

Briefly noted

News in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

For the second time in as many years, President Bush vetoed a bill June 20 that would have expanded federal funding for embryonic stem cell research. However, in order to soften the political impact of nixing the popular legislation, Bush coupled his veto announcement with an executive order designed to promote other kinds of stem cell research that offer “new possibilities for progress without conflict or ethical controversy.” Bush vetoed the “Stem Cell Research Enhancement Act of 2007,” which the House and Senate earlier passed by wide—but not veto-proof—margins. The bill would have overturned a Bush policy that effectively banned federal funding for stem cell research.

Texas pastor Dwight McKissic, who has been at the center of a debate in the Southern Baptist Convention over speaking in tongues, has resigned as a trustee of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. McKissic, the pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, told the trustee board chair in a June 20 letter that his role as a trustee was a “huge distraction” from his ministry priorities. McKissic told of his personal use of tongues during a chapel sermon at the seminary last August. Two months later, the seminary trustee board—with McKissic dissenting—voted not to hire professors or administrators who promote charismatic Christian practices, which include speaking in tongues. McKissic said he was “exhilarated” by a recent study indicating that 50 percent of Southern Baptist pastors believe “the Holy Spirit gives some people the gift of a special language to pray to God privately.”

A federal court in Pennsylvania has ruled that Sameh Khouzam, a 38-year-old Coptic Christian who feared torture if he was returned to Egypt, will be allowed to stay in the U.S. indefinitely. Khouzam had fled to the U.S. in 1998 seeking asylum after being tortured and detained in Egypt when he refused to convert to Islam. Wrote Judge Thomas Vanaskie in his decision: “While Khouzam may have no right to be in the United States, he most assuredly has a right not to be tortured.” According to human rights groups, Egypt has a record of torture, especially against Coptic Christians. The Cairo-based Ibn Khaldun research organization reports that Copts have suffered more than 120 major attacks in the past four decades.

A 10-year-old Nepalese girl has lost her title as a Hindu living goddess because she left the country to promote a film. Sajani Shakya was the first living goddess, or kumari, ever to leave the country. Her June visit to Washington served as a publicity tour for a British documentary that explores the centuries-old kumari tradition. Officials from Sajani's temple in the town of Bhaktapur announced July 3 that they would revoke her title. In the kumari tradition, very young girls are selected for their "perfect" characteristics and are believed to be reincarnations of the Hindu goddess Taleju—yet they must come from the Shakya Buddhist caste, the same caste to which the Buddha belonged. Both Hindus and Buddhists in Nepal revere kumaris and bring requests to their feet. Once the girl-goddess reaches puberty, Taleju is believed to leave her body, and temple officials search for another girl to worship. According to Nepalese folklore, men who wed a former kumari will face an early death, so many of the girls never marry, and they face a life of hardship as a result.