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Clinton's presidency presents challenge to church, pastor

By Greg Warner

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Being pastor to the president is not something you're ever ready for, says Rex Horne. "Who thinks about that happening?"

But those who know Horne say the experience has changed him and his church very little.

Horne is pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., where President Bill Clinton is a member. That distinction thrust Horne and the 4,300-member church into the national spotlight in 1992, when Clinton was elected president.

None of that attention was sought, and some of it -- such as the picketers who paraded in front of the church to protest some of Clinton's social policies -- was downright undesirable.

"It was totally different from anything you would expect on Sunday morning," recalled Russ Weeks, one of the members assigned to maintain security during the height of the protests. But the congregation was unfazed, Weeks said. "We kept right on preaching the gospel, saving souls."

"While it would have blown a lot of churches apart, this church is as strong as ever," Horne reported Jan. 19, on the eve of Clinton's second inauguration. Fewer than a dozen members have left Immanuel over the Clinton controversy, he said. "I've known churches that have lost more people over the color of the carpet."

Things are a little calmer now around Immanuel. The protesters are gone, although many Christians -- and many fellow Southern Baptists -- remain adamantly opposed to Clinton and his policies on abortion and homosexuality. And the Little Rock church has continued to support its pastor and its most famous member.

Horne, his family, the church's choir and orchestra and other members traveled to Washington, D.C., for the Jan. 20 inauguration. The 100-member choir and orchestra performed "Battle Hymn of the Republic" during the nationally televised ceremony on the West Front of the Capitol.

Lyndon Finney, orchestra member and church organist, said the trip was nonpolitical. "We were there to support a fellow Christian, and I firmly believe he [Clinton] is a Christian," he said.

On the day before the inauguration, Horne and his family attended Columbia Baptist Church in the Washington suburb of Falls Church, Va. Horne preached in place of Randel Everett, Columbia's pastor and Horne's cousin. Among those who came to hear the guest preacher were Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Horne has developed a close relationship with Clinton, who joined the Little Rock church, located a few blocks from the state Capitol, in 1980 while still governor of Arkansas. Horne has been pastor for seven years.

Although the president spends little time in Little Rock these days, the two talk by telephone, and Clinton frequently invites Horne to White House events.

"Many times I'll talk to him weekly," Horne said. Or if Clinton is unavailable, Horne will leave him an encouraging message. They also talk about issues, Horne said. While plenty of people have suggested what he might say to the president, Horne said he tries not to abuse that influence.

"He has allowed me to address anything I want to, but I have to be very careful about what issues I should raise with the president and what issues I should not raise," he said.

Horne's unique and sometimes sensitive role has not been lost on Clinton, who made a point to praise and thank Horne in his victory speech on election night.

"I was very surprised about that," Horne recalled. "I just kind of reflected that the times spent in talking and in prayer were some encouragement to him, that the things I had said and done toward him had been meaningful to him."

Immanuel members likewise understand and appreciate Horne's dilemma.

"Rex is a very personal person who carries that load himself and does not share it with the church," said Finney. "He does not complain. He knows what his responsibility is as pastor to the president. He has taken some real potshots. But he keeps a lot of that to himself."

Church members and others in Little Rock credit Horne with setting a calm, forgiving tone for the church, even during the heat of the anti-Clinton protests in 1993.

"The thing that hurt us the most," Finney recalled, "was the people who purported to be Christians who got up in our face and screamed at us."

One telling comment came from Horne's young son, Truett, Finney said. As Christians protested loudly in front of the church, across the street pro-Clinton gays and lesbians gathered peacefully. Pointing to the gays, Truett asked, "Those are the Christians, aren't they, Daddy?"

"They were very respectful of the police, ... while those who purported to be Christian were so hateful and spiteful," said Finney in retelling the story. "I will always remember that."

The church was stung also by the attempt by some Southern Baptists to exclude Immanuel from participation in the Southern Baptist Convention in 1993. Although the effort to deny seating to the church's messengers ultimately failed, Horne blamed the attackers for "recklessly ... impugning the integrity" of Immanuel.

"I thought it was a very cheap, partisan shot aimed at embarrassing our church and aimed at embarrassing Rex," said Finney. "But it didn't work ."

Although most of the animosity has subsided, Horne and Finney agree, not all. Even during the inauguration, Finney said, a group of conservative Christians "accosted" church members at their hotel and asked "why we didn't kick Clinton out of the church."

Immanuel Baptist, long known for its conservative theology, was suddenly suspect after Clinton's election, Horne recalled. People ignored the church's reputation, he said, and focused only on the controversy. "You didn't hear many voices saying, 'We know this church. We know Horne.' But what could anyone have said that would have made any difference?"

"Immanuel had always prided itself in being a conservative, Bible-believing church," said Danny Thomason, a longtime member and personal friend of the Clintons. "Then we were told by people we thought were on the same side that we were not a Bible-believing church."

"It was shocking to see the hatred of people who were proclaiming they were followers of the Lord but acting like anything but that," Thomason said.

Thomason, who also attended the inauguration, said Immanuel's experience has made church members aware of political forces at work in the SBC. Horne too has been awakened to those sober realities, Thomason said, but that has not soured him.

"I think it's made him a stronger person and a more compassionate person."

"You get toughened up pretty quick by what comes your way," Horne explained. "You decide if you are going to spend all your time defending yourself."

Once he realized he couldn't answer all the critics, Horne said, "it became liberating to me, frankly. The only one I have to answer to is God."

"I don't have any bitterness about it toward anybody," he said of the attacks.

The church has not focused on the negative. Horne has mentioned the Clinton controversy "only three or four times" from the pulpit, he said. "We've stuck by the stuff."

"Rex is the same man he has been since he was 20 years old," said Becky, his wife. "His values and morals are the same."

By most accounts, Horne's irenic handling of the controversy has done much to restore the church to favor among Baptists. He recently was elected to a second term as president of the Arkansas Baptist Convention.

"The church has been so supportive and trusted Rex's leadership," said Becky. That support has made the ordeal easier on the couple's four children, she said. "If the [church] people had been ugly, then it would have been harmful for our kids."

In his sermon at Columbia Baptist Jan. 19, Horne preached on Christian citizenship. One duty of the Christian is to show respect for everyone, particularly governmental leaders, he said. "It is inconsistent to say we believe the truth and to be party to rumor and innuendo," he told the packed congregation.

Later he said many Christians have unfairly judged Clinton and his faith. "A lot of people have bought into everything the tabloids have written or his enemies have said," Horne explained. "Because his policies are divergent from what many evangelicals think --- and all that is important --- some people believe, 'He's wrong on that, so he can't do anything that is right.'"

"There will be those who will never give the president the benefit of the doubt or who will think he can't do any wrong. Both are a little off track."

Most of the criticism against Clinton has focused on his support for abortion rights and homosexuality. While Horne too disagrees with the president on those issues, he said there are "some other issues that we need to raise."

"Christians have not focused too much on those two, but they need to bring equal emphasis to other issues," he said, citing racial injustice, prejudice and physical needs such as hunger and clothing. "It's easy to get a smugness about our lives."

Immanuel members, who were accustomed to seeing Clinton in church or singing in the choir, are less willing to judge him harshly. But other Americans hold the president to a higher ethical standard than they do themselves or their fellow church members, Horne said. "We say God is no respecter of persons, but I don't think we always believe that."

"You would think they would be glad that a person like that would go to church," he added.

"Clinton has been in church every time he's been in town," said organist Finney. "It's the one time he can come and sit and no one can tell him what to do. He thoroughly enjoys worshiping and being around the people. ... I don't know if people see it, but he is more faithful to carry his Bible to church than a lot of church members."

Thomason, the Clinton family's optometrist who for years sat next to Clinton in the choir, said it was "shocking" to hear people he knew so well being attacked publicly. "It really opened my eyes."

The experience as Clinton's pastor has convinced Horne that "we have an obligation to pray for those in office." He recently started a regular prayer session with Mike Huckabee, another Southern Baptist who has risen to the governorship in Arkansas.

"If any preacher has learned the value of being prayed for, it is me," Horne said. And when Clinton leaves office, Horne said, he will continue to pray regularly for the next president. Does he expect Clinton to return to his place in the Immanuel choir after the president's second term? "My guess is he'll be traveling around to several locations."

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TV rating system widely criticized

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- While television executives tout new program ratings as a breakthrough for helping parents monitor their children's viewing, many consumer groups are giving the industry-backed system a "thumbs down."

The system, adopted by television executives in December, went into effect Jan. 1. It uses six broad categories to rate entertainment by age suitability, similar to a system already in use by the motion-picture industry.

The proposal was released with fanfare.

"ABC is committed to this system," said network president David Westin. "Our entire goal has been to have guidelines that are user-friendly and therefore helpful to parents in making informed decisions in regard to their children's viewing."

CBS president Peter Lund said his network "unequivocally supports" the rating system. "We are confident that it addresses the concerns of the vast majority of American parents and we hope this system will be given a fair chance to work."

Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, worked with television executives to implement the rating system. In a speech last summer, Valenti pledged broadcasters "will do our dead-level best to help parents monitor their young children's TV viewing."

Since its unveiling, however, public response to the industry's standards has been overwhelmingly negative.

Various parent, educator and child-advocacy groups have criticized the ratings, noting that polls indicate the public overwhelmingly supports rating programs by content -- indicating comparative levels of violence, sex or language -- rather than age.

A group diverse enough to include the Children's Defense Fund, the National Education Association and the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission signed on to a letter to Valenti in December asking him to add to the ratings system labels such as "V" for violence, "L" for language and "S" for sex.

Gary Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, called the industry proposal "an excuse to pollute the airwaves."

"Parents ought to be able to tell whether a television program contains explicit sexual scenes, vulgar language, violence and graphic murder portrayals, or homosexual themes and references," Bauer said.

Industry officials claim a content-based plan would be less practical for parents and more difficult for newspapers to print. Critics, however, contend the TV industry does not want to label shows for specific content because it might drive away advertisers.

"No one has been able to define violence," Valenti observed. He told a trade publication that social scientists had rated "The Three Stooges" and "Roadrunner" the most violent shows on TV. "That is the mark of absurdity," Valenti said.

Television executives were prompted to develop a rating system by a law passed last year. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 called for a ratings system to be used by "v-chip" technology required in new television sets. Once a show is electronically "labeled," parents will be able to activate the chip to block certain programs.

Industry executives were given one year to set up their own rating system. Otherwise, the government was prepared to develop its own.

Television executives and others insist the industry should be self-regulated, citing fears of government censorship.

The industry's rating system includes two categories which apply to programs designed for children. "TVY" labels programs deemed suitable for all children, including ages 2-6. "TVY7" will describe programs that may include mild physical, comedic violence or frighten children younger than 7.

The remaining four categories apply to programs designed for the entire viewing audience. "TVG" rates material suitable for a general audience. "TVPG" suggests parental guidance. "TV14" issues a strong caution to parents that programs might contain material inappropriate for children under 14. "TVM" describes programs specifically designed to be viewed by adults, usually on pay-cable stations.

The guidelines exempt news and sports programs. In theory, programs such as "Hard Copy" and "Inside Edition" could be exempt, but executives say that is unlikely because they have the power to rate shows that come to them without an industry rating.

"Our goal was to create TV parental guidelines which would be simple to use, easy to understand and handy to find, and we have accomplished it," Valenti told a news conference. "We don't claim any divine inspiration," he told reporters, adding industry executives plan to review it over the next few months.

He said, however, the TV industry won't use any rating system other than its own and will fight in court any effort to impose another system.

Quentin Schultze, author of a 1992 book "Redeeming Television," said he believes there is another agenda behind the industry ratings that has been under-reported -- a desire by broadcasters to introduce more explicit programming to compete with cable TV.

"The broadcasters want to be able to air cable-like programs," said Schultze, professor of communications at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. "They think the ratings will give them a buffer from public criticism by shifting the burden to the parents."

Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., said while television executives have a responsibility to inform consumers about the content of programs, the industry's rating system does not go far enough.

If the television industry really cares about standards, he said, they should refrain from advertising adult-oriented programs during hours when children are likely to be watching.

"If I'm watching 'The Cosby Show' at seven o'clock and a television advertisement comes on for a father who murders and rapes, that's as harmful to children as their watching the program," Parham said.

Parham and Schultze agreed the ratings will be of only limited use to Christian parents.

"So much of the ratings discussion deals with sex, language and violence," Parham said. "There is a broader Christian agenda which deals with racism, materialism, unfettered individualism and lifestyles without consequences."

Schultz made a similar point about the industry's ratings.

"The categories used include absolutely nothing about some of the greatest sins of our day," he said.

"I don't know what 'Baywatch' will be rated," he said. "It's a highly sexist show and I think really degrades God's greatness in creating females. Yet that won't be touched."

"Maybe the greatest sin in our country today is materialism," Schultze added. "It's not going to be touched. Those programs will be celebrating materialistic lifestyles without any rating."

Schultze said he believes the ratings could help parents with younger children make "quick decisions" about whether a program is appropriate.

But the real value of ratings, Schultze said, is to use them for family discussions. He is concerned, he added, that too many parents will use the ratings in an "authoritarian manner without any discussion."

"I know that's happened with the movie ratings," Schultze said, noting that some parents won't allow teenagers to see R-rated movies, despite the fact that all films rated R are not of equal value.

Schultze said it is important for Christian parents to help their children "develop discernment in this area," adding that parents "abdicate" that role when they apply ratings in such legalistic fashion.

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TV parental guidelines rate programs by age

(ABP) -- Here is a rundown of the categories in TV parental guidelines released by the television industry, with examples.

-- TVY (All Children). Programs designed to be appropriate for all children, including ages 2-6. These programs are not expected to frighten younger children. Examples: "Peter Pan & The Pirates," "Timon & Pumbaa," "The Flintstones."

-- TVY7 (Directed to Older Children). Programs designed for children age 7 and above, who are able to distinguish between make-believe and reality. Themes and elements may include mild comedic violence or may frighten children under 7. Examples: "Goosebumps," "New Adventures of Winnie the Pooh."

--TVG (General Audience). Programs that most parents would find suitable for all ages, containing little or no violence, no strong language and little or no sexual dialogue or situations. Examples: "Touched by an Angel," "Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman," "Boy Meets World."

-- TVPG (Parental Guidance Suggested). Programs that contain some material that some parents would find unsuitable for younger children, such as infrequent coarse language, limited violence and some suggestive sexual dialogue and situations. Example: "Cops," "Star Trek: Voyager," "Friends," "ER."

-- TV14 (Parents Strongly Cautioned). Programs that may contain material that many parents would find unsuitable for children under 14, including sophisticated themes, sexual content, strong language or more intense violence. Examples: "Walker, Texas Ranger," "Orleans," "General Hospital," "NYPD Blue."

-- TVM (Mature Audience Only). Programs designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17. Such programs may contain mature themes, profane language, graphic violence or explicit sexual content. Applies mainly to pay-cable channels. Broadcast example: NBC's Feb. 23 telecast of "Schindler's List."

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-- By Bob Allen

Supreme Court sidesteps three church-state disputes

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court sidestepped three church-state disputes Jan. 21, including the appeal of judgment against a Colorado Methodist conference for negligent hiring and supervision of a minister accused of sexual harassment.

The high court also refused to consider an Indiana man's claim that he was fired as a substitute teacher by the South Bend Community School Corp. because of his religious beliefs and a Baptist church's appeal of a court order stopping members from picketing against homosexuality near an Episcopal church in Topeka, Kan.

Left standing in the Colorado dispute were jury verdicts totaling more than \$100,000 against the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Methodist Church.

In 1992, Dianne Winkler sued the conference, Grace United Methodist Church and minister Glenn Chambers, over allegations of sexual harassment by Chambers.

The church settled before trial for \$23,500. In 1994, a jury awarded Winkler \$57,350 from Chambers for breach of fiduciary duty and outrageous conduct. From the conference, the jury awarded Winkler \$95,853 for negligence in the hiring and supervision of Chambers and \$10,651 for breach of fiduciary duty.

After a Colorado appeals court upheld the judgments and the state's Supreme Court refused to review the case, the Methodist conference turned to the nation's high court. In the appeal turned away by the Supreme Court, lawyers for the conference argued that the First Amendment shields the church from governmental interference with a church's free exercise of religion in the hiring, supervising and disciplining of clergy.

In the Indiana dispute, Peter Helland filed claims under federal anti-discrimination laws and under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act alleging he was unlawfully dismissed as a substitute teacher by South Bend school officials because of his religious beliefs.

A federal district court, in a ruling later affirmed by the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, rejected Helland's claims.

School officials said Helland was dismissed because of his job performance. They cited complaints from teachers that Helland had failed to follow lesson plans. School officials also said he defied warnings against interjecting his religious beliefs into the classroom.

Lower courts said schools officials had shown legitimate reasons for dismissing Helland. The appeals court concluded that school officials "gave Helland ample opportunity to practice his religion, so long as he did not use his classes for religious indoctrination."

In the Kansas dispute, justices refused to consider lifting a temporary restraining order preventing picketers from Westboro Baptist Church from conveying anti-homosexual messages in a buffer zone near St. David's Episcopal Church. The buffer zone ranged from 36 feet to 215 feet and applies from 30 minutes before a service until 30 minutes after a service is concluded.

Urging the Supreme Court to review the case, the attorney for Westboro Baptist Church argued that the Kansas courts erred in finding "that a church building is entitled to the same level of privacy as a residence."

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Gore condemns clinic bombings on anniversary of abortion ruling

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Vice President Al Gore condemned anti-abortion terrorism on the 24th anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark Roe vs. Wade decision.

Speaking Jan. 22 to the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, Gore, a Southern Baptist, used stern language to decry recent abortion-clinic bombings.

"To those who committed the horrible deeds of Tulsa and Atlanta, I say this ... the American people will not tolerate your cowardly crusade," he said.

As Gore and first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton addressed the abortion-rights group, tens of thousands of abortion opponents rallied near the White House and then marched to the Supreme Court to protest the 1973 ruling establishing a right to abortion.

Randall Terry, head of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue, encouraged marchers to "carry the banner of resistance and replace evil politicians."

The anniversary began with a bomb scare when a worker at the hotel where Gore and Clinton appeared found a small fuse device used in grenade training. The device, less explosive than some firecrackers, went off in the worker's hand near the hotel, Associated Press reported.

Police said there was no evidence the incident was related to the abortion controversy.

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-- By ABP staff

Judge strikes down law banning magazine sales

NEW YORK (ABP) -- A federal judge has struck down a law banning the sale of sexually explicit magazines on military bases.

The Military Honor and Decency Act of 1996 is unconstitutional because it violates the First Amendment's free-speech guarantee, Judge Shira Scheindlin of the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York ruled Jan. 22.

The law, which forbids the sale or rental of sexual material at military facilities, was added to a new defense budget and was to take effect in December. The law was passed by Congress without debate and was signed in September by President Clinton, according to Associated Press.

"Society is better served by protecting our cherished right to free speech, even at the cost of tolerating speech that is outrageous, offensive and demeaning," the judge wrote.

Gary Bauer's Family Research Council called the ruling "a miscarriage of justice and another indicator of an out-of-control judiciary."

The ruling sends a wrong message at a time when the military is both seeking to attract more servicewomen and is being shaken by a sexual-harassment scandal at Maryland's Aberdeen Proving Ground.

"News that the military must continue selling woman-demeaning smut sends the wrong message to traumatized women who understand the direct association between exposure to pornography and sexual misconduct," said the Family Research Council's Robert Maginnis.

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-- By ABP Staff

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