

Baptist World Alliance promotes Human Rights Day

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP) — The Baptist World Alliance is encouraging churches to observe Human Rights Day the weekend of Dec. 12-13.

The weekend is nearest the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations on Dec. 10, 1948. The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty first called on Baptist bodies in the United States to observe Human Rights Day on the 10th anniversary of the declaration in 1958.

The BWA offers free liturgies, Bible passages and hymns emphasizing human rights for use in churches; all are available on BWA's website.

The global network for Baptists has strongly emphasized human rights throughout its 104 years of history. In 2008 the BWA created a Division of Freedom and Justice to formalize and expand work on behalf of the marginalized.

Each year the BWA presents an annual human-rights award. This year the award, presented in August in the Netherlands, went to Leena Lavanya of India, whose ServeTrust ministry operates a home for the aged, a home for lepers, homes for HIV/AIDS-infected children and adults, and an HIV/AIDS counseling center. (Bob Allen, ABPnews.com)

Grand jury to review police shooting of Georgia pastor^r

ATLANTA (ABP) — A north Georgia prosecutor says he will let a grand jury decide whether to bring criminal charges against undercover police officers involved in the fatal shooting of a Baptist minister during a botched drug sting.

The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported Dec. 1 that Brian Rickman, district attorney for three counties in northeast Georgia, said in an interview he was turning over a Georgia Bureau of Investigation's report of the Sept. 1 shooting death of Jonathan Ayers, to a Mountain Judicial Circuit grand jury. Ayers was pastor of Shoal Creek Baptist Church in Lavonia, Ga.

The *Independent-Mail* in Anderson, S.C., quoted unnamed court officials saying the grand jury will hear the case Dec. 15 as part of its regular session. The grand jury is expected to be in session at least three days to consider the report and other possible indictments unrelated to the shooting incident.

Ayers, 28, was fatally shot while trying to flee from a gas station parking lot when undercover police officers rushed his car. Friends and family say Ayers, who was not part of the investigation, probably didn't know the men were police and feared they were trying to rob him. (Bob Allen, ABPnews.com)

Ethicist: Obama's Afghanistan plan falls short of just-war criteria

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) — A Baptist ethicist says President Obama's Dec. 1 speech outlining his Afghanistan strategy did not satisfy criteria used by Christians for centuries to justify war. Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, said in an editorial on EthicsDaily.com that in order to be "just," a war "must have a high chance of success."

Parham, who founded the non-profit BCE in 1991 after leaving a position with the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said Obama's "make more war in order to end the war" rationale did not adequately address the question of likelihood that the plan will succeed.

Specifically, Parham said, the president failed to explain how sending an additional 30,000 U.S. troops would achieve goals, repeated throughout his remarks, of building the capacity of the Afghan military and government and those of its neighbors enough to permit a "responsible transition" of forces by July 2011.

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Worth repeating

"Hope is not something we generate on our own; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the means by which we combat cynicism and fatalism in a world seduced by materialism; too many of us pay more attention to the market and how our retirements are doing than to our impoverished neighbors."

--Molly Marshall, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kan.

"If by 'capacity,' Obama means that the corrupt Afghani government must become less corrupt, then what is the real probability of success?" Parham asked.

"If he thinks that training 50,000 more Afghani soldiers — to join the unimpressive Afghani armed forces — will allow the U.S. and its allies to leave behind a stable government, what is the probability of such a successful outcome?"

Parham said the president must define what he means by "capacity" and "responsible transition" if he hopes to win support of the American public.

"As it stands now, more war to end war is no just war," Parham concluded, "for there is low probability of success." (*Bob Allen, ABPnews.com*)

U.S. Christian leaders denounce Ugandan anti-gay bill

WASHINGTON (ABP) — Christian leaders in the United States with diverse viewpoints on homosexuality are joining forces to protest a Ugandan proposal to punish homosexual behavior with imprisonment or even death.

Catholic, evangelical and mainline Protestant leaders including Ronald Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action; Jim Wallis of Sojourners; and author and speaker Brian McLaren endorsed a Dec. 7 statement denouncing the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2009, currently before Uganda's Parliament.

"This bill is an affront to human dignity and offensive to Christians around the world who take seriously Christ's command to love our neighbors as ourselves," said Thomas Melady, a former U.S. ambassador to Uganda and the Vatican and one of the statement's signatories.

Baptists signing the statement included David Gushee, a professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University who also writes a regular column for Associated Baptist Press; Melissa Rogers, director of Wake Forest University Divinity School's Center for Religion and Public Affairs; and Derrick Harkins, senior pastor at Nineteenth Street Baptist Church in Washington. (*Bob Allen, ABPnews.com*)

Judge in Tajikistan orders Baptist church to close

OSLO, Norway (ABP) — A judge in Tajikistan has ordered a Baptist church in the capital city, Dushanbe, to cease meetings in a private home, saying that housing codes and a new religion law require houses of worship to register with the government.

Members of the church told Forum 18, a Norway-based news service that focuses on global religious freedom, that the Baptists do not want to register as a matter of principle and that Tajikistan's Constitution allows individuals to worship according to their conscience.

Judge Soliya Ismailova of Somoni District Court told Forum 18 the law requires all non-governmental organizations in the former Soviet republic to register and rejected the Baptists' contention that it violates their religious freedom.

Idibek Ziyoyev, chair of the Tajik Culture Ministry's Head Department for Religious Affairs, said it is the first time he has ever heard of anyone refusing to register. "If they asked us for registration we would assist them," Ziyoyev told Forum 18 Dec. 1. (*Bob Allen, ABPnews.com*)

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WWI changed Truett's views on war, peace & government

HOUSTON (ABP) — Legendary Baptist pastor George W. Truett's experience preaching to troops in Europe during World War I not only shaped his views about militarism, but also contributed to his growing conviction that only Christ's church — not any government — offered hope for lasting peace, church historian Kelly Pigott said in a recent lecture.

Pigott, university chaplain and assistant professor of theology at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas, presented a paper titled, "George W. Truett: Hawk or Dove?" at the annual meeting of the Texas Baptist Historical Society.

Truett, Baptist statesman and long-time pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, voiced strong support for the war effort when the United States entered what President Woodrow Wilson touted as a struggle to make the world "safe for democracy," Pigott noted.

Truett's presidential appointment to preach six months to the Allied Forces in Europe gave him the opportunity to witness the destruction that war produces and visit wounded soldiers. He narrowly escaped death himself when he missed boarding a ship, and a U-boat torpedo subsequently sunk that vessel, killing all its passengers.

And the tour of duty changed him, Pigott noted. A close-up look at the horrors of war strengthened Truett's commitment to doing everything possible to create non-military solutions to international disputes. And the failure of the United States to embrace Wilson's vision of a League of Nations left him disillusioned with government — as reflected in his famed 1920 religious-liberty speech on the steps of the Capitol in Washington.

"Beyond just an opportunity to trump a long-cherished Baptist principle, perhaps Truett's proclamation on the steps of the Capitol was the beginning of a journey of increased suspicion about government," Pigott suggested. (*Ken Camp, ABPnews.com*)

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