

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Bill would clarify lobbying by churches, allow campaigning**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bill proposed in Congress would give churches and other religious groups a "bright-line test" for how involved they can become in political activity without jeopardizing their tax-exempt status.

Churches and certain other religious groups could spend up to 20 percent of their total annual income on lobbying, including as much as 5 percent on political campaigns, under the bill introduced Jan. 31 in the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill would not apply to secular non-profit groups.

"In an effort to give churches a better idea of just exactly how much in the way of resources they can devote to grass roots lobbying, we have drafted a proposal which would give churches and the IRS a bright line test," said Rep. Philip Crane, R-Ill., sponsor of the bill.

Current tax law bars charities, including churches and most religious organizations, from spending more than a "substantial part" of their revenue for lobbying. It also prohibits those organizations from supporting or opposing political candidates.

Crane said churches have been "shy" about engaging in lobbying for fear of losing tax-exempt status.

The proposal is drawing mixed initial reviews from religious groups.

"We would have reservations about the seeming invitation for churches to get involved in politics on a partisan basis," said Forest Montgomery, counsel for the National Association of Evangelicals.

Montgomery said NAE is looking at the legislation with "cautious reflection."

Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said he was "attracted" to the bright line on lobbying activity, but is "dubious about the 5 percent electioneering part."

Will Dodson, director of government relations for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said his agency has not yet taken a position on the bill.

Crane said he does not think the nation's founders would have frowned on church involvement in the political process.

"There is no question in my mind that the so-called wall erected to separate church and state was erected to prevent the state from interfering with the activities of the church -- not to prevent the church from being involved

in the activities of the state," he said.

Speaking of the current system, Crane said, "Is allowing a candidate to come into a church to speak from the pulpit or allowing a meeting of a candidate's volunteers in the church basement really something we want to prohibit?"

A "bright line test" would allow for "limited and modest activities," Crane said.

A spokesman for Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., a co-sponsor of the bill, said he is concerned by the prospect of allowing political candidates to speak from the pulpit during worship but added, "I think what we don't want to do is stifle speech by anyone."

The Rangel aide said the measure already has bipartisan support and may be attached to tax measures that must be extended soon. At a time when cuts are being made, religious organizations need to have the means to have their voice heard, the aide said.

Church groups have been punished in the past for campaigning for political candidates.

In 1992, the Internal Revenue Service issued a warning that Jimmy Swaggart's endorsement of Pat Robertson's 1988 presidential bid violated the prohibition against campaigning for or against political candidates. To keep its tax-exempt status, the Swaggart organization agreed to refrain from similar activities in the future and made structural changes.

In another case, the IRS stripped a New York church of its tax-exempt status after the church placed newspaper advertisements urging Christians to vote against then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton.

The advertisement, published four days before the 1992 election, said, "Bill Clinton is promoting policies that are in rebellion to God's Laws. ... How then can we vote for Bill Clinton?"

An aide to Crane said the bill would allow churches to place such campaign advertisements as long as they spend less than 5 percent of their revenue on electioneering.

Montgomery also said the 1992 advertisement would be legal under the Crane-Rangel bill but would "not be in good taste."

"As an evangelical, I think the church's function is to preach the word," Montgomery said. He added that partisan activity can be divisive in a church.

Walker said, "It's dumb for churches to get involved in political campaigns. Nothing I know of will split a church faster. Plus it's unfair to the extent it allows religious groups to become involved, but continues to bar secular non-profits.

"Why should Jimmy Swaggart be able to endorse Pat Robertson but the Red Cross not be allowed to back Bob Dole?" he added.

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story.

## **Supreme Court rejects challenge to Ten Commandments display**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has refused to hear a challenge to a Ten Commandments display on the Colorado Capitol grounds in Denver.

The Feb. 20 refusal left standing a Colorado Supreme Court ruling that the engraved monument in a park near the capitol did not violate either the federal or state constitutions.

The Freedom from Religion Foundation had argued that the monument's religious message violated the U.S. Constitution's requirement of church-state separation, as well as the Colorado Constitution's ban against preferential treatment of religion.

The 3-by-4-foot monument was donated by the Fraternal Order of Eagles of Colorado as part of a nationwide program to expose young people to historic codes of conduct. Placed in the park in the mid-1950s, the monument is engraved with a hybrid version of the Ten Commandments developed by Jewish, Protestant and Catholic representatives.

In addition to the Ten Commandments, the monument depicts an American flag, the America eagle and Jewish and Christian symbols.

The Colorado Supreme Court said the monument was not erected to endorse religion, but rather to serve the secular purpose of recognizing a "historical, jurisprudential cornerstone of American legal significance."

In addition to its secular purpose, the top Colorado court noted the monument was surrounded by secular structures, including a drinking fountain and military memorials.

The monument's content and its surroundings negate any suggestion of government-endorsement of religion, the court said.

In asking the nation's high court to reverse that decision, the Freedom from Religion Foundation and some Colorado citizens argued that the Ten Commandments are not part of American or Colorado history, but part of religious history.

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-- By Larry Chesser

### **Richmond Seminary to begin offering doctor of ministry**

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond will launch a doctor of ministry degree program this summer, officials at the Virginia school announced Feb. 19.

The three-year program will offer advanced study in the practice of ministry. On-campus work will be done during three weeks in the summer and January. The first seminar is scheduled July 15-Aug. 2.

Participants in the program may choose concentrations in Christian education, missions, pastoral care, counseling, preaching, spirituality or worship, the seminary said. To qualify for the program, ministers must hold a master of divinity degree or equivalent and have at least three years of full-time ministerial experience since seminary.

The five-year-old Richmond seminary is one of several schools now offering alternative theological education for moderate Southern Baptists since conservatives gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and turned denominational schools sharply to the right.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Fellowship to offer churches a look at new seminary grads**

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is offering churches looking for ministers a chance to look at the crop of new graduates of seminaries and theological schools the moderate

organization helps support.

A breakout session at the Fellowship's June 27-29 general assembly in Richmond, Va., will provide "a meeting ground" for students and churches, said Carolyn Hale of Georgetown, Ky., who chairs the Fellowship's theological students team.

Students must submit a resume in advance to participate, Hale said. Representatives of churches will be encouraged to bring copies of job descriptions to share with prospective ministers, she added.

More information is available from Hale at (502) 863-2329.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Fire destroys historic church in Oklahoma City**

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- Fire destroyed a 57-year-old church building in Oklahoma City Feb. 16.

The afternoon fire at the historic Exchange Avenue Baptist Church reportedly started in a basement heating unit. Firefighters made an earlier call when workers at the church smelled smoke, but did not locate a fire. Later, a repairman opened the door to the heating unit to find it engulfed in flames. Fire spread quickly through the building, which was a total loss.

The church, started as a mission in 1918, is noted for its urban ministries, including outreach across racial and language lines.

Two firefighters were treated and released for minor injuries received while battling the blaze.

The church plans to rebuild, according to a staff member.

Longtime church member Paul Heath worked in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, which was bombed April 19, 1995, and is president of the Murrah Building Survivors Fellowship.

"First my building, now my church," Heath said, shaking his head. "But these are only buildings and buildings can be replaced. You can't break our spirit."

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-- By ABP staff

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