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Dunn identifies six threats to religious liberty heritage

By Bob Allen

GREENSBORO, N.C. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and a document signed by Southern Baptist leaders pledging unity between Catholics and Evangelicals are two current threats to religious liberty, said Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James Dunn in a recent speech.

"It has become socially unacceptable to call names and identify enemies. Political correctness -- left, right and middle -- rules it out," Dunn told members of the William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society in Greensboro, N.C. However, Dunn said, "religious freedom is at risk and now is the time to sound the alarm."

He offered "six specific challenges to our heritage of religious freedom."

Among them, Dunn said, is the "politicization" of religion. An ambitious, highly publicized document, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," was released in April and greeted by some observers as signaling a new era in Catholic-Evangelical relations. In reality it was the work of "a small group of well-off, white, right-wing Republicans," thinly masking a narrow political agenda, Dunn said.

"Lurking just beneath the surface is the question asked so often by Pat Robertson: 'Is it possible to be a Democrat and a Christian?'" Dunn said.

"Don't be fooled by those who conflate political agendas with 'God talk,'" Dunn said. "One of the most serious threats to the moral authority of the religious community is the shortsightedness of those who sacrifice the permanent on the altar of the temporary," he said.

"One of the most serious threats to the political process is the politicization of religion," he added. "One of the most serious threats to civility in society is the medieval use and abuse of religion as a weapon in polemical politics."

"The very peaceful pursuit of politics is pushed beyond possibility by those who want to make every political objective cause for a holy crusade," Dunn said. "The sad results of religion being locked into political molds has been seen in Beirut, Belfast and Bosnia," he said. "Anyone who thinks it cannot happen here is weak in theology and wanting in history," he added.

The Religious Right presents another religious-liberty threat, Dunn said. Sophisticated strategies and questionable ethics make the Religious Right's second generation a greater threat to religious liberty than the first,

Dunn said. "Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition is far more dangerous than Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority ever was," he said.

"Fueled by fear and flirting dangerously with hate," the Christian Coalition employs "a bottom-up rather than a top-down strategy, targets "doable objectives" such as school boards and "trains its troops" for political action, Dunn said.

"Stealth candidates" backing an agenda including "ultimate abolition of public education" are advised to conceal their true colors until elected and if exposed, howl "anti-Christian bigotry," Dunn said. "Watch them," he warned.

Other subgroups of the Religious Right include Don Wildmon's American Family Association, Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women of America and James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Dunn said. Each has a reputation for being able to "create a furor almost overnight" by swamping lawmakers with phone calls. While such groups have a right to speak out on public issues, Dunn said, they have a "less than honorable" track record for doing their homework first.

Also belonging "squarely in the camp of the Religious Right" is the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, Dunn said, based in part on the agency's "vigorous opposition" to the U.S. Supreme Courts' Lemon test regarding the establishment of religion. The test, employed by the court for decades, says to be constitutional a law must have a secular purpose, must neither advance or inhibit religion and must avoid excessive entanglement between church and state.

"What's wrong with the Lemon test?" Dunn said. "Most of us want laws to have a secular or neutral purpose, not a sectarian or religious one. Whose religion? Most of us obviously do not want any level of government to advance or inhibit religion. If we have some kooky religions, that's the price we pay for freedom. If our religion is not advanced by government, neither is anyone else's. And as for excessive entanglement, who wants government's guidelines, regulations, monitoring or any other intervention in their religious activities or institutions? We leave it to the courts to say when enough is too much."

Other religious liberty threats, Dunn said, include:

-- Revisionism. "Rewriting history is a growth industry," said Dunn. Critics in high places contend the separation of church and state was not the intent of America's founders but a latter-day innovation, Dunn said. Critics include Chief Justice William Rehnquist, who has contended the separation of church and state should be abandoned, and David Barton, whose videotape titled "America's Godly Heritage" insists that church-state separation has systematically eroded the nation's Christian roots.

Despite revisionist arguments to the contrary, church-state separation "is the law of the land," Dunn said. "Church and state have separate purposes, different (though overlapping) constituencies, opposite methods of funding (voluntary vs. coercive) and separate methods for achieving their goals," he said. Church-state separation "acts as a hedge, a guardrail, a necessary corollary for religious freedom," Dunn said.

-- Roman Catholicism. "You may squirm at my listing the Roman Catholic Church as a threat to religious freedom," Dunn said. "Yet no informed observer of the political scene can honestly ignore the millions of dollars being spent right now to get public monies for parochial schools."

Pope John Paul II, influenced during his formative years by a communist dictatorship, is the "most reactionary" Roman Catholic leader in 150 years, Dunn said.

-- Reconstructionism. Though it has received wide public attention, the group "may not be statistically significant," Dunn said. The Coalition for Revival, rooted in R. J. Rushdoony's writings, looks back to 17th century colonial America as a period when civil law was based explicitly on biblical principles. Reconstructionists aim to establish a theocracy in America "and each one of them would like to be 'Theo,'" Dunn said.

-- "Commodification." The rise of churches built on consumer-oriented marketing principles threatens religious freedom by weakening traditional Baptist emphases on experiential religion and religious liberty, Dunn said. "The bland leading the bland have no time for history and little interest in denominational distinctives," he said. Dunn said he visits two or three different churches each week and "is routinely informed that 'most of our people know nothing about being a Baptist.' "

Dunn called on Baptists to adapt a motto from the 1950s, "Every Baptist A Tither," to a call for "Every

Baptist a Baptist."

"It will take hard work," Dunn said. "We might never have seen the necessity of doing it short of the denominational holocaust we've experienced."

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EEOC seeks more input  
on harassment guidelines

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- After a flood of criticism, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has decided to seek more public input on proposed guidelines that govern religious and other forms of harassment in the workplace.

The commission is reopening the comment period after the guidelines, proposed in October, drew fire from Christians who feared the agency was trying to eliminate religious discussion from the workplace.

The initial period time for public comment expired in November, but the agency has continued to receive and consider input, an EEOC spokeswoman said. The new comment period will be open until June 12.

The guidelines represent a consolidation of what EEOC and federal courts say is necessary to comply with the 1964 Civil Rights Act's ban against workplace discrimination and harassment based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin.

The guidelines say conduct is unlawful when it has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment; unreasonably interferes with work performance; or otherwise adversely affects an individual's employment opportunities.

Conduct is sufficiently severe and pervasive to be considered harassment when a reasonable person would find it intimidating, hostile or abusive.

Reaction by religious organizations has been varied.

Some, including Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission General Counsel Michael Whitehead, say the EEOC proposal could turn workplaces into "religion-free" zones. Whitehead and others want religion omitted from the guidelines.

"We are deeply concerned that the guidelines would have a chilling effect on religious freedom and expression in the workplace," Whitehead earlier told Baptist Press. "If a person shares his faith with a co-worker on lunch break, the person and his employer might be charged with religious harassment."

"Who came up with the idea of putting religion in the same category as sexual harassment?" asked evangelical activist Chuck Colson in a radio commentary. "Christians who talk about a Bible study they attended would be on a par with people who tell dirty jokes at the water cooler."

Others, including Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Brent Walker, say such fears are overblown. Walker and others merely want EEOC to modify the guidelines to ensure they are not applied in ways that restrict legitimate religious activities.

"The guidelines, along with EEOC's interpretative fact sheet, do not call for a religion-free zone," Walker said. "The potential for overreaction by employers is better corrected by shoring up the guidelines than by removing religion as a protected category."

In an April 5 letter to the EEOC and in a subsequent meeting with EEOC attorneys, Walker said removing religion from the guidelines could send a wrong signal that EEOC is less concerned about religious harassment than it is harassment in other forms.

However, to hedge against the possibility that employers might apply the guidelines in ways that limit or "chill religious speech and practice," Walker urged the EEOC to amend its proposals "to make absolutely clear that they are intended to protect, not denigrate, religion and expressly disavow any intent on the part of EEOC to create a 'religion-free zone' in the workplace."

Among the activities that should be protected, Walker said: inviting people to worship services, telling others about one's religious convictions, holding voluntary Bible studies at work, and displaying religious symbols. The CLC's Whitehead could not be reached for comment.

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-- By Larry Chesser

New book tells  
Habitat story

AMERICUS, Ga. (ABP) -- The success of Habitat for Humanity in providing affordable housing for low-income families is the subject of a new book by the organization's founder.

"The Theology of the Hammer" by Habitat founder Millard Fuller is published by Smyth & Helwys. The publisher premiered the book during the annual assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship May 5-7 in Greensboro, N.C.

Habitat uses volunteer labor, often from churches, to build low-cost homes, which are then sold at reduced cost to families, who also contribute at least 300 hours of "sweat equity" to the construction. Interest-free loans make the homes even more affordable for the families.

Fuller, a millionaire lawyer from Americus, Ga., who gave away his wealth after a personal crisis, founded Habitat for Humanity International in 1976. He calls the program "a new, creative way to share the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Fuller's book got a boost from cable network CNN, which did a live interview with the author May 5 for a segment on contemporary religion.

During the Fellowship assembly, about 100 Fellowship volunteers joined about 200 others from the Greensboro area to build seven homes. Most of the work was completed in a four-day "blitz."

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-- By Greg Warner

European seminary moving  
from Ruschlikon to Prague

LISBON, Portugal (ABP) -- The executive committee of the European Baptist Convention has confirmed its earlier decision to relocate the Baptist Theological Seminary at Ruschlikon, Switzerland, to Prague in the Czech Republic.

The group voted last November to relocate the seminary pending approval by the various European Baptist unions that make up the convention. The executive committee, at its semiannual meeting May 6-7 in Lisbon, Portugal, considered feedback from member unions and a presentation on the proposed site for a new campus in Prague before voting to proceed with the relocation.

Ruschlikon has been home to the international Baptist seminary since its founding in 1949. Recently, however, high costs, tighter immigration laws and the changing religious landscape in Eastern Europe have made it more difficult to maintain the school in Switzerland.

The school will be renamed the International Baptist Theological Seminary and could open as soon as the summer of 1995.

The Ruschlikon school was the center of intense controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention beginning late in 1991. Convinced that the school harbored liberalism, trustees of the Foreign Mission Board suddenly voted to remove the \$365,000 in budget allocations for Ruschlikon, despite the fact that it was part of a

long-term funding commitment made by the board years earlier.

Several FMB administrators resigned over the decision. Shortly thereafter, FMB President Keith Parks announced his retirement, saying he could no longer work with the board because of philosophical differences. Eventually Parks accepted a position with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which funds its own missions program, including the Ruschlikon seminary.

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-- By Stanley Crabb and Bob Allen

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