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**Fired missionaries tops
Baptist news of 2003**

By Greg Warner

(ABP) - The firing or resignation of 77 missionaries in a dispute over the Southern Baptist Convention's new doctrinal statement topped the news in the nation's second largest denomination in 2003.

Editors of Baptist state newspapers chose the missionary terminations and the planned withdrawal of the SBC from the Baptist World Alliance as the top newsmakers of the year, in a survey by Associated Baptist Press.

The top 10 stories as chosen by the editors are:

1. Missionaries refuse to sign -- The International Mission Board fired 13 missionaries who refused to affirm the Southern Baptist Convention's new, more conservative faith statement, the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message." The firings, announced May 7, are the most SBC missionaries ever fired at one time. Another 54 missionaries resigned rather than sign the statement and 10 more took retirement. All told, at least 77 of the IMB's 5,500 missionaries left because of the doctrinal statement - presumably the agency's largest exodus ever over one issue.
2. SBC leaving Baptist World Alliance - The Southern Baptist Convention, the largest member and contributor in the Baptist World Alliance, will withdraw its membership and money from the worldwide fellowship of 43 million Baptists if a study committee's Dec. 19 recommendation is approved. Southern Baptist leaders complain the BWA, which the SBC helped found in 1905, is not conservative enough. The SBC wants to use its \$425,000 allocation to create a more conservative international body. BWA leader Denton Lotz says the SBC action is "a sin against love" that will split the worldwide Baptist family.
3. Jibla Baptist Hospital attacked -- An Islamic terrorist attacked Jibla Baptist Hospital in the Middle East country of Yemen Dec. 30, 2002, killing administrator William Koehn, physician Martha Myers and purchaser Kathy Gariety - all three mission workers from the International Mission Board. It was the worst tragedy in the 156-year history of the IMB. Amplifying the tragedy was the fact the 45-bed Christian hospital, apparently targeted by the Muslim gunman as an affront to Islam, was to be turned over to the Muslim-led government two days after the attack. The hospital, the last hospital owned by the IMB, is now run by the Yemeni government. The terrorist was convicted and sentenced to death.
4. Mission Boards cut staff. The International Mission Board eliminated 61 home office jobs June 10, displacing 37 employees, in an attempt to address a financial shortfall of at least \$10 million. The North American Mission Board

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eliminated 31 full- and part-time positions and cut seven current employees Oct. 8 in an attempt to carve \$11 million out of its budget.

5. Ten Commandments judge removed -- Roy Moore, Alabama's chief justice, defied a federal judge's order to remove a 5,280-lb. granite monument to the Ten Commandments that he had placed in the building that houses the state Supreme Court. Moore's action sparked public protests from supporters and opponents. On Nov. 13, the Alabama Court of the Judiciary voted unanimously to remove Moore from office for violating judicial ethics by openly flouting a higher court's order.

6. Hemphill resigns, Patterson elected at Southwestern -- Ken Hemphill, 54, announced in April he will take early retirement as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, to become national strategist for an SBC church-growth program. In June, after a brief search process and to no one's surprise, Paige Patterson, president of the SBC's seminary in North Carolina, returned to his native Texas to replace him.

7. Episcopal Church divided over gay bishop - The August decision to appoint a gay bishop of New Hampshire threatened to split both the Episcopal Church U.S.A. and the international Anglican Communion, of which the American church is a part. Thirteen of 100 American bishops formed a network of dissenters in December, while conservative Episcopalians worldwide look to Archbishop of Canterbury for help.

8. Baptists respond to war in Iraq, Afghanistan -- The U.S. invasion of Iraq, and lingering war in Afghanistan, prompted support, concern among Southern Baptists and other denominations. Meanwhile, Southern Baptists prepared to enter post-war Iraq with relief supplies.

9. State Baptist conventions cut staff -- The economic recession hits churches and, in turn, the ministries they support, prompting several state conventions - including those in Texas and North Carolina - to respond with layoffs and budget cuts.

10. Christian-Islam relations - President Bush insists the war on terrorism is not a war on Islam. Nonetheless, interfaith relations between Christians and Muslims are strained at home and abroad.

Other stories also caught the attention of editors, including: 11) dissension from alumni and the apparent murder of a basketball player at Baylor University, 12) the Supreme Court strikes down state sodomy laws, 13-tie) "Under God" challenged in the Pledge of Allegiance and Missouri Baptist Convention goes to court with its agencies, and 15) the White House pushes faith-based initiatives.

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Bush comments appear to back Federal Marriage Amendment

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bush is drawing fire from both the left and the right after he made comments in a television interview that appeared simultaneously to endorse a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage and support states' rights to create marriage-like "civil unions" for same-sex couples.

In a interview with ABC-TV's Diane Sawyer, televised Dec. 16, Bush appeared to back an effort in Congress to amend the constitution to ban marriage and "the legal incidents thereof" to same-sex couples. Called the Federal Marriage Amendment, it has received major publicity since recent court rulings expanding gay rights.

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Religious Right groups strongly support the proposal. Although previously the White House had avoided endorsing the amendment, Bush appeared to cast his support behind it in the interview. "If necessary, I will support a constitutional amendment which would honor marriage between a man and a woman, codify that," Bush said when asked about the issue, according to a transcript.

However, Bush also told Sawyer that "the position of this administration is that whatever legal arrangements people want to make, they're allowed to make, so long as it's embraced by the state or at the state level."

Many on both sides of the issue interpreted that statement to mean Bush would support states' rights to create "civil unions," or state-sanctioned arrangements that confer most or all of the legal benefits and responsibilities of marriage on same-sex couples. Vermont already has a civil-unions law, and California recently began conferring domestic-partnership benefits to same-sex couples.

However, many conservative groups that form the base of Bush's support oppose any legalization of civil unions. In his Dec. 17 e-mail newsletter to supporters, Family Research Council President Tony Perkins said he was "concerned that the President thinks counterfeit institutions such as same-sex unions are OK and do not threaten to devalue the real thing."

When asked to clarify the issue during his regular Dec. 18 briefing, White House Press Secretary Scott McClellan simply reiterated Bush's comments.

"The president has always been strongly supportive of the principle that marriage is a sacred institution between a man and a woman, and that he will do what it takes to protect and defend the sanctity of marriage," McClellan told reporters.

However, he added, "We said, going back to the [2000 presidential] campaign, that states have the right to decide legal arrangements that they so choose."

But the leader of the nation's largest gay and lesbian Republican organization expressed concern about Bush's apparent support for the amendment. "While we are pleased that the president has clearly stated his support of states' rights, we are concerned that the president said he might support amending the United States Constitution," said Patrick Guerriero, executive director of the Log Cabin Republicans, in a Dec. 16 statement.

"The proposed Federal Marriage Amendment would not only ban civil recognition of gay families, it would also strip fundamental rights and responsibilities from those families," Guerriero continued. "Supporting the proposed Federal Marriage Amendment is wrong, it is not necessary and would codify discrimination in our Constitution."