
A S S O C I A T E D B A P T I S T P R E S S

Phone: (904) 262-6626 Fax: (904) 262-7745 CServe: 70420,73

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Country needs churches
to combat violence: Clinton

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The nation's streets, schools and homes will be safer when its churches and synagogues become more active in the fight against violence, according to President Clinton.

Clinton emphasized the religious community's involvement with the crime issue during a Dec. 17 media round table with nine religion reporters in the Cabinet Room of the White House.

The church is perhaps the only institution that can hold life together as economic and family structures continue to crumble, the president said.

"And it seems to me that to turn it around is going to require a massive, highly concentrated effort by all Americans, starting with the president but going down to every community ... but also really it requires almost a spiritual change."

Clinton met with representatives from Jewish, Catholic and Protestant news media, including Religious News Service, Associated Baptist Press, Catholic News Service, Christian Century and Christianity Today.

Government policies alone will not curb violence, he said. Some churches are doing more than others on this issue, he added.

"I think that they (churches) can weigh in heavily on behalf of all the efforts that are being made to make the streets and schools more secure -- putting more police officers on the street and having alternative punishments for young people that have a higher probability of working, the drug courts, boot camps and things like that."

Many churches could reach out more to troubled children and get them involved in their programs and worship services, he said. Some churches could be more involved in neighborhood activities designed to help citizens take back their streets, he said.

"I'm convinced that first we have to reimpose security, but then we have to try to rebuild the lives of these young people," he added.

In part, schools need to instill basic civic values that teach respect for democracy, honesty, self, others and the environment, he said. The

schools can help carry the load, he said, but not without a strategy that includes the family and churches.

Because society is organized around family and work, the president said, the Clinton administration tries to consider the impact of its policies on both.

"We ought to do everything we can to make sure that people can have a successful family life and a successful work life and that our policy ought to be that in America people should be able to succeed as parents and as workers. If they only succeed at one, whichever one it is, we are impoverished by that."

The average American worker could benefit from policies that favor work over welfare and make it possible for people to do right by their children, he said. They also need a revamped unemployment system.

"Those are three things that I think we owe people in this world. ... And I think the business community should take the lead in providing those things," he said.

Clinton, who said his faith has sustained him during turbulent times, also encouraged Americans to see violence as a personal affront. As part of a larger humanity, violence against one diminishes all, he said.

Waxing philosophical, the president encouraged each American to "make the most of your life and the lives of those within your direct charge And then try to have the best possible connection with the larger humanity of which you are a part.

"It would be very difficult to define your lives solely in individual terms. And to me that is one of the teachings of the Scriptures."

Responding to a question about how to reduce hate crimes, Clinton said he tries to set an example that promotes respect and diversity. Schools and churches also could be involved in teaching children and youth how to respect good people who are different from them.

People can have divergent religious views, but if they share civic values, honor the law and respect others, then they can bridge those differences, he said.

"America has the opportunity to become the world's first truly multi-ethnic rainbow society where we can embrace our differences -- this is not an easy thing, by the way.

"If we get this done, I think, we will have to draw on the strength of our religious heritage and our basic sense of human kindness."

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On religion's role in policy,
Clinton practices what he preaches

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In Baptist talk, it's called practicing what you preach.

President Clinton has been saying often and unmistakably that America's political and social discourse needs the voice of religious citizens. And he's demonstrating how it works.

Drawing from his own faith experience as a Baptist and his education at a Catholic university, the president is using the bully pulpit of the

White House to connect religious values to public-policy discussions.

Nowhere is this more prominent than in his focus on the nation's violence and crime. Pollsters say crime and violence now top the list of worries facing Americans, and the president says the nation's spiritual resources are a critical component in coming to terms with those problems.

Clinton acknowledged that his injection of religious values into the violence debate has some risk. But he said he believes the nation needs to hear from its religious citizens -- including those who disagree with him.

Speaking to a group of nine religion writers Dec. 17, he reminded the writers that his 1992 campaign speeches which espoused a theme of a New Covenant were deemed "too religious" by some.

It's a delicate thing, he said to provide moral leadership from the nation's highest office and not get into the business of preaching. "That's someone else's business," he said.

"So it's easy for me because I don't feel like I'm pontificating or holding myself out as some sort of minister in that sense. But in another sense, the president has to minister to the nation's needs and I don't believe we can solve these problems without drawing on the immense reservoir of our spiritual heritage."

The infusion of religious values into discussions about the nation's direction is not new for Clinton or the nation, but the president is providing a fresh emphasis.

His remarks to the group of journalists Dec. 17 echoed concerns he expressed in recent speeches at two Memphis churches.

He's worried, he said, about the "enormous tide of crime and violence engulfing our country," its toll on the nation's children, and the fact that "we have not been able to fashion an adequate response to it."

The Brady handgun-control law and a crime package expected to put more police officers on the streets and restrict assault weapons represent a beginning, Clinton said, but "governmental policies alone will not fix this."

Turning around the crime problem also will require different private investment behavior and a spiritual change in communities, he said.

"Young people have got to find ways other than violence to resolve their own frustrations and their conflicts," he said. "They have to believe in the promise of education again, and we have to have supporting adults. We have to try to strengthen families ... and provide supportive adults ... when the families aren't there."

Feeding the crime epidemic, Clinton said, are declining economic conditions in many places across the country, a generation of family breakdown, and the exodus from inner cities of residents who formerly strengthened life there.

In many of these places, Clinton said, "the church is about the only thing left to try to hold life together."

Churches, he said, can weigh in on the side of public policies that help make the streets and schools more secure, reach out to troubled children in their neighborhoods, and become involved in a range of anti-violence activities.

Reimposing security is the first priority, Clinton said, but then it is essential to rebuild the lives of young people in crime-dominated areas.

Teaching basic civic values such as respect for democracy, honesty and

self in the public schools is important and helps, but won't by itself overcome breakdowns in the family and lack of job opportunities, Clinton said.

Society is basically organized around family and work, he said, and when those institutions break down, "you have a truly chaotic situation."

"We ought to do everything we can to make sure that people can have a successful family life and a successful work life," he said. "Our policy ought to be that in America people should be able to succeed as parents and as workers."

Religion has had a major impact on him, the president said. During his experiences at Georgetown University, Clinton said he was moved by the Catholic concept of the social mission of the church -- "that part of the obligation of being a Christian was to be involved in the world."

From the time he was quite young, Clinton said, his membership in a Baptist church had a huge impact and was a "source of real security, of reassurance, that made me feel valued."

Values gained from religious experiences show up as Clinton tackles problems as president.

"I believe that my daughter's future is limited every time another child gets shot in any community in this country," Clinton said at Olivet Baptist Church in Memphis during a Nov. 13 town hall meeting. "That's what I believe. Every time a kid in Memphis is deprived of a future, I think it limits all the rest of us."

While he believes salvation is "an individual thing," Clinton told religion writers later, the Scriptures teach that people are connected to one another.

"The churches were not founded by accident," he said. "People knew they needed each other."

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*** EDITOR'S NOTE: The following story replaces one with the same headline released Dec. 16. The new information, contained in the last six paragraphs, replaces the last paragraph of the original story.

Dispute over Freemasonry lands Baptist church in court

LINCOLNTON, N.C. (ABP) -- What began as a dispute over Freemasonry has landed the pastor and 28 members of a North Carolina church in court, according to the attorney defending the Westport Baptist Church against a lawsuit filed by disgruntled members.

The 860-member church, located in a small community 30 miles northwest of Charlotte, hired Mark Cooke as pastor in January 1992. After coming to the church, Cooke learned several long-term members and contributors were also long-time Masons and Shriners, according to his attorney, Tom Bush of Charlotte.

Cooke said from the pulpit and in other settings that Freemasonry contradicts biblical teachings, Bush said. He also preached against abortion and homosexuality.

Bush said a small moderate minority, about 10-to-15 percent of the congregation, were offended and tried unsuccessfully to force the pastor to

resign.

Seven church members later disputed the September election of a slate of deacons sympathetic to the pastor. The seven filed a lawsuit in Lincoln County District Court in November which alleges church bylaws were violated in the election.

The group's attorney, Randy Isenhour of Newton, said Freemasonry is not germane to the case. Some of the plaintiffs reportedly are Masons, however.

The plaintiffs charge that a group of church members improperly substituted a list of deacon nominees without prior notice and that the new deacons attempted to change the church's bylaws to the detriment of members with opposing views. The plaintiffs have asked the court to declare the September deacon election invalid.

But Bush, the opposing attorney, said the dispute instead centers on Cooke's controversial statements -- a viewpoint echoed by more than 20 church members who have filed affidavits with the court.

Cooke, the pastor, did not return phone calls from Associated Baptist Press. But in a court affidavit he said the plaintiffs "have taken this foolish and unbiblical action because of their blind rage towards me."

Under the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, Bush told ABP, the court has jurisdiction to resolve only property disputes and not matters of doctrine.

"The meat of the issue," Bush told the court, "is a pastor's preaching, which is strictly barred ... from intrusion by secular courts."

Larry Holly, who has led a campaign against the influence of Masons in Baptist churches, recently held a seminar on revival at Westport Baptist, one of the largest churches in Lincoln County. Holly also conducted a separate session on Freemasonry for those interested.

Holly defended Pastor Cooke in a Dec. 8 letter to 300 SBC leaders and journalists.

"From the first week the pastor arrived, months before Freemasonry became a public issue in the SBC, Masons in the church attacked the pastor," Holly wrote. "They taught their Masonic lies in Sunday school. They went to youth classes and solicited membership for the youth organization associated with Masonry. They pressured other men in the church to become Masons."

Holly also renewed his criticism of the SBC Home Mission Board, which last year conducted an SBC-sanctioned study of Freemasonry that Holly calls faulted.

"The HMB trustees have encouraged the Masonic Lodge," he wrote. "Their unwillingness to take a stand against this evil has sent a message that Masons can run over churches and pastors, and that the leadership of the convention and its agencies will do nothing."

The church members filing the suit have declined to talk to news media, their lawyer said.

The case is scheduled to go to trial Jan. 3.

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-- By Bob Allen. Randy Hawkins of the Lincoln Times-News and Greg Warner of ABP contributed to this story.

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