

Historical Commission, SBC
Nashville, Tennessee

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

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'Call to Renewal' coalition offers 'new vision' for religion, politics

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A new religious coalition hopes not only to counter the Christian Right but also to establish "a new vision" for politics, where faith unifies rather than divides the nation.

A diverse group of about 300 ministers and religious activists gathered Feb. 2-3 at a "Call to Renewal" conference in Washington to begin to flesh out what organizers hope will become an alternative voice in the 1996 elections for evangelicals who differ with both the Religious Right and the left.

"Let's call ourselves 'the other Christians in the land,'" said Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners Magazine and a spokesman for the Call to Renewal. "There are more and more other Christians in the land who don't believe the Religious Right is right about everything," Wallis said.

Speakers at the Call to Renewal's first national conference repeatedly criticized the Christian Coalition and kindred groups comprising the Religious Right for claiming to speak for all Christians while advocating a partisan Republican agenda that includes not only opposition to abortion and homosexual rights but also cutting back on social programs for the poor, tax cuts for the rich and relaxing laws that protect the environment.

"They are called the Religious Right but they don't talk much about Jesus at all or the Hebrew prophets or the kind of values that might bring us together," Wallis said. "Instead they tell us who we should be afraid of."

The Religious Right is correct, however, that many of America's problems have moral and spiritual roots, Wallis said. That fact, ignored by the left, accounts for much of the success of groups like the Christian Coalition, he added.

"One thing they are right about is there is a spiritual crisis in our land," Wallis said. However, he added, "the right and the Christian Coalition have made a fundamental mistake" by aligning too closely with a partisan political agenda.

"The answer to a spiritual crisis must be far more than simply electing as many right-wing Republicans to office as possible," Wallis said. "That is their agenda, and as far as I can see is their only agenda. It is an inadequate response to a spiritual crisis."

"We face a serious collapse in this culture of moral and spiritual values," Wallis said. "In all levels of this society we see a critical breakdown of family and community and of personal responsibility" coupled with "persistent and systemic evil in the structures of this land."

"Neither the right nor the left have effectively understood that," Wallis said. "We have a politically polarized debate that simply does not deal with the issues. The old options just do not work on the streets of our neighborhoods and our lives."

"We're offering more than an alternative to the Religious Right. We're talking about a new kind of politics," Wallis said.

Instead of dividing Americans, Wallis said, "biblical religion should be offered for the healing of the nation."

"We must be very careful not to simply not be the Religious Left in contrast to the Religious Right. We urgently for the sake of the nation need to transcend labels that are now dysfunctional," he said.

"The solution must go deeper than politics as usual," he added. "The question before us is indeed who speaks for God."

In a statement drafted during the two-day meeting, conference participants said the Bible demands that Christians be concerned about issues such as poverty, race and the environment.

There appeared to be less consensus, however, about abortion and homosexuality, which were mentioned by various speakers but not addressed in the statement.

Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action, issued a strong plea for including an anti-abortion plank in the group's political agenda.

"Progressive evangelicals should assert without equivocation that abortion on demand is a gross injustice, oppose all public funding of abortions and work for the legal protection of the unborn," Sider said.

While opposing discrimination against homosexuals, Sider said the group should reject parts of the gay-rights agenda such as support for same-sex marriages.

"Public policy must both defend the civil rights of all citizens, including gays and lesbians, while it clearly affirms heterosexuality as the societal norm," Sider said.

Eugene Rivers, head of the Ten-Point Coalition, a church-based inner city project in Boston, urged the group to "get real" on polarizing issues that nudge many voters toward the Religious Right.

"We need prophecy on the left," said Rivers, an African-American. "It's easy to talk about (Christian Coalition head) Ralph Reed, but it's hard to speak prophetically about the gay community. If you disagree with the gay community on sex, then you're homophobic."

"On the feminist issues, there is a whole set of dogma," he continued. "If you disagree, you're sexist."

The urge to be politically correct prevents liberals from negotiating on such issues, Rivers said.

"If we're really an alternative, it's going to be a debate. We're going to put it on the table. We're not going to dance around it," Rivers said.

Another conference organizer, however, urged against letting division over homosexuality and abortion derail the group's opposition to the Religious Right.

"I feel that we're trying to do too much in too-short a period of time," Baptist author and evangelist Tony Campolo said. "We want to come up with these comprehensive statements of what we're for."

"I am a sociologist by trade and I say movements are formed not by what people are for but what they are against," Campolo said.

Campolo said the Call to Renewal is opposed to the Republican Party's "Contract with America," which is backed by the Christian Coalition. The contract, Campolo said, seeks to reduce foreign aid, abolish Head Start,

eliminate the Department of Education, relax laws on gun control, relax environmental standards, dismantle health care for the poor, support capital punishment and abolish a welfare system "that needs to be fixed, not nixed."

"These are the things we are against," Campolo said. "I contend there is nothing wrong with organizing around what we are against."

"There's too much at stake to let the issues divide us," said Campolo, who teaches at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pa.

Wallis said the group will likely talk more about homosexuality, abortion and other issues in the future.

"We've tried to talk about putting together families of faith," he said. "To talk as families you've got to put some things on the table."

"Two things the Religious Right says consistently are the litmus test for political correctness are abortion and homosexuality. They have come up here today. That means we have to deal with these issues," he continued.

"I don't think we have gotten to where we need to be on those issues," Wallis said. "I think there is common ground to be found, but it must be built."

"I think there are some viable, common-ground positions on the abortion question that can bring together some of the legitimate concerns on both sides of that issue in this country," Wallis said.

And while the group wants to emphasize and strengthen traditional families, "I do not want to do what the Religious Right has done, which is scapegoat and punish gay people for the breakdown of the heterosexual family," Wallis said.

When the Call for Renewal was announced last year, it had two stated objectives, Wallis said. "One was to lift up an alternative to the Religious Right," he said. "That has already begun. We have already begun to succeed in doing that. More and more you are going to see an alternative voice being raised."

The second, he continued, was "to begin to envision a new kind of politics in this country and help the American people move beyond the polarization" between the right and left. "That is going to be much more challenging, much for difficult, more exciting and ultimately more important," Wallis said.

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'Call to Renewal' planners announce aims for 1996

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Planners hope a Feb. 2-3 meeting in Washington will spring into a new national movement for evangelicals who find fault with both the left and the right.

A diverse group of about 300 ministers and religious activists gathered for the "Call to Renewal" conference. Leaders outlined a series of plans to give the movement a voice in national, state and local elections in 1996.

"This meeting was targeted as a launching point for a grass-roots movement across the country. I think we are now ready to do that," said Jim Wallis editor of Sojourners Magazine and a spokesman for the group.

"In this election year, even though most of us work underground in our neighborhoods, ... we are going to become involved in political discussions this year," Wallis said. "We are not going to endorse candidates. We are not going to become a power bloc in one party, but we are committed to raising the level of political discourse in this election year."

During the two-day meeting, speakers criticized the Christian Coalition and other Religious Right groups for claiming to speak for evangelicals while opposing anti-poverty programs.

In a statement drafted during the two-day meeting, conference participants said the Bible demands that Christians be concerned about issues such as poverty, race and the environment.

The idea that evangelical Christians can be equated with right-wing politics "is the most serious misperception in American politics today," Wallis said.

Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the 2.5 million-member Reformed Church in America, estimated that about one-third of evangelicals accept views of the Religious Right, a third are "uncertain about how politics and faith connect" and a final third "are looking for another alternative" for political involvement.

Wallis offered a guideline for evaluating whether or not a position on a particular issue represents a "Christian" or "biblical" perspective.

"Is there for us a reliable guide to know when we are really hearing the voice of God or just self interest or even quite ungodly voices in the name of heavenly language?" Wallis asked. "I think there is."

"When the voice of God is involved on behalf of those who have no voice, it is time to listen. But when the name of God is used to benefit the interest of those who are speaking, it is time to be careful."

Wallis said next steps for the Call to Renewal include:

-- Networking, "to replicate the Call to Renewal in local, city and state coalitions."

-- Setting up regional conferences and town meetings across the country.

-- Sponsorship by local churches of candidate forums for national, state and local elections to "make sure there is a different kind of conversation about politics in this election year."

"We are calling for churches by the hundreds and perhaps the thousands to hold candidate forums," Wallis said.

-- Offering "biblical criteria" by which candidates for all public offices can be evaluated. Voter guides produced by the movement will not be "political litmus tests" like those produced by the Christian Coalition, Wallis said, but will identify "what are the issues that morally concerned Christians should be asking about."

"You cannot talk about the Bible and politics without talking about poor people or healing racial divisions or the environment or being consistently pro-life," Wallis said.

-- Holding think tanks to develop new policies.

Other possible projects still in the works, Wallis said, include:

-- Sponsoring a national candidate forum in the fall, in order to pose "tough questions for Mr. Clinton and whoever runs against him."

The event could supplement or eventually replace the Religious Right's own "national affairs briefing," which has emerged as a popular platform for Republican presidential candidates, Wallis noted. "We would love to sit down with Ralph Reed and some others and ask tough questions of the candidates," Wallis said.

-- A "Faith and Politics Sunday," scheduled in the fall, on which churches would be encouraged to focus sermons on religion in public life.

-- A new Christian youth network in America.

A "coordinating committee" of about 25 members is being gathered to guide the movement, Wallis said.

In contrast to recent presidencies, mainline Protestants represented by the National Council of Churches "have gotten a warm and receptive hearing" from President Clinton, noted Granberg-Michaelson,

"The president, who is a Bible-believing Baptist, has been vilified by fellow Christians," he said. "It is important that Christians come alongside him."

However, he added, "I think the Call to Renewal has been very wise to say we don't want to get co-opted either into the agenda of the right or the Democratic left."

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Clinton calls for humility, charity at prayer breakfast

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The hardball world of politics needs a good dose of humility and charity, President Clinton said at the 43rd annual National Prayer Breakfast.

"Every one of us is subject to error in judgment as part of the human condition. ... We need a charitable outlook in our feelings and our dealings toward those with whom we disagree, because we do not know as we are

known by God," Clinton said.

The president acknowledged "very important" public-policy disagreements between Democrats and Republicans. Those disagreements, he said, are not just partisan or political, but part of the debate America must have as it moves into a new era.

But those debates should be conducted "with a great sense of humility," he added.

Clinton urged the 3,000 attendees to pray for the nation's families and to "pray for us here in Washington to make the right decisions about how we should enlarge and strengthen the family of our communities, our nations and our ties to the world."

Clinton said it is "rewarding to see the divorce rate leveling off and the teen-pregnancy rate going down and the first indications that America may be coming back together around the values that made this a great nation." He said those efforts need to be supported.

Delivering the principal address at the gathering, Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., lamented the stress on today's American families.

"We are reaping our harvest of parental neglect, divorce, child abuse, teen pregnancy, school dropouts, illegal drugs and streets full of violence," Nunn said. "It's as if our house, having survived the earthquake we called the Cold War, is now being eaten away by termites."

Nunn said the federal government should balance its budget and do other things, "but unless we change our hearts we will still have a deficit of the soul."

Earlier, Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., also suggested there is room for more humility on the part of Washington officials.

"I've often said that those who travel the high road of humility in Washington, D.C., are not troubled by heavy traffic," he said.

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-- By Larry Chesser

House approves vouchers in D.C. budget measure

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Taxpayers could foot the bill for scholarships to private and parochial schools in the District of Columbia under a funding measure approved by the U.S. House of Representatives Jan. 31.

On a 211-201 vote, lawmakers approved a House-Senate conference report that provides \$4.99 billion in D.C. funding for fiscal 1996. It also contains a compromise on a controversial voucher proposal pushed by Sen. James Jeffords, R-Vt. The Senate has yet to act on the conference report.

Under the plan, up to \$5 million could be used for two types of scholarships to help poor students pay for tuition in private schools.

One type would pay for the tuition, transportation and mandatory fees to attend an "eligible" institution, including private and parochial schools.

A second "enhanced achievement" scholarship would be used for non-sectarian programs that operate outside of regular school hours to help students who are having trouble academically.

Opponents of the bill's private and parochial school provisions complained that House and Senate conferees were not given time to weigh the proposal before being forced to vote on it.

On the floor, opponents said the bill would be used as a national precedent for private school funding. "We are then going to see organizations with an ideological agenda who will begin to pressure each and every school

district in the country to follow the same model," said Rep. David Obey, D.-Wis.

Opponents also argued the vouchers would help only a limited number of students and those primarily at religious schools.

Rep. Julian C. Dixon, D-Calif., said only 1,500 to 2,000 of the Washington-school district's 80,000 students would be helped. The maximum amount a student could receive under the bill is \$3,000, "unless they have supplemental help and I don't know where that would come from," Dixon said. He noted that only seven schools in D.C. have tuition of \$3,000 or less and six of these are religious schools.

Supporters said the vouchers were needed to give parents some options. "This is about providing kids a hand up and a handout and an opportunity to become leaders in the community," said Rep. James Walsh, R-N.Y.

Supporters also argued that those below the poverty line should have the same educational opportunities as students from higher-income families.

To get the \$5 million, the D.C. Council must accept the program and then could decide how the money would be allocated between the two types of scholarships.

Participating schools would have to make assurances that a scholarship student would not be required to attend or participate in a religious class or ceremony without the written consent of a parent. Schools would also have to show that funds received from the program are not used to pay costs related to a religious class or ceremony.

The appropriations bill allocates \$15 million for education. It also would allow schools to apply to become public charter schools. However, the charter schools must be non-sectarian.

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Wake Forest to launch divinity school by 2000

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Wake Forest University will open its planned divinity school within four years, officials announced Feb. 2.

Trustees of the Baptist school in Winston-Salem, N.C., have authorized university President Thomas Hearn to begin to search for a dean for the divinity school. Hearn named Provost David Brown chair of a committee that will conduct the search.

The divinity school will open no later than the fall of 2000, Hearn said. The school is expected to open with about 45 students working toward the three-year master of divinity degree. Eventually, the school expects a core faculty of six-to-eight members and enrollment of about 135 students.

Wake Forest trustees approved the concept of a divinity school, contingent on sufficient funding, in 1989. So far, more than \$10 million has been raised or promised, according to school officials.

That total included a recent \$1 million "challenge gift" given by a prominent family in Winston-Salem. Two brothers, Thomas and Egbert Davis, and a sister, Pauline Davis Perry, have pledged to give \$1 for every \$2 raised toward construction of a new divinity school building, up to \$1 million. The building would be named for their mother, Annie Pearl Shore Davis.

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-- By ABP staff

Florida paper board affirms editor, but questions advertising policy

By Barbara Denman and Bob Allen

NEW SMYRNA BEACH, Fla. (ABP) -- Commissioners of the Florida Baptist Witness affirmed the leadership of new editor Michael Chute but later questioned his decision to accept an advertisement for a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship meeting.

Meeting Feb. 2 in New Smyrna Beach, Fla., the governing board of the Florida Baptist Convention newspaper also elected Keith Hinson of Montevallo, Ala., as the paper's associate editor. He will succeed assistant editor Lindsay Bergstrom, who resigns March 1 after nearly 11 years on the paper's staff.

Chute, a former missionary, was elected editor last March with a promise to "move beyond" the controversy that divided the newspaper's governing board and prompted the resignation of the last editor.

In the latest meeting of the Witness Commission, Chute reported he had traveled more than 20,000 miles in eight months to promote the Witness. He also highlighted changes in the paper's content and format, including the switch from a magazine size to an 11-by-17-inch tabloid.

Chute said the changes have been well received and that he expects circulation for the Witness, which has declined steadily since 1987, to begin to turn around soon.

When the previous editor, Jack Brymer, resigned in August 1994 charging "harassment" by board members for his editorial views, circulation was 51,097. In 1986, Brymer's third year as editor, circulation peaked at 96,000.

Chute told commissioners current circulation is 40,043. That number is down 1,625 from a figure reported in the paper in mid-December. But Chute noted the recent addition of 850 subscriptions from a single church and reported that another church with 2,000 families is considering subscribing. "I really think in the next two months we're going to see a dramatic increase," he said.

Chute said he has "concentrated my efforts along a three-prong strategy: developing and enhancing the content of the Witness; developing relationships with pastors, and marketing the publication."

When dealing with content, Chute said he focused decision making around three themes. "The Witness should present news Florida Baptists can use," he said. "We report the news, we don't make the news. To be fair to all Florida Baptists we must be fair to every Florida Baptist."

Commissioners affirmed Chute's report. "I don't know how you and your staff have accomplished all you have. I am amazed," said Joe Boatwright of Winter Park.

Arthur Lawrence of Tallahassee said he felt an "optimism I have not had since I've been on this commission. Indicators say we're on the up. For the first time we have reason to believe the circulation is going to increase."

As the commissioners neared the end of their meeting, however, Steve Henderson of Lakeland questioned the acceptance of an advertisement in the Jan. 25 issue that promoted the winter meeting of the Florida Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The Florida Fellowship is a state affiliate of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate organization that many conservatives view as undermining or competing with missions efforts of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Chute replied that the ad had been purchased by a Florida Baptist church. "It puts me in a difficult situation to tell a Florida Baptist church they cannot place an ad. I'm an editor, not a censor," he said.

Waylon Moore of Tampa replied that there was "nothing immoral, nothing compromising" about the ad.

"We're just taking a step backward in the progress we're making," said Boatwright, calling the ad "volatile, very controversial."

Michael Mott of St. Augustine replied that one reason the ad was accepted was that it provided \$1,250 in revenue.

"But we may have missed a 2,000-member church," Henderson replied. "We're going to cut off a group of people we are trying to reach. You are going to have to mend fences. Even though its just an ad, it gives the message

it's not really a new day. It's just the same old Witness with a different wrapper."

Lawrence defended Chute, complaining that fellow commissioners were taking "potshots" at the editor. He reminded the commission that last year Chute met with conservative pastors who made commitments to provide 7,500 subscriptions to the Witness.

"There were 7,500 pledges we ought to have," Lawrence said. "They ought to come on through." In light of those commitments, Lawrence said he finds it hard to understand why "we haven't seen but one church come on board."

Mott noted that the ad "helped my church see why I'm not involved in the CBF."

The commissioners stopped short of telling Chute that he could not carry CBF material. At the conclusion of the discussion, Boatwright noted that Chute was "in the infant stage" of his tenure. "I'm confident the discussion here will help you. I'm excited about the direction of the Witness."

Commissioners were also informed of Bergstrom's resignation. She has worked at the paper since May 1985.

They approved job descriptions for associate editor, editorial assistant and news writer positions in a new configuration of the editorial staff.

The paper has been without an associate editor since 1991, when Greg Warner resigned to become executive editor of Associated Baptist Press. In 1993, Bergstrom was promoted from editorial assistant to assistant editor and served as interim editor after Brymer's resignation.

Chute told commissioners the paper now needs an associate editor with strong writing and editing skills.

They approved Chute's recommendation of Keith Hinson for the post. Hinson, 37, is a free-lance writer and bivocational pastor of Dogwood Grove Baptist Church in Montevallo, Ala.

Until recently Hinson worked part time on the staff of the Alabama Baptist newspaper in Birmingham, where he had responsibilities in writing, editing, production and graphics.

He is a mass-communications graduate of University of Alabama at Birmingham and a 1988 graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

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Evangelical leaders announce plans to raise social issues in elections

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A group of centrist evangelicals will produce voter guides for the 1996 elections to contrast with views of the Religious Right.

Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners Magazine and a spokesman for the group Call to Renewal, announced the voter guides at a Feb. 1 news conference in Washington.

More than 200 theologians, pastors, ministers and church-based community organizers were expected to attend a Call to Renewal conference Feb. 2-3. The group claims to represent tens of thousands of Christians.

Wallis said the group is an alternative voice to the Christian Coalition, but urged people not to represent it as a Christian left group. He said neither the left nor the right has all the answers.

"We are going to find common ground by moving to higher ground," Wallis said. "The old categories and polarities have failed us," he added.

Wallis noted that the Christian Coalition's litmus tests for evaluating political candidates are too narrow and ideological.

When discussing the Bible and politics, concern for the poor must not be ignored, the evangelical leaders said.

Wallis said the group would not defend big government as the answer to problems, but that "slashing and burning those programs with nothing in place at the local level" is wrong.

The leaders said that non-profit groups, religious and non-religious, are doing the best work for the poor. "Public policy must empower and fund those approaches," Wallis said.

The leaders want to look for new solutions to old problems.

Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action, said he would like to see a voucher system attempted for welfare programs in which the poor could choose a public welfare system or a religious group's system. He acknowledged church-state dangers with the proposal but insisted "the advantages outweigh the dangers."

American Baptist sociologist Tony Campolo, who will head a youth movement of Call to Renewal, said America is ripe for a new student movement. Unlike youth in the 1960s, he pointed out, the students want change not from the top down but from the bottom up.

"If we lose this generation, it will be because we demanded too little of them," Campolo said. The student movement hopes to enlist summer volunteers. Campolo said students would be asked to take a year off from school to help tutor inner-city children and get into the communities.

The group also wants to help define important Christian issues in the public arena.

Wallis said racial justice, saving the environment and helping the poor are not on the agenda of the Christian Coalition, but must be included in policy discussions from a religious perspective.

"We want to move beyond the old pro-life, pro-choice bitter battles and talk about what it means to change the dramatic incidence of teenage pregnancy," Wallis said. The group said changes in the adoption system could help lower the number of abortions.

The voters' guides will not endorse candidates, the leaders said, but will attempt to define criteria that religious citizens should ask of their candidates.

A press statement from the group said, "We refuse the false choices urged on us between personal responsibility or social justice, between good values or good jobs, between strong families or strong neighborhoods, between sexual morality or civil rights for homosexuals, between the sacredness of life or the rights of women, between fighting cultural corrosion or battling racism. We seek the biblical virtues of justice and righteousness."

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'Souper Bowl' Sunday raises \$1 million for poor

COLUMBIA, S.C. (ABP) -- Churchgoers across the nation gave more than \$1 million to feed the poor and hungry as they left worship services on Jan. 28.

Brad Smith, a Presbyterian minister in Columbia, S.C., is credited with founding the "Souper Bowl" in 1988, when he prayed on Super Bowl Sunday, "As we go home to enjoy the Super Bowl, let us remember those who are without even a bowl of soup."

Worshippers at participating churches were asked to give \$1 dollar as they left worship services Jan. 28, the day of the National Football League championship game between the Dallas Cowboys and Pittsburgh Steelers.

The youth group at Spring Hill Presbyterian Church in Columbia, S.C., collected funds for the project, which raised \$5,700 in 1990. By 1995, it had grown into a national effort, raising \$450,000. This year the Souper Bowl collections passed the \$1 million mark, with more than 3,500 groups participating, according to Presbyterian News Service.

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-- By ABP staff

Episcopal diocese says suicide sometimes moral

NEWARK, N.J. (ABP) -- An Episcopal diocese in Newark, N.J., has ruled that suicide may be morally acceptable in some circumstances.

According to Episcopal News Service, a resolution approved Jan. 27 after a year-long study states that suicide by a terminally ill patient is acceptable when "pain is persistent and/or progressive; when all other reasonable means of amelioration of pain and suffering have been exhausted; and when the decision to hasten death is a truly informed and voluntary choice free from external coercion."

The resolution puts the diocese at odds with the position held by the national Episcopal Church. A resolution approved by the national General Convention in 1991 states: "It is morally wrong and unacceptable to take a human life in order to relieve the suffering caused by incurable illness."

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-- By ABP staff

EDITORS NOTE: The following updates and replaces a Jan. 31 ABP story with the same headline. It includes new information in paragraphs 11-13.

Coppenger's talk of 'prairie fire' leaves Virginia alumni cold (revised)

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- President Mark Coppenger's use of "prairie fire" imagery to tout his new administration at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary is leaving some alumni cold.

Virginia alumni of the Kansas City, Mo., seminary, wrote an open letter to Coppenger, published in the Jan. 18 issue of Religious Herald, stating "concerns" about statements attributed to the president in news reports.

"As alumni of an institution we care about deeply, it is our desire to support Midwestern," said the letter from the Virginia chapter of Midwestern's alumni association. "As much as we want to be able to be supportive, many of us are having increasing difficulty in doing so because of some of your public statements," it added.

Coppenger, a conservative leader in the Southern Baptist Convention, assumed Midwestern's presidency last fall. He replaced long-time president Milton Ferguson, a moderate, who retired.

Upon his election as president, Coppenger described Midwestern as "a seminary waiting to happen." In an issue of the seminary's alumni journal, Coppenger linked alumni support with "spiritual decline" at the school and observed that "prairie fire," the revivalistic slogan adopted by his administration, "burns off its clutter."

The Virginia alumni took offense at those references.

"As products of the efforts of dedicated staff and faculty, we firmly believe that Midwestern has been a seminary 'happening' in a very positive way for decades," the alumni wrote. "What, or who, is the 'clutter' to which you refer?" they continued. "You seem to be ... referring to alumni like us, but not only us."

"If we are the 'clutter,' then so are the thousands of churches that have called and benefitted from the ministries of Midwestern alumni as well as seminary faculty and staff. Would you also include among the 'clutter' the hundreds of alumni who have invested their lives and ministries in answering God's call to missions all over the globe? Are you going to rejoice at the burning off of such 'clutter' as these?"

While acknowledging that Coppenger and the board of trustees have a right to steer the school in a conservative direction, the alumni complained that the statements attributed to Coppenger are "demeaning, unnecessary and -- we believe -- un-Christlike."

"We suggest that both the cause of Christ and of Midwestern Seminary would benefit if you would refrain from the use of such inflammatory language directed at people who want to be your supporters and supporters of Midwestern Seminary and who have been and continue to be ministering in the kingdom of God all around the world," the letter concluded.

Coppenger responded in a letter to the Religious Herald editor that his comments were "misunderstood" and "misapplied" in the letter from alumni. He said the letter "makes the most negative assumptions imaginable regarding my statements" and then draws "the most negative conclusions based on those assumptions."

Coppenger said as the smallest SBC seminary, Midwestern has "untapped potential" to grow and that phrase about burning off clutter refers to "the sin in our lives."

"I certainly did not apply that to our alumni nor Southern Baptist churches," Coppenger wrote.

In northwest Arkansas, meanwhile, Coppenger's vision for Midwestern Seminary drew rave reviews from an associational pastors' conference that reviewed a questionnaire being used to ensure that prospective faculty members affirm conservative views on a variety of theological and social issues.

"We are very excited about his (Coppenger's) vision for Midwestern Seminary," Jim Richards, director of missions for Northwest Baptist Association in Bentonville, Ark., told Baptist Press. Richards said he and other ministers in the region look forward to the seminary "bringing revival fire across this region of the country by putting fire in the hearts of the pastors and other ministers who go there to be trained."

Benny Thompson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Garfield, Ark., said Coppenger's election at Midwestern was an answer to prayer. "Who'd have ever thought I would see the day when our seminaries would take a stand such as this?" he said.

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END