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Nashville, Tennessee

October 2, 2002

OCT 07 2002

(02-91)

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IMB negotiating transfer of Baptist hospital in Yemen

By Bob Allen

FORT SMITH, Ark. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board is preparing to transfer control of Jibla Baptist Hospital in Yemen to a local charity.

Officials of the Richmond, Va., -based IMB call the transfer an "answer to prayer" that allows Southern Baptists to continue to minister through the hospital while providing new opportunities for expanding health-care ministries in the Mideast nation.

A retired medical missionary who opposes the deal, however, says it will in effect turn a high-profile Baptist institution over to Muslims. John Wikman, a retired missionary to India who lives in Fort Smith, Ark., said the IMB rebuffed efforts by him and others to find a way to keep the hospital going as a Christian venture.

The IMB is negotiating with a group of Yemeni nationals to take over administration of the 35-year-old medical facility, the centerpiece of Baptist work in the Republic of Yemen. The proposal would save Southern Baptists \$500,000 a year and allows IMB medical staff to continue working at the hospital.

Keeping the hospital staffed has become increasingly difficult. The IMB says it has 35 requests for medical personnel at Jibla on the books but only one response in the last four years. The hospital's current administrator, Bill Koehm, plans to retire in a year, with no replacement in sight.

Board officials said financial and staffing needs are issues behind the transfer, but the main reason is to reach out to a broader spectrum of the population through mobile clinics that provide basic medical care, health education and nutrition classes.

"We have felt very strongly for several years that change was needed to reach out to parts of the country where health-care ministries are desperately needed, and we began to ask God to show us a way," John Brady, the IMB's regional leader in northern Africa and the Middle East, told Baptist Press.

A charity started by Yemen's foreign minister, a Canadian-trained medical doctor named Abu Bakr al-Qirbi, has offered to take over administration and financial responsibility for the hospital. The People's Charitable Society already works with a psychiatric hospital in Hodeidah on the Red Sea. IMB officials met with the group in August to begin negotiating the transfer.

The IMB says Qirbi has already succeeded in getting dismissed a bogus \$6.7 million complaint against the hospital for 30 years in back taxes, filed recently by a local official.

While the society is chartered as a secular charity, Wikman told Associated Baptist Press the move would essentially remove a uniquely Christian presence in a country that is officially listed as 100 percent Muslim.

Wikman described the People's Charitable Society as "supposedly a secular society -- but of course Yemen is a total, 100 percent, Muslim country -- so it's really a Muslim charity."

Yemen's Constitution declares that Islam is the state religion and that Islamic law is the source of all legislation. Most Christians are foreigners who live in the country temporarily.

Under Islam, the conversion of a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy, a crime punishable by death. Yemen allows freedom of religion for non-Muslims, but doesn't allow them to proselytize.

Christian missionaries operate in Yemen mostly in providing medical services, but some are involved in teaching and social services.

The first Southern Baptist couple went to Yemen in 1964, reportedly establishing the first Christian presence in the land in about 1,300 years. The Jibla Baptist Hospital opened in 1967, founded by Southern Baptists James and June Young of Ruston, La. It has ministered to as many as 40,000 people a year at a 22-acre site near the city of Ibb.

The hospital has a well-known reputation for superior care. International visitors report mentioning the Jibla hospital or Dr. Young at check points, and having guards nod in recognition and let them pass with no further questions.

The hospital has struggled financially in recent years and has been downsized from 77 to 45 beds. Talk of "transition" has been going on for about four years.

An IMB team conducted a survey of Yemeni towns and villages in 1999, identifying an "urgent need" for health care in outlying areas for people who have a difficult time traveling to a hospital.

Baptist Press reported at the time that any "decentralizing" medical missions in Yemen would follow the pattern of the IMB's "New Directions" strategy.

Officially adopted by the IMB in 1997, the strategy, which is now being called Strategic Directions for the 21st Century or SD21 for short, emphasizes indigenous church-planting movements among unreached people groups.

A new IMB ministry statement describes the nurturing of church-planting movements as "the primary, if not only, way of making the gospel potentially accessible to all people."

Some criticize the strategy as giving field missionaries too little input in decision-making and devaluing those who minister in institutions.

The IMB has long had a policy both of turning institutions over to indigenous Christians when they are able to support them and of closing institutions when they are no longer needed. Critics like Wikman, however, say the agency now is unloading institutions as a matter of policy, because they no longer believe they are an effective way to reach the masses.

"Basically, it's all passed down," Wikman said. "The reason they are doing this is they don't believe in institutions anymore. The poor medical missionaries have been told what they are doing isn't really evangelism."

Wikman said the IMB is telling the Jibla missionaries that workers outside the hospital are spending more time doing evangelism.

"I've been in foreign countries," Wikman said. "I know the medical missionaries work many more hours than other missionaries out in the field. I also know their evangelism is much more effective."

Wikman said hospitals -- with their ability to help people through crises and build relationships over time -- are more effective in making an impact on individual lives than simply handing out medicine or providing dental care in a mobile clinic.

"It's just been proven time and time again that mission hospitals are the best ways to win the respect of the people," he said.

Wikman cited the example of Bangalore, India. When Southern Baptist medical missionaries began work in 1966, there were two Baptist churches in the area. When the Bangalore Baptist Hospital opened in 1973, there were 16. By 1995, the number of churches in the state had grown to 570.

"These churches, for the most part, were started by medical missionaries and national Christians reached and disciplined by the missionaries," Wikman wrote in a guest editorial for the Arkansas Baptist News.

IMB spokesman Mark Kelly said the agency continues to value medical missions as a "platform" for evangelism but is trying to expand it beyond brick-and-mortar institutions. "If good missions strategy meant never changing your missions strategy, Jibla Baptist Hospital would never have been established," he said.

Kelly said the IMB considers medical work a valuable ministry, but without a verbal witness it is "pre-evangelism." He said the IMB's stated purpose for decades was "evangelism that results in churches," and Jibla Baptist Hospital fit into that strategy. That will not change, he said, because Southern Baptist medical personnel will continue to serve and be recruited for the hospital.

Transferring the hospital, Kelly said, gives the IMB "the best of both worlds" by both maintaining a current ministry and sharing the gospel "with Yemenis who never would hear if our outreach continued to be limited to the building in the city."

Wikman said he and seven or eight others offered to start a Baptist foundation to raise money and gradually take over the hospital over five years, in order to keep its Christian identity.

Wikman said he met with an IMB committee at a recent board meeting, but the decision had already been made. "Other options really were not considered," he said.

Kelly said the individuals who approached the IMB had not demonstrated they could succeed in raising money and weren't ready to take over the hospital. He said the board's top priority was to find a way for its personnel to remain free to minister at the facility, and the arrangement with the Yemeni charity accomplishes that.

Wikman said missionaries at the hospital are opposed to the change but were told not to discuss it with anyone.

Kelly said he has not heard any Southern Baptist workers say they were told not to talk about the transfer.

Wikman said missionaries there are "heartbroken and hurting" about the decision. Some, he said, are struggling with whether to stay or leave.

"If you are a pastor, and you were going to be made an associate pastor, and a Muslim cleric were to be put in as pastor, you would understand how these missionaries feel," Wikman said.

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Church politics bill fails by wide margin

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bill that would have freed churches to engage in partisan politics without losing their tax-exempt status failed to gain a majority in the House of Representatives Oct. 2 -- despite heavy support from the Religious Right.

The "Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act," sponsored by Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.), lost 239-178.

Republican leaders brought the bill to the floor in a procedure circumventing the usual committee process but requiring a two-thirds majority for passage.

The bill failed to gain even a simple majority, however, pleasing critics including Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister who directs the Washington-based Interfaith Alliance.

Gaddy, whose organization took part in a broad coalition opposing the measure, said its passage would have politicized faith and turned houses of worship "into political entities to be lobbied for money and votes."

Gaddy said its rejection did not "silence" the religious community, as some allege, but "respected it."

Debate on the measure lasted into the night on Oct. 1. "It is my opinion that this bill demeans religion and demeans houses of worship by converting them into political campaign organizations," said Rep. Chet Edwards, (D-Texas). "If I had a malicious intent to import divisiveness into our churches, I could find no better way to do it than to pass this ill-conceived bill into law."

Rep. John Hostettler (R-Ind.), however, shared a more positive appraisal of the measure. "This legislation frees our clergy to speak their consciences from the pulpit on all issues, even those which may stem from the political arena, without the chilling effect that the tax code has on our houses of worship," he said.

The bill sought to change current law that says churches and other groups organized under section 501(c)3 of the federal tax code are not allowed to endorse candidates for office.

Jones and his supporters said that regulation, inserted in 1954, was politically motivated as a way for then-Sen. Lyndon Johnson to get back at two non-profit organizations that were opposing his re-election.

But Rep. Amo Houghton (R-N.Y.), said Jones' bill was an improper solution to an imagined problem. It would have applied only to churches, meaning other non-profits would be discriminated against.

"Today churches are free to talk about the issues in any way they want, but they cannot use the church resources on a tax-deductible basis to campaign for a candidate," Houghton said. "I think that makes perfectly good sense. They can do what they want, but they should not use the tax code the way no one else can use the tax code for this political purpose."

Supporters of the bill included Florida evangelist D. James Kennedy, Focus on the Family founder James Dobson and Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission head Richard Land. More than 200 religious and civil-rights organizations opposed it, including the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Ten Democrats voted in favor of the bill, while 46 Republicans crossed the aisle to oppose it. At least three congressmen who eventually voted against the measure had at one time been among its 133 co-sponsors -- Rep. Harold Ford, Jr. (D-Tenn.); Rep. Robert Aderholt (R-Ala.); and John Boehner (R-Ohio.)

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CORRECTION: The following story as released previously had a typographical error in a date in the seventh graph. It is corrected below.

Randy Travis' gospel CD urges Christians to 'Rise and Shine' (corrected)

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Early in his career, country music superstar Randy Travis never would have imagined singing in a Baptist church.

After dropping out of school in the ninth grade -- "I had gotten so far out of hand, they were very happy to let me leave" -- Travis rushed headlong into a life of alcohol, drugs and brushes with the law.

At 16, when he won a local talent contest in Charlotte, N.C., Travis was facing possible jail time on charges of breaking-and-entering and automobile theft.

Lib Hatcher, who owned the club where he was playing, urged the judge to give the teen singer one more chance.

The judge said: "I'm going to let you go one more time. But you come before me again, bring your toothbrush because you're staying."

"That got to me," Travis recalled. "I heard that loud and clear."

Travis became a regular at Hatcher's club, spending the next five years performing there. He moved to Nashville in 1991 and Hatcher, his manager and future wife, began managing The Nashville Palace where Travis sang, cooked catfish and washed dishes.

After signing a record contract and being named the Academy of Country Music's 1985 Top New Male Vocalist, Travis racked up dozens of major music awards over the next few years. In the process, he recorded more than 20 No. 1 country hits ranging from "Forever and Ever, Amen" to "Hard Rock Bottom of Your Heart."

Fast forward to 2002: Travis has recorded more than 15 albums, including his second gospel album "Rise and Shine" scheduled for release Oct. 15.

Travis, who became a born-again Christian a decade ago, shared several songs from his new album during a Sept. 24 concert at St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

During an on-stage interview with Pastor Les Hollon, Travis told the capacity crowd of 1,700 people that his Christian conversion "was a very gradual thing."

"I went to a Baptist church a very short time as a kid," he recalled. "It didn't take, that's for sure."

"When I got into my early 20s, I started just reading the Bible to go to sleep at night," he explained. "I started reading and I was really surprised. It was just like a calming effect. It made me seem to mentally feel better."

"From that point till I was actually baptized, it took about 10 years, so you can see I was a little bit slow," Travis added. "Since then, knowing that even though I'm far from being perfect -- a work in progress and always will be -- there's a wonderful peace of mind knowing that those things I have done in the past, as bad as they were, they are forgotten and forgiven."

Describing his singing talent as "a God-given gift," Travis told the crowd: "I like what I do. I'm fortunate. I'm not a trained singer. ... Why [God] decided to give that to me, I don't know."

Recalling the impact of "Inspirational Journey," his first gospel album released two years ago, Travis said, "Things started happening with that CD that really got to me in a way that I'd never really expected."

He told about a woman whose son was using drugs and alcohol, but came to church to hear Travis because of his country music fame. After hearing Travis' gospel music and testimony, the young man became a Christian.

"When you hear that, you know you're doing the right thing," Travis added.

Reflecting on the change in Travis' life, Hollon said: "The gospel can happen in so many ways. This is a night to celebrate how Randy Travis has been impacted by the gospel. ... I think we leave with our own inspiration to be real in following Jesus."

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