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Waco probe should not be used
to define religion, leaders say

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The federal government should not use its investigation into the Branch Davidian tragedy as an occasion to define "valid religion," say many of the nation's religious and civil-liberties groups.

In a statement issued May 4, organizations including the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches and the Baptist Joint Committee, urged government to "resist any temptation to retreat" from the Constitution's guarantee of religious liberty.

The statement said it is appropriate for government to investigate what happened at the standoff in Waco, Texas, to prevent similar occurrences in the future.

"Under the religious-liberty provisions of the First Amendment, government has no business declaring what is orthodox or heretical, or what is a true or false religion," the statement asserts. "It should steer clear of inflammatory and misleading labels.

"History teaches that today's 'cults' may become tomorrow's mainstream religions."

The statement calls the nation's religious diversity a source of strength, not weakness.

"We must fend off the inclination to shrink from our commitment to religious pluralism or to seek security at the expense of liberty," the organizations said.

The statement recognizes that religious freedom is not absolute and cannot serve as an excuse for violent or criminal conduct that harms others or threatens public safety.

"Absent some compelling justification, however, government should not restrict religious exercise," the statement declares. "And force -- if ever appropriate -- must be employed as a last resort."

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the agency participated in the statement in the hope that the Waco tragedy will not be the occasion of an overreaction by government against religious

minorities.

"The difference between a 'religious fanatic' and a devout believer is never clear," Dunn said. "Even to categorize would be a calamity; to do more would be a catastrophe."

Other organizations signing the statement are the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., American Civil Liberties Union, the American Conference on Religious Movements, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the Association of Christian Schools International, Church of Scientology International, the Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, the Episcopal Church, First Liberty Institute, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, the Greater Grace World Outreach, the Presbyterian Church (USA), Washington Office, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

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-- By Larry Chesser

Reno reaffirms
support of RFRA

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno reaffirmed her support of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in an April 30 address to members of the American Bar Association.

Reno outlined the civil-rights priorities of the Clinton administration at an ABA-sponsored conference at the Justice Department on civil rights in the 1990s.

RFRA (S.578, H.R.1308) is designed to restore the high level of legal protection for religious practice virtually abandoned by the nation's high court in 1990. Previously government had to have a compelling reason, such as health or safety, before it could restrict a citizen's religious practice.

Reno included RFRA among a list of initiatives that she would like Congress to approve.

The first woman attorney general pledged to do all in her power to achieve legal, social and economic justice for every American regardless of race, gender, age or religious affiliation.

She promised to be guided by one principle -- to do what is right. No politics or demagoguery will enter into her decisions, she said, admitting that determining what is right will not always be easy.

Repeatedly emphasizing that the Justice Department will secure equality for all Americans, Reno said that the country's greatest singular crisis is the neglect of its children. When more than 20 percent of the nation's children live in poverty, Americans must realize something has gone terribly wrong, she said.

Thirty years ago Martin Luther King Jr. raised a vital question that is still relevant, she said. He asked: What good is the right to sit at a lunch counter when you cannot afford a hamburger?

"We have got to face that question in America," she said, noting that a national agenda for children must be forged.

Achieving peace through justice will require all three branches of government to work well, she said. Reno, who assured a new era of vigorous law enforcement, said she hopes the agency and government as a whole can become more user-friendly to citizens.

She wants to open the doors of America's courthouses and the Department of Justice, increasing access and citizen understanding that the U.S. Constitution is a living document that means something.

Pointing to former Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Reno said Kennedy called Americans to the great task of rebuilding their country, and a quarter of a century later, the task remains unfinished.

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-- By Pam Parry

Richmond Seminary adopts
resolution supporting women

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The faculty of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond has endorsed women as ordained ministers serving in Baptist churches.

"At this moment in our history, Baptist women need to know of our affirmation of their calling, our respect for their ministry, our appreciation for their service, and our pledge to work with them in the many tasks of ministry," the faculty statement says.

The resolution comes on the heels of comments by Albert Mohler, president-elect of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, that he and most other Southern Baptists are opposed to women serving in pastoral roles.

Mohler, who will become president of Southern Baptists' oldest seminary Aug. 1, said women will be permitted to enroll in all seminary degree programs but should be told the Southern Baptist Convention discourages their service as pastors.

The resolution from the moderate-backed Richmond seminary does not mention women pastors but affirms women in all church roles, "whatever that ministry may be."

"Recent events have demonstrated that there are forces at work among Baptists seeking to exclude women from their God-called role of ministry and service," says the Statement of Affirmation for Women in Theological Education and the Church.

The statement affirms the contributions of women, adding, "It is contrary to our Baptist heritage to exclude women from participation in the work of the church or for the denomination to determine whom a church will or will not ordain."

The resolution also notes recent criticism of Woman's Missionary Union, Southern Baptists' mission-support auxiliary. WMU has been reprimanded by trustees of two SBC agencies and the Executive Committee for its decision to produce mission-education materials for groups outside the Southern Baptist Convention.

"The turmoil visited upon our denomination has been caused by those who exclude other Baptists from full participation in denominational life because of their gender, their particular biblical interpretation, or because of a difference of opinion on political issues," the Richmond statement adds.

"At Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, we are willing to work with all Baptists who are willing to work with all Baptists, and we pray for the day when all of God's people are affirmed in their calling."

The faculty statement pledges to develop a seminary that seeks to include women's perspectives in the classroom and to make the Richmond school "a learning and worshipping community where women can speak as well as listen, lead as well as follow, and where both men and women work together, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel."

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-- By Beth McMahon

Fellowship has fourth
million-dollar month

ATLANTA (ABP) -- For the fourth month in a row, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship received more than \$1 million in contributions during March.

April receipts, projected to be \$800,000, will bring the Fellowship's year-to-date income to \$3.9 million.

If funding follows the same pattern as in 1992, the Fellowship could take in about \$9.5 million by the end of 1993, according to ABP estimates. The two-year-old organization of Southern Baptist moderates received \$7.3 million in 1992.

The Fellowship's monthly income first surpassed the \$1 million threshold in December on the strength of its first global missions offering. Since December the offering has taken in \$1.6 million.

Gifts to the offering dropped off in April, bringing monthly receipts below the \$1 million mark for the first time since November. But Fellowship officials expect that figure to rebound in May, when the organization holds its annual general assembly and the global missions offering begins its spring emphasis.

Monthly giving to the global missions offering totaled \$368,635 in December, \$416,384 in January, \$304,028 in February, \$352,255 in March and approximately \$100,000 in April. The offering goal is \$2 million.

Monthly giving to all Fellowship causes totaled \$1,074,430 in January, \$1,002,962 in February and \$1,013,129 in March. Exact April figures are not yet available.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was established in 1990 by Southern Baptist moderates displeased with the current leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention and its agencies.

The Fellowship's three funding plans allow churches and individuals to bypass the Cooperative Program and to withhold funds from Southern Baptist agencies of which they disapprove.

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-- By Greg Warner

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