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**Pro-gay Atlanta churches
survive second ouster vote**

By John Pierce and Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Two Atlanta Baptist churches under fire for welcoming and affirming homosexuals survived a second ouster vote from their local association March 12.

Atlanta Baptist Association approved by a required two-thirds majority a new bylaw excluding any church "which knowingly takes, or has taken, any action to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

A separate vote, however, to sever ties with two churches earlier removed from the Georgia Baptist Convention for pro-gay stances fell short of a required two-thirds majority, with association messengers voting 254-188 for expulsion.

Observers said they were confused by the seeming discrepancy between the two ballots. Referral of yet a third motion on church discipline to the association's membership committee suggested the issue isn't yet dead.

Most people speaking for expulsion at a packed First Baptist Church of Hapeville, Ga., for the Atlanta Association's semi-annual meeting, however, appeared more interested in starting a new association. About 50 individuals met Feb. 22 to take initial steps to form a new organization tentatively called the Metro Atlanta Baptist Association.

Earlier in the March 12 meeting of Atlanta Association, messengers accepted the requested withdrawal of the 6,000-member Rehoboth Baptist Church in Tucker, Ga. About 20 of the association's 153 congregations are said to be considering severing ties to join the rival association.

The semi-annual meeting marked the second time in six weeks that Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., and Virginia-Highland Baptist Church in inner-city Atlanta survived votes to withdraw fellowship. Both churches admit gays and lesbians as members and include them in leadership positions.

That is contrary to stated positions of both Georgia Baptists and the Southern Baptist Convention that homosexual behavior is sinful. Georgia Baptists voted to revoke membership status from the two churches in 1999. Both the former Southern Baptist congregations have ceased affiliation with the SBC, which in 1992 changed its constitution to ban churches that sanction homosexuality, while relating to both the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists.

The Atlanta-based Fellowship recently adopted a value statement described by its top leader as "welcoming but not affirming" of gays. The new policy allows gay-friendly churches to be part of the CBF but forbids direct funding of theology schools that have open-admissions policies that include sexual orientation.

The Alliance of Baptists, meanwhile, an older but smaller SBC splinter group, welcomes gays and supports churches that affirm homosexuals.

Defenders of a Jan. 30 vote by Atlanta Association to retain the two churches said it was not meant to be an endorsement of homosexuality but a recognition of autonomy of the local church. Critics said local-church autonomy does not excuse toleration of sin and that the association has the right and responsibility to discipline wayward churches.

In another development related to the controversy, the Georgia Baptist Convention executive committee voted March 13 to cut off all funding for Atlanta Association after Dec. 31 for retaining the two gay-friendly congregations.

"We cannot agree with the Atlanta Baptist Association, and we have no other way to express our dissatisfaction," said Robert White, executive director of the Georgia convention.

The SBC North American Mission Board said earlier it would go along with the state convention in defunding 16 missionary positions, along with special-ministry funds and about \$60,000 a year in denominational funds earmarked for hunger relief.

White also told the executive committee that the dispute with Atlanta Association is larger than homosexuality. Churches in Atlanta are angry over other issues, such as the Southern Baptist boycott of Disney and recent changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message," and are using the gay issue to express their feelings, he said.

White described the state convention and association as "two ships steaming further and further away from each other."

While homosexuality is a divisive issue even among liberal denominations, most Southern Baptists would likely agree with conservative denominational leaders that the Bible teaches homosexuality is a sin. Southern Baptists leave decisions about qualifications for members and leaders up to the local church, however, allowing each congregation to decide for itself what the Bible says about a particular topic.

Pastors of both the Virginia-Highland and Oakhurst congregations have said that while their views on homosexuals in the church are in the minority, they believe Scripture supports them.

Associations and conventions may choose, however, to withdraw fellowship from churches they feel have departed from the faith.

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-- This story includes information from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Religious leaders renew call for hate-crimes legislation

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In light of newly released statistics reporting a rise in hate crimes, leaders of the Interfaith Alliance have sent a letter to U.S. senators asking for passage of the Hate Crimes Prevention Act.

The legislation would make it easier for federal prosecutors to pursue crimes against racial, religious and ethnic minorities, as well as gays and lesbians.

Many religious conservatives oppose the idea, because it would focus on the hate motivation rather than the crime itself and would raise sexual orientation to a protected status. But other religious leaders have backed it as a way to curb violent crime.

"When true to the prophetic core of our religions, we cannot condemn hate and then refuse to act to stop the hate and violence fomented upon us," Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, stated in the letter. "Religion and government must work together to create a society in which diverse people are safe as well as free."

The U.S. Department of Justice's 1999 Hate Crimes Statistics report shows a growing number of hate crimes being committed against individuals based on race, religion, sexual orientation and disability.

The report said that 9,301 hate crime offenses were reported in 1999. Of those, 5,240 were motivated by bias against race, 1,532 by religion, 1,487 by sexual orientation, 1,011 by ethnicity or national origin and 21 by disability.

Gaddy disputed claims by Religious Right leaders that the legislation could infringe upon their rights to hold or espouse their personal religious beliefs. "Simply put, it is incomprehensible for this bill to be considered in any way a limitation on the rights and practices of religious people," he said.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, has been quoted as being opposed to the measure. "All crimes committed against human persons should be dealt with justly, equitably and swiftly under the laws of the land," he said.

The ERLC listed 10 reasons for opposing hate-crimes legislation, including the possibility that gay-and-lesbian advocates would seek to punish those who preach homosexuality and the agency's belief that genuine hate crimes are not widespread. Another objection cited by the ERLC is the measure would advance "the radical, well-publicized agenda of homosexuals to gain acceptance for and legal recognition of homosexuality as a normal lifestyle."

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Religious leaders oppose missile defense system in letter

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Several Baptists are among religious leaders asking President George W. Bush to reconsider his support for a plan to beef up the United States' missile-defense system.

"We the undersigned representatives of faith-based organizations share with you the desire to keep God's people, including those in the U.S. homeland, safe from nuclear attack," the leaders said in March 5 letter to Bush. "However, we are deeply concerned about the haste to make a commitment to deploy unproven technology for national missile defense."

Signing the letter were representatives from 25 different religious organizations, including the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Alliance of Baptists, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America. The Interfaith Committee for Nuclear Disarmament coordinated the letter.

The president supports building up the nation's missile-defense system as soon as possible to protect all 50 states from accidental launch or attack by rogue nations.

But the religious leaders argue that the "real and present danger" for nuclear attack on the U.S. comes from several Russian missiles now on "hair trigger alert" and some in reserve with inadequate security. They said mutual de-alerting and strategic-arms reduction are better protections.

America might have to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in order to erect a missile-defense system, the leaders argued, which could in turn prompt Russia, China and others to increase their number of nuclear weapons as well.

The letter also said "more promising methods" are available for dealing with the few small nations that might develop and deploy missiles in the future.

Finally, the religious leaders said they are concerned about the expense of the proposal.

"Since 1983 the United States has spent \$69 billion on national missile defense, enriching major defense contractors but producing no effective system," the leader said to Bush. They noted that Bush's proposal would cost more than \$100 billion. "A budgetary commitment of this magnitude, along with the tax cut you are promoting, would preclude achieving the goal of 'Leave No Child Behind' and dealing with other urgent needs."

Signers of the letter included Curtis Ramsey-Lucas, director of legislative advocacy for the American Baptist Churches; Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America; Gary Baldrige, co-global missions coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; Lonnie Turner, head of CBF's Washington, office; and Stan Hastey, who listed his title as executive director of the Alliance of Baptists for identification purposes only.

Non-Baptist signers included Lutheran, Episcopal, Jewish, Presbyterian, Mennonite, Muslim and other representatives.

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