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**USAF command chaplain  
seeks BGCT endorsement**

By Ken Camp

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (ABP) -- Col. David Park, command chaplain for the United States Air Force Space Command in Colorado Springs, Colo., is seeking endorsement by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Park, a Texas native who served on a committee that recommended the state convention start endorsing chaplains, traveled to Washington March 25 with Bobby Smith, the BGCT's director of chaplaincy relations, to formally ask the Armed Forces Chaplaincy Board to approve the state convention as an endorsing agency.

Once the U.S. Department of Defense recognizes a denominational entity as an endorsing agency, hospitals and other institutions using chaplains generally recognize the endorsement as valid.

Park, who is on track to become the first chaplain endorsed by the Texas convention, said he believes BGCT endorsement will provide an alternative for those uncomfortable with a recent decision by the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board requiring that all chaplains affirm recent changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Some of those changes are controversial, and critics say using the confession of faith as a creed violates Baptist tradition.

"By endorsing chaplains, the Baptist General Convention of Texas provides a theological umbrella under which military chaplains can serve while maintaining their own theological integrity," Park said.

Park said the endorsing alternative offered by the BGCT "frees us up from the tension we've lived with because of theological differences, and it allows us to focus on what we're called to do -- minister to men and women in uniform," he said.

Park said he respects fellow chaplains who have no problem affirming the new "Baptist Faith and Message." But he noted, "The theological identity that Baptist General Convention of Texas endorsement offers us is a real plus to chaplains who feel somewhat estranged from the Southern Baptist Convention."

Smith said the BGCT is responding to requests by Baptist chaplains for an endorsement program that affirms biblical authority "without necessity of signing a credal statement."

"These chaplains want to make a conservative statement of their faith that affirms God and the Holy Bible, while maintaining their beliefs in the priesthood of the believer and the religious freedom of each believer and local church," he said.

Smith said the BGCT endorsement process would honor experience by "grandfathering" in chaplains who were endorsed previously by other Baptist agencies.

Park oversees the ministry programs of 100 personnel in the U.S. Air Force Space Command chaplain service. He was born and raised in Texas and attended Baylor University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He said he is proud to be the first BGCT-endorsed chaplain.

Smith, who has served both as a hospital chaplain and a pastor, said he would aim to provide a "relational ministry" for chaplains that emphasizes networking, mutual support and professional development.

"I want to provide pastoral care to pastoral caregivers," Smith said. "I hope to be proactive in their lives so they can be proactive in their ministries. My intention is to go to the chaplains where they live, work and minister, and stand beside them."

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## **Baptist group joins call for peace in Mideast**

By Bob Allen

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- The Alliance of Baptists endorsed an ecumenical "Christian Call for Peace" in the Middle East April 6.

The statement, drafted by a Washington-based grassroots organization called Churches for Middle East Peace, calls for recognition of a viable Palestinian state alongside Israel and an end to Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza.

It further calls for a shared Jerusalem as "a symbol of reconciliation" among Christians, Muslims and Jews; supports a negotiated end to violence between Palestinians and Israelis; advocates international observers as a means of discouraging further violence; and urges leaders of the United States "to do all in their power to prepare the road for a just and durable peace."

The Alliance, celebrating its 15th-anniversary convocation April 5-7 at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., voted to amend a longer statement proposed by its board of directors by deleting a phrase citing encouragement over "the U.S. government's most recent efforts to promote peace in the Middle East."

"I am not encouraged by the U.S. government's recent efforts," objected Shanta Premawardhana, pastor of Ellis Avenue Church in Chicago. He said unconditional support for Israel had caused America to "lose credibility" in the worldwide community.

Cathy Tamsberg of Raleigh, N.C., who chaired a committee that helped draft the resolution, said the Alliance had often been critical of the U.S. president and government, and leaders felt it only fair to give credit for President Bush's recent announcement that he would send Secretary of Defense Colin Powell on a Mideast peace mission.

Alliance members overwhelmingly voted to drop the phrase, however, after Vic Green of Greenville, S.C., said he was "uncomfortable" with language that might be "open to misinterpretation" in the event of any future developments that might occur in U.S. Mideast policy.

In a separate resolution, however, Alliance members commended both Bush and Congress for easing the embargo on Cuba last year by allowing the sale of food and medicine there by the U.S. government. The Alliance, which has consistently spoken out against the embargo, called on government officials to "build on the progress" recently made by allowing unrestricted sale of privately financed food and medicine, lifting a licensing process that inhibits foreign trade and eliminating a ban on travel to Cuba by most U.S. citizens.

A third resolution put the Alliance on record as standing "arm-in-arm with the people of Zimbabwe, and all African nations, in the continued struggle for freedom and democracy."

"We encourage and uphold the principles of free speech, free press and the free exercise of the democratic process," the statement said.

It called for an end to violence that has pervaded Zimbabwe since controversial elections in 2000, and called on governments in Zimbabwe and the U.S. to respond to the crisis complicated by drought and the spread of AIDS.

"We call upon our own government and the governments of other nations to make available to the people of Zimbabwe and other African nations the anti-AIDS medications -- at affordable prices -- which can treat the symptoms of this deadly virus and offer both quality and length of life," the resolution said.

Both the Cuba and Zimbabwe resolutions were submitted by individual members who felt strongly about the issues because of involvement with ongoing missions partnerships between the Alliance and Baptists in those countries, said Executive Director Stan Hastey.

In his annual state-of-the-Alliance address, Hastey said the group's "distinctively Baptist and deliberately ecumenical" stance summons it to "rise above nationalistic sloganeering" in response to events like Sept. 11 and violence in the Middle East.

"As Christians, our response to jihad cannot and must not be that of jingoism," Hastey said. "Our prophetic calling, even when the innocent blood of our own fellow citizens is shed, can and must be that of rendering a sturdy witness to peace with justice."

In a greeting message to the Alliance convocation, John Mazvigadza, executive secretary of the Baptist Convention of Zimbabwe, said most of his nation's citizens were "hurt and discouraged by the controversial election." He also said Zimbabwe's 186 Baptist churches were belatedly becoming involved in responding to the crisis of increasing numbers of orphans left by parents who have died from AIDS.

Formed in 1986, the 115-church Alliance was the first incarnation of a protest movement against fundamentalist domination of the Southern Baptist Convention, followed in 1991 by the 1,800-church Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and more recently by a new group calling itself the Mainstream Baptist Network.

While all three groups formed around traditional Baptist values they claim are being eroded in the SBC's current climate, the Alliance has over the years gone on to challenge conservative Baptist views with statements affirming gays and lesbians, ecumenical and interfaith involvement, women preachers and protection of the environment.

Assessing progress after 15 years, however, Hastey said the group "still has much work to do" in order to fulfill its "prophetic" calling.

"As long as we remain an overwhelmingly Caucasian body, we have work to do," he said. "As long as women remain limited in fulfilling their vocations, we have much work to do. As long as gay men and lesbians 'are wounded and ignored by the church,' to cite a phrase from our mission statement, we still have much work to do. As long as we remain content with a lifestyle that exploits the Earth to our own selfish desires, and tolerates cruelty to animals and the rape of natural resources, we have work to do ... . As long as we acquiesce in systemic evil that dooms any of God's children to protracted poverty and entrenched injustice, the Lord knows we still have much work to do."

Hastey said such challenges mean the Alliance is "going to have to think bigger, not smaller," encouraging churches and individual members to increase their giving to the group.

The Alliance elected a new president, Craig Henry, a layman from Monroe, La. Paula Clayton Dempsey, chaplain at Mars Hill College in North Carolina, completed her term as president after presiding over the 2002 convocation.