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In this issue:

- Bush calls for ban on gay marriage, as new poll suggests growing support
- Reba Cobb leaves CBF for Children's Defense Fund
- Israeli antiques dealer arrested, suspected of forging ossuary
- Buckner-CBF partnership draws 200 volunteers to Rio Grande Valley
- Correction

**Bush calls for ban on gay marriage,
as new poll suggests growing support**

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) – President Bush joined the conservative chorus calling for a legal restriction against gay marriage, while new polls suggest public opinion may be turning in favor of such a limit.

Religious Right leaders are hailing those developments as a double blow to the cause of gay rights. But gay-rights activists offer a different interpretation.

Bush said July 30 that his administration is "looking at the best way" to protect marriage as an institution for heterosexuals only. "I believe that marriage is between a man and a woman, and I think we ought to codify that one way or the other, and we've got lawyers looking at the best way to do that," Bush said in his first formal press conference in months.

While noting he believes "in the sanctity of marriage," Bush added "it's very important for our society to respect each individual."

"On the other hand, that does not mean that somebody like me needs to compromise on an issue such as marriage," he said. "And that's really where the issue is headed here in Washington, and that is the definition of marriage."

Bush did not go so far as to endorse a proposed constitutional amendment currently making its way through Congress, however. The amendment would define marriage in strictly heterosexual terms and would override state provisions recognizing same-sex marriage or "civil unions" that offer most of the same benefits of marriage while reserving the term itself for man-woman unions.

Meanwhile, a new Gallup poll released July 28 seems to show a dramatic reversal in a long-standing trend toward greater public acceptance of homosexuality.

While gay-rights supporters celebrated the June Supreme Court ruling that overturned state laws against

8/4/03

gay sex, conservative observers say the new polling data show a backlash to the ruling from the American public.

The Gallup poll of 1,006 adults, conducted in mid-July, revealed that 48 percent of Americans believe sexual relations between consenting adults of the same gender should be legal, while 46 percent believe it should be illegal. That is a dramatic turnaround from a Gallup poll May 7, when 60 percent of respondents said gay sex should be legal and only 35 percent said it should be illegal.

Another poll conducted earlier in July revealed a similar reversal.

The turnaround was also evident in support for legalizing "civil unions," which would offer same-sex couples many of the benefits of marriage without using the term "marriage" to refer to the union.

In May, equal numbers of respondents supported and opposed the idea -- at 49 percent each. But in a more recent poll, 57 percent of respondents opposed legalizing gay civil unions, while only 40 percent supported the idea. That is the strongest opposition and the weakest support in the seven Gallup polls taken on the subject since 2000.

"The new polling data suggest a backlash," said the Gallup organization in a press release. "The discussion that followed the Supreme Court [sodomy] decision focused in part on whether it would increase the possibility of legalized gay marriage and other, more formal, reductions of the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual relations in society."

Connie Mackey, vice president for government affairs at the Family Research Council, said the "slumbering majority" has remained quiet as the gay-rights movement made gains in recent years, but she added, "gay marriage is the line in the sand where people are waking up."

Glenn Stanton, a senior analyst for Focus on the Family, said "over-reaching" by various courts has forced Americans to realize that what "was once a pretty radical and 'out there' idea could really happen."

Added Gary Bauer, president of American Values: "The more that the [gay-rights] movement demands the endorsement of the law and the culture, the more resistance there will be."

But gay-rights activists said they don't think the Gallup poll represents a clear backlash.

"It just doesn't make sense," said Laura Montgomery Rutt, director of communications for the religious gay-rights group Soulforce. She pointed to a recent poll commissioned by the Pew Charitable Trusts that showed a continued increase in support for gay marriage, even though the poll was finished after the Supreme Court's sodomy decision.

Chris Purdom, co-coordinator of the Philadelphia-based Interfaith Working Group said, "I think the polling is all over the map on this" because the Supreme Court decision, as well as other recent news involving gay-rights issues, means people are being forced to confront an issue about which they haven't made up their minds.

"I think that this is an issue that most people don't think about very much because they don't think it affects them," he said, "so I think they don't answer consistently."

James Esseks, litigation director for the American Civil Liberties Union's Gay and Lesbian Rights Project, said one reason for the change in numbers is "that people don't understand or have a clear

understanding of what gay marriage would mean."

For example, Esseks said, "I think some people think that somehow gay marriage would intrude upon the church. ... If a state recognizes marriage between two people of the same sex, that would not in any way require any religious institution to recognize it as well."

Echoing Bush's comments, White House press secretary Scott McClellan, speaking to reporters July 31, also used the term "sanctity" and other religious terms in describing marriage. Souforce's Rutt said such language is dangerous.

"Religion currently can discriminate against people based on their sexual orientation or marital status. ... They have that right," said Rutt. "But our government is based on the Constitution, and marriage is a civil contract between two people -- it shouldn't matter what their gender or sexual orientation is.

"There needs to be a distinction between the religious ritual of marriage and the civil right of marriage," Rutt concluded.

-30-

Reba Cobb leaves CBF for Children's Defense Fund

By Greg Warner and Lance Wallace

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Reba Cobb, chief operating officer of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, will leave CBF Sept. 1 to become religious action director for the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C.

Founded in 1973, the Children's Defense Fund is a private, nonprofit organization that advocates for children's issues. As religious action director, Cobb will report directly to founder and president Marian Wright Edelman.

Cobb, 60, has been with the CBF since 2001. She serves as coordinator for the organization's Resource Center in Atlanta and supervises the 52-person staff.

Cobb said she is under no pressure to leave CBF, but that the time was right for a change. "I feel like, in one way, I've done what I came to do for CBF," she told Associated Baptist Press. "We've taken it to a new level of organizational effectiveness. I always like to go out when it's going well."

She said she was recommended for the new position by a friend and was contacted in May. "I always keep my options open," she said. "And when the call came, it felt like a God thing."

Cobb said she has "a passion" for the work of CDF. In her new position, she will enlist support from religious groups for issues that affect children, such as providing health care and education and preventing violence. "Our goal is to provide the best possible start for children," she explained. "I will be working with all the faith groups."

Cobb is experienced in interfaith work. She was executive director for Kentuckiana Interfaith Community in Louisville, Ky., when she was hired by CBF.

8/4/03

"I feel like it's the perfect job for me," she said. "I've always wanted to work in Washington. I've got the political instincts in me. ... I can speak the language of the politicians [and] the clergy."

With Cobb's departure, it is unclear if CBF will fill her position or restructure it. She was hired for the newly created position in 2001 to free Daniel Vestal, CBF's national coordinator, to focus on external relations.

"Reba Cobb is a gifted individual with a heart for service and mind for problem solving," said Vestal. "She has accomplished much in her time with us in Atlanta, and we pray for her continued success as she seeks to be the presence of Christ in the world."

"It is with mixed emotions that I leave my place of service and ministry with CBF to pursue God's calling in another arena," Cobb said in a statement. "I appreciate the opportunities to use my gifts and abilities at CBF and look forward to new challenges ahead."

A native of Oneonta, Ala., Cobb is a graduate of Samford University and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. She previously worked as president of the Center for Women and Families in Louisville from 1992-1998 and as executive director of the Louisville Free Public Library Foundation. She is a founder of Baptist Women in Ministry.

-30-

Israeli antiques dealer arrested, suspected of forging ossuary

By Hannah Lodwick

(ABP) -- Israeli police have arrested the antiques dealer involved with the "James ossuary" and say he may have worked with a ring of forgery experts who systematically counterfeited antiques for years.

Oded Golan drew international attention last fall as the owner of an ancient stone box said to have once contained the bones of Jesus' brother James. Now the Israeli dealer faces charges of forgery and dealing in fake antiques. Police said July 22 Golan may have led a forgery team that included scientists, academics and other professionals.

Israeli investigators performed a late-night raid on Golan's Tel Aviv home July 21 and found the ossuary, which Golan had insured for \$1 million, sitting on an unused toilet in a room on the roof of his apartment. Police reportedly also found stencils, forgery stones and other partially completed forgeries in a rooftop storage room.

Experts say the location of the recovered ossuary -- with almost no security and exposed to summer heat -- provides a clue to its true value. "The picture speaks for itself," Amir Ganor, head of the Israel Antiquities Authority, told Religion News Service. "If this was indeed an important artifact, I'm sure no normal person would have put it on the roof of a building in a toilet."

Oded Golan startled the archeological world last fall when he produced two artifacts -- the ossuary bearing the words "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus" and a tablet inscribed with instructions for caring for the biblical Jewish Temple.

While leading archaeologists initially declared the ossuary authentic, a seven-member panel of experts associated with the Israel Antiquities Authority recently labeled it "a contamination of the

archaeological science," according to Associated Press reports.

The examiners said the patina -- chalk crust -- on the inscription did not result from the natural aging process. The patina differed from that on the rest of the box, which examiners think is authentic. The patina also contained marine micro-organisms.

"True patina is like the stone crust that accumulates on the bottom of a tea kettle," Yuval Goren, a Tel Aviv University professor, told RNS. "In land conditions, like a burial cave, you can't expect a patina to contain any fossils in it." Oded Golan remains steadfast about his artifact's authenticity. He said he bought it in Jerusalem in the 1970s and didn't realize its significance until Andre Lemaire, a leading paleographer, examined it.

"I am certain the ossuary is real," Golan told the Associated Press. "I am certain that the committee is wrong regarding its conclusions."

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Buckner-CBF partnership draws 200 volunteers to Rio Grande Valley

By Scott Collins and Lance Wallace

PROGRESO, Texas (ABP) -- Julian Vigil raised the hammer over his head and with a violent swing, struck the ceiling of Jorge and Ramona Lopez's bedroom. As he pulled the hammer down, Vigil brought with it a cloud of dust, drywall and rat feces.

Vigil's swing launched a project to gut and rebuild the interior of the Lopez home. Vigil, a member of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, was part of a joint mission project sponsored by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas, Buckner Children and Family Services and the global missions office of the national CBF.

"We've done a lot in two days," said Jorge Lopez through an interpreter. "I wasn't expecting this much help. I thought we might get the bedroom and bathroom finished, but they have done the whole house. We want to thank ... Buckner for bringing the people here. It's because of Buckner that these people are here to help."

More than 200 volunteers from 24 Baptist churches across Texas worked in the lower Rio Grande River Valley July 21-25 rebuilding five homes, hosting five vacation Bible schools, running three sports camps and ministering to women.

Organized by the missions committee of the Texas CBF, the weeklong mission project is part of a larger, international partnership between the national CBF and Buckner known as KidsHeart.

Through the partnership, the Fellowship provides substantial funding and volunteers to assist the ministries of Buckner in colonias in Hidalgo County. A colonia is a small, rural community with substandard housing that lacks basic services such as electricity, water and sewer.

Buckner has been working in the colonias of the Rio Grande Valley for more than 20 years.

"That's the beauty of this partnership," said Tom Ogburn, CBF's liaison to Buckner for the KidsHeart partnership. "Buckner has been working here for 25 years, so they know the people, they know the needs.

"CBF has made a 25-year commitment to be here and improve the conditions," added Ogburn, assistant coordinator for partnership missions. KidsHeart is part of the Fellowship's long-term rural poverty initiative. "We have access to resources to plug into the existing work as well as the commitment to be here long term," Ogburn said.

Church groups composed of children, youth, adults and seniors traveled up to 15 hours to participate in the pilot project.

The Texas CBF missions committee, with guidance from Ogburn and Jorge Zapata and Tommy Speed of Buckner, planned the event so congregations -- small and large -- didn't have to make logistical arrangements but could plug into a pre-planned project.

Zapata, director of border ministries for Buckner, identified the construction sites with the most pressing needs in the colonias throughout the Valley. Under Ogburn's supervision and with \$5,000 to \$10,000 of seed money from the Fellowship, each construction project made a dramatic gain in just three days.

First Baptist Church of College Station was the first to sign up for the project and sent a team of 30, many of whom had previous experience on mission trips and construction projects.

"Texas A&M built many of the community centers down here," said Pastor Rodney McGlothlin, "and we have a lot of church members from the A&M community, so it's a natural tie for us."

Steve Dominy, pastor of First Baptist Church of Gatesville, said his church sent five people on the trip because his goal is to "see our church become more involved, more hands-on doing missions work, rather than just giving to the mission offerings and feeling like we've done our part for the kingdom."

First Baptist Church of Hereford, far away in the panhandle of Texas, planned to send a group to the work week. After several transportation setbacks, leader Cindy Cole decided to call off the trip. But a sleepless night and a lingering sense of calling to participate convinced Cole to un-cancel the trip. The volunteers split up into several individual vehicles and drive the 15 hours to the Valley.

The Hereford group teamed up with First Baptist of Copperas Cove to lead a vacation Bible school at Mision Bautista Calvaria in Weslaco. Only three children showed up. "We were so discouraged," Cole said. "We thought, 'We came all this way and overcame all of the problems with our van and trailer to only get to minister to three kids.'"

The group prayed for greater attendance during their evening devotions. The next day, after door-to-door canvassing, more than 40 children poured out of the neighborhood to participate.

"Everybody just lit up when we saw all the people coming down the street," said James Cotten, youth minister at First Baptist Copperas Cove. "The rest of week was great. The kids were very receptive, and they didn't want to leave when it was over."

While children attended VBS, Buckner trustee Esther Fraire led workshops for women. With 15 to 20 women at some of the sessions, Fraire determined to continue the ministry in a more systematic way in the future.

The daily work schedule called for afternoon breaks when temperatures reached 104 degrees. By 6 p.m., the teams were back at it, hosting sports camps in San Juan, Progreso and San Carlos. The sports camps provided instruction in baseball, softball, basketball and soccer.

"Using a ball breaks down all the walls," said sports camp organizer Karen Murphy, minister of children and recreation at First Baptist Church of Harlingen. "The children listen to you give instructions and you gain their trust. Then they listen to you when you tell them about Jesus."

The sports camp devotions used simple object lessons with jelly beans and peanuts to drive home the gospel message.

"We're excited because we're seeing people being transformed by the power of God and by the love of these people who came from all over Texas," Zapata said, summarizing the KidsHeart experience. "Even though there are a lot of churches, we have become one body this week."

- Photos are available from Associated Baptist Press.

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CORRECTION:

In the July 24 article "Judicial nomination approved on narrow party-line vote," please change the name Todd Harkin in the seventh paragraph to Tom Harkin.

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