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Religious leaders decry excessive commercialization of Christmas

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Commercialization has robbed Christmas of its meaning and turned shopping malls into "the new shrines of worship" in American culture.

So say 25 religious leaders -- including six Baptists -- in a statement decrying the excessive commercialization of Christmas.

"We have seen the spirit of Christmas reduced to a carnival of mass marketing," the ecumenical group says. "Consumption has taken on an almost religious quality; malls have become the new shrines of worship."

The religious leaders urge Americans to distinguish between Christmas giving that captures the true meaning of the season and "obsessive spending as a way to fill the spiritual vacuum left by an over-consumptive society."

"In the end," the statement warns, "the delirium of commercial Christmas devours some, leaves others in ruinous debt, and punishes the poor, for whom the joy of Christmas always seems a dollar away."

"Christmas giving, in all its forms, is enriched when spiritual and ethical values overshadow the almost chronic compulsions to buy," the statement continues. "The advertising lords of Madison Avenue have been successful in developing among many a coerced sense of guilt that drives consumer anxiety (and buying) at Christmas time. At the same time, they have failed to recognize or achieve the ideal of giving."

Personal, altruistic and reflective giving is part of what makes Christmas real, the statement notes. It urges Americans to give simple gifts based on need, not consumption.

The religious leaders call upon people of faith to speak out against the over-commercialization of Christmas and to begin to reorder priorities.

"Christmas was never intended to be a crass marketing ploy. Let us restore the spiritual and life-affirming potential of the season -- and take it into the new year."

The statement, coordinated by the Washington, D.C.-based Center for the Study of Commercialism, was sent to hundreds of regional and church organizations around the country.

Baptist signers include: Dellanna O'Brien, executive director of Woman's Missionary Union in Birmingham, Ala.; Robert Parham, executive director of

the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn.; George Reed, director of the council on Christian Life and Public Affairs for the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina; Stan Hastey, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists in Washington, D.C.; Daniel Weiss, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches; and Calvin Butts, minister at Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York.

Other signers include Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of Churches; Timothy Hesburgh, president emeritus of Notre Dame University; and Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

A spokesman for America's retailers objected to the statement, however, noting the country's 19 million retail employees are dependent on holiday sales.

"Cancel Christmas? You would throw the country into depression," Jack Schultz, president of the National Retail Federation in New York, told the Charlotte Observer. "I don't want to take on the religious community, but an awful lot of jobs depend on Christmas.... If you think that's sacrilegious, the country's in trouble."

The U.S. Commerce Department is predicting a 4 percent jump in retail sales in December compared to the same month last year, when Americans spent \$200 billion.

Parham said the religious leaders' statement goes beyond similar ones which focused on the materialistic behavior of individuals and instead identifies commercialism as the driving force which aggravates our inherent materialism and consumerism."

"The commercialism of Christmas plays on the shadow side (of human nature)," Parham said, "attempting to replace the eternal and transcendent values of the Peace Child with the temporary and illusionary values of material consumption.

"The Peace Child's message is that all God's children have value because of who they are and whose they are. Corporate America's message is that human worth is wrapped up in personal and material consumption."

Parham said Christians must resist the idea that "to be happy is to buy things." He told the Tennessean of Nashville that he and his wife, Betsy, talk to their children throughout the year about the TV advertising they see.

"We ask, 'Why do they want you to buy that product -- because it will make you happy or because they want your money?'"

WMU's O'Brien said the commercialization of Christmas affects even Christians and churches. "We spend so much money on each other that we forget why we have Christmas," she said. "There's nothing wrong with giving gifts to each other, but when a child immediately thinks of Santa Claus instead of Jesus, then I think we have misplaced the meaning of Christmas."

O'Brien said she is concerned that the gift-giving frenzy distracts Southern Baptists from the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, which her agency sponsors to support Southern Baptist foreign missions.

"It's easy to neglect doing what is eternal and just take care of the mundane expressions (of Christmas)," she said. "In our own family, we've gone back to saying we want our money to go to the mission offering."

-- This story includes information from Pam Parry of the Baptist Joint Committee, Ken Garfield of the Charlotte Observer, and Ray Waddle of the Tennessean in Nashville.

Finance VP leaving
Executive Committee

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Richard Rosenbaum, the top financial officer for the Southern Baptist Convention, has resigned to take a new position with his former employer, the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

Rosenbaum, 38, will become director of operations for the board's trade publishing division, a position he said is more in line with his former career path in Christian publishing.

For the past two years, he has been vice president for business and finance at the SBC Executive Committee, where he has supervised planning of the denomination's budget, the Cooperative Program, and monitored the financial practices of the SBC's 20-plus agencies.

Both The Sunday School Board and Executive Committee are headquartered in Nashville, Tenn. -- in fact, across the street from each other.

Rosenbaum said many observers will look for a political reason for his departure -- coming two months after Morris Chapman became president of the Executive Committee, signaling new conservative leadership for the denomination's most powerful agency. But, Rosenbaum said, his reasons were strictly personal.

"There is a lot involved in my (Executive Committee) job," he explained. "I'm gone all the time.... I'm hoping I'll have more time with my family, and that is the biggest appeal for me."

He and his wife, Joann, have five children.

Before going to the Executive Committee in December 1990, Rosenbaum worked at the Sunday School Board for 10 years in six positions, the last as manager of the marketing section for the board's two conference centers.

Rosenbaum will assume his new position Jan. 1. As part of the recently reorganized Sunday School Board, Rosenbaum said, his responsibilities will include purchasing for Broadman Publishing and Holman Bible Publishing. He will eventually supervise 25 to 30 employees, he said.

"I have mixed feelings about leaving," Rosenbaum said, adding his tenure at the Executive Committee was "the most satisfying and rewarding time of my professional life."

"I felt a real sense of the Lord's leadership to come here," he said, noting he was committed to making the Executive Committee's transition to conservative leadership go smoothly. "It is a key position, and I had to weigh that."

But, he said, he couldn't pass up the chance "to get back into Christian publishing."

Rosenbaum said he had no problems working for the Executive Committee or Chapman and that his departure is "very cordial."

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-- By Greg Warner

Former SBC execs praise
Parks for his decision

(ABP) -- Eight Southern Baptist executives who worked closely with Keith Parks during his 12 years as president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board have defended his decision to go to work for the rival Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The eight, most of whom either resigned or retired as SBC agency heads in the 1980s, issued a letter to Baptist editors Dec. 4 in the wake of criticism from FMB trustees and others that Parks' decision will hurt Southern Baptist missions.

"Having served with Keith Parks as agency executives of the Southern Baptist Convention, we take this opportunity to applaud his courage and integrity, and affirm his decision to direct the missions program of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship," the leaders wrote. "In ethical standards and conduct, he stands tall and consistently Christian."

The signers are Jimmy Allen, former president of the Radio and Television Commission; Grady Cothen, retired president of the Sunday School Board; Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler, retired president of Woman's Missionary Union, an auxiliary to the SBC; James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty agency from which the SBC severed ties; Randall Lolley, former president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; Duke McCall, retired president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Darold Morgan, retired president of the Annuity Board; and Foy Valentine, retired president of the Christian Life Commission.

Several of them -- including Allen, Cothen, Crumpler and McCall -- have played key roles in the development of the Fellowship, an organization of Southern Baptists displeased with conservative control of the SBC and its agencies.

Parks retired from the FMB Oct. 31, three years earlier than planned, in a dispute with FMB trustees over missions philosophy. In announcing his decision Nov. 30 to become missions coordinator for the Fellowship, he said the organization's fledgling missions program would "supplement" and not compete with the much larger FMB.

"We congratulate the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship for its vision to claim his leadership," the eight leaders wrote.

"We commend Dr. Parks to Baptists everywhere as a wise, compassionate and engaged missionary. Keith Parks always will be a model missionary for Baptists.

"We pray for him and all efforts to proclaim the gospel to unreached peoples, to blaze fresh trails in mission work and to challenge a new generation of missionaries."

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-- By Greg Warner

Supreme court declines to hear
challenge to abortion law

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court continues to make clear that states may regulate abortion as long as they do not overly burden a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy.

The nation's top court reinforced this position Dec. 7 by rejecting a challenge to Mississippi regulations that require abortion counseling and a 24-hour waiting period before abortions can be performed.

The court's action came one week after it refused to disturb the basic right of women to choose an abortion. On Nov. 30, the justices refused to review a federal appeals court decision striking down Guam's law that would have criminalized most abortions.

The outcome of the Guam and Mississippi cases mirrors that of the last major abortion case heard and decided by the Supreme Court. In June, a narrow

court majority reaffirmed the basic right to abortion while upholding most provisions of a Pennsylvania law regulating the practice.

Mississippi's requirements for informed consent and a 24-hour waiting period are substantially like two of the provisions upheld in Pennsylvania. In the Pennsylvania case, the court also upheld reporting and record-keeping provisions but struck down a spousal-notification requirement.

Under the "undue burden" standard used by the court to decide the Pennsylvania case, states may not place a "substantial obstacle" in the path of a woman seeking an abortion before the fetus is developed enough to live outside the womb.

That standard is less rigid than the one set by the court in the landmark 1973 Roe vs. Wade case that recognized a woman's right to privacy in abortion decisions. Roe required states to show a compelling reason to restrict abortion.

The physicians who challenged the Mississippi law argued unsuccessfully that the regulations pose an "undue burden" because of the long distances many women would have to travel to reach one of the state's three abortion clinics.

In rejecting the physicians' general challenge of the law, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the plaintiffs would have to show that the law would not be valid under any circumstances, a burden they could not meet after the high court upheld similar provisions in Pennsylvania.

In other actions Dec. 7, the high court:

-- Declined to review a federal appeals court ruling that the free-speech rights of the rap group 2 Live Crew had been violated. Federal District Judge Jose Gonzalez Jr. had prevented the sheriff's department in Broward County, Fla., from interfering with the sale of the group's recording "As Nasty As They Wanna Be," but declared that the recording was obscene.

A federal appeals court held that the sheriff, who offered no evidence but the recording itself, failed to prove that the recording was obscene. The appeals court also said the judge must rely on expert witnesses, not on his own personal expertise about community standards and artistic values, in determining whether a recording is obscene.

-- Granted Solicitor General Kenneth Starr's request to participate in oral arguments in a challenge to an Arizona school district's refusal to provide an sign-language interpreter for a deaf student who attends a religious school. The federal Education of the Handicapped Act authorizes federal funds for special services such as interpreters for deaf students.

In a friend-of-the court brief supporting the student, Starr argues that providing an interpreter in a religious school does not violate the First Amendment's ban on an establishment of religion. Specifically, Starr contends that providing an interpreter under the act satisfies all three parts of the test used by high court to decide establishment-clause challenges.

Known as the Lemon test, that standard requires that governmental laws and policies have a secular purpose, neither advance nor inhibit religion and avoid excessive entanglement with religion.

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-- By Larry Chesser

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