



Associated Baptist Press

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Nashville, Tennessee

DEC 16 2002

December 12, 2002

(02-116)

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Spiritual 'descendent' of Judson now studies at Judson College

By Michael Brooks

MARION, Ala. (ABP) -- Nearly 200 years after Adoniram and Ann Judson took the Christian gospel to Burma, Ruth Saga of Burma is training for Christian ministry at the college named for Ann Judson.

Baptists in America revere the Judsons as founders of the modern missionary movement. Adoniram and Ann Judson began service as Congregational missionaries in India but converted to the Baptist faith and settled in Burma -- now called Myanmar -- in 1813. They worked with mission pioneer Luther Rice to mobilize Baptists in America to support international missions.

Adoniram and Ann Judson brought the gospel to Ruth Saga's ancestors. "My family has been Christian for many generations," she said. "We trace our faith back to American missionaries. I was raised in a Christian home and accepted Christ as my savior at age 12."

Saga's father is president of the Kachin Theological College, which has some 700 students. "These students will be the pastors of Burmese churches," she explained. "My mother directs the women's ministry for the Kachin Baptist Convention."

Christians remain a minority Myanmar. There are approximately 4 million Christians in a population of 50 million. Most people are Buddhists, and there are many Muslims as well.

Christians can face persecution in Myanmar, Saga says. "My country has laws to protect all religions, and these laws protect Christians in the cities. Christians can build churches in the city as long as they look like the other buildings. But in the remote areas, Christians can be arrested on false charges."

Several years ago, Saga's father began corresponding with David Potts, president of Judson College in Marion, Ala. The elder Saga was intrigued by Adoniram and Ann Judson's connection with Judson College and Burma. He began to make plans for Ruth to come to Marion.

"I want to work with my mother and father in some way when I graduate," Ruth Saga said. "The needs are great and I'm trusting God to show me how I can serve him in my country."

Among the challenges Saga has faced in America is getting used to a new system of currency. "A good salary in Burma is about \$10 a month," she said. "We eat a lot of rice, and fast food is rare and expensive! There's only one pizza restaurant in my city."

Another challenge is comprehending class lectures at Judson. "My English is very good compared to many in my country. A lot of our English teachers don't speak English! But sometimes I don't understand everything that's said. I am doing better after being in America for two years."

Saga says she's grateful for the many kindnesses she's found in America. "The people are very nice to me," she said. "I've enjoyed talking about my country and my faith to churches and other groups."

Last year Judson professors and library staffers shipped several hundred pounds of books to Kachin Theological College. The college recently built a new library and needs approximately 30,000 books to maintain accreditation.

"I want to go to an American seminary when I graduate from Judson," Saga said. "Then I will trust God to show me the kind of ministry I can have in my homeland."

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-- Michael Brooks works in the public relations office at Judson College. A photo of Ruth Saga is available from Associated Baptist Press.

Baptist senator's statements provoke race-tinged controversy

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Statements by Sen. Trent Lott in apparent support of America's segregated past are causing a full-blown crisis in the Republican Party.

Lott, the incoming Senate Majority Leader and the most powerful Southern Baptist in the government, is being widely condemned by his fellow Baptists as well as his ideological cohorts for remarks he made at a party in honor of Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.). The Dec. 5 party marked Thurmond's 100th birthday. Like Lott, Thurmond is a Southern Baptist.

In a speech at the event -- to which all members of the Senate, many Capitol Hill staffers and the press were invited -- the Mississippi Republican touted the fact that his state was one of only four to vote for Thurmond for president in 1948 on the segregationist Dixiecrat ticket.

"When Strom Thumond ran for president, we voted for him. We're proud of it," Lott said. "And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years either."

The Dixiecrats were Southern Democrats who opposed Democratic President Harry Truman's support for civil rights and withdrew to form their own party. The only major ideological distinction from the Democrats was their support for segregation. "All the laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the Army cannot force the Negro into our homes, our schools, our churches," Thurmond said at the time. Most of the Dixiecrats later joined the Republican Party.

After news of the comment broke Dec. 7, few media outlets or politicians criticized Lott. Even Lott's Democratic rival in the Senate -- Democratic leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota -- initially defended Lott, saying his words were simply ill chosen. Lott himself said he had made a "poor choice of words."

However, the story gained traction in the ensuing week after revelations that Lott made almost identical comments more than 20 years ago. Additionally, reminders of Lott's close ties to a neo-segregationist group, the Council of Conservative Citizens, hurt his cause.

Lott's problems were compounded by a stern rebuke from President Bush, who in a Dec. 12 speech to a largely African-American audience, said: "Any suggestion that the segregated past was acceptable or positive is offensive and it is wrong. Recent comments by Sen. Lott do not reflect the spirit of our country."

Bush added, "Every day our nation was segregated was a day that America was unfaithful to our founding ideals." Although the White House had earlier expressed support for Lott remaining in office as the majority leader, Bush did not repeat that support in his most recent comments.

By Dec. 12 the Congressional Black Caucus, the NAACP, several major-newspaper editorial pages and likely presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) were calling for Lott to step down from his position as majority leader.

Many on the right criticized Lott even earlier and more fiercely.

Ken Connor, head of the conservative Family Research Council, said Republicans in Congress were wrong to remain silent on the issue. "What is needed is a forthright repudiation of the substance of Sen. Lott's comments, namely, his suggestion that the country would have been better off had a champion of segregation and racial discrimination been elected president in 1948," Connor said.

"Sen. Lott may have had the best of intentions when he ham-handedly attempted to heap praise on retiring Sen. Strom Thurmond," Connor said. "But his remarks were not just politically incorrect; they were wrong."

Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and a frequent political ally of Lott's, did not return calls requesting comment for this story. No Southern Baptist response to the controversy was posted on the websites of either the ERLC or Baptist Press as of Dec. 12.

Several conservative commentators -- including National Review's Jonah Goldberg and popular web blogger Andrew Sullivan -- were among the earliest to call for Lott's resignation. Sullivan wrote: "After his disgusting remarks at Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, it seems to me that the Republican Party has a simple choice. Either they get rid of Lott as majority leader or they should come out formally as a party that regrets desegregation and civil rights for African-Americans."

Some major conservative newspapers -- including The Dallas Morning News -- also called for Lott's resignation as majority leader.

Lott's home-church pastor was more supportive. "What I really think is that he got carried away extolling a 100-year-old senator, and he said some things that I wish he hadn't said, and that all of us wish he hadn't said," said Rex Yancey, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Pascagoula, Miss. "I know him well enough to know he's not a racist." Yancey said much of the furor over the comments was fomented by those looking for political gain at Lott's expense.

But a Southern Baptist ethicist who specializes in the study of religion and racism had a much harsher assessment of Lott's words. David Gushee, a professor at Baptist-related Union University in Jackson, Tenn., said Lott's comments "were outrageous on their face, and cannot be characterized merely as insensitive. They seem to reflect a barely suppressed yearning for an earlier America in which segregation was a common feature of life -- and not only in the South."

"Tragically, as an observer and resident in the South, I can say that those attitudes are still rather widely shared, including in the Christian community, the white Christian community," Gushee continued. "Racial segregation and the oppression of black Americans was one of the gravest evils every perpetrated in this country. The overturning of that evil was one of the greatest moral triumphs in the history of this country."

Bush uses executive order to expand charitable choice

By Robert Marus

PHILADELPHIA (ABP) -- President Bush has implemented a rule change, designed to expand his "faith-based initiatives," that critics say does an end-run around Congress.

Bush signed an executive order Dec. 12 that mandated all federal agencies under his control to ignore the religious character of a charitable group in determining whether the group is eligible for government funds to perform social services.

Legislation to do the same passed the House in 2001 but stalled in the Senate this fall. Bush's desire to expand the ability of religious charities to receive government grants and contracts is a major part of his agenda as president.

The executive order also contains provisions that secure the right of religious organizations to discriminate in hiring on the basis of religion and ideology, even if they receive federal funding.

Previous federal civil-rights laws have given religious organizations the right to hire personnel on the basis of religion. However, courts have not settled the question of whether such employment discrimination remains legal if the organization receives federal funding.

Bush announced the executive order in a speech in Philadelphia to leaders of religious charities. "I recognize that government has no business endorsing a religious creed, or directly funding religious worship or religious teaching," he said. "That is not the business of the government. Yet government can and should support social services provided by religious people, as long as those services go to anyone in need regardless of their faith. And when government gives that support, charities and faith-based programs should not be forced to change their character or compromise their mission."

However, critics of the plan said it would essentially allow the government to fund religious discrimination -- one of the major complaints that bogged down the faith-based legislation in the Senate.

"There is something ironic and wrong about trying to stop alleged discrimination against religious groups by implementing a regulation that actually subsidizes religious discrimination in job hiring," said Rep. Chet Edwards (D-Texas), in response to Bush's remarks. "No American citizen should have to pass someone else's religious test to qualify for a federally funded job."

Senior White House officials told Associated Baptist Press that Bush views the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as allowing religious groups to discriminate in hiring on the basis of religion, whether or not they are funded by the government.

Ralph Neas, head of People for the American Way, found irony in the fact that Bush announced the executive order in the same speech in which he criticized Senator Trent Lott for comments many critics viewed as discriminatory. "Far from championing equal rights, the president is endorsing tax-funded discrimination," Neas said.

"President Bush says his policy is designed to put religious groups on an equal footing, but in fact he has created a special right for religious groups to discriminate using tax dollars, something other groups are forbidden from doing," Neas charged.

Bush's order includes language designed to ensure that federal funds given to religious organizations do not go to support "religious worship, instruction or proselytization." The White House released a set of guidelines for religious groups applying for government funding.

Bush also signed an executive order creating new offices of faith-based initiatives in two more federal agencies -- the Department of Agriculture and the Agency for International Development.

Carter accepts Peace Prize with warning about U.S. policy

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Former President Jimmy Carter, the second U.S. Baptist to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, accepted the award Dec. 10 to the cheers of international Baptists and with a warning about U.S. foreign policy.

Carter received the honor in Oslo, Norway, from a five-member Norwegian committee that awards the prize. Committee members said the award was given in recognition of Carter's effort to broker the 1978 Camp David Accords, which ended hostilities between Israel and Egypt, as well as his work on issues of human rights, poverty and justice in the U.S. and abroad since leaving the presidency in 1981.

Another Baptist from Georgia -- Martin Luther King Jr. -- won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his efforts to end legalized segregation in the South through non-violent means.

In his acceptance speech, Carter cited his faith to describe his principles of non-violence. "The unchanging principles of life predate modern times. I worship Jesus Christ, whom we Christians consider to be the Prince of Peace. As a Jew, he taught us to cross religious boundaries, in service and in love. He repeatedly reached out and embraced Roman conquerors, other Gentiles, and even the more despised Samaritans," Carter said.

In comments that many observers viewed as veiled warnings against the U.S. entering into a "pre-emptive" war against Iraq, Carter said that all war is "evil," even when it is necessary. "In order for us human beings to commit ourselves personally to the inhumanity of war, we find it necessary first to dehumanize our opponents, which is in itself a violation of the beliefs of all religions," Carter said. "Once we characterize our adversaries as beyond the scope of God's mercy and grace, their lives lose all value."

While not directly criticizing the Bush administration, Carter voiced support of several foreign-policy objectives -- such as international treaties on global warming and the new International Criminal Court -- that are in direct opposition to Bush policies.

Several Baptist leaders in other countries sent congratulations for Carter to the Baptist World Alliance, a Virginia-based umbrella group for Baptist bodies around the globe. "All of them mentioned his strong Christian witness," reported BWA General Secretary Denton Lotz, "and how it contributed to their witness overseas in a minority setting where Baptists are often unknown or suffering persecution."

Back home, however, Carter's award received little or no attention from current Southern Baptists.

Richard Land, head of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, was contacted for comment but did not respond by press time.

Carter, a member of Maranatha Baptist Church in his hometown of Plains, Ga., was a longtime Southern Baptist but now identifies primarily with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate splinter group of the Southern Baptist Convention.

James Lauder, interim director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, a peace-advocacy organization that unites various Baptist groups, praised the Nobel for Carter. "He's clearly the most visible Baptist involved in global peacemaking," Lauder said.

"His comment in his speech that war is always evil is something that ... everyone needs to be reminded of at this time that our country is thinking of going to war again," Lauder continued. "I also hope that it will be an opportunity in encouraging more Baptists to become involved in reducing the amount of conflict in our world and working for peace and justice."

William Neal, editor of The Christian Index, the oldest Baptist newspaper in the country, also praised Carter. "The Sunday school teacher from Plains is greatly deserving of this honor in light of his many efforts over a long period of time to promote peace throughout the world, Neal wrote when the award was announced

in October. "It is refreshing to see the secular media talk about how Christianity has greatly influenced Carter's position as a peacemaker."

Meanwhile, moderate Baptist ethicist Robert Parham called the lack of attention from Southern Baptist leaders to Carter's accomplishment a "shameful but expected failure." Parham, executive director of the Nashville-based Baptist Center for Ethics, drew a parallel between the silence of conservative SBC leaders about Carter's accomplishment and the SBC's silence in 1964 about King's award.

"Carter is a prophet without honor among the Southern Baptist spiritual and genetic offspring of those who refused to honor another Baptist Nobel Peace laureate," Parham wrote in a column for BCE's online publication.

Parham said leaders were silent in both cases because both Carter and King "took Jesus too literally" in his teachings about justice and peace issues. "Both men shared family secrets about Baptists in the United States," Parham said. King spoke about the racism that pervaded Southern Baptist churches in the 1960s, he said, and Carter spoke about the disharmony that has rocked the SBC for more than 20 years.

Carter said he will donate the \$1 million award that accompanies the Nobel Peace Prize to the Carter Center, an Atlanta-based charity he founded that works to alleviate poverty and advance human rights and democracy around the world.

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