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Voucher opponents defeat procedure to end debate

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A vote on a District of Columbia appropriations bill is being held up in the U.S. Senate as partisans debate a controversial provision offering publicly funded vouchers for students at private and parochial schools.

Senators opposed to tuition vouchers won two votes in three days. Supporters of the D.C. spending measure fell six votes shy of the 60 votes needed to cut off debate on a \$5 billion D.C. funding bill Feb. 27. A second motion to cut off debate Feb. 29 was defeated 52-42.

The bill contains what opponents say would be the first federally funded private-school-voucher program in the nation's history.

The D.C.'s chief financial officer has said the district government is on the verge of running out of money and must get an appropriations bill passed immediately.

Another vote to end debate was scheduled for March 5. A Senate spokesman said supporters hope the mounting pressure to approve funding for D.C. can secure the additional votes but admitted it would be an "uphill battle."

He said the House of Representatives, which approved the spending measure Jan. 31, does not want to discuss a measure that strips the voucher provision.

Supporters of the voucher provision said public schools are failing to educate students and that the proposal would give children from low-income families the same educational opportunities afforded to children from higher-income families.

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., said the district's public schools "are not performing their basic mission of educating our children. And so we have to give some of the kids an opportunity to seek a better way."

Sen. Daniel Coats, R-Ind., said public, Catholic and Lutheran school systems in Fort Wayne, Ind., are "vibrant" and "successful" because competition has caused them to do a better job.

A voucher opponent, however, said the reason the private schools in Indiana are prospering is that the government is leaving them alone. "The duty of the government toward public education is to support and finance

it," said Sen. Ernest Hollings, D-S.C. "The duty with respect to the government with private education is to leave it alone," he added.

"I don't want federal strings attached to private and religious schools. We've got to preserve the freedom and independence of these schools," Hollings said. "What nettles this particular senator is why in the Lord's world we are not financing public education."

Senate opponents said vouchers would hurt public schools, which cannot turn students away, by allowing private schools to take the best students from the public schools.

"This voucher proposal will fund the few at the expense of the many. It gives scarce federal dollars to the schools that can exclude children," said Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass.

Groups that monitor church-state matters have been watching the voucher proposals closely. Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said tax dollars "should not be used to finance the teaching of religion."

"With public money comes invasive governmental regulation," Walker said. "I don't understand why those who complain the most about the burdensome public education bureaucracy want to subject parochial schools to that same fate."

On the Senate floor, Lieberman argued that "giving a poor child a scholarship to go to a religious school" would not be an unconstitutional establishment of religion by the government.

Under the proposal, up to \$5 million could be used for two types of aid and the D.C. Council could decide how to allocate the money between the two.

One scholarship would be used to pay the tuition at "eligible" institutions including private and parochial schools. A second "enhanced achievement" scholarship would be used for non-sectarian programs that help students who have trouble academically.

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Community, compassion, civility are answers to violence, speakers say

By Ken Camp

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- Christians must respond to violence by rebuilding community, resurrecting compassion and restoring civility, speakers said at Feb. 26-27 meeting in San Antonio sponsored by Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

"I do not believe violence is the problem. Violence is the consequence of some deeper problems," said Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners evangelical community in inner-city Washington, D.C.

Root causes of violence such as racism, materialism and hopelessness are fundamentally spiritual, and they demand a spiritual solution, he said.

"The Religious Right is right in saying that we are in the middle of a spiritual crisis. It will require what the Scriptures call 'the healing of the nation,'" Wallis said.

"But the Religious Right is wrong in saying that the answer to a spiritual problem is electing as many right-wing Republicans as possible and becoming a political voting bloc."

Christians should provide a voice in the public square that is prophetic, not partisan, he said. Wallis and a number of other progressive evangelicals recently launched a "Call to Renewal" movement as an alternative to what they considered the divisive agenda of the Religious Right. Their goal, he said, is to move beyond labels of "left" and "right," providing a faith-based unifying vision.

"Politics worthy of the name 'Christian' will be a politics of compassion, a politics of community, and a politics of civility," Wallis said, pointing to a link between violent political rhetoric and street violence.

Churches cannot hope to stem the tide of urban violence unless they are willing to invest themselves in those communities, said author Tony Campolo, another Call to Renewal leader.

"We cannot attack the problem from the outside. We must be part of the community," said Campolo, director of the urban studies program at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pa.

Instead of singing "Just As I Am" and allowing converts to leave "just as they" were," he said, churches should issue real invitations to take seriously Jesus' call to discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount.

"The problem with you Southern Baptists is that you have a big fight over inerrancy. Then after you've proven that it's inerrant, you don't do what it says anyway," said Campolo, an American Baptist minister.

Churches should commission young couples as missionaries to live in the inner-city, challenge young people to become public school teachers, start alternative schools for at-risk children, and commit congregational resources to creating jobs for unemployed workers, he said.

Churches also need to offer a prophetic word on issues such as gun control, government-sanctioned use of violence, consumerism and racism, he added.

Racism fuels both overt and subtle forms of violence, said Michael Bell, pastor of Greater St. Stephen First Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, and chairman of the Tarrant Clergy for Inter-ethnic Peace and Justice.

The chasm between races in the United States is widened by "white denial of responsibility and black dualism," Bell said.

Too many whites refuse to admit that racism exists, he said. And too many blacks practice dualism -- talking honestly around other African-Americans but telling whites only what they want to hear.

The way to overcome racism is through relationships built on time, trust and talk that goes beyond polite and superficial "hello language," Bell said.

Lack of mutual respect and the inability to resolve conflicts peacefully are at the heart of family violence, according to Lane Powell, associate professor of human development and family studies at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

"We must let them know that violence is not a normal or acceptable state for families. There are better ways to handle interpersonal conflict," Powell said.

Each year, more than 6 million children are abused and at least 3 million spouses are assaulted, she said.

"Home is where the first birth occurred, and the first murder," said Allen Walworth, pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, who presented theme interpretations throughout the conference. "If there is any place where we need grace, it's at home."

Human touch carries the power to bless or curse, Walworth said. Those who are "touched wrongly" in violent or sexually abusive ways can carry painful scars for life. But those who never know a gentle touch and loving hug may also be scarred, he said.

"We can be too careful," he said, "so careful that we don't touch anymore."

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NAACP swears in former congressman as president

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The new president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People called for a "reunited and reinvigorated" NAACP as he was sworn into office Feb. 21.

Kweisi Mfume, a Baptist, until recently was a Democrat Congressman representing Maryland's 7th Congressional District and chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus. At 47, he was in his fifth term in the House of Representatives when he resigned to accept the post at the nation's oldest-and-largest civil-rights organization. The organization claims half a million members.

Mfume said the NAACP is at a crucial point in its history.

"Extreme ultra-conservative policies of the far right wing in our nation are draconian. They are punitive and they are backward," he said.

"Similarly, policies born out of the guilt or the misdirected compassion of the ultra-left that speak as their sole objective the maintenance of the poor are equally punitive and just as backward," he added.

"The poor must not be maintained, they must be transformed," he said.

President Clinton, Attorney General Janet Reno and a number of civil-rights advocates were among those who attended the ceremony in the Justice Department's Great Hall.

Clinton called Mfume "a uniquely gifted man with a personal history that shimmers with the promise of America and the possibility of personal renewal and the virtue of never giving up on yourself."

Mfume's life story is one of hardship and change. He was a high school dropout and fathered five sons out of wedlock before returning to school and eventually earning a master's degree. Mfume called his children the "love" of his life. All of his children were present at the ceremony except one who was in school.

Mfume said the NAACP would "reclaim" its voice for people who believe in the "power and premise that all people are, in fact, created equal."

"I commit to you that racism and sexism and anti-Semitism will not be allowed to enjoy a comfortable and quiet acceptance," he said.

Mfume said the NAACP must focus on voter registration, voter education and voter participation. He added that it must also focus on "educational excellence and individual responsibility, and it must create an infrastructure for economic and social caring for all of Americans."

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Grahams will receive medal at joint session of Congress

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Evangelist Billy Graham and his wife, Ruth, will receive the congressional medal of honor in a joint session of Congress May 2.

President Clinton signed a bill authorizing the award Feb. 13.

The U.S. House of Representatives approved the measure Jan. 23 followed by Senate approval Feb. 1.

Members of Congress noted that Graham's messages have been heard by more than 100 million people in person and 2 billion people on television.

Ruth and Billy Graham stand as shining examples of faith, family, morality and charity," said Sen. Lauch Faircloth, R-N.C.

The text of the measure states, "Billy Graham, throughout his 76 years of life and his 52-year marriage to Ruth Graham, has exemplified the highest ideals of teaching, counseling, ethics, charity, faith and family."

Graham's daily newspaper column and 14 books provide "spiritual counseling and personal enrichment to millions of people," the measure notes. It also praises the Grahams' creation of a children's health center at Memorial Mission Hospital in Asheville, N.C.

The cost of creating the medal will be paid with private contributions. Memorial Mission Hospital has already stated its intention to cover the cost.

A congressional spokesman said in January that fewer than 100 such awards have been given. Among recipients were George Washington, Thomas Edison, the Wright brothers and Winston Churchill.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Episcopalian bishop facing heresy charges

WILMINGTON, Del. (ABP) -- The American Episcopal Church began heresy hearings Feb. 27 against a retired bishop who knowingly ordained a homosexual deacon five years ago.

Bishop Walter Righter, 72, is charged with breaking his ordination vows and with false teaching. If convicted, Righter could be stripped of his priesthood, but would not lose his pension, according to Ecumenical News International.

Five years ago, as assistant bishop of Newark, N.J., Righter ordained Barry Stopfel a deacon, even though he knew Stopfel to be a non-celibate homosexual.

Representing Righter at a Feb. 27 church hearing in Wilmington, Del., attorney Michael Rehill said there is no church doctrine specifying qualifications for deacons.

"It is not contrary to the doctrine of this church to ordain to the diaconate a non-celibate homosexual man or woman," Rehill said.

Arguing against Righter, meanwhile, Hugo Blankingship of Fairfax, Va., cited a 1979 resolution which stated that it was inappropriate to ordain openly gay candidates and a 1990 statement distancing bishops from controversial Bishop John Spong of Newark, who ordained a gay man to the priesthood.

"The church is right to reserve its blessing only for heterosexual marriages," Blankingship said, noting that the teachings of Scripture "are unanimous on this and on the virtue in celibate life."

Forty reporters attended the celebrated heresy hearing, only the fourth in the American Episcopal Church's 207-year history and the first in 75 years.

The heresy council will decide whether to dismiss charges against Righter or to force him to go to a full trial May 26. A decision is not expected for several weeks.

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