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Missouri convention in turmoil as committees make sweeping changes

By ABP staff

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- The Missouri Baptist Convention, in recent years a scene of contention between conservatives and moderates for control of the state affiliate of the Southern Baptist Convention, is gearing up for another round this fall.

While Missouri Baptists have endured controversy at annual meetings for the last three years, observers say it has escalated since conservatives took over last fall.

After winning presidential elections three years in a row, conservatives gained controlling interest last year in a key committee that nominates leaders for the state convention's various trustee boards.

Now, they are reported to be moving quickly to fill those boards with new members sympathetic to conservative causes, in the process bypassing current trustees who would traditionally be offered a second term and tightening qualifications for all nominees.

Other anticipated controversy when the state convention meets Oct. 29-31 in Cape Girardeau surrounds a proposal to require member churches to pledge loyalty to the conservative-led Southern Baptist Convention and to adopt a version of the SBC's "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement. Critics say the changes would violate Baptists' long tradition of local-church autonomy.

Jim Hill, the state convention's executive director, has warned that such wholesale changes could prompt many churches to cut ties with Missouri Baptists. Some are speculating that disenfranchised churches could form a separate state convention.

And in part an effort to add distance from the state convention's heated political climate, two agencies -- a retirement home and conference center -- have voted to change to a self-perpetuating board of trustees.

Developments include the following:

-- In July, an MBC nominating committee declined to re-nominate at least 24 persons eligible for second terms on convention boards and agencies. That followed an earlier announcement in March that the

committee would impose additional criteria to those stated in convention bylaws for nominees. They included limiting the number of board members per church and requiring that all nominees be "personally supportive of both the Missouri Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention."

Committee members said the new criteria were intended to "broaden the tent" of convention leadership and break up a "good-old-boy" system perpetuated by moderates. In a rare public criticism by a paid leader, Hill told the state Baptist newspaper he believed the new guidelines were rather a way to facilitate a quicker takeover of Missouri Baptist boards by a politically motivated group.

"I have been very concerned about these new rules that have not been approved by the convention and are not part of the constitution, bylaws or nominating-committee rules that have been adopted by the convention," he told Word and Way.

In a subsequent column for paper, Hill wrote that the nomination process "does not seem to reflect a spirit of integrity and fairness."

Hill said recommendations he gave the committee to fill six vacancies were ignored. Moderates believe that after this year's elections, a new conservative majority on the state's executive board may move to replace Hill.

Meanwhile, a number of sitting board members complained that they met the announced criteria but still weren't offered an additional term.

-- A committee on "continuing review" is recommending tighter membership requirements for the convention's churches. Among proposals are that churches affirm either the 1963 or 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" and be in "single alignment" with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Critics, including Hill, said the recommendation would lead to an unprecedented "connectionalism" between the state and national convention. Others, including Word and Way Editor Bill Webb, faulted the proposal for "telling churches to 'approve or else,'" a violation of Southern Baptists' tradition of local-church autonomy.

Speaking to conservative leaders, credentials committee chairman David Tolliver said charges of creedalism are unwarranted. "This statement doesn't ask anyone to sign anything," he said. "It does not ask anyone to adhere to or adopt anything. It says 'affirm.'"

-- Conservative leaders of the Missouri Baptist executive board were said to be considering a lawsuit against the Baptist Home, which removed itself from convention control last year by moving to a self-perpetuating board of trustees.

Attorneys advised Baptist Home trustees to make the move to limit liability for both the home and state convention in event that either is sued. Insiders acknowledged, however, that it was also motivated by a desire to distance the agency from politics in the state convention.

The executive board narrowly approved a covenant agreement with Baptist Home designed to avert a lawsuit July 10 after debating the issue in executive session. Observers expect the covenant to face challenge at the annual convention.

Windermere Baptist Conference Center followed suit this year, setting up a self-perpetuating trustee board July 30. At least one other entity related to the state convention was said to be considering a similar move.

-- Hill warned that such wholesale changes in Missouri Baptist life could prompt perhaps 200 churches to leave the convention in protest.

Moderate leaders are said to be privately discussing the possibility of a new, separate state convention. While conservatives in Texas and Virginia have taken that step, Missouri would be home to the SBC's first anti-fundamentalist state breakaway group.

Hill also complained that conflict in the convention is destroying his vaunted New Directions plan to reorganize and revitalize the state's Baptist witness.

Criticized by conservatives for such comments, Hill replied: "Some believe that I'm taking a side in this. I'm really not. I'm on the side of staying together and doing what God's called us to do."

-- Two official MBC committees reported on their work at the annual meeting of Project 1000, the conservative organization that has worked since 1998 to gain control of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

Chairmen of the state's nominating and credentials committees headlined the annual meeting of the group led by layman Roger Moran. Critics said it was improper for a committee elected to serve all Missouri Baptists to answer to one political faction.

-- Earlier, offered a voluntary severance package as part of a staff reorganization, a fourth of Baptist Building employees left their jobs. Many cited fears over job security stemming from Baptist politics.

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White House issues report on status of church-state partnerships

By Jeff Huett

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Faith-based and community providers of social services face "burdensome" restrictions and receive "very little" federal support, concludes a White House report released Aug. 16 at the Brookings Institution.

The 25-page survey, titled "Unlevel Playing Field," makes no specific policy recommendations but lists 15 barriers that faith-based and community organizations reportedly face in seeking and receiving federal funds. The report finds a "widespread" bias against these organizations, and concludes that the federal government often "ignores" them despite their "vast, varied and vital community-serving roles."

An executive order signed by President George W. Bush in January mandated the report, which presented the results of an audit of five cabinet departments to identify "barriers" to the participation of faith-based groups in the delivery of social services. Included in the audit were the departments of Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Education, Labor and Justice.

John Bridgeland, director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, said the report "shows systematically that government has been hostile to the participation of faith-based and community-based organizations when it ought to have been neutral."

Melissa Rogers, executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, said that while that may be the view of the White House, "there's a very important other side to the debate."

"In some respects the field is not level," Rogers said. "That, to some, is not a problem . because their feeling is that to treat religion differently . would actually be consistent in honoring the religious-liberty principles."

Of the 15 barriers cited, six were listed as obstacles to faith-based organizations seeking federal support. The remaining were referred to as barriers to small and community-based organizations.

John DiIulio, who resigned for personal reasons as head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives a day after the report's release, said there is no question that nonprofit organizations play a large role in the delivery of social services. However, he said, an explanation for the wide funding gap between large providers and grassroots organizations has long been debated. Current charitable-choice provisions that were enacted as a late addition to 1996 welfare-reform legislation "[have] not been vigorously or well implemented by those charged with implementing it," he said.

"I think what the report tells us is that we have a lot of work to do in the way of government reform if we're going to realize our aspirations . for fair and effective social-service contracting," DiIulio said.

The report claims the government has focused much more on the "prohibition" of governmental establishment of religion than the "honoring the protection" of religious liberty when it comes to doling out federal aid to social-service providers.

But Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said that what the administration calls "barriers" to government funding for faith-based groups are really safeguards needed for the groups' own protection.

"Barriers, like bureaucratic red tape and unnecessary regulations, should be eliminated," Walker said. "Much of what the White House calls barriers are really guardrails keeping faith-based, government funded programs from falling into a constitutional ditch."

Darren Walker, the chief operating officer for the Harlem, N.Y.,-based Abyssinian Development Corporation, underscored that point in a panel discussion held by the Pew Forum a day after the report's release.

He said the organization had not encountered any restrictive conditions as a result of the group's religious orientation or affiliation with a Christian organization. However, he said there were general restrictions articulated very well in the report. In particular, the restriction in some grant programs that qualifying organizations must be separate 501 (c)(3) entities are appropriate, he said, because "it protects and undergirds the integrity and autonomy of the religious institution that is . doing the work."

The U.S. House passed charitable-choice legislation on July 19 in the form of the Community Solutions Act. Senate Democrats say it may be next year before they address the administration's faith-based funding plan.

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Bush faith czar leaves post, critics say initiative in trouble

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- After six months at the post, President Bush's director of the office on faith-based initiatives, John DiIulio, is calling it quits.

DiIulio, a registered Democrat on leave from the University of Pennsylvania, made the announcement Aug. 17.

He said that he had intended to stay only a short time to help launch Bush's White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. But he also gave other reasons in news interviews, including health and family reasons as well as exasperation from partisan politics over the faith initiative.

Supporters of the initiative want to see tax dollars funding religious groups to provide social services, but opponents of the measure say it would violate the separation of church and state and threaten the independence of churches from the government.

In news interviews DiIulio said that he had always intended to re-evaluate his position after six months. A CNN Web site story said he had become frustrated at internal White House politics on the issue and with critics from the right and left.

"Things that should be bipartisan can turn partisan," said DiIulio.

In an interview with Cox Newspapers, DiIulio said, "We had every possible criticism from every possible side."

Bush's faith initiative has passed the House of Representatives but is stalled in the Senate where lawmakers appear unwilling to approve the bill in its present form. One major stumbling block is the

measure's allowance for religious groups to take federal dollars while continuing their long practice of discriminating in hiring practices based on religious beliefs. While churches have long been allowed the exemption from civil-rights laws, they have never taken tax dollars while doing so.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State, an opponent of Bush's faith initiative, said in a press release that DiIulio's comments to reporters are revealing -- particularly comments shrugging off opposition to the bill as "nonsense."

"Most people whose ideas are criticized by 'all sides' would probably think their ideas are the problem, not that everyone else is wrong," said Barry Lynn, AU's executive director. "DiIulio prefers to condemn honest disagreement as 'nonsense' and then head out of town."

Lynn also charged that "DiIulio was left out of the loop in recent weeks as Bush operatives manipulated the faith-based initiative to make the plan more palatable to the Religious Right." Lynn concluded, "I can't blame him for leaving. I wish he'd take the faith-based initiative with him."

Officials in the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives were contacted by ABP but failed to respond before deadline.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, released a statement about DiIulio's resignation, saying it was "disappointing but not surprising." He also stated his skepticism about Bush's faith measure becoming law.

"While I am skeptical about the likelihood that President Bush's noble goal to empower religious groups to meet human needs more effectively will be successful politically, I feel that it is right for our government and religious leaders to try to achieve that goal within constitutional parameters," said Land. He noted that DiIulio often found himself at "ground zero of the agonizing complexities of one of our founding fathers' most ingenious bedrock principles -- the separation of church and state."

Land added, "I believe John understands Southern Baptists and other evangelicals far better than when he begun his tenure."

Meanwhile, Bush spoke in support of his faith initiative in his Saturday radio address, a day after DiIulio announced his resignation.

"A compassionate government should find ways to support their good works," Bush said. "Unfortunately, government often treats charities and community groups as rivals instead of partners."

He discussed the report recently released by the White House faith office examining federal rules and regulations for discrimination against community and faith-based groups.

"Five Cabinet agencies now have issued their findings," Bush said. "Their report . documents a government bias against faith and community-based organizations, a bias that exists even when constitutional concerns about church and state have been addressed.

Bush said, "Government administrators restrict religious groups from even applying for funding simply because they are religious."

He said, "My Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives is also working closely with groups to help them know their civil rights, know how to effectively apply for funds so their good works can be expanded.

Children touch community through prayer ministry

By Marv Knox

BOERNE, Texas (ABP) -- Children's prayers have touched lives throughout a small Texas town and beyond, all due to the inspiration of an 8-year-old who wanted to pray for his pastor.

At First Baptist Church of Boerne, located near San Antonio, Pastor's Prayer Partners has become a means for children to commit to pray for their church and pastor, as well as their community, state and nation. And they also put feet to their prayers, reported Pastor Bubba Stahl.

The program started several years ago when 8-year-old Mason Finley approached Stahl after a Sunday-morning worship service.

"I pray for you every day, especially on Sundays," Mason told his pastor.

The boy's love and commitment touched Stahl, who asked Mason to be his prayer partner. The experience inspired Stahl to write parents of all the church's children from age 5 through 12, describing his idea for Pastor's Prayer Partners and asking permission to write the children.

"About 100 prayer partners were enlisted that first year," Stahl recalled. "They each made a one-year commitment to be my prayer partner.

"I prayed for them, and they prayed for me, especially on Sundays. They also committed to pray for their families, our church, their teachers and various requests I would send them throughout the year. This began one of the most powerful prayer ministries in our church." Stahl provides each prayer partner with a praying-hands pin, and he sends a thank you/birthday card and three or four letters throughout the year, each citing specific prayer requests.

"When I see them on Sunday wearing their pins, I make a special effort to pray for them, thanking them for their prayers for our church, our community and me," Stahl said. "At the end of the year, I write them all a thank-you letter for their year of ministry, and we begin the process all over again for the new year." The prayer partners receive requests asking them to pray for mission trips and missionaries. And that led to mission action, Stahl noted.

"This past year, we decided to take the prayer partners on a mission trip -- a prayer walk in our community," he explained.

Stahl made appointments with the mayor, chief of police and school superintendent in Boerne. The children prayer walked in the city hall, police station and school district offices. They learned about the needs of city leaders and prayed with them and their staffs.

"Each child was prepared with a verse of Scripture and a prayer, and at each location a boy and a girl were called upon to share their verses and to pray," he said.

The success of the local prayer walk inspired expansion. The prayer partners in grades four through six participated in a prayer walk mission trip to the state capitol.

"The prayer partners dressed according to Senate and House dress code, and each had a verse of Scripture and a prayer prepared," Stahl reported. "They also were instructed to enlist someone to pray for them for the day while they were in Austin. Missionaries need prayer support, and we were on a mission trip." The children met and prayed for their state representative and senator, as well as their staffs. They also conducted a prayer walk in the capitol, including the House and Senate chambers, as well as the Supreme Court building and around the governor's mansion.

This year, the sixth-grade Pastor's Prayer Partners participated in a five-day prayer walk in Washington, D.C.

After six months of training, they met their congressional representative and senators and prayed with their staffs, just as they had done with officials in Boerne and Austin. They also conducted prayer walks in the

U.S. capitol, including the House and Senate chambers, plus the U.S. Supreme Court building, the White House and Arlington National Cemetery.

"Our Washington trip was one of the most powerful mission trips I have ever experienced," Stahl noted. "God used us in the lives of our nation's leaders in ways that were unexpected.

"As we traveled by subway to the various places, we would pray for people we encountered, and several shared prayer requests with us as they realized what we were doing. Some of the children made contacts with international tourists and have continued to pray for them." Pastor's Prayer Partners and prayer walking are ministries that can be duplicated in other churches, Stahl said.

"The children in your church are a powerful resource for prayer ministry," he added. "Prayer walking is a mission-trip experience that children can participate in and benefit from."

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Retirees meet unusual challenge to build earthquake-resistant church

By Becky Bridges and Ken Camp

TAHOE CITY, Calif. (ABP) -- More than 30 retired couples from Texas spent the summer near Lake Tahoe. But unlike most other visitors to the popular leisure spot, they devoted every waking hour to hard labor -- framing and decking a building for a Baptist church.

A crew of Texas Baptist Men Retiree Builders started work May 18 on a new facility for First Baptist Church in Tahoe City, Calif. Three months later, despite sunburn, sore thumbs and aching muscles, the builders couldn't help but smile as they recounted the challenge of building an earthquake-resistant church facility.

The church, near the California/Nevada state line, lies near a major fault line. It is in an area designated "level three," meaning earthquakes are likely. As a result, the church building had to be built with oversized, reinforced beams and meet stringent building codes.

"We had to build this church differently than anything I've ever seen," said Retiree Builder Gene Stapp of Mabank, Texas. "The building will be so sound, you could practically pick it up, roll it down the hill, and it wouldn't break apart."

First Baptist Church of Tahoe City has been planning the building for 10 years and saving a building fund for three, said Pastor Dan Holzer. The facility will provide not only a place for worship and Bible study, but will also house many of the community ministries, including a variety of programs for youth and children.

"It makes it worth it when we see how valuable this church is to the community," said Carol King of Tulia, who came to Tahoe with her husband, Gene.

While men worked on the construction site, women helped with a vacation Bible school and a summer-school program for the children of working parents, both sponsored by First Baptist Church of Tahoe City.

For the duration of the building project, the Retiree Builders lived in recreational vehicles parked near the construction site. One worker stayed in a borrowed camper provided by someone who heard about the project but couldn't volunteer due to health reasons.

"When God calls these couples, he provides a way for it to happen in some way or another," said Jim Furgerson, executive director-treasurer of Texas Baptist Men.

The workers in Tahoe City are among more than 1,400 volunteers who have served with the Texas Baptist Men Retiree Builders, including church builders, camp builders and special-project builders.

Last year, they built 35 churches, 13 facilities at Texas Baptist encampments, and special projects ranging from apartment complexes for a Baptist seminary in Canada to a family visitation center near a prison. So far this year, the Retiree Builders have worked on about 20 churches, 10 camps and several special projects.

The challenge of building an earthquake-resistant facility meant the Tahoe City project proceeded much more slowly than most church buildings. While the Retiree Builders were able to complete half the work before leaving, more work is needed to get the building "in the dry" before snow begins to fall in a few weeks.

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: The following story updates and replaces an earlier version posted Aug. 21. It includes a comment from a CBF spokesman and new information about another church that previously left the CBF over the same issue.

Texas church leaves CBF over anti-gay policy (revised)

By Bob Allen

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- A former Southern Baptist church has announced it is cutting ties with the moderate breakaway group Cooperative Baptist Fellowship over what congregation leaders called discrimination against gays and lesbians.

Members of University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas, voted Aug. 15 to withdraw from the Atlanta-based CBF over a new policy against hiring gays or funding organizations that "condone, advocate or affirm homosexual practice," according to a press release.

The policy, adopted originally by the Fellowship's governing board, survived a challenge at this summer's General Assembly when delegates voted 701-502 against rescinding it for a yearlong study of where CBF churches stand on the issue.

The policy doesn't exclude homosexuals from CBF membership but forbids funding for pro-homosexual causes. Fellowship leaders describe it as "welcoming but not affirming" of gays.

But a letter to CBF officials, signed by University Baptist leaders on behalf of the congregation, said the policy doesn't speak for Fellowship-friendly churches that both welcome and affirm homosexuals.

"We most deeply regret the condemning message you have sent in the name of Christ to all gay and lesbian persons," said the letter signed by Senior Pastor Larry Bethune, moderator Ellen Bell and Anthony Chapple, deacon chairman.

"We cannot in good conscience support an organization which discriminates against our brothers and sisters in Christ on the basis of their orientation any more than we could do so if the CBF discriminated on the basis of race or gender," the letter continued.

CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal said in a statement that he was "saddened" that any church would use an internal administrative policy "as a litmus test for cooperating with other congregations in global missions and ministries through the Fellowship."

The 400-member church, one of a small number of traditionally Southern Baptist congregations to come out in support of full inclusion of gays and lesbians, in the past defended itself against challenges from its association and state convention for its stance.

The Austin Baptist Association voted to oust the church in 1995 after University Baptist ordained a gay deacon. The Baptist General Convention of Texas executive committee withdrew fellowship in 1998. The Southern Baptist Convention changed its constitution in 1992 to ban from membership any churches that "act to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

Members of the church were present when the CBF separated from the more conservative SBC over a variety of theological issues in 1991. The congregation still belongs to American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and the Alliance of Baptists, a smaller and more liberal SBC splinter group that formed in 1986.

University Baptist isn't the first church to leave the CBF over the funding policy. Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., cut ties with the national CBF last fall, according to a church spokesperson.

Stan Hastey, executive director of the Washington-based Alliance of Baptists, said he wasn't aware of any other gay-friendly churches discussing cutting ties with the CBF, but some congregations are said to be thinking about reducing their level of support over the funding policy.

Dispute over the issue has also energized voices on the other side who contend the relatively close vote against a study is being misused by political opponents to cast the CBF as soft on homosexuality.

They say only a handful of 1,800 Fellowship-friendly churches have taken action to ordain homosexuals or perform a same-sex union. Most of the 500-plus individuals voting for a study, they say, weren't necessarily pro-gay but merely sympathized with those calling for dialogue on the subject.

In July, a self-described "centrist" Baptist leader wrote an open letter labeling a "fundamentalism of the left" within the CBF.

David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, compared a minority of CBF members who advocate full inclusion of homosexuals with fundamentalists in the Southern Baptist Convention who won't tolerate divergent views from moderates.

In a letter to Baptists Committed members, Currie predicted the Fellowship "will not grow unless it is a traditional Baptist organization and not led by fundamentalists of the left."

"Baptists are conservative, Bible-believing, Jesus-following people," Currie wrote. "CBF must reflect that, as well as the Baptist General Convention of Texas."

Former CBF Coordinator Cecil Sherman told the Texas newspaper Baptist Standard that he also ran into rigidity from the left on issues of homosexuality and women in ministry.

Sherman said there were individuals more willing to destroy the CBF rather than compromise, a position he found reminiscent of conservatives who now control the Southern Baptist Convention.

"Fundamentalists were willing to tear up the SBC if they couldn't control it," Sherman said. "Fundamentalists of the left are willing to tear up CBF if they can't control it."

Hastey agreed there is nothing new about tension within CBF between its centrist and more liberal constituencies.

But Hastey disagreed that any left-of-center faction wants to control CBF. "The Texas influence dominates CBF life, in my opinion, and has from the beginning," he said. "There's always been, behind the scenes, a lot of talk about the relative conservatism of so-called moderates out there and what I have heard described as easterner elitism."

Years ago, Alliance and CBF leaders held conversations about the possibility of merging the two groups. Eventually those talks broke down, he said, because leaders from Texas felt "we were too far left of center on women's issues and really off the charts when it came to homosexuality." That would keep CBF from attracting what one former leader "liked to call the tall-steeple churches in Texas," Hastey recalled.

In their letter to CBF leaders, University Baptist representatives accused the organization's executive leadership of making "a political decision affecting theological identity," and then requiring membership to react by affirming or disaffirming its leaders.

The letter said the Fellowship "missed the opportunity to lead all Baptists on this issue" by fostering dialogue on the issue of homosexuals in the church. "We regret that the CBF Coordinating Council chose political expediency instead," the letter said.

The letter encouraged CBF leaders to "listen to voices of dissent among you in the days to come" and looked forward "to a day when all Baptists, including gay and lesbian Baptists, will feel welcome at the Lord's table and in the decision-making councils of our common Baptist life."

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News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Church members 'prayer walk' at opening of molestation trial

ATLANTA -- Members of Eastside Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., "prayer walked" around a Superior Court building hours prior to the largest child-molestation trial in Cobb County history.

The trial against Gunther Fiek, a former martial-arts instructor at the church who is accused of sexually molesting 24 children, began with jury selection Aug. 20.

"The congregation is very concerned about the whole process," Pastor Gerald Harris told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "We are very prayerful about it."

About two dozen church members walked around the courthouse seven times, praying for God to protect families and for the truth to be known.

Harris said he has walked a fine line between visiting Fiek, a trusted Sunday school teacher and soccer coach whose wife still works at the church's Christian activity center, where the abuse allegedly occurred, and counseling with the children and their families.

Harris said Eastside "is a very resilient church. They believe what the devil intends for evil, God can turn that into good." (ABP)

Baylor social-work program accredited

WACO, Texas -- Baylor University's graduate program in social work has gained accreditation from the Council on Social Work Education.

Diana Garland, a social-work professor who chairs the program, said accreditation is important for graduates to qualify for jobs.

Baylor applied for accreditation in 1998 and the next year began offering classes. The first 17 students graduated from the program this May.

Garland said accrediting officials were impressed "that we had integrated faith with professional social-work practice in what they said was a highly ethical way." (ABP)

Youth camping organization moves to Alabama

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. -- The PASSPORT youth-camping ministry is moving after nine years from Louisville, Ky., to new digs in Birmingham, Ala.

The organization has purchased office property in Birmingham and renovated space for a new administrative headquarters for move-in scheduled Aug. 15.

Co-founders David and Colleen Burroughs cited personal reasons for moving the company "back home" to Alabama.

PASSPORT added a full-time administrator in conjunction with the move. Allan Burton, a former staff member at First Baptist Church in Ashland, Va., who has worked on PASSPORT teams with his wife, Valerie, joins the organization as office manager and summer-team coordinator.

The new PASSPORT address is 3421 Sierra Drive, Birmingham, Ala., 35216. (ABP)

Longtime Baptist preacher dies

FAYETTEVILLE, N.C. -- North Carolina Baptists lost what admirers called a "giant" June 10, when preacher Isiah Locklear died two months shy of his 102nd birthday.

Locklear preached his first sermon in 1928. Despite having only a seventh-grade education, he spent 89 years as a minister in Methodist and Baptist churches, 73 as a bivocational pastor. He never held a full-time pastorate.

Since "retiring" at 71, he remained active as a guest preacher in many North Carolina pulpits, preaching his last sermon at age 100 in 1999.

Friends remembered him as an "inspirational Christian" who treated others with, and in turn received, respect. (ABP)

Cuba travel crackdown shouldn't affect Baptist group

WASHINGTON -- Reports of a Treasury Department crackdown on illegal travel to Cuba isn't expected to affect ongoing partnerships sponsored by the Alliance of Baptists.

"From what I've heard, we will be unaffected," said Alliance head Stan Hastey.

While some religious groups travel to Cuba without permission to protest U.S. policy limiting tourism there, Hastey said most Alliance members wouldn't feel comfortable going without the organization's license allowing religious exchanges.

He said 25 Alliance churches have established partnerships with a congregation in Cuba or the Alliance's partner organization, the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba. Hundreds of volunteers have both traveled to and greeted visitors from Cuba over the past 10 years. Many U.S. churches send delegations every year or two, and representatives of both groups travel to attend the other's annual meetings.

Hastey said the Alliance's original two-year license was recently renewed for a year and expires next March 22. (ABP)

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-- By ABP staff

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