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

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Alliance has niche on left,
director tells convocation

By Bob Allen

GREENVILLE, S.C. (ABP) -- The Alliance of Baptists' position on the left of the Baptist spectrum leaves it free to pursue "causes that others consider too risky or controversial," said the group's executive director.

Stan Hastey, speaking at the Alliance's eighth annual convocation March 3-5 in Greenville, S.C., said he "stopped resisting that (left) designation a long time ago. I think in our context it's a good place to be."

Alliance causes are "essential to the vitality of the progressive wings of Baptists in our country," Hastey said.

Among those causes are ecumenical dialogue with other progressive Baptist groups and "the Alliance's attitude and posture toward gay men and women ... and the injustice and discrimination they so often face in church and society," Hastey said.

Two years ago, the Alliance's board of directors established a task force on human sexuality with specific focus on homosexuality. Last fall the directors asked the task force to develop a "working statement."

That statement got a preview at a director's meeting immediately preceding the convocation, where it "was debated with the vigor characteristic of Alliance board meetings," Hastey said.

The chairperson of the task force, Priscilla Perry Asbury of Monroe, La., reported "the board has certainly been careful to respect honest differences of opinion and different places in the journey" in the working statement.

Some board members would prefer the Alliance not adopt a formal statement on homosexuality, while "others insist we must," said Hastey. While the Alliance should not apologize for addressing "issues surrounding the fundamental rights and fair treatment for all persons," Hastey said, "it is equally incumbent upon us to recognize forthrightly that not all of us are of the same mind on them."

He urged that as any statements and recommendations are finalized, the Alliance should adopt as "a first principle" the "freedom of the local church

to determine for itself what its positions on this and all other matters are to be."

Hastey also called on Alliance members to give "the highest priority" to joint sessions planned in 1995 with a predominately white northern Baptist convention in Providence, R.I., and a predominately African-American convention in Charlotte, N.C.

Both meetings coincide with the 150th anniversary of the 1845 founding of the Southern Baptist Convention in Augusta, Ga., representing a major schism of a unified Baptist witness in America over the issue of slavery.

A meeting with representatives of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. will be scheduled at the First Baptist Church in America in Providence, R.I., to commemorate "the historic rupture between Baptists North and South," Hastey said.

Hastey reported on ongoing dialogue with a task team of American Baptists, which since 1984 has been considering responses to the SBC controversy. The American Baptist Churches have recognized the Alliance as the "primary partner in an ongoing dialogue on present issues and future configurations in Baptist life," Hastey said.

Another joint task team is working with leaders of the Progressive National Baptist Convention. The Alliance is invited to the August 1995 meeting of the predominately black Baptist group in Charlotte, N.C. A joint project on racism will be presented and President Clinton will be invited to the meeting, Hastey said.

Hastey said both meetings are "once-in-a-lifetime opportunities" and "an opportunity to make a difference in America."

The Greenville convocation, held at First Baptist Church, also welcomed delegates from Canadian and Cuban Baptist groups who share the Alliance's experience as a progressive minority.

The Atlantic Baptist Fellowship of churches in the Maritime Provinces of Canada was formed in 1971 in response to attempts by leaders of the Atlantic Baptist Convention to control local churches' selection of delegates to national bodies, said Elaine Anne MacGregor of Halifax, Nova Scotia, first vice president of the Atlantic Fellowship.

Through a relationship with Hastey, MacGregor said she "realized the goals and attitudes of the Alliance and the Atlantic Baptist Fellowship are very similar." She also "heard a warning that what happened to the Southern Baptist Convention could also happen to the Atlantic Baptist Convention," which has a divinity college "already unduly influenced by conservative voices," she said.

Representing the Fraternity of Cuban Baptist Churches was Adalberto Cuellar, executive secretary.

The fraternity is a fellowship of almost 30 churches and mission points supported by the Alliance. The founding churches were kicked out of the Western Baptist Convention of Cuba -- the group recognized by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board -- for reasons including the ordination of women and rejection of the established convention's strong anti-Castro stand.

Speaking through an interpreter, Cuellar said, "We don't greet you in the name of brothers and sisters who tell us what to do, because you are brothers and sisters who stand by us in our struggle."

Cuellar described suffering of Cubans as a result of the 30-year-old trade embargo with the U.S.

During his report, Hastey fought tears to describe "the fervent Christian witness of God's people in the midst of almost indescribable human suffering and material deprivation" he and five other Alliance representatives witnessed on a trip to Cuba last fall.

The Alliance adopted a motion by Larry Coleman, pastor of First Baptist

Church, Laurinburg, N.C., instructing Alliance officers to write President Clinton and leaders in Congress, asking them to remove the trade ban on Cuba.

The embargo, imposed during the Bay of Pigs era, is "a failed policy" which meant to encourage the citizens of Cuba to overthrow their government but instead forced them into the arms of the Soviet Union, Coleman said. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, he added, the people of Cuba now have nowhere to turn.

Hastey described the trade embargo as "a moral issue of the first rank in our nation's international policy."

In other business, the Alliance convocation heard a "covenant address" -- delivered each year by an individual who embodies the Alliance's seven-point covenant -- by Ralph Elliott. Elliott, now an American Baptist pastor in Rochester, N.Y., was fired in 1962 from the faculty of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., for controversial writings.

Elliott said the invitation "means far more to me than you can possibly understand ... because I really haven't made any kind of major speech to Southern Baptists in 32 years."

The convocation marked the end of the two-year presidency of Ann Quattlebaum, a clinical psychologist from Greenville, S.C., and a member of First Baptist Church, Greenville. The pastor of First Baptist, Hardy Clemons, is current moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

In his welcome to the convocation, Clemons described the Alliance as "a source of strength, a source of challenge, a source of learning and a beautiful source of worship" for him.

The Fellowship's coordinator, Cecil Sherman of Atlanta, Ga., brought official greetings from the Fellowship, lauding the Alliance's "vision for the needs of Baptists and for the preservation of ideals that are precious to us all."

The continuation of both the Alliance and Fellowship "constitutes our health," Sherman said. "It is not required that a church choose between participation in the Alliance or the Fellowship.

Elected to serve as Alliance president in 1994-95 was John Roberts, pastor of Woodbrook Baptist Church, Baltimore, Md.

Next year's convocation is scheduled March 3-5 in Vienna, Va. For the first time, it will begin on Friday and conclude with worship on Sunday morning, to encourage lay participation. Roberts said pastors, by informing their churches they will miss a Sunday to attend the convocation, "send the best possible signal of just how important the Alliance is." He recommended, to best express the Alliance's aims, that pastors invite a woman or layperson to substitute in the pulpit that day.

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Bennett's prescription for America:
less government, more responsibility

By Greg Warner

DEL CITY, Okla. (ABP) -- Americans should ask less of their government, not more, and they certainly should not let government raise their children, says William Bennett.

Formerly America's top education official, Bennett may run for president in 1996. But don't expect to hear sweeping promises about what a Bennett-led government would do for you.

"We are asking the government to do too many things," he told a Baptist

audience near Oklahoma City March 1.

In Bennett's view of government, less is more. But for Americans who traditionally look to government to cure the country's social ills, he said, that will be tough medicine.

"It's a big change inside of the American people that has to occur," he said. "They have to realize what they can expect from government and what they can expect from themselves."

Not only is government trying to do a job it was never intended to do, Bennett says, it's not doing a very good job at it. For example, parenting:

"We have conducted an unwitting social experiment in this country in the last 25 years -- have children and then don't raise them, and let's see what happens," he said. "We are now seeing what happens, and it is not great."

He told of a Chicago tenement where police recently found 19 neglected children living in squalor. Bennett said one six-year-old being led out of the building asked a social worker, "Will you take me home and be my mommy?"

America is paying the price for shirking the responsibility of parenthood, said Bennett, whose book "The De-valuing of America" is in a second printing. His second book, "The Book of Virtues," is on the New York Times' best-seller list.

Bennett said a shift in American thinking in recent decades has produced an "entitlement mentality" among the citizenry: "That we, the citizens of America, were not only entitled to the pursuit of happiness but were entitled, as a right, to happiness, and if we weren't getting it, it was somebody's fault -- the government, your spouse, your employer, the mayor."

This shift was "one of the most consequential changes in public philosophy" and the source of many social ills today, he said.

Bennett said one moment in the 1992 presidential campaign typified the problem. In a televised debate, a questioner from the audience asked the three candidates what they would do to solve his problems.

While George Bush and Ross Perot responded vaguely, Bennett recalled, Bill Clinton recited a list of proposed government initiatives to address the questioner's needs. The attitude of many politicians, Bennett said, is "'Give me your fortune and I will take care of your needs.'"

"Maybe a lot of this is better done by families and neighbors and churches," he said.

Instead of expecting government to solve their problems, Bennett said, Americans should take their country back from the politicians and bureaucrats. "We should say to the government, 'We want our money back.'"

"Happiness has moved above commitment in the priority of modern American thinking," Bennett continued. "When that occurs, the dissolution of critical institutions is bound to follow."

One institution that has suffered, he said, is the family. "Its dissolution is the most important fact of American life," said Bennett, whose own parents were divorced.

The demise of the family was the theme of the three-day seminar sponsored by the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, which featured Bennett as keynote speaker.

Bennett, a Roman Catholic, was secretary of education under President Reagan and drug czar under President Bush. His unabashed advocacy for public morality has won support from many conservative Christians who would like to see him win the Republican nomination for president in 1996.

Other conservatives favor former Rep. Jack Kemp or former Vice President Dan Quayle. Both Bennett and Kemp are directors of Empower America, a conservative think tank.

Bennett also was a speaker at the CLC's 1992 seminar and was featured in a CLC publication in 1993.

"The crisis in America is a spiritual problem," Bennett told the Oklahoma audience. Yet Americans and their government are looking for a "material solution" to the spiritual malaise.

America already is a country of material abundance, Bennett said, yet Americans are basically unhappy -- a country of complainers -- because they ignore their spiritual needs. "People are expecting the kind of repose that the world cannot give."

Bennett's prescription for America's ills is summed up in his vision for America:

"In the future, I think there should be fewer lawyers and more ministers. Less abortion and more adoption. Less television and more reading. Less divorce and more commitment. Less time on the phone and more time with your spouse. Less health club with the guys, more time playing ball with the kids. Fewer condoms and more abstinence among the young and the sick. Less adultery, more fidelity. Fewer assault weapons in kids' hand, and put in their hands instead fishing poles and nets.

"Fewer class outings from school, more homework from school. Less solo microwaving and drive-through dinners, more meals together around the table. Less noise in life, more quiet. Less rap, more Bach. Less self-esteem, more self-respect. Less psychotherapy, more prayer. Fewer public confessions on television, more private repentance alone. Less victimology, more individual responsibility. Less sociology, more good old stories. And finally, less whining in America, more counting of our blessings in America. Less asking things of government, more asking things of ourselves."

While the family is the key to America's moral reformation, Bennett said, what happens in America's schools is also crucial.

From the beginning, the mission of the public schools was "to establish a common code of morality," Bennett said. Americans expect their children to be taught academics as well as a "basis of right and wrong," he said.

"Unless the schools return to that larger role, we have lost something of significance," he said.

Public schools must also return to teaching basic academics if Americans are to regain their leadership role in the world. "We don't mind losing to Norway in downhill skiing," Bennett said, "but when we are last in the industrialized world in math and science ... people just really get fed up."

Christians who want to make a difference in education should run for local school boards, Bennett advised. "I hope people of faith and conviction will not all abandon the public schools."

But the former education secretary conceded he sends his own children to a private Catholic school in the Washington area. Parents facing the public-or-private choice must do what they consider best for their children, he said.

And parents should be given the choice of using their tax dollars to pay for private education, Bennett said. That principle, he said, already applies to private colleges, which receive some federal funding, and should apply to primary and secondary education as well.

"School choice," though routinely deleted from federal education-reform legislation, "is going to pass in some state soon," Bennett predicted. Many Americans oppose such initiatives as unconstitutional. Such opposition will eventually fail, Bennett said, but not on the strength of the legal arguments. "What will bring it down is the dissatisfaction of the American people with the low performance of American education. ... It is breaking the American people's hearts."

Bennett recited a litany of education innovations -- outcomes-based education, values clarification, sex education, new math, new social studies -- which he said "have brought American education to its knees."

Those innovations were imposed by so-called education experts, he said, and did not come from parents. To undo the damage, he said, America should adopt a common-sense approach to education -- if everyday Americans think a policy makes sense, it is probably right.

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UPDATE: The Christian Life Commission has responded to ABP's request for more specific registration figures for their recent seminar. There were 411 paid registrants and 335 unpaid registrants. The unpaid included 276 members of the host church who were not charged a fee. The 59 other unpaid include speakers, staff, press, etc. Total registrants numbered 746. The largest crowd at any session numbered 592.

To incorporate this information into the March 3 ABP story "Christians may be winning...", please replace the 9th paragraph with the following:

"There is a real sense of urgency" about America's sad moral state, "but also a sense that God is moving and God is working," said Land, executive director of the Christian Life Commission and organizer of the Feb. 28-March 2 seminar, which attracted 411 paid registrants and 335 other participants.

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Texas Baptist church
wins property-tax dispute

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- First Baptist Church of San Antonio, Texas, has won its legal battle to keep two parking lots it leases to a real estate firm off county tax rolls.

The church prevailed March 7 when the U.S. Supreme Court, without comment, left standing a lower-court's ruling that exempting the two lots from property tax does not violate the federal or Texas constitutions.

The church, which owns four parking lots, leases two that are not adjacent to its sanctuary to Valero Realty Co. for more than \$100,000 per year, according to court records. Valero has use of the lots, valued at more than \$2 million, from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The church has use of the lots after 5 p.m. on weekdays, as well as Sundays and occasional holidays.

Bexar County officials argued that exempting the two commercially leased lots from taxes violates the First Amendment's ban against establishment of religion. Bexar officials county asked the high court to reverse a Texas appeals-court's ruling against them.

The property at issue in the dispute, the lower court noted, "is being used primarily for religious purposes" and is "reasonably necessary" for engaging in worship.

In asking the Supreme Court to review the case, Bexar County argued that the tax-exemption statute favors religious organizations over secular ones and is not evenly enforced. The county's petition noted that courts

denied another Texas church an exemption for similarly leased parking lots.

The lower court said the statute's purpose is to exempt from taxation all charitable organizations, including ones that are religious. "There is nothing improper about that legislative purpose," the court said.

The statute does not advance religion or produce "excessive entanglement -- administrative or otherwise -- with religion," the court said.

In upholding the state law's exemption of religious property, the Texas court applied the three-pronged Lemon test used by the Supreme Court to assure governmental neutrality toward religion.

A Baptist church-state specialist said the case presents some difficult questions but that the courts arrived at the correct answers.

"This is yet another good example of how the much-maligned Lemon test can significantly accommodate religion -- almost to the verge of an establishment-clause violation," said Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee. "It need not spell hostility to religion."

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Suspected arson damages room
at First Baptist, Jacksonville

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- A fire believed to be intentionally set damaged an auditorium at First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., Saturday, March 5.

The fire caused about \$45,000 damage to the 900-seat Hobson Auditorium, said Douglas Pigg, church administrator. The blaze was contained to the auditorium, which was built in 1903 and is used for weddings, funerals and assemblies for the church's high school department.

Pigg predicted it will take about eight weeks to repair the damage. During that time activities will be transferred to the 3,500-seat auditorium that until last year served as the church's sanctuary. No damage occurred in the church's new 9,200-seat auditorium completed in September 1993.

Police arrested a Jacksonville man on charges of arson, burglary and trespassing. Reports indicate the man was found hiding with several boxes of matches in his pocket in the auditorium while a small fire blazed on the stage area. He was detained by security guards who responded to a burglar alarm about 6:40 a.m.

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Bread for the World launches
new campaign for the hungry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In an effort to reduce hunger among poor women and children in America, Bread for the World launched a major letter-writing campaign March 1.

"A Child Is Waiting" is the theme for this year's Offering of Letters, designed to increase funding for the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), which serves nearly 3.5 million needy women and children.

"Without writing checks -- just letters to Congress -- Baptists can help win nearly a billion dollars for vital nutrition- and health-related services for low-income children and women," said David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, an ecumenical Christian organization which fights hunger with lobbying efforts.

Bread for the World expects Congress to receive at least 150,000 letters from local congregations and people from various Christian backgrounds.

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-- By Ashley Householder

(Ashley Householder is a Baptist Joint Committee intern.)

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CORRECTION: In the March 3 ABP story "Christians May Be Winning...", two mistakes need to be corrected.

In the 12th paragraph replace Harvard with Yale.

In the 15th paragraph replace passed with past.

Also, in the Feb. 22 story "Fellowship OKs missionaries...", in the 14th paragraph, replace William with Walter.

Thank you.

***** END *****