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September 22, 1992

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Religious freedom bill
cannot wait, experts say

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- As Congress races to adjourn in early October, approval of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act is "a long shot but it's a shot," said a Baptist church-state specialist.

Oliver Thomas, Baptist Joint Committee general counsel who has worked two years on the measure, said that the bill must be approved by House and Senate committees before it can come up for a vote. With the Congress hustling to adjourn because of the election, the bill's chances of approval are lessening, he said, adding that the bill has been in the House for more than a year.

A spokesperson for the House Subcommittee on Civil and Constitutional Rights said the House Judiciary Committee anticipates voting on RFRA the week of Sept. 21 but there has been no formal confirmation. She said that subcommittee chairman Don Edwards, D-Calif., wants to move the bill forward and there should be enough votes to do so.

It is uncertain when and if the Senate Judiciary Committee will vote on the bill. But it did hold a hearing on RFRA Sept. 18.

Thomas told the Senate panel that politicians should restore religious freedom in America instead of merely touting religious values on the campaign trail.

"I am puzzled because both political parties and their presidential candidates are falling all over themselves to appear religious, and yet neither party appears to see the importance of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act," Thomas said.

"So it's been a bit ironic that, while parties and candidates have been scurrying around looking for the right religious issue, the most important bill affecting religion, certainly in our lifetime, has been languishing in the Congress," said Thomas, who is chairman of the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion and who helped draft RFRA (S. 2969, H.R. 2797).

RFRA would restore the strict "compelling interest" test the U.S. Supreme Court formerly required government to meet before restricting religious liberty. That test permitted government to restrict religious practice only to further a compelling governmental interest, such as health

or safety, and if the least restrictive means of safeguarding that interest had been used.

The compelling-interest standard, articulated in 1963, virtually was abandoned in the court's 1990 Oregon vs. Smith decision. The Smith decision said that government needs only a rational basis to justify burdens on religious practice unless the restriction singles out religion.

Thomas pled with senators not to let RFRA slip through the cracks because of abortion politics that had been injected into the process.

He said that critics "will tell you that religiously based abortion claims have been made in the past and will be made under this bill, and for that reason, you should vote against it. Mr. Chairman, they will not be able to cite one case, not one, where such a claim has stood up on appeal."

The support for the bill is extraordinary, Thomas said, noting the diversity of the 54 religious and civil-liberties organizations that form the coalition. Among coalition members are the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, American Civil Liberties Union, People for the American Way, Concerned Women for America and Home School Legal Defense Association.

Thomas described the coalition as "54 organizations willing to set aside their deep political and ideological differences in order to unite in a common vision for the common good -- religious liberty for all Americans."

Sen. Orrin Hatch of Utah, chief Republican sponsor, agreed the coalition was unique. "When the American Civil Liberties Union and the Coalitions for America see eye to eye on a major piece of legislation, it is certainly safe to say that someone has seen the light," said Hatch, who supports pro-life causes.

However, two major organizations oppose the bill. The U.S. Catholic Conference and the National Right to Life Committee oppose any legislative response to Smith that does not have an amendment to exclude any potential abortion claims.

James Bopp, general counsel of the National Right to Life Committee, said: "The abortion-on-demand movement is urgently seeking new moorings for a constitutional right to abortion because of the ongoing scholarly and judicial rejection of the Roe vs. Wade abortion-privacy analysis. Pro-abortion partisans have repeatedly and forcefully asserted a free-exercise-of-religion right to abortion."

RFRA poses real dangers to the legal protection of the unborn, he added.

The Catholic Conference seeks two other exemptions to protect the tax-exempt status of religious organizations and the participation of religious groups in government social programs. But the coalition steadfastly has maintained that these exemptions are unnecessary and detrimental to the bill.

Douglas Laycock, professor at the University of Texas Law School and noted First Amendment scholar, called the need for the three exemptions "imaginary." "If I had deliberately set out to draft amendments that would prevent the enactment of any bill, I could not have done better than these three amendments," Laycock added.

Thomas said, "While we have been haggling over a hypothetical abortion question, more than 50 cases have been decided against religious claims."

He also noted that the coalition has several pro-life members.

Michael Farris, president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, said pro-life members of the coalition recognize that abortion claims may be brought on free-exercise grounds, but "it is our collective judgment that there is no realistic chance that a pro-choice argument could be successfully made if Roe v. Wade is ever reversed.

"As a pro-life advocate, I believe it is counterproductive to turn every legislative issue into a battle over abortion," Farris continued.

Additionally, bill supporters said RFRA would protect the rights of

individuals such as medical or health-care professionals who are conscientiously opposed to performing abortions. And, they say, while the abortion issue is a red herring, the threat to religious liberty is real and pervasive.

Forest Montgomery, public affairs counsel of the National Association of Evangelicals, said that under Smith religious liberty "is now to be bestowed by a beneficent majority" or "denied by a tyrannical majority unmoved by the pleas of religious minorities."

Thomas, likening Smith to the 1857 Dred Scott decision that declared African Americans were property, said that governments throughout the country have run roughshod over religious conviction. He gave some examples: churches have been zoned out of commercial areas; Jews have been subjected to autopsies against their families' religious beliefs; and a Catholic shelter for the homeless was closed because it could not afford an elevator -- even though the nuns said they would carry any disabled person up the stairs.

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Enrollment at Richmond seminary
triples as second year begins

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond has begun its second year with triple the enrollment and double the faculty.

The seminary has 90 students for the fall semester, three times the number enrolled a year ago in the school's first class. Of these, 55 are new students.

Three new faculty members were installed at the seminary's opening convocation Sept. 15, bringing the number of full-time faculty to six. In addition, the school has eight visiting and adjunctive faculty members.

Founded by the Alliance of Baptists, the Richmond seminary now receives the largest portion of its financial support from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. It is governed by an independent board of trustees.

Cecil Sherman, moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, was the speaker for the convocation. He warned against using a "wooden literalism" to interpret the Bible and he encouraged continuous openness to God's revelation.

"Literalism is a great peril and has opened (us) to much bad religion," Sherman told BTSR students.

Sherman said the root of Southern Baptists' "Bible wars" is not biblical inerrancy, but biblical literalism. In a world where "old certainties are challenged," a pastor with a literal approach to Bible finds a ready audience. "Our culture seeks certainty, and our preachers are ready to give it."

But Jesus was not a literalist, Sherman said, recalling stories of Jesus healing on the Sabbath in violation of Jewish law. "Correctly, Jesus saw that literal law made bad religion."

"Baptists ought to have no part with literalism. It is not of our heritage, and it is not of the spirit of Christ. It has brought grief to the fellowship and embarrassment to the faith," Sherman said.

Sherman called for openness in interpreting Scripture. "So much of God remains a mystery to us. God is above us and far beyond us, and we only know bits and pieces.

"Karl Barth said the Bible was our 'true sample' of the revelation about God," Sherman said. "We need the 'true sample' to keep us from error. But 'true sample' suggests there is more. The risk in Baptist life is not in being too open. Our risk is that we are not open at all.

"Read the Bible as a seeker," he advised.

New professors installed were Isam Ballenger, professor of Christian mission and world religions; Elizabeth Barnes, associate professor of theology and ethics; and Glenn Hinson, professor of spirituality, worship, and church history. Each presented a personal confession of faith which will be added to the BTSR faculty covenant.

Seminary President Tom Graves presented a resolution of appreciation to the Baptist General Association of Virginia. The resolution, approved by BTSR trustees last April and presented to BGAV President Jerry Holcomb, expresses thanks for Virginia Baptists' financial support of BTSR and for their interest in the seminary's placement program. The resolution also invites the BGAV to nominate one person to the trustee board of BTSR annually.

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-- By Beth McMahon

Religion/business dialogue
on environment prescribed

By Relma Hargus

BATON ROUGE, La. (ABP) -- Dialogue between the religious community and society is a necessity if ethical challenges concerning the environment are going to be heard, Baptist ethicist Robert Parham told a group of chemical executives Sept. 16.

Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., addressed the Louisiana Chemical Association meeting in Baton Rouge.

Parham might well be the first ethicist to speak about environmental issues to chemical producers, who are often blamed for pollution problems. But, he said, "economic development and environmental protection are not antagonistic objectives. Both are mutually interdependent objectives."

Parham modeled the dialogue he prescribed by speaking to both the chemical association and a meeting of local religious leaders earlier in the day. He delivered the same message to each group.

"Arrogance, ignorance, greed and sloth are the ethical problems driving our ecosystem into bankruptcy," Parham charged. But it's not enough just to know the underlying causes of the environmental crisis, he said.

"Once we grasp the root causes, we must construct a new ethic. We must shape a new way of thinking." That new way of thinking, Parham said, is based on the biblical command to "love your neighbor," which he said involves thinking of one's neighbors not just in terms of location but also time.

"We must see those who live in Baton Rouge in the year 2050 and beyond as our neighbors. Neighborhood is more than geography," he said.

Parham's Baton Rouge talks -- "Values and Visions: Leaving a Decent Place to Live" -- echoed his book, *Loving Neighbors Across Time*, which was published by New Hope last year.

Leaving a decent place to live for those who will come after us is one way to love them across time, Parham said, adding the religious community must accept the challenge to "fashion an environmental ethic."

"People of faith need to articulate a new vision, sound the warning, create a new ethic," he said.

Parham's address to the chemical association, as well as his earlier appearance before the Greater Baton Rouge Federation of Churches and Synagogues, were facilitated by Jeff Day, executive director of the federation. Day said he was approached by the Louisiana Chemical Association

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about dialogue between the faith community and the association.

Parham said the faith community has not been active enough on environmental issues. One way for churches to do their part, he said is to model environmentally friendly behavior, such as using energy wisely and recycling.

Parham suggested guidelines for people and institutions to follow in order to ensure a healthy world for future generations:

-- Do ecojustice.

"Eco stands for ecology. Justice refers to social relationships. Ecojustice ensures that the environment is safeguarded for future generations. Ecojustice makes sure that economic justice continues so that the poor can escape from poverty and that human need can be met."

-- Build community.

"Two billion people in our world drink and bathe in polluted water, while a handful of us drink bottled water from a single spring in France. Some of us consume more than our share. Real community is a sharing community. Real community is also a community where decision-making is shared."

-- Live simply.

Excessive accumulation ruins the environment while it also fails to create strong families or healthy communities, Parham said.

He cited the Old Testament story of God supplying manna sufficient for each day. The Hebrews fleeing Egypt were told to gather enough manna for their immediate need. Nevertheless, Parham said, some "greedy, insecure, unfaithful and unwise" people gathered more than they needed, only to discover it had spoiled the next day.

"The lesson for them and for us is that excessive accumulation does not pay off," Parham said.

After the two meetings, Day said continuing communication about environmental ethics seems to be a concern for members of both the federation and the chemical association. "The question now is what form it will take," he said.

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-- Relma Hargus is a staff writer for the Baton-Rouge Advocate. This article is reprinted with permission.

Churches, the disabled find ways
to overcome communication barriers

By Shari Schubert

(ABP) -- About 43 million Americans -- or one of every six persons -- have some kind of disability, either physical, sensory or mental, according to the National Organization on Disability.

With odds like that, chances are that virtually every church has someone in its membership who is disabled in some way. The person may be an elderly person who is hard of hearing, a child with a learning disability or an adult whose ability to function is severely affected by cerebral palsy or a brain injury.

Those disabilities affect the way people experience church, whether they are listening to a sermon or music, looking at a Bible or hymnal, watching a baptism, or making a decision for Christ.

Some of those with disabilities will need help from their churches to

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enable them to use the abilities they do have. The specific accommodations needed will depend on the number of individuals involved, the kind and severity of disabilities involved, and the resources of the church.

Printed materials constitute the most common communication barrier for blind or visually impaired individuals. Churches can help by providing Braille materials, tape recordings or large-print materials for the visually impaired. If these are not available, volunteers can read materials to those who need such assistance.

Opinions differ over whether Braille or tape-recorded materials are preferable for individuals who are completely blind.

"Braille is wonderful for people who know it," explained Gary Wunder, president of the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri, but only a relatively small percentage of blind people are able to read Braille.

Many older people who lose their sight later in life choose not to learn Braille, Wunder pointed out. There also are some people who cannot feel the raised dots well enough to read the patterns, he added. This is true of many diabetics.

The cost and bulk of Braille materials also are limiting factors. One Braille Bible, for instance, consists of 18 volumes and requires five-and-a-half feet of bookshelf space, and may cost about \$250.

But tape recorded materials have other limitations, noted Mission Service Corps volunteer Gene Stevens, a consultant for ministries to blind individuals.

Stevens explained that the adult Bible study and supplementary materials currently available on cassette from the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board are not marked in Braille, so a blind person cannot pick up a tape and quickly identify it or tell which side is which. The tapes also are not tone indexed, he pointed out, so it is difficult to locate a particular spot on the tape.

"I don't mean to be critical," he emphasized. "I appreciate what is being done." But he added he personally would prefer to have Braille materials.

Stevens is able to obtain some Sunday school materials in Braille, thanks to a ministry project of Park Avenue Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn. Charles Couey, a member of the church and president of the Southern Baptist Conference of the Blind, obtains computer data files of selected Sunday School Board periodicals and reformats them into Braille, using a computer with Braille display capability.

A few congregations have someone read their church newsletter onto tape for blind members. For partially sighted members, some churches enlarge bulletins and other materials on a photocopier. Other churches make announcements verbally during the worship service in addition to printing them in the bulletin.

Sunday school teachers who have visually impaired people in their classes need to consider their special needs in choosing teaching methods, Stevens added. For instance, if the lesson plan calls for writing out answers on response sheets, the teacher may want to consider a different approach that would not draw attention to a class member's disability.

For worshipers who are deaf, many churches now provide an interpreter. A few congregations have been established specifically for deaf people.

Judi Barker, deaf field consultant for St. Louis Association and the Missouri Baptist Convention, pointed out that interpreting involves more than many people realize. Some ideas cannot be translated directly, word-for-word, into sign language. Puns, for instance, which play on words which sound alike, lose their humor in sign language unless the interpreter sets the audience up for the punch line by providing some additional explanation.

Ideally, Barker said, the person who will be interpreting for worship

services should have the opportunity to plan with the pastor, other staff members responsible for leading worship, and any guest speakers prior to the service.

Breaking down communication barriers involves not only compensating for physical handicaps, but also building relationships. At this point, attitude makes a world of difference.

For a person with a physical impairment that does not affect his or her ability to hear, think or speak, few things are more irritating than to be treated as if he or she is not capable of communicating directly with others.

The scenario goes something like this: John, who is blind, goes to a restaurant with his wife. The waitress turns to the wife and asks, "What will he have?" Or an acquaintance walks up to Mary, who is in a wheelchair, and her mother, who is not, and says to the mother, "How is Mary today?"

Advocates for people with disabilities stress the importance of speaking directly to the person, not through a companion. Even if a person's disability is mental, if he is an adult he needs to be treated like an adult, advocates add.

People sometimes hesitate to initiate a conversation with a mentally retarded person because they don't know what to say, acknowledged Terri Rudy, director of adult special education for First Baptist Church of Raytown, Mo.

The same greetings that would be appropriate for anyone else -- "Hi. Glad you're here. God loves you." -- are appropriate for mentally handicapped people, she pointed out.

Rudy expressed appreciation for church members who take the initiative to greet members of the special-education class. It doesn't take a large number of people to make these members feel welcome, she added. "To them, it just takes one."

In conversing with a person who is mentally ill, it is important to remember that while he or she may have some difficulty processing information, the person is not necessarily lacking in intelligence, noted Bill Mosby, a Southern Baptist chaplain for Fulton State Hospital. Patience and a willingness to listen will help facilitate communication.

If the person begins to make statements that indicate he is out of touch with reality, "don't get in an argument with them," Mosby advised. "Don't tell them they're wrong."

An appropriate response, he said, might be something like, "I hear what you're saying, but I don't understand it that way." Changing the subject may help bring the person back to reality, he added.

Disabilities sometimes can make communication a challenge. But people with disabilities want and need the opportunity for meaningful interaction with others in the church family, the specialists said.

As one disabled individual, quoted in an NOD handbook for congregations, commented: "I'd much rather have someone deal with me directly, maybe even say the wrong thing, than to say nothing at all! Words I can handle. Being ignored is tough."