By Hillary Wicai

ATLANTA (ABP) -- At 7-foot-2, NBA star Dikembe Mutombo's full name is nearly as long as he is tall. Born in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire, he was named Dikembe Mutombo Mpolondo Mukamba Jean Jacque Wamutombo.

Perhaps it's the empowering name. Maybe it's the height. But 34-year-old Mutombo doesn't like to take no for an answer. In fact he had some trouble last season with NBA referees. "When they call something I don't believe, I love to express myself, and sometimes I express myself too hard. I get caught up," he said in a FaithWorks magazine interview about his play last season with the Atlanta Hawks.

But you don't get to be the NBA leader in rebounding and the NBA's only three-time Defensive Player of the Year by being a pushover. In fact you have to push some people. Mutombo's elbows have been known to make painful contact with opposing players.

How does that square with his well-known Christian commitment?

"I don't think God said we should all be soft," Mutombo explained. "My job is to compete, and the best prevails. I will continue to play, and that's the way I'm succeeding in my life. If I hit you by mistake, all I can say is 'I'm sorry' and I keep moving on," he added.

Playing hard has paid off for Mutombo. The Hawks signed him as a free agent in July 1996 to a 5-year deal for more than \$56 million. "It was a dream come true. I never thought about having as much money as I have today. I only thought about working hard," Mutombo said.

But the large player with the big salary has a big heart as well. While many players dream of such big NBA salaries, Mutombo dreams instead about Africa. "God has given me so many chances to survive and to help," he said.

Mutombo often talks of his blessings and of God. Growing up in the Congo, his parents were Presbyterians and he attended Catholic schools. In Atlanta Mutombo and his family attend Eastside Baptist Church. "The bottom line is the truth, the Bible. Whatever the denomination you attend, you're a Christian," he said.

Mutombo, who speaks English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and five African dialects, holds a degree from Georgetown University with a double major in linguistics and diplomacy. He originally planned to study medicine because he wanted to make a difference and his homeland needs doctors.

But the Congo is in desperate need of many things. It has been independent of Belgium for 39 years, but it lacks infrastructure, including paved roads and clean water. At Georgetown Mutombo quickly realized a big NBA salary would allow him to make a bigger difference than being a highly skilled doctor in a poor country without enough medicine, supplies or equipment.

His homeland also needs hospitals. Mutombo wondered if one man, even a man with a lot of money, could build a hospital. It's a job usually reserved for corporations and religious institutions.

"I put my courage to the test," Mutombo said. "Our God led me to do this."

He said he has a clear sense that building a hospital is what he's supposed to do. "Looking at the mortality rate and the condition of living in my country, I felt I'm in a position to do this," he explained.

Three years ago he set up the Dikembe Mutombo Foundation. In the foundation's second year, he started the campaign to build a new hospital in Kinshasa, Congo's capital.

"I was just trying to look at what would make more difference than anything else I've done. I decided a hospital would be the best way to do it. I think it's a blessing," he said.

He personally contributed \$3 million toward the project. He hired architects and researchers to conduct feasibility studies. He needs to raise another \$9 million of the estimated \$14 million cost to make the dream a reality.

Many organizations have offered to donate equipment, but that's not what Mutombo needs right now. "We need money," he said. He's hoping to hear from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

It's been tougher to raise money from individuals than he expected, but Mutombo actually needs less money now than he thought he would require in the beginning. The studies showed it would be cheaper to build a large one-story hospital rather than a high-rise structure.

In the meantime, Mutombo continues to help the few ill-equipped hospitals that already exist in the Congo. In 1999 the foundation shipped \$250,000 worth of medical supplies and 140 hospital beds. Last year he sent another \$500,000 worth of donated supplies, including an ambulance.

"That's not enough of a solution. There hasn't been a new hospital built in my country in 40 years," he said.

The project is massive, which is why it's usually reserved for corporations or large religious organizations. Not only is Mutombo determined to raise the necessary millions to build the structure, he'll oversee the 38-month construction of the 300-bed hospital. He also plans to have the foundation run the hospital when it's open. He and his board will have to hire and lead a medical staff of 750. "I have to fight hard to make it happen, challenge myself," he said.

Mutombo eventually sees turning over the new hospital to a church organization. "We've had so many churches come forward willing to run it, but so far I've said not right now," Mutombo explained.

He plans to name his project the Biamba Mutombo Hospital after his mother. Two years ago, just hours after speaking with her son on the phone, Biamba Mutombo died in her home from a stroke because she couldn't get to a hospital in Kinshasa.

Mutombo recounted the story to an audience at a fund-raising event covered by the Baltimore Sun. "My mother was sick at home. She really needed to see a doctor. But all the fighting in the streets -- nobody could get her to a hospital where she could be treated. She passed away in the middle of her living room."

Mutombo couldn't even attend his mother's funeral because of the civil war.

His mother's lessons in both life and death are largely responsible for Mutombo's African dream of a new hospital. He said she always told him to help others, that helping others was his responsibility. "I come from a large family, but I was not raised with a fortune. Something more was left me, and that was family values," he explained.

He explained to FaithWorks that he believes everyone is put on earth with a clear job. While basketball is his work, Mutombo believes it's a means to a more important end. He doesn't want to be remembered for simply blocking shots and getting a ball through a hoop.

"God put us here to prepare this place for the next generation. That's our job. Raising children and helping the community, that's preparing for the next generation."

Mutombo and his wife are raising five children, four of them adopted.

As for work in the community, he's involved with Strong STARTS, a national NBA program that targets teens who suffer from emotional disorders that impair academic and social achievement. He's also the spokesman for the Hawk's Team Up program that encourages middle-school students to volunteer. In addition to his hospital project, Mutombo is involved in an effort to vaccinate the Congo's children against polio.

Because of all this work, Mutombo was chosen as one of 20 winners of last year's President's Service Awards. It's the United States' highest honor for volunteer service.

Mutombo makes it clear, anyone can make a difference, even if they don't earn \$56 million playing basketball. "You don't just have to be economically strong. You can be part of Big Brothers/Big Sisters or many good organizations that are making such a big difference. You don't just have to be Dikembe Mutombo and build a hospital. Whatever your contribution I think it's very important."

As for his major contribution, crews should break ground on the Biamba Mutombo Hospital in September.

-30-

-- Hillary Wicai is a free-lance writer in St. Louis. The Dikembe Mutombo Foundation Inc. can be reached at 1090 Northchase Parkway, Suite 200-South, Marietta, Ga., 30067 or 800-546-3917.

News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Baptists minister to tornado victims

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. -- Alabama Baptist churches opened their doors to victims of Dec. 16 tornadoes that killed a dozen people in three counties.

Valley View Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa received between 200 and 300 requests for assistance, said pastor Mike Hall, including about 20 church members whose homes were either destroyed or damaged. Tuscaloosa's Skyland Baptist Church allowed the American Red Cross to use the church's gymnasium days after the storm. Macedonia Baptist Church in Coates Bend, despite being damaged by a tornado, housed more than 50 people in emergency shelter.

Two other Alabama Baptist churches reported damage to their buildings and at least one fatality was a Baptist. Carol Fitts, a member of Sandy Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa, died from injuries she received when her house was destroyed. (ABP)

Mercer to share in real-estate gift

ATLANTA -- Baptist-affiliated Mercer University and LaGrange College, a liberal-arts school affiliated with the United Methodist Church, will share a property gift valued at more than \$123 million.

A bequest by real-estate investor Remer Crum and his wife, Emily Fisher Crum, deeds one of Atlanta's prime office parks, the 83-acre Century Center Park in north Atlanta, to the two schools. The couple have been longtime supporters of higher education in Georgia.

"This gift will make a tremendous impact on future generations of students and will help to preserve the kind of quality higher education the Crums have found at both of these institutions," said Mercer President Kirby Godsey. (ABP)

Pastor turns down Truett dean position

WACO, Texas -- The search for a dean at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary is apparently back to square one after the leading candidate for the post turned the job down.

Howard Batson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo, Texas, was one of three finalists interviewed for the deanship. He told the Baptist Standard newspaper that after being offered the job, he felt he should stay at Amarillo, where he became pastor in 1995. "I just couldn't get a sense of release from my calling to Amarillo," he said. (ABP)

Houston church severs BGCT ties

HOUSTON -- Houston's Sagemont Baptist Church, one of the city's largest Baptist congregations, has voted to sever ties with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

The 12,000-member church, which last year gave \$85,000 to the BGCT's unified budget, voted 2,243-20 by secret ballot Dec. 3 to sever ties and align solely with the new and smaller Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

Pastor John Morgan told the Baptist Standard he believes it is the first large church in Texas to put such a vote before the entire congregation. The recommendation approved by the church said the move is intended to "reaffirm our commitment to the Bible as the inspired, infallible and inerrant word of God." (ABP)

Former seminary professor named co-pastor in Michigan

ANN ARBOR, Mich. -- Paul Duke, who resigned a year ago as a professor at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology citing personal reasons, has been named co-pastor of First Baptist Church in Ann Arbor, Mich.

The American Baptist congregation unanimously elected Duke and Stacey Simpson, pastor of Fellowship Baptist Church in Edison, Ga., as co-pastors, effective Jan. 7. (ABP)

Baptist editors rank faith statement, Texas response, as year's top stories

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Editors of Baptist state papers ranked last summer's revisions to the "Baptist Faith and Message" the year's top national news story.

Coming in a close second in the editors' ranking was an autumn vote by the Baptist General Convention of Texas to reduce funding to seminaries and selected other programs of the Southern Baptist Convention by more than \$5 million.

The two stories were not unrelated. Texas Baptist leaders pointed to the first major rewrite of Southern Baptists' official belief statement since 1963 as a rationale for re-evaluating the state convention's historic relationship with the denomination.

A committee appointed last year by the SBC president recommended changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message" in June aimed in part at tightening loopholes in the previous edition that conservatives say once allowed moderates and liberals to infiltrate teaching and other denominational posts.

Though approved by a wide margin by overwhelmingly conservative messengers at the June 13-14 convention in Orlando, Fla., the revised statement drew critics who said it weakened Southern Baptists' historic commitments including priesthood of the believer and autonomy of the local church.

While secular media focused on the statement's declaration that the Bible disqualifies women from serving as pastors, religious leaders, such as those in Texas, centered on the removal of a phrase that specified Jesus Christ as the criterion for interpreting the Bible. Defenders of the change said that language has been misunderstood and abused, while opponents said the revision goes too far by elevating Scripture to an object of worship.

The Baptist General Convention of Texas, the largest of the autonomous state and regional conventions that cooperate voluntarily with the nation's largest Protestant faith group, has leaders with more moderate theological views than the conservatives who have controlled the SBC since 1990.

While Texas Baptists have taken steps to declare greater independence from the SBC for several years, last year's revisions to the state's unified budget marked the most dramatic denominational realignment to date.

Meeting in late October in El Paso, Texas Baptists reduced funding to six SBC seminaries by about 80 percent, earmarking the money instead for three theology schools in the state. They also cut funding to the SBC Executive Committee, the convention's central planning committee, to a token level and defunded the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission outright.

In an unscientific survey done annually by Associated Baptist Press, all of the 13 Baptist journalists responding to this year's poll ranked either changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message" or the Texas defunding as first or second in the year's top 10 stories.

Nine rated the "Baptist Faith and Message" revisions No. 1, while four picked the Texas action as the year's top story.

The other top stories, as ranked by a majority of editors, were:

3. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship adopts a value statement that leaders describe as "welcoming, but not affirming, of gays." The policy says the moderate group will no longer provide direct financial support to organizations that promote homosexual behavior, such as schools that include sexual orientation in their open-admissions policies. It stops short, however, of denying membership to churches that welcome gays.

4. "Mainstream Baptists" form a nationwide network, followed by several similar groups in states, in an effort to mobilize moderates to defend their state conventions against conservative dominance like that in the SBC.

5. Baptist Homes for Children, an agency of the Kentucky Baptist Convention, defends itself against a lawsuit by a former worker who was fired because she is a lesbian.

6. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who achieved a high profile as a Southern Baptist after describing himself as "born again" during his 1976 campaign that continues through his work with Habitat for Humanity, announces he no longer regards himself a Southern Baptist. He cites differences with conservative views espoused by the denomination.

7. The U.S. Supreme Court rules that public prayers at high school football games in Texas violate the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.

8. Religious violence escalates in Indonesia.

9. The Supreme Court rules that the Boy Scouts of America are not required to accept homosexuals as scout leaders.

10. Albert Mohler, the conservative president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, makes comments critical of E.Y. Mullins, who shaped Southern Baptist thought as primary author of the denomination's first doctrinal statement, the "Baptist Faith and Message" adopted in 1925.

Mohler, who served on the committee proposing a new "Baptist Faith and Message" last summer, charged that Mullins gave too much credence to religious experience, ultimately contributing to an undermining of biblical authority among Southern Baptists.

-30-

END
