

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **First lady joins husband's call to become 'repairers of the breach'**

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Responding to candid and personal remarks by President Clinton at the Feb. 6 National Prayer Breakfast, Hillary Rodham Clinton urged another audience to heed her husband's call to be "repairers of the breach."

At the prayer breakfast, the president cited Isaiah 58:12 -- a passage he quoted earlier in both his Inaugural and State of the Union addresses -- urging all Americans to work to repair the divisions that polarize and marginalize society.

Like many who heard the speech, "I felt he was talking directly to me," the first lady told a prayer luncheon later that day.

Mrs. Clinton said she did not know in advance what her husband was going to say at the prayer breakfast. "I saw him early this morning flipping through some prepared remarks that had been given to him. And then in the car on our way here from the White House, I saw him discarding them page by page," she said.

"And, as anyone who is the spouse of anyone in public life -- a preacher, a member of Congress, a president or a business executive -- you know what it feels like when you watch your husband or wife stand up and have no idea what is about to come out. So you are as interested and sometimes as amazed as anyone else in the audience."

She urged all Americans to give heed to the president's call to take personal responsibility for "breaches" they have caused or have seen and left unrepaired.

"Part of the challenge of living any life -- but particularly a life in the public arena -- is constantly to ask oneself, what can I do to repair -- not to tear down, not to give in to one's worst impulses, not to turn one's back on every biblical injunction and Sunday-school lesson that one has been taught -- but to pick oneself up and get about the business of repairing."

The first lady described being in a recent dinner-party conversation about differences people of faith have in the political arena. During the discussion, she said, a man whom she did not know asked her to forgive him because for four years he had sought "to destroy" her before he came to realize "that my faith in my head was not in my heart."

She said she thanked him and told him she forgave him. Later, however, she concluded her response was inadequate. "What I should have said is, I don't know anything about you, but I want you to forgive me also, because I am sure that in my moments of frustration and anger, I have said terrible things about people like you and I've thought even worse."

Religious people, she said, need to be careful about justifying their actions by presuming they are doing the will of God.

"People of faith, I think especially, have to be humble whenever we think that, to catch ourselves and be honest enough to say, I think what I'm doing is on behalf of God; I believe this is what I am called to do; but to know that this is a human judgment, and always to be open to looking at it from a different perspective."

The Bible gives examples of people who were "transformed" from less-than-virtuous characters into heroes of the faith, she said. "But even after transformation we have to be humble," she said, "and we have to work hard to make sure we don't elevate ourselves now that we've been transformed."

As she wrote her book, "It Takes A Village," she said, she wanted to write about the role religion plays in raising children. As she submitted draft pages, however, editors pointed out that most people are not very religious and references such as names of biblical characters would take too long to explain.

Eventually, she said, she was able to get the book to say what she wanted to say. "But what struck me then, forcefully, is that if indeed we are living in a country where very few people even know who King Solomon or King David is, and don't know the story of Saul's transformation into Paul, then a lot of us who argue with one another over matters of faith or politics are really wasting a lot of time and energy, because there are millions and millions of people right here in America who have not heard the word and who have not even, more importantly, seen us act in such a way that opens their hearts to wanting to hear the word."

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## **Amendment would exclude inmates from religious-liberty law**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bill introduced in the U.S. Senate would deny prisoners protections guaranteed by a 1993 law that reduced government's power to restrict the practice of religion.

Saying that prisoners have abused protections in the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., introduced an amendment to the bill to prohibit its application to any prisoner of a "federal, state or local correctional, detention or penal facility."

The bill, introduced Jan. 28, faces an uphill battle because the head of the Senate Judiciary Committee opposes removing prisoners from the scope of RFRA.

Reid introduced the same bill last Congress, but stopped pushing for its passage after striking a deal with Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah.

Reid accepted a less-stringent compromise last term that prevents prisoners from filing frivolous claims in court, a Reid spokeswoman said. That deal was just for the last Congress, however, she said.

A spokeswoman for Hatch, meanwhile, said the senator "continues to believe that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act should apply to prisoners."

Congress passed RFRA after a 1990 Supreme Court decision changed significantly the way courts view religious-liberty claims. In *Employment Division vs. Smith*, the court ruled that government no longer needed to show a "compelling" interest to enact broadly applied laws that happen to interfere with the free exercise of religion.

The law restored the requirement that government show a compelling interest in laws that restrict religious practices.

Reid argues that prisoners should be exempt from the law's protections.

"Criminals should not enjoy the same rights and privileges as law-abiding citizens," he said. "The sad commentary in our present system ... is they enjoy more rights than many people who are outside prisons." He added that prisoners should not have the ability "to file these lawsuits with an unending array of ideas at the expense of the taxpayers."

He said that providing inmates with the rights under RFRA has been a disaster, and courts are now wading through "ridiculous" lawsuits, including a Nebraska inmate who filed suit because he "thinks he is a woman trapped in a man's body and strip searches by male prison officials are not allowed by his religion," Reid said;

Deborah Phillips, director of federal affairs at Justice Fellowship, opposes Reid's proposal. Justice Fellowship is the public-policy arm of Prison Fellowship.

Phillips said most of the prison examples being used by those who want to exempt prisoners from RFRA are examples of "prison officials who have not become familiar with RFRA."

Prisoners are "still humans," Phillips said. "Religion, above all else, should be the last thing you strip from a prisoner." She said that from a Christian perspective, "if Christianity transforms character, what sense does it make to deny Christ to people who need their character transformed?"

Phillips noted that prisoners use whatever means are available legally to aid their circumstances and RFRA is just one of many such provisions.

"For Reid to want to deny the light of Christ in the darkest places on Earth -- prisons -- is baffling. Religious freedom is not a privilege, it's a constitutional right as is life," Phillips said.

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## **Kurds en route to America in need of helping hand**

By Robert O'Brien

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A new wave of Kurdish refugees fleeing Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein will soon hit U.S. shores and will need sponsors to help them, says a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary who formerly worked with the people group in northern Iraq.

Some 4,900 Kurds are undergoing security screening on Guam after a December evacuation from Iraq. They will begin arriving in the United States in mid-February and continue through March, officials estimate.

The total includes 27 Kurdish employees and 100 family members of Concern for Kids -- an organization through which Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionaries Robert and Roni Anderson provided humanitarian aid to Kurds.

Saddam reportedly has targeted Kurds for death, especially those who cooperated with Americans. Already, some 2,000 Kurds have found refuge in the U.S.

Since leaving Iraq last September, the Andersons -- CBF missionaries since 1995 -- have been working stateside to get the Kurds evacuated and to build a network of churches and others to help relocate Kurdish families.

They have found places for most Concern For Kids people, which include teachers and medical personnel employed to do humanitarian work. They are also working with World Relief and others to place Kurdish employees and dependents of other Christian and humanitarian aid agencies who own little but the clothes they wear.

The Kurds -- mostly Muslim and descendants of the Biblical Medes -- have faced generations of hardship and scorn, Robert Anderson said. "But through it all, God has performed one miracle after another to save them," said Anderson, citing a series of events that have headed off disaster for the people group.

"Our goal is to show Kurds, who believe they're friendless, that we really care," he said. "We want to show our faith by showing them the love of Jesus Christ. We need churches and others to step forward and help."

Anderson first ministered to the Kurds in Kurdistan in 1992 as a Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board volunteer. He and his wife worked three years as independent missionaries before being appointed by the Fellowship in 1995.

The Fellowship, a moderate Baptist organization which supports 140 missionaries, appoints missionaries primarily to people groups, often transcending national borders, with an emphasis on groups with little or no access to the gospel message.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Andersons may be reached by phone (770-271-4921); fax (770-271-3730); e-mail (73410.765@compuserve.com) or mail (PO Box 652, Buford, Ga. 30518).

World Relief, the disaster and relief branch of the National Association of Evangelicals, has offices in Atlanta, Ga. (404-294-4352); Dallas/Ft. Worth, Tex. (817-924-0748); Jacksonville, Fla. (904-641-9011); Nashville, Tenn. (615)-244-3967); and Minneapolis, Minn. (612-798-4332).

## **Tough neighborhood got gentler when church moved in, pastor says**

By Amanda Phifer

KEARNEYSVILLE, W.Va. (ABP) -- Fellowship Baptist Church in Kearneysville, W.Va., began six years ago as a storefront church in an area known for prostitution and drug trafficking.

Eight to 24 teenagers sold crack cocaine on the sidewalk in front of the church, related bivocational pastor Joe Burwell. Some of the drug dealers drew chalk drawings of his body in front of the church.

"Is this a dangerous neighborhood?" Burwell asked rhetorically, then provided a surprise answer to his own question. "It used to be."

Some would say it still is, but since the church moved into the low-income area called Fox Glen, drug arrests and police calls have been cut almost in half.

"This community was a government project that was left alone for 20 years," said Burwell, who lives behind the church's current 3-year-old building in a mobile home with his wife and two children. "The first year we were here, agents arrested 90 in a drug bust; the next year they arrested 40."

The church started a homeowner's association in the neighborhood of about 400 families, most headed by single parents. Property values immediately rose. The church also began a neighborhood watch and a community newspaper that residents eventually adopted as their own.

"We found this was a bedroom community," Burwell said. "People locked their gates at night, unlocked them to drive to work in the morning, came back after dark, drove in and locked the gates behind them. We found people who'd been living here 12-13 years and didn't know the people on their left or their right."

The church, which now has 75 members, has adopted an open-door, outreach-oriented approach. The multi-purpose church building is used seven days a week for community activities, most of them geared towards children and youth -- Girl Scouts, high school girls volleyball, 4-H Clubs, after-school tutoring, after-school youth basketball, beauty pageants.

"This area is part of a major drug triangle," Burwell said. He received threats from some of the drug dealers when he began his ministry in Kearneysville, located in extreme eastern West Virginia about five miles from the Maryland state line, he said.

"When we came, no church in this county would touch this community," he said. "They didn't send their vans in here to pick up kids for vacation Bible school. They didn't want anything to do with it. Nobody did. The local community centers wouldn't have these kids. We would."

Despite the neighborhood's high-crime rate, the church doors remain open 24 hours a day. Yet nothing has been stolen or vandalized.

"Sometimes we come in here late at night and find people in the sanctuary praying," Burwell said. "Sometimes when deputies are on duty in our area they stop by the church for coffee and a break, because their offices are so far away. One who stopped by during our New Year's Eve watch said, 'This place is the only sanity in this community.'"

Fellowship Baptist Church began in 1990 as a home Bible study. It soon moved into a shopping center -- several doors down from a strip joint -- where it remained for two-and-a-half years. It was at the storefront location where Burwell experienced most of the threats and harassment from drug dealers, he said.

In 1993, the father of a girl who had been in the youth group at a church where Burwell was youth minister several years earlier, offered the congregation 10 acres of land at a bargain price. At the time, the property was mostly a mosquito-infested tire pile. Enter the federal government, which cleared the dump as part of the "Super Fund" environmental clean-up program.

The 60-by-80-foot, two-story church building looks more like a gymnasium than a traditional church. A carpeted floor with gym markings serves as a sanctuary on Sundays. A balcony overlooks the athletic court area on four sides. The building also holds a small exercise room, a commercial kitchen, a nursery, two locker rooms, a choir room, an office, a lounge and seven bathrooms.

Burwell, who works as a paramedic, has not drawn a salary from the church in two years. He also serves as chaplain for the fire department and a local hospital, describing himself as "the closest thing to a parish priest there is."

"When someone gets sick or dies, I'm expected to be there. When I walk down the street, they know me," he said.

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