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Baptist groups mobilizing aid for Burmese victims

BANGKOK, Thailand (ABP) - Baptist groups are among the scores of international aid organizations trying desperately to bring relief to the hundreds of thousands of cyclone victims in Burma. Along with thousands of other aid workers, groups of Baptist relief officials waited May 12 for visa approval to enter the country -- nearly 10 days after Cyclone Nargis drowned as many as 100,000 residents of the Irrawaddy Delta region.

According to Baptist World Alliance officials, several international Baptist response teams were stationed in Bangkok, capital of neighboring Thailand, awaiting permission to enter Burma, which is also known as Myanmar. The teams "are putting plans in place to provide food, drinking water, mosquito nets, temporary shelter, pots and pans, and basic medicine," said Bonny Resu, general secretary of the Asia Pacific Baptist Federation. The body is one of six regional fellowships that make up BWA, the worldwide umbrella group for Baptists. Resu's organization is helping coordinate Baptist relief work in Burma.

The teams waiting in Bangkok include members from Baptist organizations in the United States, Hungary and Australia. They expect to coordinate with the Myanmar Baptist Convention based in the nation's largest city, Rangoon, but have not been able to get in touch with Burmese Baptist officials, because the tropical storm's winds severely damaged the city's already-fragile infrastructure. "All the telephone and electric poles have been destroyed," said Kabi Gangmei, another Asia Pacific Baptist Federation official who is waiting in Bangkok to accompany the Baptist teams into Burma.

International officials -- including President Bush and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon -- have expressed increasing anger at the pace of the Burmese government's response. According to news reports, Ban described "immense frustration" that he and other U.N. officials were feeling May 12.

The nation has been ruled by an oppressive military junta since 1992. The generals who run the country are suspicious of outside governments and journalists, particularly Western ones. They have reportedly harassed the few journalists who have made it into the country to report on the disaster, and have intercepted many of the few aid shipments that have made it through.

International public-health officials are warning of a humanitarian crisis even worse than the cyclone itself due to water- and insect-borne diseases if relief supplies do not get to the estimated 1 million victims soon. One Oklahoma-based Christian group, His Nets (www.hisnets.org), is attempting to provide insecticide-treated mosquito nets to prevent a malaria outbreak. "The U.S. and other countries will provide food, drinking water and shelter," said T Thomas, the group's director, in a press release soliciting donations for nets. "However, standing water from the cyclone will quickly cause an outbreak of malaria. This will result in a second wave of deaths if nets are not provided quickly!"

Thomas, a former Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary and now coordinator for Oklahoma CBF, said the nets can each protect a family for up to five years. They can be provided for only \$6 apiece. HisNets has committed enough funds for more than 1,000 nets, but the need in Burma is "much greater," he said. The group works closely with BWA. CBF and the American Baptist Churches USA have each made initial contributions of \$5,000 to relief funds and both are accepting Internet donations from individuals and churches (CBF at www.thefellowship.info/give and ABC at www.abco.org/give). BWA has committed \$50,000 to the Burma effort and is also accepting donations through its relief arm, Baptist World Aid, online at www.bwanet.org/bwaid.

Surprise move at Two Rivers Baptist reverses vote, ousts dissidents

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- One week after an effort to oust 71 members of Two Rivers Baptist Church failed by four votes, the Nashville megachurch voted again and this time removed the dissidents on a show-of-hands vote. The congregation was told that the 71 plaintiffs who filed a lawsuit against church leaders last September should not have been allowed to vote May 4 on a motion for their own dismissal, according to Robert's Rules of Order. Members then voted not to allow the votes of the plaintiffs to count, effectively reversing the outcome of the May 4 vote.

The 71 members filed a lawsuit against Pastor Jerry Sutton for refusing to release church records to members and with using church funds on his daughter's wedding reception and other questionable expenses. The suit requested that Sutton be fired and sought compensatory and punitive damages. Sutton has repeatedly denied the allegations. In the first vote May 4, 1,000 secret ballots were cast; 663 people voted to dismiss the plaintiffs, while 337 voted "no" - four votes shy of the two-thirds majority required for removal from membership.

Another business meeting was called following the May 11 service so deacon chairman Carlos Cobos could officially report the May 4 vote, according to an article in the Nashville newspaper, The Tennessean. David Mills, a former trustee and deacon chairman, then challenged Cobos' decision that allowed the 71 plaintiffs to vote, the newspaper reported. Two Rivers attorney Larry Crain attended the 9:15 a.m. service but told the paper he was not expecting a revote. He defended the action, however. "If you're charged with a crime, you can't sit on the jury," he told The Tennessean. Cobos also told the paper he was surprised by the move to disallow the 71 votes, but he refused to comment further.

Last October, Sutton, who has served Two Rivers for more than two decades, easily won a churchwide vote of confidence in his leadership -- 1,101-286. The plaintiffs had asked a local judge to stop the vote-of-confidence meeting, but she refused. In April, Sutton requested that the plaintiffs be dismissed from membership "because of the damage done to the witness, reputation, and welfare of Two Rivers Baptist Church," leading to the May 4 vote. Neal Buchanan, a long-time member of Two Rivers and a plaintiff, said he went to church May 11 without a suspicion that "anything would happen."

Buchanan told the Baptist and Reflector, the Tennessee Baptist news journal, that Sutton had prayed last week that the Lord's will would be done. After the vote to oust the members came up short, "we thought that it was over," Buchanan said. He noted some plaintiffs had gotten together to discuss ways to reconcile.

When the matter was brought up following the 9:15 a.m. service, it was a total surprise, Buchanan said. "There was no warning whatsoever. In fact, many of the plaintiffs weren't there because they were visiting family members in other churches" for Mothers' Day.

Plaintiff Peggy Lewis, one of the ones who was not in attendance, said she found it ironic that the pastor had previously said he would accept God's will concerning the original vote, according to The Tennessean. "Evidently he didn't like what he heard from the Lord," she told the paper.

Buchanan said no effort was made to see that only members voted. "Last week we had to show our driver's license and sign a ballot. This week, it was done by a show of hands vote." Buchanan disagreed with The Tennessean's report that the vote passed by an "overwhelming" majority, adding, "It was a travesty of justice in the way it was handled." "It is a sad day for the church. They can't blame all that has happened on the plaintiffs," Buchanan added.

Two Rivers Baptist is one of the most prominent congregations in the Southern Baptist Convention, which is headquartered in Nashville. Many of the denomination's top leaders attend the church. Sutton, a one-time SBC first vice president, lost a three-way race for the SBC presidency in 2006.

A message for Scott Hutchings, executive pastor of Two Rivers, was not returned May 12.

Children from FLDS compound praise Texas Baptist agency

SAN ANGELO, Texas (ABP) -- Although Texas officials have taken some criticism for removing hundreds of children from a religious compound, the Baptist agency caring for them has earned praise from the most important people: the children themselves.

Baptist Child and Family Services, an agency affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, was charged with caring for hundreds of children removed from the Fundamentalist Latter-Day Saints compound near Eldorado, Texas, in April. They coordinated the children's care in nearby San Angelo for three weeks, after which 75 moved to the BCFS Youth Ranch near Luling.

"You're nice," a 6-year-old girl announced last week as Nanci Gibbons, the agency's executive vice president, walked past her on the ranch play ground. "Why, thank you," Gibbons replied, "but how do you know I'm nice?" Because your shirt says 'BCFS,'" the girl answered, "and you know what BCFS stands for, don't you?" "Is it, 'Beef, Chicken, Fish and Sausage?'" Gibbons guessed, quoting the nickname many of the children had bestowed during their stay in San Angelo.

"Oh no," the girl said firmly. "It means, 'Best Care for Children.'"

"For the children to recognize that the folks in BCFS shirts are there to help and be nice is the best compliment we

could get," BCFS chief executive Kevin Dinnin said. "Though there are significant differences, there is a common denominator between what we are doing with the FLDS children and what we did for Hurricane Katrina evacuees and victims of the Sri Lanka tsunami and what we're doing to help fight the international sex trafficking in Moldova -- we didn't create the situation, but are working to meet the needs of those affected. "Job one continues to be respecting each child's dignity and making them as content as possible. Our overriding concern is to provide the children with safe, clean places to sleep, access to medical care, healthy food and people who care about them."

Placing 75 of the 462 children -- taken from the polygamist compound on suspicion of abuse -- at the Youth Ranch allowed Texas Child Protective Services to keep many sibling groups together. It also kept BCFS in overdrive mode to staff the facility and activate support programs with local school districts. One of the mobile medical units was also stationed at the ranch.

In the move from San Angelo, one constant for children was the men and women in BCFS shirts. "In San Angelo, our staff -- all wearing BCFS shirts -- quickly became known as the people you went to when you needed something, whether it was organic baby food or just someone to listen. And now the 75 children waiting to know what their future will be have promoted us several ranks, it seems."

The San Antonio-based agency was alerted April 4, just as the operation to remove the children from the compound got under way, to be ready to receive 24 children at the Youth Ranch. But the next day Dinnin was asked if BCFS could supervise sheltering operations in San Angelo "for up to 150 women and children." At the operation's peak, the shelters housed 550 women and children.

As "incident commander," Dinnin and BCFS were tasked with providing oversight and coordination for all the agencies responding to the crisis. During the three weeks the children and mothers were housed in San Angelo before a court ordered the children placed in child-care facilities across the state, approximately 1,000 state, county, and city personnel and volunteers worked under BCFS supervision.

The agency interacted daily on critical incident decisions with the commissioners of the Texas Department of State Health Services, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, the Texas Department of Public Safety, Gov. Rick Perry's staff and other local and statewide elected officials.

BCFS deployed 55 employees, including most of its senior administrative staff, and more than \$1 million in assets. In addition to two mobile medical clinics and a mobile feeding unit, BCFS provided communication technology for the operation, including VHF radios for communication between all responding agencies, satellite uplink for Internet telephones, 28 laptop computers, plasma-screen and projector displays for incident management and direct, real-time, visual incident-management communication with the Texas State Operations Center in Austin.

While state child-protection officials and Texas courts decided about placement of the children, BCFS ministered to emotionally stressed women and children around the clock; respected the FLDS adherents' religious practices by providing organic, non-processed meals and acceptable toys and play activities; treated outbreaks of chicken pox and respiratory infections (FLDS children do not take inoculations); created an alternate phone system when the cable to the shelters and command post was accidentally cut; developed contingency plans for all possible court rulings; processed mountains of laundry; and handled all purchasing.

When the courts ordered the transfer of the children to facilities across the state, BCFS used GPS technology to track the bus convoys dispatched around Texas. "To categorize the sheltering operations as 'highly successful' is a gross understatement," Dinnin added. "To quote Chief Colley of the Governor's Division of Emergency Management, BCFS was the 'rock star' of the San Angelo operation. We do appreciate that -- but being noted for providing 'Best Care for Children' is the highest compliment possible."

In the past few years, BCFS has gained a national reputation for its expertise in such operations. Last month the Federal Emergency Management Agency asked it to be a "subject-matter consultant" to develop a "functional template" for special-needs shelters.

BCFS also is in charge of training Texas cities in setting up such facilities and recently began doing the same for the state of Nevada. The BCFS incident-management team has undergone a nationally recognized training program and is credentialed through the Federal Emergency Management Agency in various aspects of emergency management. The team's 55 members were pulled from BCFS programs across the state. Most worked 14- to 18-hour daily shifts on the front end of the operation.

Mix of politics, religion inevitable, but all blends not equal, scholar says

ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- Religion and politics inevitably will mix -- especially in the U.S. presidential campaign -- but that does not mean Americans should sanction a free-for-all, church-state expert Melissa Rogers insisted. Rogers, director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., delivered the annual T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Lectures at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary in Abilene.

"There's a growing interest in religion's role in politics that could result in an 'anything goes' approach," she observed. "But it doesn't have to be that way. There are some constructive ways of managing these issues."

The U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to mix politics and religion -- to a degree, reported Rogers, former executive director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and former general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, both based in Washington. "Our Constitution certainly says that religious groups and people have the right to participate in the debate of political issues," she said. "Private citizens clearly have a constitutional right to comment on issues of public concern in religious terms."

And while Article VI of the Constitution forbids any government-imposed religious test for public office, "voters certainly are free to cast their ballots for any reason, including voting for or against someone because of his or her religion or lack thereof," she noted. Still, the spirit of this constitutional provision should influence voters' decisions, she argued. More broadly, Rogers offered six suggestions for "managing the mix of religion and politics."

-- "Accept the fact that religion and politics will mix," she said. "They always have. They always will." Long before Mormon Mitt Romney and former Baptist pastor Mike Huckabee ran for president and candidate Barack Obama's pastor made headlines, Americans were bringing their values to bear on political/religious discussions, she noted. "There is nothing unconstitutional, un-American or otherwise wrong with the mere fact that some will draw on religion as a source of guidance when making decisions about public matters or that some will include religious references in their discussion of such matters," she said. "The separation of church and state does not require the separation of religion and politics. Further, I believe any attempt to do so would not only generate a tremendous backlash, it also would be ultimately unsuccessful."

-- "Although the religious and political spheres overlap, they are different, and there are risks when religion and politics mix," Rogers warned. "This is one indication of the risks when religion and politics mix: We begin to think that those who disagree with us are enemies of God, and we are at the right hand of God. Other risks include the potential for damage to our pluralistic democracy and to the integrity of religion, including the use of religion as a means to a political end."

-- While religious people have rights to participate in politics, they are not better rights than others' rights, she admonished. She quoted Huckabee, who said on the campaign trail, "... I don't feel like a person has to share my faith to share my love of this country." "America," Rogers urged, "should be a place that welcomes all people of good will to bring their values to the political process and to participate fully and equally in that process." "After all, religious people who are political conservatives are not the only Americans who have values and vote them. All God's children got values, including nonreligious people, and all of us vote them."

-- Candidates have an obligation to answer some questions that "touch on religion," she insisted. To illustrate, she showed a video clip of John McCain talking about whether the United States is a "Christian nation" and quoted Barack Obama discussing his beliefs about teaching evolution in public schools. Emphasizing candidates should be willing to answer questions "about how their personal beliefs, including personal religious beliefs, might affect their governance," she also referenced some statements by Obama about race, religion and patriotism, and played a clip of Huckabee answering a question about whether his religious perspective on marriage would impact his political decisions.

-- "There's good religious outreach and bad religious outreach by candidates," Rogers said. "Here I am talking not about what is politically effective, but about what is right," she explained. Assuming they are respecting the tax rules that nonprofits must follow, she said, "It is good for candidates to reach out to religious as well as nonreligious communities and listen to religious as well as nonreligious groups. "But it is not good for candidates to try to tell people of faith what their faith means to them, how they should vote, or to otherwise try to command, control and co-opt religion."

-- Religious communities engage in both "good and bad forms of religious engagement" of politics, she reported. Churches and other religious groups should resist attempts by politicians to usurp the autonomy and freedom of religion, she added, warning against giving politicians access to church members' contact information, church money and volunteers. "Our faith is not an instrument of electoral politics, and we should never do anything that suggests it is," she admonished. "Partisan politics should have no place in the pulpit. ... Let's say it again this election: God is not a Republican or a Democrat. An awesome God does not affiliate with any political party."

Faith-in-schools debate best handled in local communities, Rogers says

ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- Whatever the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately decides about the role of religion in public schools, communities should strive to have better conversations on the topic, Melissa Rogers told participants at the T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Lectures at Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon Seminary. Rogers, director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University, offered a few ground rules for guiding the religion-in-schools debate in communities across the nation.

Before outlining her ground rules, Rogers explained what kinds of prayer, religious speech and religious curriculum

are allowed and disallowed in public schools. Put simply, she said: "The only kind of prayer that is not permitted at public schools is the kind the government leads or sponsors." For example, students may pray silently at any time and may pray audibly over lunches and at other times "as long as they are not disruptive and the school does not sponsor the religious expression."

But schools "cannot organize or sponsor prayers during class time or at school events, whether through teacher-led prayer, inviting clergy to pray, organizing student votes on prayer or otherwise," she reported. "Moments of silence are unconstitutional if they are used to promote prayer." Rogers affirmed the place of religion in public-school curriculum. "We cannot understand our nation or our world without understanding religion," she said. "But how can we ensure that schools teach about religion rather than preach about it? After all, preaching about religion is not the job of the schools, but rather the job of religious leaders, houses of worship and family."

The landmark 1963 Supreme Court decision *Abington Township v. Schempp* "made clear that public schools could not engage in devotional teaching of religion," she noted. "In this same decision, the court also noted that academic teaching about religion was constitutional and even desirable within public-school classrooms. ... "The Supreme Court has made it clear that the school's curricula must be shaped by academic rather than religious principles and that it must not otherwise seek to indoctrinate students in religion," she said.

Schools may teach about religion if they are neutral regarding faith, neither inculcating nor denigrating religion, she added. Rogers noted some ways in which the new justices on the Supreme Court may differ on these issues from the justices they replaced. But she acknowledged predicting the Supreme Court's course is risky and often unproductive. "We cannot control what happens in the future at the Supreme Court," she said. "We can control, however, how we deal with these issues in our communities, and I believe that we can and should invest our energies there."

Seeking to alleviate local battles over religion in school, Rogers proposed four general ground rules that she believes everyone can endorse, even if they differ on more specific church-state issues:

-- "Our nation's public schools are not and should not be religion-free zones," she said. "Students who are people of faith will want to express that faith on campus, and they may do so in many ways that do not involve state sponsorship and thus do not violate the First Amendment. ... Further, schools need to teach about religion. Schools should never indoctrinate; they should never press for the acceptance or rejection of religion. But schools should instruct students about the way religion has shaped societies." To ensure that these matters are handled appropriately, she called for "mandating and funding teacher training" regarding religion and public schools.

-- "The government should never create a hierarchy of faiths," she insisted. "It isn't the job of government to determine which faith is right or best or dominant," Rogers said. Instead, it is the job of government to safeguard the rights of all people. "In short, one does not have to believe all religions are equally true in order to believe that the government ought to treat all religions equally," she said. "We demand full religious liberty for Christians abroad, in countries that are majority Muslim, for example, and properly so. On the flip side, we must demand religious liberty for non-Christians here at home."

-- "We should never heckle or bully others because of their faiths, lack of faith or positions on church-state issues," Rogers urged. "This should not be a difficult one for Christians, given that Christ taught us to love our neighbors. Frankly, and sadly, we don't have to look hard to find examples of Christians behaving badly when it comes to debates about religion and public schools. That's a shame. As the song goes, they should know we are Christians by our love."

-- Tell the truth about church-state issues, she pleaded. "Prayer has not been kicked out of public schools," she asserted, citing one of the persistent untruths told about church-state relations. Blanket statements are not truthful or helpful, she said. "We only confuse the issue and hurt our public witness when we make false statements like 'prayer has been kicked out of public schools.'"

Iowa church, CBF commit to S.D. Indian reservation

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Until last summer, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship didn't have much of a ministry presence in Buffalo County, S.D. Leaders from Together for Hope, CBF's rural-poverty initiative that works in 20 of America's poorest counties, had identified the county as a place where transforming ministry could take place. But they couldn't find any group to make a long-term commitment to ministry there.

Kathleen and Ray Kesner, then Together for Hope facilitators in South Dakota, had been learning about the county and building relationships with local leaders. When they shared the ministry need with Ashworth Road Baptist Church in West Des Moines, Iowa, members responded. As one of the closest CBF partner churches to Buffalo County, a few members made the seven-hour drive to Crow Creek Indian Reservation, one of the county's largest reservations, where they met with leaders.

"They just captured our hearts," said Tim Deatruck, the church's pastor. "We realize the importance of making long-term commitments, and we're hoping to be invested in the work of Crow Creek for years to come."

In less than a year, church members have made several trips to Crow Creek to build relationships and learn how they could help. Already they've provided funding to help financially strapped Boys and Girls Clubs stay open, and have donated funds and labor to build a new playground. "The playground was provided to a community that has been completely overlooked," said church member David Phillips, who, along with his wife, Jami, serves as TFH ministry facilitator in South Dakota. "The donation of the playground and, even more, the labor to install it communicate to the people of Crow Creek that they are important to us."

Last September church members traveled again to Crow Creek to deliver new clothes and school supplies for 300 children on the reservation. Local leaders worked to give correct clothing sizes to the church, and the church raised the money to purchase each child a new coat and outfit for school. "We didn't go to [local leaders] and say, 'This is something we want to do,'" Deatruck said. "We asked them, 'How can we help you be successful? What can we do to help you?' The coats and clothes were their idea."

Church member Scott Oswald was on that distribution trip and has been touched by the community's desire to better the reservation. "They have a sense of community and family and try to overcome such huge obstacles to have a better way of life," he said.

Thus far, more than half the church's members have been to Crow Creek. The ministry partnership is making missions accessible for every member who wants to experience missions firsthand, Deatruck said. "The church is being changed and transformed because individuals are going out and being changed and transformed. That's what we want," he said. "They can go and have the experience and not just do something, but really make an impact."

This summer the church has another trip planned. Leaders hope to take 50 church members -- about half of the congregation -- to work with children and teenagers and do construction projects. In August, with financial backing from Ashworth Road, two members will move to Crow Creek. As law-school students who will graduate in May, they will be a resource for legal issues and economic development on the reservation. "We're excited about what's going on in the church," Deatruck said. "We really think that what's happening is a God thing. We're just hanging on for the ride and looking forward to seeing some other great things happen."

"The most important thing churches like Ashworth Road provide is a sense of worth to the people who live on the reservation," said Jami Phillips. "It has been such a joy to see the Native Americans realize that when these church members look at them, they don't see an Indian or a Marine or a single mother or an alcoholic. They see a child of God who is worthy of love and compassion because that is the way he sees his children."
