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**Bus accident leaves eight dead,
church, town grieving (updated)**

By Ken Camp

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This updates and replaces an ABP story originally released Oct. 14)

ELDORADO, Texas -- A church bus accident in eastern Louisiana claimed eight lives, left seven passengers hospitalized, and broke 2,000 hearts.

A church bus taking 12 senior adults from First Baptist Church of Eldorado and three of their friends on a tour of historic sites slammed into the back of a parked tractor-trailer rig near Tallulah, La., just before noon on Oct. 13.

The impact of the crash was felt 500 miles to the west in Eldorado, a town of 2,000 residents in west-central Texas.

Ken Thomas, 66, was driving the church-owned bus at the time of the accident. Thomas received a misdemeanor citation for careless operation, according to a statement by Schleicher County (Texas) Sheriff David Doran. As of Oct. 16, authorities had not arrested Thomas or filed criminal charges. The National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration are investigating.

Thomas, the church's treasurer and past chairman of deacons, was hospitalized at River Regional Medical Center in Vicksburg, Miss., following surgery on a broken leg.

The accident left First Baptist Church mourning the immeasurable loss of a deacon, a choir member, an all-around handyman, a missions-minded registered nurse and a "grandmother to all the kids in the church," according to pastor Andy Anderson.

And it rallied the church in prayer for the seriously injured survivors who remained hospitalized in four widely scattered medical centers in Louisiana and Mississippi.

"The folks on that trip are the reason this church has been so great all these years," Anderson said. "They are the backbone of the church."

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The five deceased church members included two couples -- Kenneth and Betty Richardson, both 81; Delia Pina, 72, and her husband, Domingo Pina, 65 -- as well as Mary Ruth Robinson, 63. The crash also killed three trip participants who were not members of the church -- Jean Demere, 74, and Jimmy Teel, 68 of Water Valley, Texas; and Laverne Shannon, 76, of San Angelo, Texas.

The remains of the five Eldorado residents arrived home on Oct. 15. They were to lie in state at the church because the small local funeral home did not have enough rooms for that many caskets.

Anderson, who has been at the Eldorado church for seven years, described the deceased as the kind of people who "took care of each other and took care of people outside the church."

The Richardsons were "so devoted to each other," Anderson said. "After all these years, he still opened the door for her."

Betty Richardson was an active member of the church's adult choir. Kenneth Richardson was a deacon, known in the community for being willing to read storybooks to schoolchildren in his unmistakably resonant voice. "He had this one-of-a-kind voice, kind of like James Earl Jones," said Syllas Politte, the church's youth minister.

Domingo Pina was a volunteer firefighter who also gave his time as a general handyman and mechanic at the church. His wife, Delia, was a retired nurse who served on the local hospital's board. Both volunteered in missions work along the impoverished Rio Grande Valley, in the Mexican towns of Piedras Negras and Acuna.

Mary Ruth Robinson was "the church's grandmother. All the kids loved her," Anderson said.

In addition to Thomas, other hospitalized church members were:

-- Billy Frank Blaylock, 78, in fair condition at University Medical Center in Jackson, Miss. He was reported to be "in and out" of consciousness, suffering a brain hemorrhage and broken arm.

-- Mabel Blaylock, 76, in serious condition at the surgical trauma unit of Louisiana State University Hospital in Shreveport. She suffered a pelvic fracture, punctured lung and broken arm, and she sustained considerable blood loss.

-- Mary Barton Robinson, 75, who suffered multiple lacerations, was transferred to a hospital in Monroe, La. from Rayville, La. She was released to Waco, Texas to be near her daughter, Kathy Hillman, president of Woman's Missionary Union of Texas, and was to undergo surgery on Oct. 16. Robinson was WMU director at the church and had served as coordinator for the senior adult trip.

-- Oleon Stricklan, whose age was not available at press time, was in the River Regional Medical Center at Vicksburg, Miss., with a broken ankle, broken ribs and gashes. She was to be released on Oct. 16.

-- Dana Owens, 75, was in stable condition at the Vicksburg hospital. She damaged a recent knee replacement and was scheduled for surgery on Oct. 16.

-- Jim Robinson, 70, was transferred from Rayville, La., to North Monroe, La. He had surgery, and was expected to be released within a few days after the wreck. His wife, Mary Ruth, was one of the accident's fatalities.

When the wreck took place, the "Senior Ambassadors" group was on the second day of a planned 16-day tour that was supposed to take them to Colonial Williamsburg, Va.; Valley Forge, Philadelphia and Gettysburg, Pa.; and through the Pennsylvania Amish countryside.

Pastor Anderson initially learned about the accident from a motorist on Interstate 20 in Louisiana. The passerby called on a cell phone after seeing the church's name painted on the side of the badly damaged bus, reporting that that the wreck looked "really serious" and all the windows were "blown out" of the vehicle.

On the day after the wreck, Anderson was struggling to find time to prepare for three funerals of accident victims scheduled at his church on Oct. 17. The Richardsons' service was slated for 11 a.m., Mary Ruth Robinson's at 2 p.m., and the Pinas' at 4:30 p.m. He wasn't yet sure what he would say.

"I'll attempt to preach a message of comfort to the families, based on the hope we have in Jesus Christ," Anderson said.

"Of course, this is as much of a shock for us as it would be for anyone. The big difference is our faith in Christ and our hope of a future beyond this life. We don't understand tragedy, but we know the Lord is with us. We can't understand and can't see his hand in this, but we know his heart. And that makes it possible to get through it."

Anderson expressed appreciation for the support offered by churches of all denominations in his community, from the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and particularly to Director of Missions Roger English in Concho Valley Baptist Association.

"It's going to take a long time even to discover all that we lost. But we will rally, and through it all, we pray the Lord will be glorified," he said.

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Georgia governor's proposal could enable school vouchers

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A battle over government funding of religious institutions is shaping up in Georgia -- and it could have national implications.

On Oct. 7, Gov. Sonny Perdue (R), a Baptist, proposed an amendment to the Georgia Constitution that would clear the way for state funding of pervasively religious groups -- whether directly or indirectly.

The U.S. Supreme Court has already ruled that the federal Constitution allows indirect state

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funding of religious schools through voucher-type scholarship programs as long as secular alternatives are available. But Georgia and many other states have provisions in their state constitutions that specifically bar the state from funding churches and other religious groups -- even if such funding is done indirectly.

And the federal courts have repeatedly ruled that the government may only fund activities conducted by religious groups when they achieve a secular purpose. The government is not allowed to fund inherently religious activities -- such as worship or indoctrination.

The state constitutional provisions prohibiting funding of religious groups are commonly grouped under the title "Blaine Amendments," after 19th-century U.S. Sen. James Blaine of Maine. He proposed a similar amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Although it narrowly failed, many states modeled state provisions after it.

Supporters of government funding for religious groups say Blaine amendments are vestiges of anti-Catholic sentiment that was rampant in the United during the 1800s. But supporters of strict-church state separation say the amendments are useful in guaranteeing religious freedom today and often were instituted less out of anti-Catholic bias than in reaction to aggressive attempts by Catholic organizations to receive government funding.

Currently, Georgia's Blaine amendment reads, "No money shall ever be taken from the public treasury, directly or indirectly, in aid of any church, sect, cult, or religious denomination or of any sectarian institution."

A press release from Perdue's office calls that provision "an even higher barrier to faith-based initiatives than the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution."

Perdue proposed adding a 12-word clause to the beginning of Georgia's Blaine-style provision: "Except as permitted by the United States Constitution, as amended."

That would clear the way in Georgia for voucher programs that fund religious schools. It could also legalize the provision of other state services through religious groups, although in practice some state agencies are already contracting with religious organizations. Nonetheless, Perdue may face an uphill legislative battle.

"I suspect that's going to create quite a stir," said longtime state Sen. Terrell Starr (D), former speaker pro tem of the Georgia Senate, when asked about the proposal. Starr declined to take a firm position until he knew more about the proposed amendment's specifics, but added, "I'd have to be convinced it's the thing to do." Terrell is a member and deacon at the First Baptist Church of Forest Park, Ga.

The state legislature, which next meets in January, would have to give the amendment two-thirds approval in both chambers before it could go before the public. A majority of the state's voters would then have to support it in the 2004 general election before it could become law.

A spokesperson for Georgia House Speaker Terry Coleman (D) told Associated Baptist Press her boss is "not going to say one way or the other" if he supports the amendment until the legislation is formally proposed. However, Allison Manning pointed to media reports where Coleman said he would support a "carefully crafted" amendment.

According to an Oct. 8 article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Coleman said, "any discussion of a faith-based constitutional amendment must include the realization that there are some religious organizations that do not support the democratic principles of government."

Perdue's proposal also would remove Georgia's only legal barrier to school-voucher programs that include religious schools. But school vouchers -- while cleared by the Supreme Court -- have proven politically unpopular in recent years nationwide.

Public-education groups and others in Georgia have expressed concerns that the proposed amendment is a back-door voucher scheme. But Perdue spokesman Derrick Dickey insisted that wasn't the case. "That's not currently the focus of our efforts," he said.

However, Dickey added that the governor's office was "not going to take anything off the table -- and that means that vouchers are a nice arrow to have in our quiver, so to speak."

Dickey also said that the governor believes "that direct funding of secular activities of faith-based organizations is permissible under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution" and noted that state policies will require that any faith-based organization receiving state funding have "a clear division between its religious and secular activities."

However, when asked if Perdue had any proposal for a regulatory apparatus to guarantee that division, Dickey replied, "Not at this time."

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