

Journal reporter Daniel Pearl -- who was forced by his killers to "confess" his Judaism on videotape -- more than 20 major incidents of violence against individual Christians or Christian churches, institutions or communities have been documented by the All Pakistan Minorities Alliance.

The most recent took place May 5, when a bomb exploded at a Christian hospital in the nation's Northwest Frontier Province -- the location of many of the incidents.

Altogether the attacks have killed around 40 Christians and injured more than 100. The most-publicized incidents include an October 2001 gun assault during Sunday morning mass at a Catholic church in Bahawalpur that left 16 dead and a March 2002 bombing that killed five worshipers at the Protestant International Church in Islamabad.

To date government officials have not successfully prosecuted anyone in the anti-Christian attacks.

The commission has noted many official abuses of religious freedom under the government of Pakistan's head of state, Gen. Pervez Musharraf. Among them are a law that makes blasphemy against Islam a capital offense and court rules that create unequal treatment between Muslims and other religious minorities in both civil and criminal cases.

Because of these and the seeming unwillingness to prosecute Muslims for crimes against Christians, the commission asked the State Department to declare Pakistan a "Country of Particular Concern (CPC)" -- a diplomatic designation for particularly severe violators of religious freedom. So far, administration officials have declined to label Pakistan as such.

The commission's most recent report on global religious freedom, released May 13, said that "discriminatory religious legislation has helped to create an atmosphere of religious intolerance and eroded the social and legal status of non-Muslims" in Pakistan.

The Pakistani leader also pointed to evidence of a rise in crimes against Christian women in the months since the U.S. began build-up for the war in Iraq. In particular, women and girls -- some as young as nine years of age -- have been beaten, kidnapped, gang-raped, disfigured and forced to convert to Islam at gun- or knife-point, he said.

The man said one 9-year-old Pakistani Christian girl named Razia Masih, who worked as a live-in maid in the home of a Muslim family, was beaten and tortured when news of the U.S. attack on Iraq reached the household. When she took her case to court, "She was told by the [judge] that 'You are Christian and infidel, and we will take revenge on you for bombing of Iraqi children,'" the leader said.

Felice Gaer, chair of the Commission on International Religious Freedom, said those examples were "disturbing evidence" for why the commission asked the State Department to designate Pakistan a CPC.

Although the U.S. has worked closely with Musharraf in the war on terrorism, a rising tide of anti-American sentiment led to dramatic gains for militant Islamic political parties in the nation during recent elections.

The Pakistani said those parties are often closely allied with -- and funded by -- outside Islamist groups, including groups of Saudi Arabians.

The commission lambasted Saudi Arabia for both violating religious freedom and exporting extremist Islamic teachings around the world through their funding of Madrasahs, or Islamic religious schools, in places like Pakistan.

Gaer said there is a link between the hatred of minority religions often taught in those schools and Saudi funding. "We think the exportation issue we've identified in Saudi Arabia is directly related to the situation in Pakistan," she said.

Gaer also noted that she hoped President Bush would raise these issues when he meets with Musharraf at Camp David in late June. In particular, Gaer said, commissioners hoped Bush would push for a repeal of Pakistan's blasphemy law.

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Both 'Idol' finalists credit
God, Baptist churches

By ABP staff

UNIVERSAL CITY, Calif. (ABP) -- In the end, only 130,000 out of 24 million votes separated "American Idol" finalists Ruben Studdard and Clay Aiken. But a glimpse into their personal lives shows they were even closer than that.

Both finalists in the wildly popular TV talent contest are Baptists with a strong faith. Each grew up singing in church, credited God for his success and said the outcome of the contest was in God's hands.

"I'm making sure I give him props (recognition) because he deserves all the credit and respect," said the 24-year-old Studdard, who won by one half of 1 percent of the viewers' votes, which were cast by phone and text messaging.

A Christian since the age of 10, Studdard said his singing career began at age 3 at Rising Star Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., where he still attends with his parents.

"[Being a Christian] not only affects my singing, it is my singing," said Studdard, whose kind demeanor has won the hearts of many in Alabama and across the nation.

"American Idol" is the Fox Network's search for the next American pop star. Modeled after the British hit "Pop Idol," the series began in January with 234 contestants, selected from 70,000 regional auditions. The show's judges -- Simon Cowell, Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul -- critiqued them, but the outcome depended on the button-punching fingers of viewers. The results were announced each Wednesday, and one contestant would leave the show each week until only the winner remained.

"We were both so calm tonight," said Clay Aiken, the 24-year-old runner-up from Raleigh, N.C., in a recorded interview following the final show. "We just had fun." Gracious in defeat, Aiken called Studdard "one of the most talented people I know [and] one of the best friends I have. I'm so proud of him!"

Aiken also has been singing in church since he was a little boy, according to pastor Roger Shuford. He said members of Leesville Baptist Church usually gathered in the church fellowship hall or at the home of Aiken's mother, Faye Parker, on Wednesday's throughout the competition to see if Aiken made it through to the next round. Aiken is a student at UNC-Charlotte and works with special-needs children.

"It's amazing to watch him," Shuford told the Biblical Recorder, newspaper of North Carolina Baptists. "When he feels a song you can see it all over his face. He's an awesome young man."

Studdard also had support from his church and community. Nearly 400 gathered May 21 to watch him win the "American Idol" title, according to

the Tuscaloosa News.

Fellow church members don't expect fame to change the affable Studdard. "He's still the same as he was when he was small -- humble, a Christian young man from a good family and loved by everyone," said Gloria Chancey, who watched Ruben grow up in the church. "I'm just so thrilled that he's brought so many people together for one good cause."

The large crowd in Birmingham included a wide range of ages and races. Many observers said it was a new, positive image for a city widely known for racial turmoil during the civil-rights movement.

"It's doing a great thing for Birmingham, showing that we have great talent here in Birmingham," said the church's pastor, Donnie Little. "I'm just so excited because I see it bringing unity across the world."

Studdard, who often wore a shirt emblazoned with Birmingham's 205 area code, said spending time in Hollywood filming the show did not have an adverse affect on his faith. Rather, "being able to pray and have somebody to talk to through it all" helped him, he said.

Studdard and Aiken will release separate recordings simultaneously in a couple of weeks, creating another showdown for fans.

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- Erin Webster of the Alabama Baptist and Steve DeVane of the Biblical Recorder contributed to this article.

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Mississippi association may be first
to make employees affirm faith statement

By Greg Warner

COLUMBUS, Miss. (ABP) -- A Baptist association in Mississippi has adopted a policy that requires all employees to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," the Southern Baptist Convention's new, more conservative doctrinal statement.

Golden Triangle Baptist Association in northeast Mississippi may be the first SBC-affiliated association to make the faith statement a condition for employment, according to a denominational official.

Already the new policy apparently has cost one employee her job, although the reason for her dismissal was not made public.

Diana Bridges, founder and director of a ministry to international students at Mississippi State University in Starkville, was terminated May 15 by the association, which operates the Crossroads International Fellowship House.

The new policy, adopted in an associational meeting April 15, also requires employees to be members of a church that belongs to the association. Bridges is a member of University Baptist Church, which was rejected for membership in the association in February 2002 in part because of its affiliation with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Steve Lammons, director of missions for the Golden Triangle Baptist Association, declined to comment on Bridges' dismissal. "That deals with private employee-employer relations, so we don't really have a statement," he told Associated Baptist Press.

Diana Bridges was on a mission trip to Turkey and unavailable for comment. Her letter of dismissal said only that "it is no longer in the best interest of Golden Triangle Baptist Association to continue your

services of employment."

David Bridges, her husband, said the "Baptist Faith and Message" was not cited in discussions about his wife's dismissal. "The effort was made to remove her because she is a member of a church affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship," said David Bridges, a professor at Mississippi State.

University Baptist was founded three years ago by disaffected members of First Baptist Church of Starkville. University has been in the process of applying for associational membership for more than a year. Minutes of associational meetings indicate the application was rejected because of the church's affiliation with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, as well as unspecified "doctrinal and philosophical differences."

The association's employment policy adopted in April was recommended by a committee and specified, among other things, that employees "shall affirm their personal beliefs are consistent with the current Baptist Faith and Message and will agree to work in accordance with the document."

The recommendation apparently was intended for new employees only and made no mention of church membership. But Ed Knox, pastor of Antioch Baptist Church in Columbus and a critic of Diana Bridges, offered an amendment that the policy be applied to current and future employees and that all employees be required to be members of Golden Triangle churches, according to minutes.

"If you draw a paycheck from Golden Triangle Baptist Association, you should adhere to the doctrine that we as Southern Baptists believe," Knox told Associated Baptist Press May 22. "Mrs. Bridges is a non-Southern Baptist, a member of a CBF church."

Knox and others said Bridges' job performance was never in question. "The nature of the work or quality of the work she is doing was not the issue," Knox said. Diana Bridges founded the Crossroads International Friendship House in 1995 with associational help.

Dan Beall, director of chaplaincy strategy for the North American Mission Board, said NAMB is unaware of any other SBC associations that are using the Baptist Faith and Message as a criterion for employment or associational membership. However, each association is autonomous and precise records of such policies are not kept.

The Baptist Faith and Message, adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 2000, is not binding on the churches, associations or conventions that affiliate with the SBC.

But Knox, the Columbus pastor, said other associations might follow the lead of Golden Triangle. "I have spoken to a number of other people and, if I understand correctly, even now a number of associations are making arrangements to do the same thing."

"I think that would be healthy," he said. "I believe that Southern Baptists are people of the book, people of the Bible, and we follow the principles of the Bible for our lives."

David Bridges said his wife has "mixed feelings" about her firing. "We had seen it coming for a few weeks, and there had been a lot of anxiety leading up to that," he said. "When it finally came, there was a certain amount of relief. ... The show of support she got from students and friends really helped her."

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Two Mars Hill trustees resign
over election of president

By Tony Cartledge

CARY, N.C. (ABP) -- Two trustees of Mars Hill College, including chairman Fred Pittillo, announced May 20 they have resigned from the board, citing dissatisfaction with the behavior of other trustees and concerns that the college has strayed from its Christian roots.

Pittillo, of Fruitland, N.C., and Richard Bullard, of Charlotte, were expected to report on the recent hiring of interim president Dan Lunsford as permanent president of the North Carolina Baptist school. Instead, their report of the state convention's executive committee outlined a series of concerns about the college and its new president.

Lunsford was elected May 9 after the candidacy of Rick Brewer, who was promoted by Pittillo and Bullard, was derailed by stiff opposition from the faculty, students and a majority of trustees. Brewer is vice president for planning and student affairs at Charleston Southern University in Charleston, S.C.

Pittillo had praised Lunsford's accomplishments and commitment after the election, but he and Bullard were less complimentary May 20. Bullard said Lunsford had demonstrated a lack of financial management abilities and business acumen, as well as an "inability to follow instructions" of the trustees' executive committee.

Bullard and Pittillo also suggested that Lunsford was not a good candidate for president of the school because he was "not Baptist as an adult."

Lunsford grew up as the son of a Baptist minister and has spent most of his life as an active Baptist. He joined an Episcopal church several years ago for a brief period but is currently a member of Mars Hill Baptist Church in Mars Hill.

Pittillo and Bullard also criticized Mars Hill faculty members, saying they have transformed the college's mission of providing a rigorous liberal arts education into a promotion of liberal theology. The faculty and staff tend toward secularism, are confused as to what represents academic freedom, and exercise too much control over the administration and some trustees, they said.

The two former trustees complained about visitation rules between male and female students and said there are "sexual issues" of concern on campus. According to the Mars Hill student handbook, coed visitation is allowed in residence halls from noon until midnight, with the hours extended until 2 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights. Visiting students must sign in and be escorted by their host.

Some students feared Brewer would implement a policy disallowing coed visitation, as is reportedly the case at Charleston Southern University.

Both Pittillo and Bullard said students and staff have told them that they have been ostracized for openly expressing their Christian faith on campus.

The two men presented a list of recommendations to the executive committee, asking the committee to establish a special commission to investigate Mars Hill and the other North Carolina Baptist colleges, to establish an accreditation process for schools to demonstrate that they are "Christian colleges," and to base state convention funding on compliance with the established standards.

In his letter of resignation, Pittillo said other trustees held conference calls and made decisions without his knowledge. "I feel that my presence as chair is not needed," the letter said.

Pittillo concluded: "If Mars Hill College can go back to her roots, and be a campus that has faculty, staff and a president who are not ashamed of Jesus Christ, let me know and I will gladly help her any way I can."

The executive committee voted to ask the Council on Christian Higher Education to study the matter and report back in June.

College president Lunsford was not informed about the presentation by Pittillo and Bullard and was not present.

In an interview later, he said: "Thirty-plus trustees voted to ask me to be president of Mars Hill College. I've agreed to do that out of my love and devotion for the institution and the mission it has to deliver a liberal arts education in a Christian environment. I will do my best to honor that."

Lunsford said faculty, students and alumni had all responded very positively to his election.

When asked about the charge that Christian students are ostracized for their faith, Lunsford said, "Categorically, I have not seen that. ... I have seen so many affirmations of students expressing their faith on campus. I've personally said to our faculty that we need to respect the young people who come here and their different interpretations of Christianity and their own faith."

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NC giving plan OK without
SBC funding, committee says

By Tony Cartledge

CARY, N.C. (ABP) -- The giving plan that allows North Carolina Baptists to send mission funds to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship instead of the Southern Baptist Convention does not violate the state convention's constitution, according to a study committee.

The six-member committee, equally divided between conservatives and moderates, was asked to determine if the so-called Plan C -- which funds the CBF but not SBC -- is consistent with the constitution of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

The constitution says, in part, "The purposes of the convention shall be to assist the churches in their divinely appointed mission; to promote missions, evangelism, education, social services, the distribution of the Bible and sound religious literature; and to cooperate with the work of the Southern Baptist Convention."

The heart of the committee's report, according to chair Charles Page of Charlotte, is the finding that, "It is neither logically nor legally necessary that each action of the Baptist State Convention fulfill each purpose of the convention in order for the action to be in furtherance of the multiple purposes of the convention."

"In other words," Page told convention leaders, "not every thing deals with every thing."

Plan C giving fulfills all the purposes of the convention with the exception of cooperation with the SBC, Page said.

Convention churches choose which of four funding plans they want to support. The other three giving plans send national missions money to the SBC. Churches in those plans also have the option of excluding the SBC or any other budget items included in the plan.

The study was the result of a motion at the annual state convention meeting last year and will be reported to the convention in November.

In one-page report acknowledged differences in Baptist life but said North Carolina Baptists have a tradition of cooperating in ways that transcend differences between and within the SBC and the CBF.
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News Briefs
from ABP's Washington Bureau

By Robert Marus

AIDS bill signals victory for conservatives

WASHINGTON -- Religious conservative groups expressed pleasure with Congress' passage of a bill designed to combat AIDS. On May 16, the Senate voted to authorize a program, proposed by President Bush, that could spend up to \$15 billion to relieve suffering from AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean and fight transmission of the virus that causes the disease.

AIDS is at epidemic proportions in Africa, with some nations reporting infection rates of the HIV virus at more than 30 percent of the adult population. The World Health Organization estimates that 10,000 Africans are infected with HIV every day.

The bill would set up a program that, if fully funded, could provide billions for advanced drugs to treat those already infected. It also would provide money to support programs that curb infection rates and to care for some of the millions of orphaned children who have lost mothers -- and sometimes both parents -- to the disease.

Bush made the initiative a centerpiece of his legislative agenda by mentioning it in this year's "State of the Union" address and calling it "a moral imperative." After conservative groups objected that not enough of the funding for preventing HIV transmission was earmarked for programs that promote sexual abstinence rather than condom usage, lawmakers added a provision into the bill doing so. Religious conservatives generally oppose programs that distribute condoms, saying they promote sex before marriage. (ABP)

Gay-rights activists again to protest SBC

WASHINGTON -- A Christian gay-rights organization has announced that it will once again hold a protest during the Southern Baptist Convention. Soulforce, a group that says it is devoted to "ending spiritual violence perpetuated by religious policies and teachings against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) people," will protest at its fourth consecutive SBC annual meeting, June 17-18 in Phoenix.

The group also demonstrated at SBC meetings in Orlando (2000), New Orleans (2001) and St. Louis (2002). Its members have been arrested at previous SBC protests.

The Southern Baptist Convention has issued several resolutions and pronouncements in recent years that Soulforce members consider anti-gay, including a provision that ejects from the denomination any church that affirms the legitimacy of homosexual relationships. However, Southern Baptist leaders have repeatedly said their interpretation of Scripture leaves them no other choice than to oppose homosexuality.

Several of Soulforce's leaders come out of Southern Baptist backgrounds. In a press release, the organization said their protesters are only seeking to begin a dialogue with Southern Baptists in hopes of changing their minds about the legitimacy of gay relationships. (ABP)

Russian court allows Muslim scarves on IDs

WASHINGTON -- The Russian Supreme Court ruled May 15 that Muslim women can be allowed to wear head scarves in photos for their government-issued identification cards, but that doesn't mean the court's order will be implemented.

In Russia, all residents are required to carry such cards when traveling, even within the country. Police had forbidden anyone to wear head coverings in the photos because they said it would make it harder to identify potential criminals wanted for arrest.

But a group of women from Russia's 20 million-member Muslim minority sued the government, saying being photographed with their heads uncovered would violate their religious beliefs.

A panel of judges from the Supreme Court agreed. But the country's Interior Ministry has vowed to appeal for a rehearing of the case before the full court. Even if the court rules in the Muslim women's favor, the rule may not be implemented because Russian courts often defer to political leaders. Russian President Vladimir Putin reportedly has expressed his support for continuing the head-scarf ban for ID photos. (ABP)

Supreme Court declines to hear prayer case

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. Supreme Court has declined to hear an appeal from a California city that offered sectarian invocations at city council meetings. Justices refused, without comment, to entertain an appeal by the city of Burbank to a state court ruling that outlawed their practice of beginning city council meetings with prayers offered by members of a local ministerial alliance.

The clergy, who included representatives of faiths other than Christianity, could offer any prayer they desired under the Los Angeles suburb's policy. But two city residents -- one Jewish, one Christian -- sued after they heard a Mormon offer a 1999 prayer that was addressed to "Jesus Christ."

The lower-court ruling, which the California Supreme Court also declined to overturn, banned sectarian prayers. But the city may still have someone offer "generic" prayers, according to a city lawyer. "We still have the invocation. We just don't have a sectarian invocation," Assistant City Attorney Juli Scott was quoted by the Associated Press as saying. "They are usually very benign, positive expressions of thanks asking for divine guidance so legislators do a good job." (ABP)

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