

Associated Baptist Press

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Gore, religious leaders affirm religious liberty

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Vice President Al Gore joined a diverse group of religious and civil-liberties leaders July 14 in affirming that both church-state separation and the free exercise of religion are indispensable parts of the American experience.

More than 80 individuals and six religious and civil-liberties organizations signed a statement, called a "Shared Vision," which affirmed the nation's religious-liberty heritage. The statement was presented to Gore in a ceremony at the Old Executive Office Building by James Dunn of the Baptist Joint Committee, James Rudin of the American Jewish Committee and Oliver Thomas of the National Council of Churches of Christ.

The vice president commended the group and said church-state separation and religious liberty have been good for America.

It's no accident, he said, "that the United States of America is by far the most religious of the industrial democracies around the world, with rates of religious affiliation, of belief in the Divinity, that are five and 10 times higher among our population than in many European countries.

"I don't believe it's an accident that we have that distinction, on the one hand, and simultaneously the First Amendment protections and tradition of tolerance on the other hand."

The statement rejects both the notion that the nation's founders did not intend to separate church and state and the view that religion has a minimal or no role to play in public life.

"As individuals and organizations committed to religious liberty as well as a robust role for religion in public life," the statement declares, "we share ... a vision that avoids the theocratic tendencies on one side and the hostility toward religion associated with the other."

The statement calls for rigorous application of the First Amendment's ban against government sponsorship of and interference with religion.

Gore told the group, "Your 'Shared Vision' statement reaches to the heart of the American people and indeed to the soul of the entire American experiment."

The statement, he said, "recognizes the dangers of state intrusion, intervention and involvement in religious institutions. As John Leland once said, 'The fondness of magistrates to foster religion has done it more harm than all the persecutions ever did.'

"By the same token, you know that government must allow the free exercise of religion to flourish," said Gore, an active Baptist layman who once attended divinity school.

The statement encourages an active role for religious people in government and politics but discourages making religious affiliation a campaign issue, invoking divine authority for policies and platforms, and characterizing political opponents as ungodly. Gore echoed those sentiments.

"I'm so troubled, always, when I see people who are sure that they know exactly what God's plan for the world is, what political party God belongs to, what God's ideology is, what God's position on particular cases and controversies might be," he said. "They seem to know where God stands on term limits, the balanced budget amendment and farm price supports," Gore said.

The statement also addresses the role of religion in public schools and the government aid to religious institutions.

Public schools should not advance or endorse religion but should accommodate the free-exercise rights to students, the statement says.

It opposes "direct or indirect government funding of parochial schools at primary and secondary levels and of pervasively sectarian colleges and universities."

Organizational signers include the American Jewish Committee, Americans for Religious Liberty, the Baptist Joint Committee, the General Board of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, the National Council of Churches of Christ and People for the American Way.

The vice president cited a personal episode to underscore the importance of religion to Americans. He recalled the experience of almost losing his son in an accident, a "deeply personal event" he has spoken and written about previously.

"The most important lesson for me that came out of that event was that people by the thousands I didn't even know reached out to me to lift up me, my son and my family in prayer and in compassion in their hearts and expressed an empathy and compassion with such intensity that I felt it as a palpable force," he said.

"It was a healing that came from multitudes of caring souls, praying with us and for us and whose compassion fell on us like a mantle of divine grace," he added.

Gore said the event was a turning point in his life.

"I know that all of you, as practicing people of faith, have felt this grace -- an awareness that directly challenges the distrustful words of our all too often cynical popular culture," he told the religious and civil liberties leaders.

After Gore's remarks Thomas thanked the vice president for the administration's role in enactment of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a law signed by President Clinton in 1993 that requires government to have a compelling reason to restrict religious practice.

"Religious liberty is a very popular concept in the abstract," said Thomas, who chaired a coalition of religious and civil-liberties groups that sought passage of RFRA.

"It's only in the application that we start killing one another," he said. "So we hope that this document will be of practical use to the administration as you develop policy platforms and position statements."

the Baptist Joint Committee.

Practice religious liberty with humility, leaders say

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious people have a right and obligation to enter public life, a group of religious leaders said July 14, but they should do so with humility, never claiming to know the "absolute will of God" in public policy.

The speakers -- including Texas Baptist ethicist Phil Strickland -- announced the release of a "Shared Vision" statement signed by more than 80 individuals and six religious and civil-liberties organizations. The statement, presented later that day to Vice President Al Gore, affirms church-state separation and the free exercise of religion as essential to the American experiment of religious liberty.

Strickland, director of the Christian Life Commission, Baptist General Convention of Texas, said that nothing could be more natural for Baptists than to reaffirm support of religious liberty.

"For more than 300 years Baptists have been in the thick of the fight to protect our God-given religious liberty and to insist upon a wall of separation between church and state to help guard that liberty," he said at a press conference. "Baptists, like many in this room, have felt the sting of persecution that inevitably results when government gets into the business of promoting or hindering religion."

He added, "However, even some Baptists have on occasion forgotten their history as they covet government cash, ask government to sponsor religious exercises in the schools or fail to cry 'foul' when government interferes with someone else's right to practice their religion."

But Baptists stand with others to announce the "Shared Vision" for religious liberty, he said, calling it a "positive, pro-active statement to guide our thinking and conduct us into the 21st century."

Delineating a portion of the vision, Strickland said the signers of the statement believe both religion clauses must be rigorously enforced on behalf of the weak and strong in society. They also envision public schools that teach about religion without seeking to inculcate sectarian beliefs.

"We support public money being used solely for public purposes ...," he said. "We are committed to free churches, synagogues, temples and mosques -- free to worship and practice their faith without governmental interference.

"And we are committed to a free state -- where government is never used to force the God of the majority on the consciences of the minority."

Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A., said, "We are here because we recognize that true religious freedom is always a risk, always an experiment. And because it is an experiment, naysayers fear that faith itself will falter. But it will not. ... Between the theocrats of the right and the nihilists of the left, there are multitudes of good citizens -- multitudes who appreciate the role religion plays as the salt, light and leaven of our society, yet who do not seek to impose their faith on others through the power of the state."

She added, "We envision a nation where God is worshiped but Caesar is not. Where the state secures peace and stability but never aspires to holiness. A place of liberty and justice for all -- not a select few, be they Christian, Judeo-Christian or otherwise."

Alexander Schindler, president of Union of American Hebrew Congregations, said the vision statement expressed the convictions of the majority of Jews. For American Jews, church-state separation is a "gut issue," he said.

"We hold this principle to be our fundamental protection, the ultimate ground of that unique freedom that we have experienced here," Schindler said. "Everywhere else in our wandering through the ages we have suffered

persecution. Never here. ... This is why we prize the First Amendment as the cornerstone of our liberties in this land."

James Rudin, director of the interreligious relations department of the American Jewish Committee, said that religious liberty is "the most fevered issue of the 1990s."

"I predict for the rest of this decade the issues that are raised in 'A Shared Vision' will in fact be the most fevered, the most debated and most important domestic issues here in the American republic."

The statement affirms Thomas Jefferson and historic American values, he said.

"Let later generations say of us that we responded to the challenges of our day," Rudin added. "Let them say that we remembered our history and our traditions."

Strickland, responding to a question, said that he believed the statement "would be very broadly supported by Southern Baptists."

"As I look at our history of speaking to this issue, you would find some statements that would be incompatible, but for the most part our history, and I think our people, would be very comfortable and supportive of the principles articulated in this document," Strickland said.

Another question focused on what some members of the Religious Right characterize as "Christian bashing" in American society.

Rudin said as a sympathetic observer that he could not detect any Christian bashing, but he added that sometimes criticism and opposition are the price a religious group pays for participation in the public arena.

Campbell said she thought it was interesting that when the NCC, which represents 42 million American Christians, is criticized, the Religious Right has never complained about "Christian bashing." Perhaps they had a particular kind of Christian in mind, she quipped.

"I think there is equal-opportunity bashing going on," she joked.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, underscored that the statement is not a reaction to another one signed earlier this year by Catholic and evangelical leaders. Shared Vision was about five years in the making, he said, and "has nothing to do with a responsive modality."

In addition to presenting the statement to the administration, Dunn said the supporters plan to use it as an educational tool within their respective faith groups.

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Fellowship hires specialist in missions education

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Grace Powell Freeman, 37, of New York City has been hired as a specialist in missions education for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

In her position -- called associate missions coordinator for missions education promotion -- Freeman will develop missions education materials, promote the Fellowship's annual Global Missions Offering, and serve as a resource person to churches for missions conferences and prayer support, among other duties.

She begins Sept. 1.

The Fellowship, an organization of Southern Baptist moderates, sponsors its own missions program, with 41 missionaries and numerous mission projects at home and abroad. The Fellowship has approved plans to publish age-level materials to teach about missions in local churches.

Since 1992 Freeman has been a manager for the American Bible Society in New York City, where she coordinated the recent \$6 million launch of the Contemporary English Version of the Bible.

Previously she was education consultant for the Kentucky Baptist Woman's Missionary Union (1988-

1992). She also has worked as minister of education and family life at First Baptist Church of Forsyth, Ga.; adjunct professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; director/trainer for Centrifuge youth camps; and a public school teacher.

Freeman holds a bachelor's degree from Shorter College, a master of education degree from West Georgia College, and a master of divinity in Christian education from Southern Seminary (1987), where she was class president and president of the Christian Education Council.

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-- By Greg Warner

Committee unanimous behind Breyer nomination

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Senate Judiciary Committee unanimously voted July 19 to recommend to the full Senate that Stephen Breyer be confirmed as the 108th justice to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Senate is expected to vote on the nomination no earlier than Friday, July 22.

Breyer, President Clinton's second nominee to the high court, is chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. If confirmed by the Senate, he would replace retired Justice Harry Blackmun.

Appointed to the federal bench by President Carter in 1980, Breyer expressed a keen desire to make the "law work for people" and endorsed a wall of separation between church and state during his confirmation hearings.

Breyer's years of public service cover all three branches of government. Prior to his judicial appointment, Breyer was chief counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee, pioneering landmark airline deregulation legislation. He also has been a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg, a top aid in the Justice Department's anti-trust division, an assistant special prosecutor in the Watergate investigation and a law professor.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said that Breyer "has distinguished himself on the U.S. Court of Appeals" and "has earned a reputation as a moderate pragmatist."

Hatch said Breyer's testimony before the committee demonstrated a commitment to the free exercise of religion and a pragmatic approach to church-state separation.

Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., added that he was encouraged by Breyer's testimony embracing the Jeffersonian wall of separation between church and state, which he called vital in today's society.

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-- By Pam Parry

Dallas church calls Alabama pastor

DALLAS (ABP) -- Park Cities Baptist Church, the third largest Baptist congregation in Dallas, has elected Allen Walworth of Huntsville, Ala., as its new pastor.

Walworth, 38, has been pastor of First Baptist Church of Huntsville for six years. In Dallas he succeeds longtime pastor James Pleitz, who retired last September after 15 years in the position.

The Dallas congregation unanimously approved Walworth's nomination July 17. He begins his duties Sept. 11. The church, with 8,400 members, is the 20th largest congregation in the Southern Baptist Convention and has a budget of more than \$5 million.

A native of Alabama, Walworth holds a bachelor's degree from Samford University and a master's and doctorate from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Kathy, have two children. He previously held pastorates in Scottsboro, Ala., and Frankfort and Guston, Ky.

Robert Langford, chairman of the church's search committee, described Walworth as "a deeply spiritual man, a most marvelous Bible teacher, a strong pulpiteer and a big-hearted shepherd who cares about people."

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-- By Greg Warner

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