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Baptist Press

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May 3, 2002

(02-37)

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**Religious leaders found
on both sides of cloning debate**

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Everyone on Capitol Hill involved in the current debate on human cloning agrees that it shouldn't ever be done for reproductive purposes.

After that, questions of ethics and morality get a bit more complicated. Even religious leaders wind up on both sides.

U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) disappointed fellow religious conservatives when he came out in favor of a Senate bill that would allow the cloning of human embryos for research.

Hatch, who has a consistent pro-life voting record, signed on to the legislation along with fellow Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Arlen Specter (R-Penn.), and Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.)

Doctors say "therapeutic" cloning offers great promise for breakthroughs in the treatment of serious diseases. The process involves implanting DNA from a person into an unfertilized human egg cell, creating an embryo that is an exact genetic match of the DNA donor. From the embryo, scientists would harvest "stem cells," specialized cells that can be used to grow new tissues. Possible treatments include cancer, heart disease, diabetes and spinal-cord injuries. And since the new tissues are used by the original donor, there is less risk of their being rejected than if they came from an outside source.

The controversy arises because in the process of harvesting the stem cells, the embryos are destroyed. For that reason, most anti-abortion leaders oppose all stem-cell research, whether with cloned or fertilized embryos.

"They're saying in this bill that you cannot create an embryo for the purpose of reproducing a baby," Shannon Royce, a Washington lobbyist for the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said in a statement released through Baptist Press. "What they are doing is mandating the destruction of these tiny people, because all they are outlawing is the implantation of these tiny cloned embryos. How is this good or right?"

Hatch says he does not believe embryos created by therapeutic cloning and naturally created human embryos are morally equivalent. "At the core of my support for regenerative medicine research is my belief that human life requires and begins in a mother's nurturing womb," Hatch said at an April 30 press

conference. He said embryos cloned for "regenerative medicine research" are not conceived in the traditional sense of a sperm and an egg uniting, nor are they transplanted into a "mother's nurturing womb."

Turning the anti-abortion movement's own terminology on itself, Hatch went on. "Regenerative medicine is pro-life and pro-family," he said. "It enhances, not diminishes, human life. If encouraged to flourish, it can improve the lives of millions of Americans and could lead to new scientific frontiers not now in sight."

Ken Connor, president of the conservative Christian group Family Research Council, lambasted Hatch's reasoning as "morally vacuous and scientifically inaccurate." Connor said cloned embryos should be regarded as fully human. "If human life 'begins in a mother's nurturing womb, not in a petri dish,' according to Hatch, then location is what determines the personhood of the human embryo," Connor said. "That's nonsensical!"

Connor also argued that embryonic stem-cell research is unnecessary, because research using stem cells from adults shows promise at curing the same illnesses. Many scientists, however, including 40 Nobel laureates who endorsed the Hatch bill, disagree.

Connor said a competing Senate bill banning all forms of human cloning is the only truly pro-life alternative. "There is only one bill, the bipartisan Brownback-Landrieu Human Cloning Prohibition Act, that will both prevent the implantation of a cloned embryo in a woman's uterus and will not mandate that cloned human embryos be destroyed," he said.

That bill is sponsored by Sens. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and Mary Landrieu (D-La.)

But several other religious leaders, including Christians, sent representatives to the April 30 press conference in support of the Hatch bill. Representatives of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations were there, as were several local pastors.

Michael Bledsoe, pastor of Washington's Riverside Baptist Church, said he supports the legislation even though he is aware of the risks involved. "I oppose human cloning and fear that governments might use scientists to create Orwellian societies," he said in an e-mail interview. "Yet, I am a pastor, and pastors have a window into the entire journey of life. We bless infants in the hospital crib and we bless the departing elderly person at the hospice. I think regenerative medicine holds great promise for the whole spectrum of life."

Bledsoe said he believes the potential benefits of therapeutic cloning research to those who are clearly living humans outweigh both the concerns about abuse and the destruction of embryos.

"To ban this research," he said, "is to give primacy to cells smaller than the punctuation marks of this text over human beings, fully flowered."

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Layman Jack Harwell to be ordained, finally

By John Pierce

MORROW, Ga. (ABP) -- Jack Harwell had the longest tenure as editor of the Christian Index, the Georgia Baptist newspaper founded in 1822. He preached in churches across the state for more than two decades in that role, but preferred being counted among the laity.

Harwell named his column "Layman's Log" at the independent news journal Baptists Today, where he became editor after leaving the Georgia paper in 1988. But now, months shy of his 70th birthday, Georgia Baptists' once most visible lay leader is going to be ordained.

The service will take place June 16 at the First Baptist Church of Morrow, Ga., just south of Atlanta, where Harwell serves as interim pastor.

"I refused ordination for 40 years," said Harwell, noting that lay leaders greatly outnumber clergy and are essential to the work of the church. "But I think God's will changes in different eras of your life."

Harwell said he was surprised last summer when someone from the Morrow congregation called and asked him to lead Wednesday night prayer services while they searched for a new pastor.

"I asked, 'Why they would call me?'" said Harwell, whose editorials against the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention led to his early departure as editor of the Christian Index. "They told me the lay people there said I was the first person in Georgia to tell the truth about fundamentalists."

Harwell began leading the mid-week prayer services last June, occasionally filling the pulpit on Sundays. In November, he became the full-time interim pastor.

"I have a greater appreciation for what pastors have to do," said Harwell, who has found preparing three sermons each week to be both a challenge and a spiritual blessing.

Harwell said he also has "a great new appreciation for the volunteer spirit" of the church's lay leaders who help coordinate a medical clinic, build houses with Habitat for Humanity and support a new mission congregation and various other ministries.

But now Harwell believes it the right time to leave the league of laity. His cousin Brantley Harwell, a retired minister who once served in Morrow, will preach the ordination sermon. Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Coordinator Daniel Vestal will give the charge to the church. Jimmy Lewis, who left the Morrow pastorate last year to be missions coordinator for CBF of Georgia, will present the ordination Bible.

And on June 16, the Rev. Jack Harwell will continue his ministry as interim pastor until the next door of opportunity opens.

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Missouri agency boards dispute legal opinion

By Bob Allen

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Five Missouri Baptist agencies are disputing a legal opinion that they broke the law by distancing themselves from the Missouri Baptist Convention.

The MBC executive board recently made public a legal opinion, written by lead lawyer Michael Whitehead, that the state convention has the legal right to control the Baptist Home, Windermere Baptist Conference Center, Missouri Baptist College, Missouri Baptist Foundation and Word and Way. Therefore, the opinion continued, those institutions must recognize trustees duly appointed by the state convention and rescind earlier votes allowing their respective trustee boards to elect their own successors.

In a joint open letter released April 26, however, leaders of the five institutions took issue with several points in the Whitehead opinion.

"After researching the law, our attorneys have concluded that the Missouri Baptist Convention does not, in fact, have membership status standing in any of the five institutions."

The open letter said representatives of the various institutions have sought to meet with convention leaders to resolve concerns and had requested but not been granted copies of legal opinions from three law firms that Whitehead reportedly consulted in compiling his report.

The various entities have said they changed their leadership-selection processes in part to shield them from convention politics, but mainly for fiduciary and liability concerns.

"The decisions reached by our various boards were made only after much consideration, prayer and legal advice," the letter said. "To ascribe evil or ulterior motives to these Missouri Baptists is untrue and harmful to a healing process."

The agency representatives said when similar disputes have erupted in other states, leadership was able to find a compromise solution. They criticized both legal opinions and "inflammatory rhetoric" in the Whitehead report, however, which they said would undermine such efforts.

"Each board of trustees had independent legal counsel from highly respected Missouri law firms," the letter continued. "These firms were unanimous in their recommendations that the boards were following their advice in all actions taken.

"These are complicated issues with multiple ramifications. To characterize these legal issues as they were in the Whitehead report is legally superficial and extremely harmful to Missouri Baptists."

The letter said each board of trustees remains committed to finding common ground with the convention and its churches. "It is our prayer that all of those involved will have the same objective," it concludes.

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Missionary 'transition' likely to be slow, Texas leader says

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- The role of the missionary transition fund established by the Baptist General Convention of Texas may take years rather than months to assess, according to convention leaders.

The fund was established earlier this year to provide assistance to Southern Baptist Convention missionaries who resign or are fired for refusing to sign an affirmation of the SBC's 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

Missionaries will need this assistance over a period of months ahead, reported Don Sewell, director of the Texas Partnerships Resource Center of the BGCT. Decisions leading to immediate resignation or termination are being made in few cases, he explained.

The SBC's International Mission Board has not set a firm deadline for missionaries to sign the faith statement.

"Some missionaries are deciding to resign, while others are simply not signing the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message' and willing to face any consequences while staying on the field," Sewell said.

"The bulk of people are going to be coming very, very slowly," Sewell said. "This might be a two-year process."

By the end of April, the "transitions" e-mail address established by the BGCT had received 66 contacts from active missionaries, reported Steve Seaberry, equipping director of the Texas Partnerships Center. Nine of these either have resigned from the IMB or will be resigning within the next few weeks. One has decided to take an early retirement.

"We have started giving financial assistance to one family," Seaberry said. "Another family will begin receiving assistance in May; yet another will arrive in the States in June and will begin receiving assistance in September. This pattern continues."

The BGCT also has heard from missionaries on four continents who are taking early retirement rather than sign the faith statement -- missionaries who will not need financial aid.

Also as of April 30, the BGCT had in hand cash gifts to the missionary transition fund of \$1,080,000. An additional \$250,000 gift in stocks was in process at that date also.

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