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Nation's leaders say volunteers needed to restore American dream

By Kenny Byrd

PHILADELPHIA (ABP) -- Present and past presidents from both parties participated in a three-day summit to encourage volunteer service in areas such as education and crime to provide children access to opportunity.

President Bill Clinton told more than 5,000 elected officials and community leaders gathered April 28 in front of Philadelphia's Independence Hall that "too many people are out there doing the very best they can and still not keeping up, much less moving forward."

A lot of the problems facing children are "problems of the human heart -- problems that can only be resolved when there is a one-on-one connection, community by community, neighborhood by neighborhood, street by street, home by home, with every child in this country entitled to live out their God-given destiny," the president said.

Retired Gen. Colin Powell, chairman of the Presidents' Summit for America's Future, reflected on the historic importance of the site. "Over 200 years ago, a group of volunteers gathered on this sacred spot to found a new nation. In perfect words, they voiced their dreams and aspirations of an imperfect world," Powell said.

"Despite more than two centuries of moral and material progress, despite all efforts to achieve a more perfect union, there are still Americans who are not sharing in the American dream," Powell said. He added, "So today, we gather here today to pledge that the dream must no longer be deferred and it will never, as long as we can do anything about it, become a dream denied."

Former President George Bush said the American dream is a stirring phrase. "It means the freedom to worship your own God in your own way without fear of persecution. It means freedom of speech and assembly, and, perhaps most importantly the freedom to vote." Bush said that sometimes these freedoms are taken for granted.

He added that the American dream also means "the opportunity to go as far in life as your abilities will take you."

The group of leaders want to provide 2 million young Americans access to opportunity by giving them the fundamental resources they need by the year 2000.

The leaders and participants kicked off the summit April 27 by spending five hours on a graffiti-filled Philadelphia road to work on over 100 service projects, including painting, picking up trash, building playgrounds and reading to children.

Organizers said there are 15 million children in need of mentors and other assistance.

Clinton announced some government initiatives to support the effort. The administration will award 50,000 new AmeriCorps scholarships through a new approach that gives the money to a nonprofit charity or religious organization. The organization must then agree to pay the living expenses of the volunteer. AmeriCorps was created in Clinton's 1993 budget.

The original AmeriCorps model provides a college scholarship of \$4,725 a year for each year of full-time service and also provides a living allowance of around \$7,000.

An administration spokesman said that last year, AmeriCorps pioneered a new approach with the National Council of Churches in which the religious group agreed to pick up the living expenses of the volunteers and AmeriCorps provided the scholarship.

The president also announced an expansion of the police corps, a program that grants a four-year college scholarship to young people who agree to four years of service as a police officer.

He also announced a plan to allow students to defer interest on their student loans while they serve. The president said the proposal would benefit students such as those participating in a program organized by Baptist leader Tony Campolo.

Campolo is helping to organize a movement to get churches to sponsor 10,000 full-time youth volunteers to take a year off from college under the sponsorship of their churches. Under Clinton's proposal, interest on their student loans would not accrue during that year.

Vice President Al Gore and former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford participated in the summit, as well as present and past first ladies and Alma Powell, the wife of Colin Powell.

Ford said he is optimistic because he knows firsthand the positive results of one-on-one relationships that groups like the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Big Brothers and Big Sisters provide for children.

Nancy Reagan, wife of former President Ronald Reagan, said she wished President Reagan could be at the rally. "So for him and me, I ask a special favor of everyone watching or listening today. From this day forward, when someone asks you to help a child, just say 'yes,'" she said.

Powell also called the country to action. "All of us can spare 30 minutes a week or an hour a week. All of us can give an extra dollar. All of us can touch someone who doesn't like us, but, by God, needs us in their lives. And that's why we have to keep all of this going," he said.

Carter, known for his work with Habitat for Humanity and other charitable causes, said the summit can be the beginning of a renewed commitment to children. "But the real revolution will take place only if we carry this new spirit of Philadelphia back to our own neighborhoods and turn it into action," Carter said.

He added, "The divisions between those of us who have many opportunities and those who feel they have none are growing deeper. Children are dying, in body and spirit."

Study: Gifts to churches, charities affected by tax-deduction incentive

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Eliminating the tax deduction for charitable gifts would reduce sharply amounts Americans donate to churches and other charities, according to a year-long study released April 28.

The study was commissioned to assess the impact on charitable giving of various tax-reform proposals before Congress. It was commissioned by two private organizations, the Council on Foundations and Independent Sector. The study was conducted by Price Waterhouse and the Washington law firm of Caplin & Drysdale.

The study, based on data from 93,000 federal income tax returns filed in 1992, concluded that eliminating the charitable-tax deduction "would place an enormous new burden on charities at the very time that the federal government is continuing to cut sharply the funding of social programs and calling on charities to pick up the slack."

Independent Sector President Sara Melendez said the study refutes the idea that the charitable deduction has little impact on gifts to charities.

"Most people don't give because they receive a deduction," Melendez said in a prepared statement. "They give because it's the right thing to do. However, the amount they give clearly is greatly affected by the charitable deduction."

The study found that taxpayers who itemize deductions represent less than 30 percent of all taxpayers but account for 75 percent of gifts to charities.

Citing a 1995 Gallup Poll, the report noted that nonprofit groups as a whole draw about 18 percent of their income from charitable gifts, but churches and religious organizations receive 83 percent of their revenue from contributions, the study found.

"This study explodes the myth that churches will not suffer if the charitable deduction is eliminated," said Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee.

Walker was one of four representatives of religious organizations serving on a 32-member Working Group on Tax Restructuring sponsored by the Council on Foundations and Independent Sector.

"Not only should we preserve the charitable deduction, we should allow nonitemizers to deduct their contributions, too," Walker said.

The study examined the potential impact of three tax-reform proposals offered in the 104th Congress that are expected to be part of a future tax-reform debate.

It concluded that a flat tax with no charitable deduction and a reduced tax rate would result in sharp declines in charitable gifts. If a flat tax with a top rate of 21 percent had been in place in 1996, individual gifts to charities would have dropped from an estimated \$104 billion to \$71 billion, the report said.

The study did not attempt to estimate how replacing the nation's income tax system with a national retail sales tax would affect charitable gifts by individuals. Giving up a purchase to make a charitable gift or to put money in savings would reduce taxes under a system based on consumption, the study said.

But the study concluded that a national sales tax system would dramatically increase expenses of charities by requiring the collection of a 15 percent tax on revenue from most services provided by charitable groups and by possibly requiring them to pay federal and state sales tax on purchases.

Individual giving could increase by as much as \$34 billion under a third tax reform proposal, known as the Unlimited Savings Allowance, or USA tax. This proposal retains the deduction for charitable gifts and allows an unlimited savings deduction.

But if taxpayers chose to save rather than give to charity, increases in giving under this tax structure may be reduced, a study summary noted.

Melendez said Independent Sector takes no position for or against the tax restructuring proposals.

"But while we do not support or oppose tax restructuring, we will work aggressively against any move to eliminate the charitable tax deduction," she said.

Walker called proposals that discourage charitable gifts inconsistent with the recent national summit on volunteerism in Philadelphia.

"Government cannot encourage volunteerism by discouraging giving to pay for it," he said. "It makes no sense to hold a summit on volunteering and then undercut the means to pay for it."

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Church amends covenant to accept homosexuals

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Suburban Atlanta's Oakhurst Baptist Church voted in January to amend its church covenant to specify it welcomes people regardless of sexual orientation.

The church in Decatur, Ga., known in the past for strong stances on hunger and peace issues, now specifies it rejects any "status in this fellowship" in terms of sexual orientation or mental or physical ability, according to a report in Baptist Peacemaker magazine. Previously the statement rejected discrimination based on "church office, possessions, education, race, age, gender or other distinctions."

The statement apparently places the congregation at odds with the Southern Baptist Convention, which in 1992 amended its constitution to ban membership by "churches which act to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior," said convention spokesman Bill Merrell.

If the covenant language "does endorse or promote" homosexual behavior, "then it is a clear violation" of the convention's stance, said Merrell, vice president for convention relations at the SBC Executive Committee.

Although Oakhurst's participation in the SBC has been minimal in recent years, the congregation apparently would still qualify as a Southern Baptist church.

An Oakhurst spokesperson said the church gives a token \$1 annual gift to the SBC's unified budget, while continuing to support the convention's home and foreign missions offerings. The SBC's records lists the church as giving \$1 directly to the Executive Committee in 1994-95 but nothing in 1995-96. However, gifts to the mission offerings or other SBC causes still qualifies a church for representation in the SBC.

Oakhurst also supports the Atlanta Baptist Association and the Georgia Baptist Convention and is aligned with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Alliance of Baptists and American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.

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-- By Bob Allen

South Carolina CBF adapts budget, approves plan to hire coordinator

By Sue Poss

SPARTANBURG, S.C. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina approved a new funding plan that will funnel contributions through the state CBF office and then on to the national CBF.

The new plan is expected to increase the state Fellowship's budget from \$69,190 this year to \$144,409 next year, enough to hire a state coordinator.

Until now, most South Carolina churches affiliated with the Fellowship have sent their money to the moderate organization's Atlanta office, designating that a portion be returned to the state, typically 10 percent.

The new budget, approved by 250 participants at the state group's April 25 general assembly at Fernwood Baptist Church in Spartanburg, will retain 25 percent of received funds for in-state use before forwarding 75 percent to the national Fellowship. Churches may still designate that their gifts be divided in a different way, said treasurer Bill Thomason.

Even though the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is currently facing a financial strain, a leader in the national Fellowship said he favored the recommendation. John Cothran of Greenville, a former member of the national CBF's coordinating council who still serves on the group's Global Missions ministry group, said hiring a state coordinator would help the CBF grow and thereby increase revenue.

"This may impact us both in the short term, but I think in the long run having someone giving their full attention to CBF here in South Carolina will pay off for all of us," said Cothran.

The budget includes \$25,000 for a six-month salary for a coordinator and more than \$15,500 for other expenses related to the position. A committee which recommended the position will begin work on a job description. The position is not expected to be filled before January, said Jamie Norris, committee chair.

Also in the budget is \$14,000 for missions, mostly earmarked for a planned partnership between the state CBF and Baptists in Albania. The partnership was scheduled to begin in September, but political unrest recently forced CBF missionaries to flee the country.

Davis Saunders, a retired missionary with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, is coordinating the partnership, which will focus on teaching English as a second language. While the first team of volunteers may be delayed, he urged those attending the general assembly to continue to promote the partnership.

"If we find we can go in, we want to be ready," he said. "It's now more urgent than ever."

Beth McConnell, associate pastor of Greenlawn Baptist Church in Columbia, was elected moderator of the state CBF. She succeeds Marion Aldridge, pastor of the same church. Cothran, a member of First Baptist Church in Greenville, was elected moderator-elect.

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Defense contractor subsidiary moving out of Baptist offices

VALLEY FORGE, Pa. (ABP) -- LMC Properties, Inc., a subsidiary of Lockheed Martin Corporation, has decided not to renew its option for a second-year lease at the American Baptist Mission Center in Valley Forge, Pa.

According to American Baptist News Service, the one-year lease signed last May will be extended one month before the company moves out on June 30.

The decision to lease space in the headquarters of the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., was reached in 1995, following a space-utilization study by the group's general board.

Some American Baptists protested the decision to lease offices to the world's largest defense contractor. Lockheed Martin said no weapons were designed at the site, which was used to develop unclassified commercial communications software.

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-- By ABP staff

Southwest Baptist University inaugurates new president

BOLIVAR, Mo. (ABP) -- At his April 25 inauguration, Southwest Baptist University President Pat Taylor embarked on what he called "an incredible journey" of leading Christian higher education into the next millennium.

The former chief academic officer at Oklahoma Baptist University who in October assumed the presidency of the school in Bolivar, Mo., told a crowd of more than 1,000 he is "more convinced today than ever before that ... Christ-centered, distinctively Christian universities hold the keys to the future of our society."

Taylor said Christian educators must try to reverse the trend toward "values-free" education pushed by secular universities in the last half of the 20th century.

"If we do not reverse the current trends in education, the important lessons of western civilization may indeed be lost," he said. "I am totally convinced that the breakdown of religious faith will lead to an increase in immorality, lawlessness and eventually to the complete collapse of society."

Taylor said the university must accept the challenge of "teaching our students that we can and must stop the erosion of morals and values. Indeed we hold in our hands the keys to the future."

The inaugural ceremony capped a week of special events honoring Taylor and his family.

A native of Kentucky, Taylor formerly served an administrator and faculty member at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn., and Union University, Jackson, Tenn. His wife, Judy, also is a former Oklahoma Baptist University faculty member and administrator.

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-- By ABP staff

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