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In this issue:

- Pastor offers 'Ten Commandments' to guide political involvement
- Black suburban church 'new phenomenon,' speaker says
- Editor's note
- BJC panel reaffirms statement on use of clergy as informants
- Baptist tradition offers much in postmodern world, Ammerman says
- Christianity's impact on society perceived positive, poll says

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Pastor offers 'Ten Commandments' to guide political involvement

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Virginia Baptist pastor Charles Fuller offered "Ten Commandments for Christian Citizens" at a national seminar on faith in public life March 4.

By its nature, the gospel message "is on a collision course with sin and evil," whether in the church or the public world, Fuller, pastor of First Baptist Church in Roanoke, Va., said in the opening session of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's 29th annual national seminar.

Fuller said he is "baffled" by Christians who preach a gospel emphasizing personal conversion and selected social issues, while avoiding more volatile and controversial issues. "It is neither wise nor necessary to die on every hill of every pet peeve our fellow Christians may have, but if it is a subject of biblical morality and justice, how dare we muzzle God's voice on the issue," he asked.

Baptists historically have rightly advocated the separation of church and state, Fuller said, noting that religious people should not expect the government to "evangelize and Christianize America." Christians should, however, beware of government "overstepping its bounds" by restricting religious exercise.

"I remain mystified as to why profanity, vulgarity and the products of depraved entertainment fall under the category of protected speech, but public prayer and voluntary religious remarks by students are not," Fuller said.

Fuller said the First Amendment "does not need to be rewritten" to protect religious freedom, but he advocated "an interpretive course correction. A "30-year zeal" in courts has overemphasized the amendment's establishment clause to the neglect of the free exercise of religion, he charged.

The theme of the March 4-6 conference in Washington was "Christians in the Public Square: Faith in Practice?" Fuller offered guidelines for political involvement with the following "Ten Commandments:"

1. Honor your citizenship. "You and I do not deserve to be Americans. We are privileged to be Americans," Fuller said. While Christians have the right to debate vociferously in the political sphere, "it is not our right to dishonor the United States of America," he said.

"To love America is to honor all that is good about her while seeking to protect her from all that would destroy her goodness," he said.

2. Know your heritage. Fuller warned against "those who will methodically make a totally secular country out of us despite the great Judeo-Christian foundation underlying the birth of this nation."

"The revisionists, with their humanist-secular agenda, should be constantly impeded and challenged by those who know the American story," he said.

3. Live your values. He urged Christians not only to talk about morality, but to live moral lives. "It is one thing to extol high moral values and to be hard on those who seek to lower them. It is another thing to prove your morality in the body and behavior of your own flesh," Fuller said.

4. Maintain your prayer life. "We are to pray for government officials," Fuller said. "I believe we are to pray for their salvation," he added, but that is not all. "We are to pray for their wisdom, teachability and sense of accountability," he continued.

"And for those with whom we disagree, we are to pray, avoiding a hostile and punitive spirit. Above all, we are to pray for God's intervention and protection from human error in matters of the nation's life and destiny."

5. Voice your convictions. Christians should make themselves heard "through every legitimate channel given to us, with a courteous forthrightness," Fuller said.

6. Discipline your criticisms. Not everything in public life is wrong, Fuller said. "Public officials and wholesome legislation ... need to be commended and encouraged by Christian citizens," he said.

7. Analyze your zeal. While time prevents Christians from speaking out for every worthwhile cause, Fuller said, they should be motivated by a sense of morality, not prejudice or politics. "For us to be strong and vocal in our opposition to abortion, the homosexual agenda and the gambling lobby, while apparently suffering from lockjaw on matters of racial injustice, may reveal we are more motivated by personal appeal than by moral consistency," he said.

Fuller commended the Southern Baptist Convention for a resolution last summer confessing the convention's racist past and responded to critics who question the validity of repenting for sins of the convention's founders. "Let me remind you that though we are not guilty of Adam's sin, we surely have to acknowledge his guilt and the ongoing impact of it," he said.

8. Protect your family. Fuller said "the bull's eye of Satan's strategy to take America is our home and family life." He warned Christians "to stand against the revisionists who seek to redefine the family to suit the corruptions they dare to call 'family values for an enlightened America.'"

Fuller commended conservative groups emphasizing strengthening families. "Thank God for the James Dobsons. Thank God for the Gary Bauers. Thank God for the Promise Keepers. May their tribes increase."

Dobson is founder of Focus on the Family. Bauer leads the Family Research Council. Promise Keepers is an interdenominational Christian men's movement.

9. Extend your compassion. "Too often we assume our sole task in resisting social and moral evil is to publicly condemn it," Fuller said. "If we expect to be heard when we say our Lord hates the sin but loves the sinner, we will have to be living proof texts with hands-on ministries to those victimized by their own sins."

Fuller said he cannot understand the rationale of some secular activists but noted they often "out-campaign" Christians in extending compassion.

"Does it baffle you? Save the whales, save the rain forest, save the environment, kill the babies? Does it make sense to you?"

"While we sit in judgment of what we regard as moral failure, let's not let the secular humanists out-campaign us in the name of compassion," Fuller said.

10. Declare your hope. Christians involved in politics "must not place the hope of it all in the lap of human response," Fuller said. "As vital as our efforts may be, as important as election outcomes may be, as crucial as the debates over moral issues may be, the hope of America lies squarely in the hands of a sovereign God."

"We must be a nation who says 'In God we must trust,'" Fuller said.

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Black suburban church 'new phenomenon,' speaker says

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Migration by African-Americans from the inner city has created "a new phenomenon" in America -- "the black suburban church" -- a California Baptist pastor said at a national seminar March 5.

"Blacks are moving out of the inner city by the thousands and they are carrying their churches with them," said E.W. McCall, senior pastor of St. Stephen Missionary Baptist Church in La Puente, Calif.

McCall spoke at the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission's 29th annual national seminar, titled "Christians in the Public Square: Faith in Practice?" held March 4-6 in Washington.

The relocation of African-Americans to more affluent neighborhoods is proof that the status of blacks in America is improving, said McCall, an African-American pastor of a Southern Baptist church.

"Contrary to the public rhetoric ... blacks in America are living better than they have ever lived in the history of this country," McCall said. "Somebody ought to say that and I guess I am just one of those people who doesn't mind telling it like it is."

"We're doing better now," he continued. "We have people in our church that are making more money than they ever dreamed of. They're driving cars they can't even spell. They're living in homes they used to work in."

Ministry for black churches is much different in the suburbs, however, McCall said. Rather than "doing business just like they did it in the inner city," he said, suburban black congregations need a "transformation" that begins with "taking a survey of the terrain."

The suburbs are different from the inner city "because of the kinds and qualities of the people we find in our communities," McCall said. "When church is done well," he said, "it is the place where mixed marriages show up. It's a mixture of all the people in the community."

McCall said the black suburban church is characterized by "a blended theology" which "takes the best of the Anglo-Saxon world and blends it with the best of the African-American or black world."

He said his church, which has 4,400 members, uses a "holistic ministry" that emphasizes both social-ministry programs that help the poor and each person's need to accept Christ.

"We have a biblical demand placed upon us by our Lord that we do what is right, that we help those who are in need," McCall said. "We cannot turn our back on the realities of our world today. Regardless of how people have gotten there, they are God's creation."

"I didn't say they are all God's children," he added, noting he reserves that designation for those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ.

"One of the ways we get to helping people accept Jesus is giving them a piece of bread and talking to them about the word of God. We do that at our church very successfully," he said.

"Our Christianity must be about helping people to see who Jesus is," McCall said.

Many blacks living in suburbs still depend on social services that are located primarily in the inner city. Because of that, and because many of those programs are being cut back in government downsizing, suburban churches like McCall's must fill that void, he said.

McCall said some government programs for the poor should be eliminated. "There are some things that must die so people can live," he said. America's poor have grown accustomed to relying on a welfare program that was intended as "a bridge for them to cross over, not a mountain to stand on," he said.

His church sponsors programs including a 12-step drug rehabilitation program, tutoring, prison ministry, midnight basketball and ministries to the homeless both to meet a "social need" and to introduce people to faith in Christ, McCall said.

McCall described himself as a conservative, both in theology and politics.

"Contrary to what others think, there are some of us who are ethnic, black ... who are conservative," he said. "We are criticized for that, but that's OK. I'd rather be right with Jesus and wrong with the world," he quipped.

McCall said blacks must take the responsibility for transforming their own churches, and not look to government or the Southern Baptist Convention to do it for them. "Transformation is an internal thing. It is not external," he said.

He added that African-American suburban churches now have the leadership and financial resources they need to transform their churches. "If we in the black church in suburbia remain underlings, we must not blame anyone else; we must blame ourselves," McCall said.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: ABP plans to release more stories from the Christian Life Commission annual seminar Thursday.

BJC panel reaffirms statement on use of clergy as informants

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Baptist Joint Committee's executive committee has reaffirmed a 1980 statement opposing the use of "clergy, missionaries and church workers" as intelligence sources.

The BJC panel took the action March 4 in response to recent news reports revealing a loophole in a Central Intelligence Agency policy against using journalists and religious workers.

While CIA policy generally forbids using journalists or missionaries as informants, officials have recently acknowledged that the agency's director or deputy director can waive the prohibition in situations of "tremendous importance" to the United States.

The 1980 BJC statement said the use of religious workers as intelligence sources "compromises and renders ineffective the primary role of religious workers to be carers for the humanitarian and spiritual needs of the constituents they serve."

The statement urged Congress to enact legislation that would bar the CIA and other intelligence agencies from using missionaries and other religious workers in intelligence operations. The statement also urged Baptist bodies to adopt policies that prohibit their personnel from engaging in "intelligence gathering activity on behalf of government."

At the time the BJC statement was first adopted, Congress was considering legislation that would have barred all U.S. intelligence agencies from either using religious workers as informants or using religious organizations -- real or ostensible -- as cover for covert operations.

In other matters, the BJC executive committee:

-- Heard a progress report from a committee studying the possibility of encouraging individuals to participate in the Baptist Joint Committee through membership in the Religious Liberty Council. Membership in the BJC is

limited to national and state Baptist bodies. But the RLC, which has served since 1989 as a support auxiliary of the BJC, is made up of individuals. The RLC is one of the national bodies represented on the BJC board.

-- Heard a report from Executive Director James Dunn that the agency had received its largest-ever one-time gift -- a \$42,000 anonymous contribution to the BJC's endowment fund.

-- Reviewed the agency's 1995 fiscal report. Administrator Karen McGuire reported that agency receipts totaled \$778,852 during 1995, \$25,248 (3 percent) less than the adopted budget of \$804,100.

-30-

Baptist tradition offers much in postmodern world, Ammerman says

By Mark Wingfield

LEXINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- As the world moves from a modern to postmodern framework, Baptists have much to offer from their traditions and experience, sociologist Nancy Ammerman said Feb. 23.

Ammerman, a Baptist who teaches at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut, spoke at Lexington (Ky.) Theological Seminary as part of a lecture series funded by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The Lexington seminary, owned by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), operates a Baptist studies program.

"Modernity is not the last word," Ammerman said. "There may be a new era in fact that is characterized by moving beyond modernity."

While a modern faith sought to accommodate, to adapt to the realities of a modern world, a postmodern faith "opens up new possibilities for keeping the faith and for building faithful communities," she explained.

She cited three primary challenges of the modern world that are being redefined in a postmodern world: mystery, specialization and pluralism.

Since the Enlightenment, modernity has displaced mystery by insisting on the rational and scientific, she said. But the pendulum may be swinging back slightly in the postmodern era.

"We've been seeing the limits of reasoned solutions to human problems," Ammerman said. "We've seen what science can do, and it may only deepen our difficulties. We're also recognizing we've always depended on other ways of knowing. ... Some of our knowledge comes to us in ways we find hard to explain ... but we still know in some way that it is true."

Baptists and others who affirm the mystery of faith "dare not be silent" at this critical time, Ammerman said. "Now is the time to speak forthrightly of the ways of the Spirit and of knowledge that comes by faith."

Religion also has been challenged by a trend toward specialization in the modern era, Ammerman said. "We have seen religion as somehow separate from the rest of our lives."

But postmodernity has exposed the limits of specialization, she asserted. "We're beginning to see people put their lives back together again ... to find some wholeness that makes room for faith."

More people are breaking down the boundaries between the private and public compartments of life, she said. "It is far more important at this stage for us to realize that faith has a public role in informing our understanding of issues surrounding the common good."

Modernity also has brought the challenge of pluralism, Ammerman continued.

"Throughout much of history, what it meant to be a person was bound up with what it meant to be a religious person," she explained. "Today there are fewer and fewer places where that kind of consensus exists. Most of us live in the midst of very real differences," with people believing in a variety of gods or no god at all.

"A fear of fundamentalism has hampered our ability to deal with the modern problem of pluralism," Ammerman suggested. "We've acted as if the only options we had were either a kind of narrow sectarianism that

was so narrow it was virtually useless to anyone else, or a kind of wishy-washy liberalism that claimed a truth so broad as to be virtually meaningless."

Postmodernism recognizes the need for both local communities of security and mutual understanding and global communities that are diverse, she said.

"The dangers of tribalism are real indeed. But to live only in a global community is not really to have a home," Ammerman said. "We can say to conservatives, come on out of your enclaves occasionally; the world's not nearly as fearsome as you think it is. But we can say to liberals, go home, listen to the stories, relearn the language, find out who you are."

Baptist distinctives that are vital for shaping the postmodern world include belief in the authority of the Bible, advocating religious liberty and affirming the priesthood of the believer while at the same time realizing faith is developed in communities, Ammerman said.

The future requires Baptist churches to realize they are neither the "independently owned local franchise of the Southern Baptist Convention" nor a "radically independent tub on its own bottom," she said. "We're rediscovering at this time that we have to be autonomous in the sense of developing our own sense of missions, our own sense of place in God's world, but that we can't do that alone. We have to develop networks of cooperation"

"We're in the process of trying to rediscover the balance between local freedom and translocal cooperation," she said.

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Christianity's impact on society perceived positive, poll says

GLENDALE, Calif. (ABP) -- Americans view Christianity as having a more positive impact on society than other religious traditions, according to a new poll by the Barna Research Group.

Among those surveyed, 85 percent said they perceive Christianity as exerting a positive influence on society, while only 4 percent said they think Christianity creates a negative influence. Another 6 percent said they didn't know.

The next-highest rating was given to Judaism, with 58 percent saying Jews have a positive influence on American society. Another 15 percent said Jews create a negative influence, while 23 percent said they didn't know.

Mormonism ranked third, with 43 percent citing a positive influence by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Another 27 percent said Mormons create a negative influence, while 26 percent said they didn't know.

Among groups for which Americans are more likely to express a negative opinion than a positive opinion: Muslims, Scientologists, Buddhists and atheists.

Muslims are perceived by 33 percent of the general population as having a negative influence on society, while only 28 percent view Muslims positively. Another 35 percent said they didn't know what to think about Muslim influence.

Scientologists are perceived negatively by 39 percent of those surveyed, with only 21 percent expressing a positive image of the group founded by L. Ron Hubbard. Another 38 percent said they didn't know how to assess the influence of Scientologists.

Buddhists got a 33 percent negative rating, compared to a 29 percent positive rating. Another 35 percent said they didn't have an opinion.

The American public reserves its most negative assessment for atheists, however. Of those surveyed, 61 percent said atheists exert a negative influence on society while only 14 percent rated atheism positively. Another 22 percent said they were undecided on the influence of atheists.

"While many Americans are not practicing Christians, they retain some identity with the Christian faith and remain protective of it," said George Barna, president of Barna Research Group. "They are suspicious of other faith groups because they are unknown but different, and we are generally uncomfortable with those who are not just like us."

On a related note, the survey also asked American adults what they thought should be the relationship between Catholics and Protestants. Nearly 80 percent said they believe Catholics and Protestants should put aside their doctrinal differences and work together to address the social, economic and spiritual needs of the culture. Only 4 percent said they believe the issues dividing Catholics and Protestants cannot be resolved.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

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