

Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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104th Congress opens with flurry of activity

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The 104th Congress convened Jan. 4 by electing new leadership and introducing reform legislation -- including proposals to amend the U.S. Constitution to allow public-school prayer.

The first Republican-led Congress in 40 years elected Rep. Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., a Southern Baptist, as speaker of the House. The House of Representatives worked into the morning hours Jan. 5 to fulfill some lawmakers' pledge that the opening day of Congress would be far more than ceremonial.

Lawmakers introduced a plethora of reform initiatives in both chambers. Three of the 149 bills and 38 resolutions introduced in the Senate related to public school prayer -- two of which propose amending the U.S. Constitution.

Melissa Rogers, associate general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, said that many of the school-prayer initiatives are "perennial efforts that have failed time and time again. A Republican-led Congress, of course, throws a new factor into the mix.

"But opponents of state-organized prayer in the schools sit on both sides of the aisle and will be sure to fight such measures," she said.

Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., introduced a bill (S. 27) that would withhold federal funds from public schools that bar constitutionally protected prayer. He introduced a similar measure in the previous Congress, but it failed to become law.

Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., also introduced a resolution (S.J. Res. 7) that would amend the Constitution to neither prohibit nor require prayer in public schools or at extracurricular activities.

Introducing the resolution, Byrd said the amendment is "an effort to make clear that neither the Constitution, or the amendments thereto, require, nor do they prohibit, voluntary prayer in public schools."

He said he hoped the amendment would "restore the spiritual compass that has been lost in the lives of so many of our citizens. And, most importantly, we can begin to return to our children the moral orientation they so desperately desire."

Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., who was elected president pro tempore, also introduced a measure (S.J. Res.

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6) that would amend the Constitution related to "voluntary school prayer."

In addition to the three Senate measures, prayer-related bills also were introduced in the House, although no final tally was available.

One proposal introduced in the House by Rep. Bill Emerson, R-Mo., would amend the Constitution to allow for voluntary school prayer.

Emerson said the "Founding Fathers intended religion to provide a moral anchor for our democracy. Wouldn't they be puzzled to return to modern-day America and find, among elite circles in academia and the media, a scorn for the public expression of religious values?"

In December, Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, met with another House Republican, Rep. Ernest Istook of Oklahoma, to help the congressman draft a Republican-sponsored prayer amendment.

Istook's proposal aims to guarantee the right of individual students and groups to pray during the school day. But it would bar government from writing the prayers and would not require all students to participate.

Land said he wants to ensure that prayers are always initiated by students, not adults. "There's no perfect solution, but if an amendment is done right, it will vastly increase public support for public education," he said in December.

But the BJC's Rogers said: "Prayer has not been 'kicked out' of the public schools. Students always have had and always will have the right to pray in school. They may pray privately at any time, and they may pray in a group as long as they are not disruptive."

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-- By Pam Parry

Ruschlikon seminary sells Swiss property for \$20 million

RUSCHLIKON, Switzerland (ABP) -- A Baptist seminary in Europe that was the center of a bitter dispute in the Southern Baptist Convention has sold its property in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, for \$20 million.

The funds will be used to move the International Baptist Theological Seminary from Ruschlikon to Prague in the Czech Republic.

Ruschlikon has been home to the 44-student seminary since its founding by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in 1949. The FMB transferred the property to the European Baptist Federation in 1989. Recently, high costs, tighter immigration laws and the changing religious landscape in Eastern Europe have made it more difficult to keep the school in Switzerland. Trustees voted in 1993 to move and began looking for a buyer.

The picturesque campus overlooking Lake Zurich was sold to a Swiss insurance underwriting firm, Schweizerische Ruckversicherung, which will use it for a training center and for guest housing.

The property, which includes 14 acres and 22 buildings, was sold for 25 million Swiss francs, or approximately 20 million U.S. dollars, according to the European Baptist Press Service. Not included in the sale is the seminary's chapel, which will be held in trust by the Swiss Baptist Union for use by Swiss Baptist churches. Under terms of the contract, signed Dec. 19, Schweizerische Ruckversicherung will take over the Ruschlikon property Sept. 1, 1995.

The funds from the sale will be used to purchase and renovate the new site in Prague, relocate the staff and faculty, and provide an endowment for scholarships. Renovations have already begun on the site, which is expected to open next summer.

The new campus, originally a retirement facility for Czech military officers, includes 16 acres and 22 buildings, the oldest dating from the 18th century. The site will cost \$6 million to buy and renovate, seminary officials said.

The Ruschlikon seminary 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.

The decision strained relations between the FMB and European Baptists. Several FMB administrators resigned, and shortly thereafter FMB President Keith Parks announced his retirement, saying he could no longer work with the trustees because of philosophical differences.

Eventually Parks accepted a position with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which funds its own missions program and supports the European Baptist seminary.

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-- By Greg Warner

Charity bingo a scam, former employees say

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Charity bingo's big benefits go to unskilled workers receiving untaxed wages and to commercial operators skimming profits from crooked operations, according to two former bingo hall workers in Dallas.

And if the state cannot effectively regulate small-scale bingo halls, they ask, how can it expect to oversee multi-million dollar casinos?

Michele Slaten worked about three years as bookkeeper for an east Dallas bingo hall. Her sister, Patricia Currie Stark, worked in the bingo hall nearly seven years, mostly in the concession area.

Slaten said she resigned once she "caught on" that her employer was requiring her to break the law.

Stark was fired after her employer charged that she was stealing from the cash register. Stark maintained that she simply was doing what she had been told to do -- taking her wages in cash so that they would be "off the books."

Both Slaten and Stark insist the system that once provided their livelihood not only is riddled with abuse but is rotten to the core. And they said the Texas Lottery Commission, charged by the state with regulating charitable bingo, has been slow to address their concerns -- a charge that investigators with the commission dispute.

The sisters' former employer, Mariann Quick of Dallas, denies all wrongdoing, and she maintains that the complaints are simply the grumblings of disenchanted ex-employees, encouraged by her ex-husband and former business associate.

However, Stark maintained: "I only have firsthand knowledge about what happened where I worked. But when you work in bingo as long as I did, you hear things. There's a real grapevine. And you realize the same

things are going on in a lot of places."

While large non-profit organizations such as Amvets or American Indian groups are legitimate charitable entities, the problem comes when bingo games are operated by commercial lessors for chapters or posts of the parent organization, the pair reported to investigators with the Texas Lottery Commission in July.

Slaten and Stark allege that some of these local chapters exist only on paper, that their membership rosters are fabricated, that the few members who do exist never meet, and that the profits -- many of which go unreported or under-reported to the Internal Revenue Service -- go to the commercial operators.

Theoretically, commercial lessors lease their buildings to charities who operate bingo games and the lessors keep their hands off the bingo operations. In practice, however, the involvement of the lessors is much more extensive, according to Stark and Slaten.

Lessors routinely are involved in all aspects of the bingo operations -- hiring and firing employees, writing checks, ordering supplies and maintaining inventory, the sisters have said.

"If there's an honest bingo hall in the state of Texas involving a commercial lessor, I don't know where it is," Slaten said.

In a September 1992 letter to the IRS, Slaten charged that Quick created four phony charitable organizations which grossed about \$2 million between 1988 and 1992.

Slaten said that she was ordered by her employer to create membership lists for two "charitable" organizations, Redman Mohawk Council No. 4 and Redman Tribe No. 22, using the names of employees and their families, the commercial lessor's family and the Dallas phone directory.

She also said that she fabricated minutes for meetings of another charity, Amvets Post 4, after being notified that the operation would be audited.

But Quick said, "It's a lie. It's all being brought on by my ex-husband." Charges against her had been investigated by Amvets, Redman and the Texas Lottery Commission, and she had been cleared by them all, she said.

The investigation is "not officially closed," according to Rusty Robbins, investigator with the northeast region of the Texas Lottery Commission, but it is "closing rapidly," he said on Dec. 13. The final report was to be completed within about a week.

Illegal activities at bingo halls are only part of what make them repulsive, according to Stark. The plight of problem gamblers and their families is heart-breaking, she said.

"One woman would leave her kids out in the station wagon on the parking lot in all kinds of weather," she said. "It was the job of the older kids to change the baby's diapers. And they were under strict orders not to disturb mother until after she was through playing bingo."

Some customers were all-day players who would move from one bingo hall to another from 10 a.m. to midnight.

Slaten said she realizes that her job as a dispatcher with the Dallas Police Department could be jeopardized by her coming forward with stories of illegality in her former workplace. "I have nothing to gain financially and a lot to lose. But I'd like to see every bingo hall in this state shut down. And I sure don't want to see casinos come into Texas," she said.

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