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December 31, 2004

Posted: 12/31/04

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By Greg Warner

Associated Baptist Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP)—The Southern Baptist Convention's withdrawal from the Baptist World Alliance was the top Baptist news story of 2004, according to a survey of journalists.

The murder of four SBC missionaries in Iraq was the second most significant story, followed closely by President Bush's re-election with support from so-called "values voters."

The annual survey of Baptist state newspaper editors was conducted by Associated Baptist Press, an independent news organization based in Jacksonville, Fla.

The Baptist World Alliance, an international umbrella organization representing 211 Baptist bodies, lost its largest member and funder in June. The SBC's conservative leaders said BWA harbors theological liberalism, a charge denied by the Virginia-based alliance and many of its member groups worldwide. The action became official in October, costing BWA \$300,000 a year.

In the deadliest tragedy in 157 years of Southern Baptist missions history, four International Mission Board missionaries were killed in their car March 15 in Mosul, Iraq, by unidentified assailants wielding automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades.

The relief workers were researching the need for a water purification site. Killed were Larry T. Elliott, 60, and Jean Dover Elliott, 58, of Cary, N.C.; Karen Denise Watson, 38, of Bakersfield, Calif.; and David McDonnell, 29, of Fort Worth, Texas. McDonnell's wife, Carrie Taylor McDonnell, 26, was severely wounded but survived.

Conservative Southern Baptists, who strongly supported George W. Bush's re-election Nov. 2, have since celebrated the growing influence of moral issues in American politics and called for Bush and the Congress to push ahead with reforms to outlaw gay marriage and abortion, appoint conservative judges and expand federal funding for faith-based charities.

The other top stories of 2004 were:

4. Gay marriage—particularly its approval by the Massachusetts Supreme Court and gay marriages held in San Francisco and a couple of other municipalities—prompted a nationwide outcry from conservatives and legislative attempts to prohibit it.
5. Four deadly hurricanes smashed into Florida, other Southern states and the Caribbean in late summer, killing more than 100 people, damaging dozens of churches and triggering Baptist disaster-relief work.
6. Mel Gibson's blockbuster movie "The Passion of the Christ" debuted in February amid charges of anti-Semitism, but pre-Easter audiences responded favorably, producing record ticket and DVD sales. While the movie made Jesus' death a topic of water-cooler conversation, evangelical Christians turned the box-office phenomenon into an outreach tool.

7. Constitutional amendments banning gay marriage were passed in 11 states Nov. 2 in reaction to legalization in some jurisdictions. Two other states approved bans earlier.

8. The SBC International Mission Board adopted guidelines in July requiring volunteer mission workers to endorse the more conservative 2000 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement. The endorsement is already required of IMB missionaries.

9. Congress defeated the Federal Marriage Amendment on a procedural vote July 14. The defeat of the constitutional ban was hailed as a victory by gay-rights activists, but the vote triggered a cascade of state gay-marriage bans and energized a conservative electorate.

10. The SBC North American Mission Board voted Feb. 4 not to endorse female chaplains in cases "where the role and function of the chaplain would be seen the same as that of a pastor." The move brought an end to the SBC's endorsement of female chaplains for the military, but may not prevent women from serving as hospital chaplains.

Other stories ranking high in the minds of Baptist editors were a study showing the number of "declining" Southern Baptist churches on the rise, the worldwide reaction to the election of a gay Episcopal bishop in New Hampshire, and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's fight against making the SBC the "sole member" of its corporation, ensuring trustees could not break away from the SBC.

A separate survey of religion writers at the country's daily newspapers produced a tie for the No. 1 news story of the year. At the top of the poll by Religion News Service were "The Passion of the Christ" and the role of faith in Bush's re-election.

The rest of the top 10, according to the religion reporters, were: 3. gay marriage, 4. the denial of communion to pro-abortion politicians by some

Catholic bishops, 5. the international Anglican report on New Hampshire's gay bishop, 6. the Supreme Court's approval on technical grounds of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, 7. the U.S. role in Iraq, 8. the trial of two lesbian ministers by the United Methodist Church, 9. the controversy over homosexuality in the Presbyterian Church (USA), and 10. the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.