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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Regional missions leader requests assent to 'Baptist Faith and Message'
- CBF creates refugee fund, World Vision partnership
- Supreme Court agrees to hear door-to-door canvassing case

Regional missions leader requests assent to 'Baptist Faith and Message'

By Mark Wingfield

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- A regional leader for the Southern Baptist Convention International Mission Board acted on his own when he recently asked personnel to sign a pledge of affirmation for the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," according to IMB officials.

Gordon Fort, regional director for the IMB's work in Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean Islands, sent an e-mail to the missionaries under his supervision in early October asking them to take what he called a "proactive" step.

"There continues to be questions from our SBC constituents at the annual SBC conventions concerning the dissemination of the current copy of the 'Baptist Faith and Message' and the adherence to it by all entities of the SBC," he wrote. "I would like to send a strong message of support from the region of Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean Islands." Such a message could be sent if each IMB missionary in the region would "sign a statement that they have read (the revised 'Baptist Faith and Message') and can affirm it." Even though newer missionaries may have signed the 2000 faith statement before appointment, Fort asked them to do so again in a show of solidarity.

"My desire in asking for this signed statement is to send a strong message of support to our IMB leadership and its trustees," he wrote. "I would like to be able to take these signed statements to the IMB trustee meeting in November." In the e-mail, Fort urged those under his leadership to "follow up with your personnel to be sure they have received this request and actively check to be sure action is taken."

The statement he wanted missionaries to sign says: "I have read and affirm the current edition of the 'Baptist Faith and Message.' In accountability to the SBC, its member churches and the trustees of the IMB, I will carry out my responsibilities as a missionary in accordance with and not contrary to the 'Baptist Faith and Message.'" Asked by at least one missionary for clarification, Fort later sent a second e-mail stating his request was "purely voluntary" and involved "no mandate from Richmond," meaning from IMB headquarters in Richmond, Va.

Fort's request was not initiated by IMB administrators in Richmond, confirmed Larry Cox, IMB vice president for mobilization.

"This was his own action, his own decision," Cox said, emphasizing that Fort had requested that "each missionary voluntarily sign the statement."

"This was an action of a regional leader but not an action of the IMB administration or trustees," Cox said. "This was something he decided to do himself."

Even though the request was stated to be voluntary, that may not be how it was received by some missionaries on the field, suggested a Texas minister who spent 15 years as an IMB missionary in the same region.

"There is a compulsion about it, no doubt. If you don't sign, you're going to be stigmatized," said Bryan Houser, minister of missions at Shiloh Terrace Baptist Church in Dallas.

"There is a general feeling that things are handled top down anyway, so this will be perceived in that light," he added. "Certainly anybody who didn't sign would feel like they were singled out. If I were on the field and I got the letter, I would think, 'If I don't sign it, what's going to happen?' Somebody somewhere is going to know, and they're going to ask why."

While Houser said he and Fort are friends and he understands the positive intent Fort had, he believes the request has the potential to put pressure on veteran missionaries.

IMB policy regarding missionaries remains the same as it has been since trustees clarified the matter in January, Cox said. At that time, trustees codified a longstanding practice of requiring missionary candidates to explain any disagreements they have with the "Baptist Faith and Message." Missionary candidates also are asked to sign a statement saying they will carry out their work in "accordance with" the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Unlike some other SBC agencies, missionary applicants are allowed to have minor points of disagreement with the wording of the faith statement, trustees were told at the time.

According to trustee action in January, previously appointed missionaries were not to be required to sign an affirmation of the revised "Baptist Faith and Message."

Cox declined to say what response IMB administrators in Richmond, Va., had to Fort's request of missionaries in Southern Africa. However, as a former regional leader, he acknowledged he was allowed "to make decisions based on what the team I worked with and I felt like was best for our region."

Fort insisted his intention was positive but acknowledged he "stepped into the minefield of perception."

"For those outside our region, who have not had the opportunity to understand the context or positive intent of my request, I apologize for any misunderstanding this may have caused," he said in an e-mail interview.

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CBF creates refugee fund, World Vision partnership

By Jim Newton

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Executives of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and World Vision announced Oct. 18 a joint intent to respond to the Afghani refugee crisis, issuing a "declaration of love" for innocent refugees of Afghanistan.

The collaborative effort was reported to CBF's Coordinating Council by CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal and Global Missions Co-coordinator Barbara Baldrige during the council's fall board meeting in Atlanta. World Vision is the largest Christian relief and development organization in the United States.

The lives of 7.5 million Afghans are at risk as they flee for safety in what is now the world's biggest refugee crisis. "These refugees lack food, clean water and medical care," the joint statement said. "When brutal winter descends, millions more will suffer."

"While the American government has declared war against the terrorists behind the deplorable attack on Sept. 11, we as Christians declare our love for the innocent refugees of Afghanistan, most of them women and children," said Vestal. "We must respond by putting our love into action."

"The needs are staggering," he added. "Military action against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has intensified the refugee crisis. The people of Afghanistan have endured three years of drought, two decades of civil war, and now aerial bombardment."

According to USAID, Afghanistan has the lowest per-person calorie intake in the world. One out of every four children dies before the age of five. Refugees lack food, shelter, clean water and medical care.

Already, World Vision has sent thousands of family survival kits to help the refugees. Each kit contains life-saving blankets, water-purification kits, soap, food and cooking supplies, and more.

World Vision has established an operating budget of \$3.2 million to work through a humanitarian alliance with Afghani refugees who flee to the bordering countries of Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. As much as \$20 million will be needed before winter ends.

The joint response with World Vision "is made for such a time as this," said Vestal. "CBF and World Vision share many common values, including holistic ministry, participatory models, and transformation of communities. World Vision's expertise in emergency response, coupled with CBF's global missions experience with volunteer deployment, will make both organizations more effective in responding to this enormous crisis."

CBF has created an "Afghan Refugee Relief Fund" and issued an appeal to its individual members and 1,800 churches to give sacrificially to enable a variety of ministries among the refugees.

Baldrige announced that David Harding, an agricultural-development specialist with expertise in working with non-governmental organizations in the Mideast and Africa, will serve as full-time project manager to coordinate the Fellowship's Afghan refugee response and partnership with World Vision.

CBF plans to recruit volunteers with professional expertise in areas such as health, refugee camp management, food distribution, shelter, trauma counseling, general administration and accounting/bookkeeping. When volunteers are needed, CBF will deploy and supervise small, professional teams of volunteers to help the refugees.

The Fellowship will also create a Web site devoted to Afghan relief ministries, providing updated information on prayer concerns, volunteer opportunities and online donations; bulletin inserts and other resources for churches; and practical suggestions for ways for churches and individuals to be involved. The URL address for the Web site, expected to go online by Nov. 1, is www.cbfaafghanrelief.net.

-- Jim Newton writes for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Supreme Court agrees to hear door-to-door canvassing case

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear arguments in an Ohio case regarding the practice of door-to-door evangelism. The case, which the court accepted Oct. 15, stems from a lawsuit brought against the town of Stratton, Ohio, by members of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

In the case, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society vs. Village of Stratton, Ohio, members of the national Jehovah's Witnesses organization and a local Jehovah's Witnesses congregation sued the government and mayor of Stratton.

The plaintiffs were trying to prevent the town from implementing a 1998 law requiring any neighborhood canvasser -- from door-to-door evangelists to schoolchildren raising funds to itinerant salesmen -- to receive a permit from the mayor's office before beginning their solicitation.

The Jehovah's Witnesses argued that violated their First Amendment right to free exercise of religion. A major tenet of the Jehovah's Witnesses faith is that practitioners participate in door-to-door evangelistic efforts.

The Jehovah's Witnesses also argued that the ordinance violated the freedom of press and freedom of expression clauses of the First Amendment. Specifically, they contended the ordinance violated a right to "anonymous" political speech established by previous Supreme Court decisions.

The high court, however, agreed to hear only the anonymous-speech portion of the Jehovah's Witnesses argument.

Previous courts -- most recently the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals -- have upheld most of the town's anti-canvassing statute. In accepting only a portion of the case, the Supreme Court apparently agreed that requiring permits for door-to-door proselytizing does not impose an unreasonable burden on religious expression.

Paul Polidoro, the lead attorney for the Jehovah's Witnesses group, said he was happy the court will hear the case but disappointed that it will not be decided on religious-liberty grounds.

"We do feel there's a viable free-exercise claim," he said. "But that being said, the fact that the court is deciding to hear this on free-speech grounds gives us a really solid feeling that the rights of individuals just to communicate information will be upheld."

Polidoro said the Jehovah's Witnesses object to being required to get government permission before doing door-to-door evangelism because they believe it cuts at the heart of their faith. "They feel that the right to engage in their ministry comes from God -- it is a commission," he explained. "Since they have that commission from God, it would almost be an insult to God for them to then go and ask man's permission to fulfill it."

Baptist leaders consulted said they didn't view the Ohio law as a great barrier to religious liberty.

Jerry Field, evangelism-initiative coordinator for the Missouri Baptist Convention, said he would not object to applying for permits for door-to-door evangelism.

"I would say, 'Fine -- what do I need to do to get my license,'" Field said, noting that street witnessing is becoming less popular and less effective as a means of evangelism among Christians anyway. "But I would hope in our country that there would be the freedom to do that for those who choose to do so," he added.

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said that since the case is being tried on free-speech grounds, it will not have as direct an effect on religious-liberty issues as it could have had the justices agreed to hear the Jehovah's Witnesses' entire argument.

"The court declined to review the more interesting and perhaps more important legal issue concerning the contours of the Witnesses' rights under the First Amendment's Free Exercise Clause," he noted. "Although

it is impossible to predict the outcome, the court generally disfavors registration requirements and tends closely to examine any such attempts on the part of government -- particularly when applied to non-commercial speech."

This is far from the first time that Jehovah's Witnesses have challenged a municipal anti-canvassing ordinance. In the first half of the 20th century, Jehovah's Witnesses were in the forefront of using the court system to gain a high level of protection for such religious practices as well as other forms of religious expression.

Polidoro said he expected the court to hear arguments in the case in February.

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-- Robert Marus is chief of ABP's Washington bureau.

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