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SBC now 'on trial,'
Clinton's pastor says

By Mark Kelly

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention is on trial, and SBC churches must decide for themselves whether the convention still deserves their support, said a pastor whose congregation recently survived an attempted ouster from the SBC.

Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., was the target of a motion to unseat its messengers to the SBC annual meeting June 15-17 in Houston.

The church was criticized for failing to censure its most prominent member -- President Bill Clinton -- for his views on homosexuality. The motion would have expelled the church from the 15 million-member denomination.

"The question is not whether our church is good enough for the Southern Baptist Convention," said Immanuel's pastor, Rex Horne, June 20. "The question is, is the Southern Baptist Convention good enough for us?"

The motion to expel Clinton's church was offered to the SBC June 15 by Bo Hammock, a pastor from Lake Butler, Fla. The motion was debated at length by the SBC credentials committee, which later voted unanimously to reaffirm the church's participation.

However, the SBC did pass a resolution denouncing Clinton's views on homosexuality and abortion -- one of about 20 anti-Clinton resolutions proposed during the three-day convention.

Speaking to his congregation June 20, Horne decried the notoriety his church received during the SBC.

"We are not the ones on trial," he said. "The Southern Baptist Convention is the one on trial. We will never be judged, because we are autonomous and independent. We will never be judged by another church or group of churches."

Horne lamented that an atmosphere has been created in the Southern Baptist Convention in which "ungrounded, unsubstantiated attacks" can be brought against congregations by individuals with "personal, secular, political agendas."

"A lot of people are rushing through those doors to put their name out

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and to make their statements, and they are neither people that think nor are they people of integrity," Horne charged. "We pride ourselves ... that (SBC) messengers are free to speak or to present business.... But are they free to use their freedom recklessly in impugning the integrity of a church like Immanuel?"

Horne pointed out that Immanuel Baptist contributed more than \$422,000 in 1992 through the SBC budget, the Cooperative Program, ranking it 13th among more than 37,000 SBC churches. Since 1983, "during the heat of the controversy" in the Southern Baptist Convention, the congregation's Cooperative Program gifts have totaled more than \$3.7 million, he said.

Horne said he believes Southern Baptists "have entered what can be called the post-Cooperative Program era." Most Southern Baptist churches are decreasing the portion of their budgets that go to the SBC, Horne said.

Immanuel's members, meanwhile, are "proud of our historic commitment to the Cooperative Program and hope to maintain an exemplary level of involvement," he said.

However, Horne added, he cannot easily dismiss that the national body tried to dictate how a church should deal with one of its members. Such an issue, he said, "will not go away quietly or quickly."

Horne noted that a church-growth task force at Immanuel is discussing how the church will invest its resources in the years ahead, and a subcommittee will be discussing the relationship with the Southern Baptist Convention.

"We re-evaluate everything else that we do," he observed. "There are some things we need to evaluate even now."

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Bill protecting entrances
to clinics approved by panel

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bill designed to combat escalating violence and vandalism at abortion and pregnancy clinics is headed to the Senate floor after receiving a bipartisan endorsement from the Labor and Human Resources Committee on June 23.

After rejecting a series of amendments pushed by Republican senators who want the bill to include language protecting the free-speech rights of demonstrators, the panel voted 13-4 in favor of the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act of 1993 (S. 636).

Three of the panel's seven GOP members -- Nancy Kassebaum of Kansas, James Jeffords of Vermont and David Durenburger of Minnesota -- voted with the committee's 10 Democrats.

The bill would create federal criminal and civil penalties for threatening or using force or physical obstruction to intentionally injure, intimidate or interfere with people seeking to obtain or provide abortion-related services. The penalties also would apply to the destruction of property at abortion-related facilities.

The bill would allow private parties, the U.S. attorney general or state attorneys general, to seek relief by court injunction.

The push for the legislation intensified when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in January that an 1887 civil-rights law could not be used to bar abortion-clinic blockades, and after the slaying of clinic physician David Gunn in Florida two months later.

Sens. Dan Coats of Indiana and Orrin Hatch of Utah said changes already proposed by chief sponsor Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., answered some, but not all, of their concerns.

In his revised bill, Kennedy replaced the term "abortion services" with "abortion-related services" to cover facilities providing both pregnancy care and pregnancy termination. Abortion opponents say violence is escalating at clinics that counsel against abortion, not just abortion clinics.

Coats said the bill should include free-speech protection. "We ought to protect peaceful, lawful protest for any reason," he said.

Kennedy responded that free-speech rights already are protected by the First Amendment and that lawful demonstrations would not be affected by the bill.

"This is not about free speech," Kennedy said. "This is about violence and intimidation and threats and force."

Kassebaum told Kennedy she agrees with the purpose of the bill but thinks its protection should extend beyond abortion clinics. She plans to introduce a bill to ensure that violence -- whether at an abortion clinic or other location -- designed to prevent people from engaging in legal commercial activities would be treated the same under federal laws.

"The freedom of speech guaranteed by the Constitution does not include bombings, vandalism, assault, arson, destruction of property and physically preventing people from entering medical clinics," Kassebaum said.

A measure similar to Kennedy's bill is pending in the U.S. House of Representatives where Judiciary Committee action is expected this summer. That bill is H.R. 796, sponsored by Reps. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., and Constance Morella, R-Md.

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-- By Larry Chesser

Vatican ambassador nominee
appears before Senate panel

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Appearing before an amicable Senate Foreign Relations Committee June 23, Boston Mayor Raymond Flynn took the first step toward gaining Senate confirmation as the next U.S. ambassador to the Vatican.

The committee is expected to vote on the Flynn nomination June 29, according to a panel spokeswoman. No additional hearings are scheduled.

Flynn was introduced to the panel by Massachusetts Sens. Edward Kennedy and John Kerry, who lauded his leadership in areas such as human rights, democracy and social justice.

In prepared remarks, Flynn said it is his intention, if confirmed, to advance those same causes as ambassador to the Roman Catholic Church.

"In my opinion, and I feel strongly about it," he said, "government is society's tool for balancing the scales of social and economic justice.

"In my view, we are elected to public office to become stewards of society's nobler impulses: to create economic and social justice where injustice prevails, and to look out for the sick, the hungry, the needy, and the victims of discrimination."

Flynn said President Bill Clinton wants the post used "to promote human

dignity around the world."

Flynn is the third Roman Catholic appointed to the position since President Ronald Reagan established diplomatic ties with the Vatican in 1984. He expressed his willingness to work "wherever the U.S. and the Holy See can work shoulder to shoulder to alleviate hunger, dislocation and disease; to eliminate racism and religious discrimination; and to restore hope and basic human rights to the world's most oppressed peoples."

Despite the warm greeting extended Flynn by the three members of the Senate panel present at the hearing, the nomination is not without opposition.

A number of religious organizations -- including the Baptist Joint Committee and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission -- oppose diplomatic ties between the United States and the Holy See as a violation of the Constitution's requirement of church-state separation.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, called the appointment "a clear violation of the principle of church-state separation, a dangerous and divisive precedent of government meddling in church affairs, and the occasion for political problems for all those engaged in the far-flung missionary venture in developing countries."

At its recent annual session in Houston, the Southern Baptist Convention reaffirmed its opposition to diplomatic ties with the Vatican and urged senators to "reject the nomination and to restore the federal law which barred diplomatic relations with the Vatican."

The resolution described Clinton as "a Southern Baptist and a professed advocate of church-state separation," and urged the president to reconsider his position.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State criticized the Senate committee's "hasty and unpublicized decision to proceed with hearings" on the Flynn nomination.

"We are deeply disappointed that the committee has chosen to move full steam ahead to continue the official relationship between the United States government and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church," said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United. "The First Amendment of the Constitution forbids just such entanglement between religion and government."

The nomination of Flynn, a strong abortion opponent, also is being fought by a coalition of more than two dozen mostly pro-choice and women's organizations, including Catholics for a Free Choice, Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the National Organization for Women.

In written testimony submitted to the Senate panel, the coalition criticized the role of the Vatican in shaping the Reagan and Bush administrations' policies that barred the use of foreign aid for overseas family-planning services that promoted abortion.

The coalition testimony said the Vatican's influence was evident in a 1992 comment from former Vatican Ambassador William Wilson, printed in Time magazine. "American policy (on overseas family planning) was changed as a result of the Vatican's not agreeing with our policy," Wilson told Time.

"With Ray Flynn as our ambassador, will U.S. policy once again be held hostage to Vatican positions on women, family planning, AIDS, and abortion?" asked Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice. "Whose interests will be better served by Flynn's ambassadorship, those of the United States or those of the Vatican curia?"

Forced repatriation of Haitians
upheld by U.S. Supreme Court

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The United States policy of intercepting fleeing Haitians on the high seas and returning them to their home country does not violate U.S. or international laws, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled June 21.

In an 8-1 ruling, the high court said returning Haitians to their homeland without first determining whether they qualify for refugee status does not violate provisions of U.S. immigration law or a United Nations protocol. Those provisions bar the return of refugees to territories where their life or freedom is threatened.

Joined by seven of his colleagues, Associate Justice John Paul Stevens wrote that the U.S. and international laws do not apply to actions taken by the U.S. Coast Guard on the high seas. The laws at issue control only how the United States treats aliens already in the country or at its borders, the majority said.

The court's decision reversed a federal appeals court's ruling that the U.S. law is not limited to aliens within the United States and that the U.N. protocol covers all refugees, regardless of location.

Since 1981 -- except for a brief period immediately following the overthrow of Haiti's first democratically elected president, Jean Bertrand Aristide -- the United States has interdicted migrating Haitians at sea.

At first, Haitians who established a credible claim for refugee status were transported to the United States to apply for asylum. After the volume of fleeing Haitians surpassed the level that could safely be screened on Coast Guard cutters and at a temporary facility at Guantanamo, Cuba, President George Bush issued an order allowing the Haitians to be returned without giving them an opportunity to show why they deserve refugee status.

President Bill Clinton, despite a campaign promise to the contrary, decided not to modify the executive order issued by Bush.

"The wisdom of the policy choices made by Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton is not a matter for our consideration," Associate Justice Stevens wrote. "We must decide only whether (the executive order), which reflects and implements these choices, is consistent with (U.S. immigration law)."

Associate Justice Harry Blackmun, the sole dissenter, disagreed with the majority's interpretation of both the U.N. protocol and the U.S. immigration statute. The U.N. provision, Blackmun wrote, "limits only where a refugee may be sent 'to,' not where he may be sent from."

Blackmun insisted that the U.S. immigration law extends to the high seas. "Whether 'within the United States' or not, a refugee may not be returned to his persecutors."

Blackmun said the Haitians claim neither a right of admission to the United States nor that the United States has no right to intercept their boats.

"They demand only that the United States, land of refugees and guardian of freedom, cease forcibly driving them back to detention abuse and death. That is a modest plea, vindicated by the (U.N. protocol) and the statute. We should not close our ears to it."

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-- By Larry Chesser

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