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President Clinton signs  
religious freedom bill

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act during a Nov. 16 ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House.

Approximately 200 religious and civic leaders watched the president sign what they have heralded as the most important legislation affecting religious liberty since the Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791.

RFRA, backed by a 68-member coalition headed by the Baptist Joint Committee, restores the high standard of protection lost in a 1990 Supreme Court decision (Oregon vs. Smith).

That protection requires a "compelling state interest," such as public health or safety, before government may hinder religious practice of Americans. Government also must use the least restrictive means of safeguarding its interest.

Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, both Southern Baptists, addressed the crowd prior to the signing.

"What this law basically says," Clinton noted, "is that the government should be held to a very high level of proof before it interferes with someone's free exercise of religion. This judgment is shared by the people of the United States as well as by the Congress.

"We believe strongly that we can never, we can never be too vigilant in this work."

Clinton lauded the unique RFRA coalition, which represents virtually every point on the political, ideological and religious spectrum.

Two Baptist organizations were members of the coalition: the Washington-based BJC, which is supported by 11 national Baptist organizations, and the Christian Life Commission, the moral-concerns and religious-liberty agency of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"Today this event assumes a more majestic quality," Clinton said, "because of our ability together to affirm the historic role that people of faith have played in the history of this country and the constitutional protections those who profess and express their faith have always demanded

and cherished."

The country's founders placed religious liberty as the first freedom listed in the Bill of Rights because they understood its significance, Clinton said.

"They knew that religion helps to give our people the character without which a democracy cannot survive," he said. "We are, after all, the oldest democracy now in history, and probably the most truly multi-ethnic society on the face of the earth.

"And I am convinced that neither one of those things would be true today had it not been for the importance of the First Amendment and the fact that we have kept faith with it for 200 years."

In a written statement, Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, a chief sponsor of the bill, heralded the signing of the landmark legislation as a restoration of a fundamental right guaranteed to all Americans by the Constitution.

"This act restores the precious balance between the interests of our government and the religious liberties of our citizens."

At a press conference held after the ceremony, Oliver Thomas, former BJC general counsel who chaired the coalition, said that since the Smith decision "there has been a steady drumbeat of bad (court) decisions for religion."

Churches have been zoned out of even commercial districts in some cities, he said. Hmong and Orthodox Jews have been subjected to unnecessary autopsies in violation of their religious beliefs, and one Catholic teaching hospital lost its accreditation for refusing to provide abortion services.

"All told, more than 60 cases have been decided against religious claimants since Smith was handed down," Thomas said. "Today we celebrate the end of this dark night."

James Dunn, BJC executive director, said: "When anyone's religious liberty is denied, everyone's religious liberty is endangered. We believe passionately that our religious liberty is a gift from God."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A follow-up story on RFRA's signing will be sent later.

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Growing up without fathers becoming norm, speaker says

By Bob Allen

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Growing up without a father is becoming normal in America, and the trend bears grave consequences for society, a family-policy spokesman told a Baptist gathering Nov. 15.

"We're living in an increasingly fatherless society," David Blankenhorn, founder and president of the New York-based Institute for American Values, told the small crowd at First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, N.C.

The conference on fatherhood, sponsored in part by the Baptist Center for Ethics, came on the eve of Nov. 15-17 meeting of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

On a typical night, 36 percent of American children go to bed in a home where a father does not live, Blankenhorn said. By age 18, more than half will have experienced some significant portion of their childhood living apart from their father.

"Fatherlessness is seeking a parity with fatherhood as a defining

experience of American childhood," said Blankenhorn. And, he added, it is "the most socially consequential trend" affecting American life.

"I don't think any one single thing explains all our social problems," Blankenhorn said. "Having said that, let me suggest that one single thing explains all our social problems."

Fatherlessness is "a kind of driving engine behind most of our social problems," he said. He offered a litany of supporting arguments:

-- Out-of-wedlock births, he said, comprise 28 percent of all live births. "The most important predictor of adolescent pregnancy is growing up without a father," he added.

-- Poverty is "increasingly linked to family structure," Blankenhorn said. Now, for the first time in history, more than half of all poor families are father-absent. Much of the increase in poor families, he said, "can be attributed to the trend of father absence."

-- Crime, he said, is "primarily a problem of young males." Among young males, "the most important predictor of criminal activity is fatherlessness," he said. Seventy percent of juveniles in long-term correctional facilities grew up apart from a father.

"As a crime reducer, fathers are better than prisons," he said.

-- Domestic violence is on the rise, he said, and the increase "tracks with eerie precision" the replacement of fathers in homes by an unrelated male.

Blankenhorn said the absence of positive role models has caused a "protest masculinity" to emerge, marked by a street vernacular hostile toward women and a violent bravado acted out in gang culture.

One role of the father is to help boys "find out what it means to be a man." In the absence of that influence, he said, young men get angry and direct that anger at the only adult influence in their lives -- women.

"Do children need fathers?" is a fundamental question for society, Blankenhorn said. Contrary to the "yes" answer given by every other culture in the world, both now and throughout history, he said, "Our answer today is 'not necessarily.'"

Blankenhorn's organization offers a list of public-policy solutions. But, he acknowledged, the policy recommendations "are secondary matters."

"The primary issue is that we change our minds about that basic question. I frankly think that's where the church comes in," he said.

The church, he said, far better than secular culture, can articulate the importance of fatherhood. Through sermons, Sunday school studies and other programs, ministers can build stronger families among church members.

He also suggested churches bring "a stronger public voice on the subject of responsible masculinity" in society.

On the public policy front, Blankenhorn proposed laws that identify fathers of unwed births; creating incentives for marriage in welfare, public housing and tax codes; and rewriting divorce laws to assert that society encourages couples to remain married and elevates child well-being to the primary concern.

But more important, he said, is an "attitudinal shift" in society. He compared the issue to public attitudes toward tobacco, which at one time was acceptable. When evidence emerged that smoking posed a health threat, "we changed our minds about smoking. We don't like it," Blankenhorn said.

Ironically, he added, "As we've raised our health standards for smoking, we've lowered them for male responsibility."

Blankenhorn's Institute for American Values, founded in 1987, is a private, non-partisan organization for research, publication and public education on issues of family well-being, family policy and civic values.

The North Carolina conference was sponsored jointly by First Baptist

Church of Winston-Salem and the Baptist Center for Ethics, based in Nashville, Tenn.

"For too long and too often, Baptists in particular and Christians in general have been anti-everything," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics. "It seems to me it is time for thoughtful Baptists to be for something."

He said his agency promotes positions on ethical issues that are "positive, practical and pro-active rather than reactive, negative and highly ideological."

Attendance for the conference, the first to piggyback on a Baptist state convention meeting, was disappointing -- under 40 -- Parham said. However, he added, the sessions were videotaped. Over time, he predicted, the tapes will be widely distributed and appreciated in Baptist churches.

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Retired Mississippi editor  
suffers stroke, hospitalized

BRANDON, Miss. (ABP) -- Donald McGregor, editor emeritus of the Baptist Record of Mississippi, suffered a stroke Saturday, Nov. 13, and remains hospitalized.

After the stroke, McGregor had some paralysis on the right side of his body and was unable to speak. But family members reported Nov. 16 he had regained some motor functions and was able to walk a short distance.

Doctors performed a CAT scan Nov. 16 to further assess the damage. McGregor is hospitalized at Rankin Medical Center in Brandon, Miss., but is expected to move soon to a rehabilitation center for an extended recovery period.

McGregor, who lives in Brandon, served as editor of the weekly Mississippi Baptist newsjournal until his retirement in 1990. He is executive director of Associated Baptist Press, a volunteer position, and is one of ABP's founding directors.

-- By Greg Warner

Religious leaders decry  
Christmas commercialism

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Bracing for another frantic, holiday-shopping frenzy, a national coalition of religious leaders again has issued an indictment of the excessive commercialization of Christmas.

Twenty-five prominent religious leaders -- including at least six Baptists -- are urging Americans to resist Madison Avenue's pressure by exercising moderate and thoughtful giving, genuine charity and concern for the social and environmental harm of overconsumption.

"We have seen the spirit of Christmas reduced to a carnival of mass marketing," said members of the Religious Coalition to Take Commercialism Out of Christmas.

The coalition, which includes Protestant, Catholic and Unitarian leaders, is coordinated by the Washington-based Center for the Study of Commercialism. The coalition issued an identical statement last year. That

pronouncement drew the ire of the National Retail Federation in New York, which warned "canceling" Christmas would cost people jobs and produce a financial depression.

This year some coalition members are expanding the effort by imploring church-related universities, in addition to clergy, to oppose rampant commercialism.

"Church leaders need to speak out at this season and extend this critique to the halls of academia," said Albert Fritsch, a Jesuit priest and statement signer. "The theological and philosophical ramifications of the throwaway culture needs extensive treatment. ... Church-related schools should be first to recognize this and discern what can be done about it."

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, echoed the call. "The commercialization of American culture, especially at Christmas, undermines a mission of religious educational institutions to shape the moral character of students," Parham said.

"Religious schools must warn students about the cultural malnourishment which results from stuffing empty souls with commercialized things," he said.

"Commercializing the holiday season detracts from its deeper meaning," added Philip Wogaman, senior minister of the Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington. "I hope that academic and church leaders will join in helping Americans find alternatives to consumerism that do not cheapen the human spirit."

The coalition offers suggestions for "making Christmas real," including giving simple toys and clothes to children "because of need not consumption," baking bread for others, "opening our hearts to family and friends," as well as to strangers, and sharing goodwill with neighbors.

The coalition charged that the customary Christmas buying frenzy "devours some, leaves others in ruinous debt, and punishes the poor, for whom the joy of Christmas always seems a dollar away." In addition, the religious leaders called on Americans to "be mindful of how our addiction to consumer goods is devastating the planet."

Members of the coalition include T. M. Hesburgh, president emeritus of Notre Dame University; Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of Churches; Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Dellanna O'Brien, executive director of the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union; Paul Sherry, president of the United Church of Christ; Herbert Chilstrom, General Secretary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; and Daniel Weiss, general secretary of the American Baptist Churches.

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CORRECTION:

In the Oct. 28 story "Holiday Inn boycott...", ABP incorrectly identified Ralph Sawyer as first vice president of the Missouri Baptist Convention. Please replace the 7th paragraph with the following:

Messengers defeated a presidential candidate openly endorsed by an organization of conservative pastors in the state. Hallsville pastor Ralph Sawyer lost by a 350-vote margin to T. O. Spicer Jr., director of missions for Spring River Baptist Association and first vice president during 1993.

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