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English Web site offers online confession

LONDON, England (ABP) -- "Confession is between you and your priest," the old saying goes. Not anymore.

A Web site that offers online confessions was visited one million times in the first 72 hours after it was launched by a nondenominational Christian radio station in London.

Internet users who go to the company's Web site, www.theconfessor.co.uk, are greeted with, "Here's an opportunity for confession and repentance." They are prompted to type their confession, which is confidential and is erased once the user moves to the next screen.

"It takes them on a journey of faith," Peter Kerridge, managing director of Premier Christian Radio, told the *Hartford (Conn.) Courant*. "I think it rings true for many people that confession is a way of getting rid of the garbage in life."

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Southern Baptist, civil-rights leader spar on ethics of death penalty

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- With the execution of two federal inmates in recent weeks and the continuing cry from civil-liberties groups that there is racial and economic disparities in the use of capital punishment, the debate over killing as a means of justice for the public has been re-ignited.

Just days before the execution of convicted Oklahoma city bomber Timothy McVeigh -- the first federal execution in more than three decades -- U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft released a Justice Department report designed to show that whites were more likely to face the death penalty than minorities. He

testified before the House Judiciary Committee that "there is no evidence of racial bias in the administration of the federal death penalty."

But death-penalty opponents said Ashcroft was focusing on statistics that supported his position and ignoring many others, according to a major news report.

The Justice study showed that once people were charged with a federal capital crime, race played little if any role in whether they faced the death penalty. But the study did not investigate why such a large proportion of inmates who face federal prosecution in the first place are African-American or Hispanic.

The study revealed that whites charged with a capital crime were twice as likely as minorities to enter into a plea bargain, freeing them from facing the death penalty.

At a recent debate on the theology and morality of using the death penalty, a Southern Baptist proponent of the death penalty faced off with an African-American religious and civil-rights leader. The event was sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

Longtime civil-rights leader Joseph Lowery, chairman of the Black Leadership Forum and a co-founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, squared off with Barrett Duke, vice president for research at the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. Also on the panel was a Catholic representative explaining the church's opposition to the death penalty and a Jewish representative speaking in support of use of the death penalty.

Lowery said, "The death penalty is a matter of place and race, inequity and iniquity; place and race, inequity and iniquity."

He added, "Where the execution of Jesus Christ is most deplored in the South, the execution of human beings is most employed." He compared the "Bible Belt to the killing belt," and said the U.S. -- as the world's leader -- was only in company with countries like Iran, Iraq, Libya and China on the issue.

John Carr of the U.S. Catholic Conference said the Catholic church does believe the state has the "right to execute people, but other ways have evolved to protect society, specifically the penal system, and that the state ought to forego the right to execute people and protect society in other ways."

Nathan Diament of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America supported the use of the death penalty but noted that Jewish groups disagree on the issue. He said if one had to "sum up the position of my organization as the umbrella group for orthodox synagogues around the country in a pithy sound bite, I would say, we're not abolitionists, but we are for a moratorium."

Duke, although acknowledging that the state has undoubtedly killed innocent people and that the death penalty has problems related to race and economics, said he opposes a moratorium while problems are studied. Duke said his concern about a moratorium is that many who are calling for a moratorium "see it as simply the first step to the abolition of capital punishment, not a real effort to try to change the system."

He said the SBC's greatest concern is "that someone who's innocent might be executed. We are not oblivious to that accusation. ... If there is not clear and overwhelming evidence of guilt, then capital punishment should not be sought, should not be practiced." However, Duke said that "such a possibility is less likely today than it has ever been. There are more secure ways of determining guilt than there have ever been."

He said, "It is the state's responsibility to protect the image of God, in which we are created." Duke participated in the event to explain why the Southern Baptist Convention approved a resolution at the June 2000 annual meeting in support of capital punishment. Duke said, "Southern Baptists did decide to speak on this issue, so we need to show up and take the heat wherever we get invited to do that."

The 2000 resolution, in part, says "God authorized capital punishment for murder after the Noahic Flood, validating its legitimacy in human society." It resolves that messengers of the SBC "support the fair and equitable use of capital punishment by civil magistrates as a legitimate form of punishment for those guilty of murder or treasonous acts that result in death."

Duke told participants on the panel and the audience that "historically Southern Baptists have supported capital punishment in our rank and file. There were some attempts in the late '60s to have Southern Baptists actually go on record opposed to capital punishment. And Southern Baptist rank and file rejected that as an option."

Duke said the SBC's support for the death penalty "is a biblical position. And we do believe that the Bible continues to be relevant for life today."

Duke offered Scripture to back his position, including Paul's statements in the New Testament book of Romans: "Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right, and he will commend you, for he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

Duke said the SBC acknowledges that there are racial and economic issues that need to be addressed. "To us, they are real issues, and we call for a study, and we call for change in the way this is done so that there is not racial or economic inequity in the system. However, we do acknowledge that the state has the right to execute those who have violated certain laws."

Lowery discussed the position of the United States "as the leader of the free world. But I don't know who we are leading. Who's following us? Iran, Iraq, Libya, China. Nobody in the European Union is following us in the death penalty. Turkey held out, but recently they did away with it."

Lowery said death penalty advocates use the same arguments as those who supported the right to enslave. "And the Bible was used to justify that as well," he said. "The state does not have the right to kill, to take a human life; the state does not have a right to enslave. It has the power, but the Bible addresses that. It says 'Not by power, nor by might, but by my spirit, says the Lord.'"

It's a matter of race because in the 20th century, Lowery noted, "eight out of 10 persons executed in the South were African-American. In Georgia, where I live, black males constitute 15 percent of the population but 50 percent of those who are on death row."

"The poor are rigidly prosecuted but poorly defended," Lowery said. It is a matter of inequity because "capital punishment is for people who have no capital." He said, "Poor defendants are represented by lawyers who are paid meager fees and spend an average of two days on the case."

Lowery noted that "most of the major religious bodies in this country -- Methodist, American Baptist, National Baptist, all except for Southern Baptist -- oppose the death penalty."

He said, "It's interesting to me that killing [supposedly] damages the image of God when it's done by a person, but it doesn't damage it when it's done by the state."

The death penalty "extends the cycle of violence; it affirms killing as an acceptable means of resolving social problems," Lowery said.

In a question-and-answer period, Duke discussed the use of the death penalty against the mentally ill. "There is a point at which we must say that a person is not mentally competent to really have been able to understand the consequences of his actions, and that that should be taken into consideration. And in some of those, there are certain circumstances capital punishment would not be appropriate."

Discussing Lowery's linkage of the "Bible Belt to the killing belt," Duke said "there are more evangelicals in the South, in terms of percentage, who attempt to apply the biblical teachings to life. And their conclusion, then, when they do that is that capital punishment is an appropriate response, under certain circumstances, for a civil government."

But Lowery countered, "You interpret the Bible to conform to Southern mores. The same argument was used to justify slavery. That's why they dehumanized black folk, so they could enslave them. And there were a lot of biblical arguments for that. It is the section of the country that is the most armed. ... The Bible Belt is the belt with the gun in the holster."

Lowery said, "We've lost reverence for life. And you don't protect society by making killers of all of us because one of us kills."

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Southeastern to close child-care center

By Tony Cartledge

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary has announced plans to close its child-care center, citing as one of the reasons "ideological problems" with the school sponsoring child care.

The Ruby Reid Child Development Center has served both seminary and community families for decades. It was designed as a learning laboratory for seminary students while providing quality care for children ages 2 to 5, according to Beth McLeod, who directed the program from 1965-85.

That is no longer seen as the center's function. Seminary President Paige Patterson said the center doesn't fit into the school's "Statement of Institutional Purpose."

Providing day care "is not really a part of our mission, especially when the vast majority of our clients are from the community and not students," he said. "We have no program for early childhood education, and the center serves no educational purpose."

In separate letters to student parents, community parents and the center's 21 employees, Patterson related a variety of reasons for the closure. He told parents from the community that the children had been "an infinite spring of happiness" but that child care is not the seminary's focus, and he was concerned about the seminary's liability exposure.

To student parents, Patterson said the seminary could no longer afford the liability or the operating cost of keeping the center open. Raising fees to a break-even level would make it impossible for students to afford the service, Patterson said. The center reportedly has lost \$332,000 over the past five years.

"When we added it up, we determined that the seminary was spending \$4,000 of Cooperative Program funds per year per student child to provide day care," Patterson said. "When we raised rates in order to try to break even, many of our students could find more affordable services elsewhere."

Patterson also told students that seminary officials had "ideological problems" with seminary sponsorship of a child-care center.

"Recent discoveries regarding children reared in child-care centers have only escalated our convictions that the child that is most likely to have a happy and useful life is a child reared in the home with the parents, not in a child-care center," he said.

Patterson said Southeastern students embrace those views.

"However, our position on child rearing did not close the center," he told Baptist Press. "Had that been the case, we would have closed it nine years ago when I became president."

The center currently has 60 pre-schoolers enrolled for the summer program, with 86 children pre-registered for the fall semester, according to director Tina Dekle.

Dekle has been director for seven of the 12 years she has worked at the center. Only 20 percent of the summer participants are children of seminary students, she said, but about half of those planning to attend in the fall are from student families.

Some parents and others in the Wake Forest community reacted with dismay. Christie Pleasant of Youngsville told the *Biblical Recorder* newspaper that her daughter Katie has been in three other day-care centers, but none offered the level of care she received at Ruby Reid. "Katie is happy and learning and has a

place where students pray at lunchtime," Pleasant said. "Those traits mean a lot to a parent."

In response to Patterson's belief that children should be raised in the home, Pleasant said, "If this were a perfect world, we would all stay at home." Citing financial pressure and the need many families feel for both parents to work, she added, "It's not a perfect world."

Former director McLeod expressed similar sentiments in a letter to the *Wake Weekly*. "I retired with a sense of satisfaction that every day we had sought to teach God's love, from greeting each child in the morning until we said goodbye in the afternoon," she said. "It is unrealistic to think that all of the mothers of children presently enrolled at Ruby Reid will be able to stay home with their children."

A group of parents, including some seminary students, met June 19 to discuss options for keeping the center open as an independent facility. They decided to write seminary trustees, asking to use the current facility for another year while they seek an alternate location.

Although Patterson's letter said the center would close prior to the fall semester, Dekle said Patterson has offered to allow rent-free use of the campus facility through December, provided organizers agree to pay utilities and operate independently of the seminary.

The closing comes on the heels of similar actions at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. and Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

Southern Seminary officials announced in April 2000 that the campus child-care program would close at the end of July. After a public outcry, seminary president Al Mohler pledged to keep the center open at least one more year while seminary leaders studied long-term options to meet the seminary's child-care needs.

Mohler cited financial issues for the closing and denied claims the decision was based on a belief that mothers should stay home with their children. The center remains open, with its future status still uncertain.

Midwestern's child-care center has been closed and reopened twice since 1995. Interim president

Michael Whitehead reopened the center in August 2000, but new seminary president Phil Roberts decided in April to close the facility. However, a May 23 article in the *Kansas City Star* said seminary officials are considering keeping the campus center open by negotiating with an outside operator to run it.

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CORRECTION: There was an error in the 17th paragraph of our SBC wrapup story last Wednesday. The paragraph should read as follows:

With 9,559 messengers registered just prior to the final SBC session Wednesday afternoon, it was the smallest convention since 1998 in Salt Lake City. The last meeting in a Southern city as small as Oklahoma City in 1949.

END
