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Bush OKs partial funding of stem-cell research

By Bob Allen

CRAWFORD, Texas (ABP) -- In a much-anticipated decision that seemed to partly satisfy people on both sides of a controversial issue, President Bush said Aug. 9 he would allow federal funding of medical research using existing stem-cell lines.

Bush refused, however, to use taxpayer funds for development of new stem cells for research from about 100,000 frozen embryos that exist in fertility clinics in the United States.

Bush has reportedly struggled for months with the question of whether to fund scientific research on stem cells derived from human embryos.

In making up his mind on a decision that he called an "ethical minefield," Bush said he sought advice from scientists, scholars, bioethicists, religious leaders, doctors, researchers, members of Congress, his cabinet and friends.

"I have given this issue a great deal of thought, prayer and considerable reflection," he said. "And I have found widespread disagreement."

"My position on these issues is shaped by deeply held beliefs," Bush said. "I'm a strong supporter of science and technology, and believe they have the potential for incredible good -- to improve lives, to save life, to conquer disease. ...

"I also believe human life is a sacred gift from our Creator. I worry about a culture that devalues life, and believe as your president I have an important obligation to foster and encourage respect for life in America and throughout the world."

Scientists say stem-cell research offers promise for breakthrough treatment of debilitating illnesses including diabetes, neurological diseases and spinal-cord injuries. Many pro-life Christians, however, believe human life is sacred even in its earliest stages and shouldn't be used for research.

In resolving the dilemma, Bush sought a middle-ground position. Since obtaining the stem cells requires the destruction of embryos, the president said the government would fund continuing research on the more than 60 stem-cell lines that have already been harvested but would not allow taxpayer funding on research that requires the harvesting of new cells.

The Bush proposal also includes funding for additional research on adult stem cells, which have some of the characteristics of embryonic cells but don't appear to be as flexible.

Bush's decision brought lukewarm acceptance from people on both sides. Supporters of research were gratified that funds would be made available but worried that limiting research to existing lines might slow progress. Pro-lifers credited the president with assuring that no embryos would be destroyed with tax dollars but feared his decision would encourage the practice with private funding.

Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, an opponent of embryonic stem-cell research, gave Bush's decision "generally a thumbs up."

"We were pleased by the fact that he -- he may not have said it directly, but he implied that life beings at conception. That's a good thing." Dobson said on CNN's Larry King Live. "And although we grieve the loss of the babies that were sacrificed for the cells that now exist, they are now gone, and these cells are there. And I think we can live with that."

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle had said before the announcement that if Bush refused to allow federal funding, the Senate would take up legislation to override the decision. Afterward, Daschle said he was "heartened" that Bush would allow some funding but said the Senate may still act.

Two other leading Democrats, House Minority Leader Dick Gephardt and Sen. John Kerry, said Bush did not go far enough but called the proposal a "bare minimum."

The decision appeared to divide the Religious Right, which had lobbied for months against the funding. Some viewed the glass as half full, while others said Bush had bowed to pressure and broken promises made during his campaign.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, who earlier urged Bush not to fund such research, said he was "deeply disappointed" with the decision. "I fear that this first halting step in the direction of embryonic stem-cell research will build pressure to cross the important moral barrier barring the killing of more embryos to obtain their stem cells."

Despite that, Land commended the president "for a reflective, thoughtful speech" to "champion the humanity of human embryos."

Land said he does not believe that Bush broke his campaign promise not to provide federal funding for research that would cause the destruction of human embryos."

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said on CNN's Larry King Live he is relieved that tax dollars will not be used for direct destruction of embryos but concerned that more will be destroyed in the private sector as a result of Bush's decision.

Mohler said it is "fundamentally wrong to use human embryos" for research, but appreciated Bush's declaring embryo tissue as human life. "The president was a statesman tonight," Mohler said. "He set a policy and established a model of how to discuss this issue."

Other conservative religious leaders were less charitable.

Ken Connor of the Family Research Council called the decision "troubling."

"By permitting research on existing stem-cell lines obtained by past killing of embryos, Mr. Bush attempts to put a redemptive gloss on previous bad acts and to distance himself from the immoral acts that resulted in the killing of embryonic human beings," Connor said.

Connor also complained that by "casting such research in a positive light," Bush would encourage Congress to advocate additional research that would require destruction of additional embryos to obtain more stem-cell lines.

Judie Brown of the pro-life American Life League put it more bluntly: "What the president has said is literally this: 'If someone else paid to kill these people, the American taxpayer does not object to harvesting their body parts.' That's wrong. That's immoral. It's unethical."

The Southern Baptist Convention in 1999 passed a resolution opposing all uses of human embryos in stem-cell research. That statement said that "protectable human life" begins at fertilization, and the practice "would likely lead to an increase in the number of abortions and create a market for aborted embryos and other fetal tissues."

A similar resolution in 2000, however, dealt only with such tissues obtained through elective abortion. A third SBC resolution this year opposed the use of cloning for human-embryo research.

Land reportedly wrote Bush in March urging him to rescind a Clinton-administration policy allowing funding of stem-cell research.

In July, Land wrote a column calling whether Bush would stand by campaign comments opposing federal funding for stem-cell research "a test of character."

"If he keeps faith with his promises and with the ideals that brought him to office, he will go down in history as a man of sterling character -- a true statesman of conviction," Land wrote. "If he caves in to the pressure, as enormous as it is, and compromises his promise on this most important issue, he will have lost the confidence of many of those who elected him."

After Bush's speech, Land gave the president credit for not basing his decision on political calculation, "because politically this decision is nonsensical in that it deeply disappoints many of his fervent pro-life supporters without satisfying most of his critics."

"The bad news is that I, like many pro-lifers, disagree with the decision," Land said. "However, I personally believe that it is the most pro-life decision that any American president would have made facing this issue in the last half century."

Asked if Bush' position was a compromise, a senior administration official speaking on background said, "I think the president views his decision tonight as a solution."

The official said Bush's decision satisfied his desire to help people who suffer from diseases that might benefit from stem-cell research. At the same time, "It's a solution in terms of the moral compass that he has established for himself, where he simply doesn't want to put taxpayer dollars at work in funding things that will encourage further destruction of human embryos."

A moderate Baptist ethicist, however, said Bush engaged in "moral zigzag" that avoided major ethical issues.

"He correctly raised the two fundamental issues," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. "First, are frozen embryos human life? And second, if they are, should they be used for the greater good?"

From there, Parham said, Bush "used the word ethics or its derivatives nine times and made 15 other religious references. But he failed to make a compelling ethical case or give clear, personal answers."

Parham said the president's "short-term solution leaves the nation more time to chew on the moral aspects of this issue."

Science, morals collide, Bush says in question of stem-cell research

By Bob Allen

CRAWFORD, Texas (ABP) -- As science expands the horizons of "what we can do," it sometimes raises profound moral questions about "what we should do," President George W. Bush said of his decision to allow limited federal funding for medical research on stem cells derived from human embryos.

In the most anticipated decision of his presidency so far, Bush said he would limit funding for such research to existing stem-cell lines where "the life-and-death decision has already been made."

"At its core, this issue forces us to confront fundamental questions about the beginnings of life and the ends of science," Bush said in his weekly radio address Aug. 11.

Bush said the dilemma "lies at a difficult moral intersection" between "the need to protect life in all its phases with the prospect of saving and improving life in all its stages."

"As the genius of science extends the horizons to what we can do, we increasingly confront complex problems about what we should do," Bush said.

Bush's decision pitted many in the scientific community against some in the pro-life camp who helped him win the presidency.

Though stem-cell research is still in its early stages, many scientists believe it holds promise for treating debilitating diseases that affect millions of people. They view it as the best hope in finding cures for conditions like Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, juvenile diabetes and spinal-cord injury.

Others say such promises are overrated, setting up an argument that some describe as "great hope" versus "great hype."

To create embryonic stem cells for research, a stem-cell "line" is created from the cells of a week-old embryo. If cultured properly, embryonic stem cells can grow and divide indefinitely.

The process destroys the embryo, however, creating a moral dilemma for those who believe life begins at conception.

One Baptist ethicist said he believes many people of faith are just now tuning into the debate.

"My sense is they reject both the extremist argument of the anti-abortionists and the miracle promises of the scientists," said Robert Parham of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn.

Stem cells are derived from embryos created in the course of infertility treatment. Many embryos created for in-vitro fertilization go unused. About 100,000 are frozen in clinics around the country, and fewer than 1,000 have been "adopted" for a mother's womb.

While the White House won't allow funding for research requiring further destruction of frozen embryos, officials believe there are about 60 stem-cell lines in existence.

Some in the medical community say it is unclear if all the existing stem-cell lines are accessible for general research. Other criticism is that such a limited number doesn't allow for the kind of genetic diversity needed to help the greatest number of people.

According to a poll by ABC News, 56 percent of Americans approved of the president's decision. Two thirds of Republicans and more than half of Democrats and independents said they approved. Four of five who supported the decision said they would have preferred broader funding, while three fourths of those who disapproved preferred no funding.

In a separate Gallup poll, half said they thought Bush made his decision mostly for political reasons, while a third said it was based more on deeply held beliefs.

An aide to Bush, however, told reporters the president wasn't swayed by public opinion.

"This is a public-policy decision. This is an ethical decision," said Karen Hughes, counselor to the president. "This was not, for him, a political decision. I think one of the things you learn as president is that you're not able to make all people happy all the time."

"He felt there was a clear line that we should not cross; and that is that he felt that he should not allow government, through taxpayer funds, to sanction any further destruction of human life."

Jay Lefkowitz, general counsel of the office of management and budget, said Bush's decision balanced "his strong commitment for the potential and the promise of scientific research with his equally strong commitment for the dignity of human life."

Hughes said funding will go only to "ethically derived" stem-cell lines, where donors gave informed consent, there was no financial inducement and the embryos were developed for reproductive purposes and not research.

She cited "a real lack of consensus" on the issue that divided people on both sides of the abortion debate. Some pro-choice people have problems with experimenting with embryos, while some pro-lifers support moving forward with research.

Hughes said there is precedent for Bush's decision in development of a now widely used vaccine for chicken pox. Early research involved fetal tissue, she said, and some believe fetal tissue obtained from abortions. While that is something that many people oppose on moral grounds, once the research was concluded and there was no turning back the process, many religious leaders decided the best course of action was to go forward and use the vaccine, she said.

In addition to going ahead with research on already-harvested stem cells, Bush said he would provide \$250 million for funding of research on umbilical cord, placenta, adult and animal stem cells, which do not involve the same moral dilemma but many scientists believe hold less promise than embryonic cells.

In another bow to the right, the president also said he would name a panel to oversee stem-cell research and propose regulations. It will be chaired by Leon Kass, a conservative bioethicist from the University of Chicago.

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Decision on stem-cell research divides abortion opponents

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bush's decision on stem-cell research is dividing the pro-life religious community.

According to a New York Times article published Aug. 12, the split doesn't fall along religious or theological lines, pitting, for example, Catholics against Protestants. Instead, it appears to be tactical: pragmatist versus purist.

Bush's long-awaited decision to allow federal funding for research with existing stem-cell lines but not to spend money for further sacrificing of human embryos drew immediate praise from some leaders on the Religious Right.

The National Right to Life Committee applauded Bush's Aug. 9 speech announcing his long-awaited decision on the issue. So did Jerry Falwell, founder of the Moral Majority, James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, and Pat Robertson, founder of the Christian Coalition.

On the other side, representatives of 11 anti-abortion groups called a news conference criticizing both the president's decision and abortion opponents who praised it.

"I find their positions difficult to square with the fundamental principle that human life is precious and ought to be preserved," said Ken Connor, president of the Family Research Council.

Connor said some support might be driven more by loyalty to Bush than by principle.

"If a President Al Gore had come out with this position, I am left to wonder whether or not their reaction would have been entirely different," Connor said.

Others, like the Southern Baptist Convention's Albert Mohler and Richard Land, said they have concerns about Bush's decision but took heart in the president's tacit acknowledgment that fertilized embryos are human life.

Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said in a statement embryonic stem cells are "fundamentally different" from body parts such as a kidney or heart that are donated for medical research.

"These stem cells are the essential, foundational building blocks of an entire human being whose life was lost before his or her stem cells were harvested," said Land, who is reportedly being considered by Bush for appointment to a government panel monitoring religious persecution.

Land, however, was among many religious conservatives who were relieved that Bush didn't compromise more with pressure from the left. While saying he was "deeply disappointed" by the decision, Land said it was probably "the most pro-life decision" that any president would have made under similar circumstances in the last 50 years.

A consultant for Land's agency, meanwhile, said some Americans might not take advantage of treatments developed through methods he described as "a form of biotechnological cannibalism."

"These cells have been harvested by killing human embryos," said Ben Mitchell, professor of bioethics and contemporary culture at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Ill. "They are morally tainted and any benefits from research on those cells will be ill-gotten gain."

"Our tax dollars should not be used to fund research we find morally reprehensible. Yet, President Bush's decision makes us pay for tainted research," said Mitchell, who works as a consultant on biomedical and life issues for the ERLC. "It's like forcing us to eat our own offspring and charging us for the meal."

According to an ABC News/Washington Post survey conducted prior to Bush's announcement, support for stem-cell research varies by religious denomination.

The poll, conducted in late July, said 63 percent of the American public believes the research is an important way to find cures for many diseases, while 33 percent said it's wrong to use any human embryo for research purposes.

Evangelical Protestants, however, divided narrowly on the same question, with 46 percent supporting the research, 48 percent opposing and 6 percent with no opinion.

Other Protestants supported stem-cell research 74 percent to 22 percent. Among Catholics, it was supported by 63 percent and opposed by 34 percent. Among those with no religious preference, 80 percent approved of the research and 16 percent were opposed.

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CBF personnel evacuate from Macedonia

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Six overseas workers for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship have arrived safely in Greece after their evacuation from Macedonia.

Three couples who work on the Atlanta-based CBF's Albanian team left the Balkan nation over the weekend over fears that violence might spread into and around the capital city of Skopje.

Most of the fighting so far between Macedonian troops and Albanian rebels has occurred in the northwestern city of Tetovo, the nation's second-largest city.

One of the CBF workers, Rick Shaw, said the six hope their stay in Greece will be brief, but he admitted that a return to Macedonia depends largely on response to a peace agreement signed Aug. 13.

The agreement aims to end six months of fighting between the Macedonian government and ethnic-Albanian rebels. The peace accord was signed by the Macedonian president and leaders representing the majority Slavic Macedonians and the minority ethnic-Albanian population, along with French mediator Francois Leotard and U.S. envoy James Pardew. NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson and European Union envoy Javier Solana also attended the signing.

In anticipation of the signing, both sides had agreed to a cease-fire Sunday night after five days of heavy fighting. However, overnight shelling occurred north of Skopje.

The conflict began in February when ethnic Albanian rebels armed themselves saying they wanted greater rights for ethnic Albanians, who make up about a third of the country's population of 2 million. The Macedonian government says the rebels want only to seize territory.

The three CBF couples evacuating Macedonia are Arville and Shelia Earl, Darrell and Kathy Smith, and Martha and Rick Shaw.

According to the Associated Press, once the peace accord was signed, NATO would send 3,500 troops to Macedonia to disarm the Albanian rebels. Operation Essential Harvest, led by British troops, would last about a month and involve troops from the United States and 10 other European nations.

Troops would enter Macedonia only if there is a sustainable cease-fire and if the Macedonian government approves an amnesty for the rebels.

This is not the first evacuation faced by CBF's Albanian team. In March 1999, six CBF field personnel withdrew from Macedonia when the U.S. Embassy recommended all western personnel leave the area. In 1997, personnel serving in Albania were evacuated from that country due to escalating violence.

Recently, CBF field personnel put their normal activities on hold following a U.S. Embassy recommendation in late July that Americans remain indoors due to protests in Skopje.

The Earls serve in Gostivar, where they are leading a reconciliation project that has been put on hold because of recent violence.

Darrell and Kathy Smith work among Albanians through English-as-a-second-language training and agricultural ministries in the capital of Skopje.

Martha and Rick Shaw also minister to Albanians in Skopje. Martha leads ministry to orphans and widows, while Rick works primarily with two church plants in Skopje and Kosovo.

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-- By ABP staff

Proposed moderate seminary in Kentucky elects president

By Trennis Henderson

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, a moderate seminary that has been in the planning stages for several years, has named a president to seek to move those plans into reality.

Seminary trustees elected Greg Earwood, pastor of Faith Baptist Church in Georgetown, Ky., as president July 16. Earwood, pastor of the church since 1995, will leave the pastorate to begin his seminary role Sept. 1.

The proposed seminary was incorporated in the mid-1990s in response to the conservative shift at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. Earwood has served since 1998 as chairman of a committee to give direction to the seminary's future.

"When the Spirit of God blows a fresh breeze of new direction into your life, you must follow God's leading," Earwood wrote in an Aug. 5 letter of resignation to his congregation.

Though details of his job description have not been finalized, he is expected to provide leadership for fund raising, faculty recruitment, curriculum development and other administrative responsibilities. Trustees will meet later this month to address those and other issues.

Trustee Bob Baker, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Lexington, noted, "One of the reasons Baptist Seminary of Kentucky has not been established yet is that we have not had that leader who was willing to step forward and provide the leadership the seminary needs."

"We have that type of person in Greg," he added. "I think he is one who can take the best of scholarship and the best of church life and blend the two together to enhance the kingdom of God."

Baker said seminary leaders "know it is going to be small when we start out but we want it to be quality."

"This wasn't a spur-of-the-moment thing," he said. "It's been a matter of timing."

Earwood, a Mississippi native, compared the seminary's future to building a new home. "After envisioning what our home might look like, we are ready to proceed to the architect stage by working on the details," he said, noting that the seminary's foundation "will be our historic Baptist principles."

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Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children announces layoff of 9 staff members

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Citing a decline in state referrals, Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children is laying off nine workers on two campuses.

In an Aug. 7 memo to employees, KBHC President Bill Smithwick wrote, "The loss of these jobs is a result in a decrease of referrals from the commonwealth of Kentucky."

Smithwick said the agency's policy against hiring homosexual workers is a factor but "not the real reason referrals have dropped recently."

"There still are social workers who won't refer to us but that's nothing new," he said.

Smithwick said the main reasons for the loss in referrals include new placement strategies by the Kentucky Cabinet for Families and Children, KBHC hiring standards that are being challenged in court and the design of the agency's available programs.

Smithwick said the state has placed approximately 5,000 children with relatives, significantly reducing the number of children referred to private childcare providers.

Vickie Grassman, KBHC communications director, said the recent layoffs include five staff members on the Spring Meadows campus and four at Glen Dale. She said the agency currently is operating three of six cottages at Spring Meadows and two of six at Glen Dale, serving a total of 50 children on the two campuses.

Smithwick said the staff reduction was an effort to "get our personnel in line with the number of referrals we're receiving. It's a matter of managing resources.

"This is not the closure of the program," he added, noting that referrals typically increase in the fall.

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Kentucky Baptist relief volunteers help flood victims cope with loss

By David Winfrey

MUD BRANCH, Ky. (ABP) -- It is a scene all too familiar for Baptist disaster-relief volunteers. But for the victims, it's brand new.

Dora Newsome looks at the buckling hardwood floor, less than three years old, that she now must tear out of her home.

For four days she has been cleaning her house, which filled with water after flash floods hit eastern Kentucky Aug. 3-4.

Teenagers from Missouri who were scheduled to help First Baptist Church of McDowell with vacation Bible school instead helped her get the mud out of her living room and kitchen.

"We've used so much Clorox (bleach) it's eating my hands up," Newsome said.

And yet, it's still not enough to save most of her belongings.

The water rose so quickly from the stream behind her house that she had just 10 minutes to get her car up a hill to safety.

"People ask 'Why didn't you save anything?'" she recalled. "It just came so fast. You don't have time. You're saving your life."

Now, she is left with problems seen and unseen. Disaster-relief workers already had told her she would have to toss her mattress, and she knew the waterlogged boxes of belongings would have to go.

Doors on the kitchen cabinets are falling apart, and tiles are popping up from the floor. But that's not all.

The rose-colored wall in the dining room is freshly scrubbed, but officials have told her an unseen enemy -- mold -- will force her to tear out the wall to remove any insulation that was soaked by the rising tide.

"I had everything looking so pretty, and it's gone," she said with a nervous laugh.

Kentucky Baptist Convention disaster-relief volunteer O.A. Collins has seen this over and over again. Tearing out wet, white insulation from behind a wall, it's hard to imagine that the material is ruined.

But within a day, mold turns insulation black. Leaving it in the walls -- or refusing to throw away a soaked couch -- will pose serious health problems, said Collins, a member of Unity Baptist Church in Ashland, Ky.

Harold Moore's voice quakes when he talks about the losses he's seen as a coordinator for the Kentucky workers.

"The hardest thing we have to do is to tell people that they have to tear out as much of their home that they do," said Moore. He estimated that a third of the families they serve in eastern Kentucky would lose all their belongings. "Sometimes, this job gets to you. It really does."

Volunteers must maintain their own spiritual health while working at disasters in order to be able to adequately serve others, according to Mickey Caison, national coordinator for Southern Baptist disaster relief at the North American Mission Board.

"The unique thing about the mud-out ministry is that you spend hours or days with families," he said.

As opposed to feeding, when volunteers must keep the food line moving, workers have a chance to develop a close bond with families touched by disaster when cleaning out a house, Caison said. "It opens the door for us to give a verbal witness to Christ and his love."

Thirty-five state Baptist conventions have organized disaster-relief units, with approximately 21,000 trained volunteers.

Many of the 300 mobile units involve equipment and crews for feeding or cleanup. But some teams also provide such services as childcare, communication, water purification and clean showers.

Last year, workers responded to 79 natural disasters, including disasters in Turkey and Venezuela.

Workers served approximately 300,000 meals last year, but that was far less than the 1.6 million meals served in 1999 when hundreds of volunteers responded to Hurricane Floyd in North Carolina.

Volunteer Earl Leach Sr. said he first learned about disaster-relief work from a Western Recorder article about volunteers needed in North Carolina after Floyd.

"I haven't missed a job since," said Earl, a member of New Hope Baptist Church in Winchester. "I love the Lord and I love people. When I asked him (God) about it before I started, I knew before I got off my knees that was what I was supposed to do."

Volunteers could be in Kentucky at least two more weeks if enough workers are available, according to volunteer Wanda Klein.

Gov. Paul Patton has asked President Bush to declare Floyd, Knott, Letcher, Perry and Pike counties as federal disaster areas, freeing them up to receive federal assistance.

The heavy rains, dumping approximately four-and-a-half inches in four hours, damaged at least \$11.5 million worth of roads, bridges and public buildings, according to the Kentucky Division of Emergency Management. At least another \$1.5 million worth of personal property also was destroyed, state emergency management officials said.

Kentucky Baptists had more than 100 requests for clean-up assistance as of Aug. 10.

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