

# Associated Baptist Press

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## In this issue:

- **Members of Congress spar over proposed constitutional amendment**
- **North Carolina escrows funds for Meredith College**
- **Stetson becomes interfaith campus**
- **Promise Keepers begins '97 tour, sets sights on Washington rally**

## **Members of Congress spar over proposed constitutional amendment**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- After weeks of negotiations and text revisions, Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., has introduced the "Religious Freedom Amendment," sparking a debate among representatives over the need to amend the U.S. Constitution's religious-liberty protections.

Istook introduced the measure May 8 with 106 House Republicans and 10 Democrats signing on as co-sponsors. Istook said supporters hope to hold hearings on the issue this summer and have a full House vote by fall. To be ratified, the amendment would have to pass by a two-thirds vote in each house of Congress and approved by three-fourths of the states in the union.

The measure would allow school-sponsored prayer and for religious symbols to be displayed on government property. It would also enable religious groups to receive tax dollars through school-voucher proposals and funds for religious groups to provide social services.

Istook says the measure is needed to correct judicial misinterpretations of the First Amendment. "We don't think that it's right for un-elected judges to make these decisions and reverse the trend of the first 170 years of this country," he said.

House members opposed to the Istook amendment held a press conference May 8, saying the fundamental purpose of the amendment is to eliminate the separation between church and state.

Istook said religious speech should be as protected as any other speech. The measure would permit school prayer under the same standard applied by the U.S. Supreme Court to the Pledge of Allegiance, so that students are not compelled to participate "but they are not permitted to silence their classmates simply because they disagree," said a fact sheet.

Asked if the amendment would cover the right to acknowledge a creator or divinity other than God, Istook said, "What is a divinity other than God? I think that God and divinity are synonymous."

Rep. Charlie Stenholm, D-Texas, a supporter of Istook's amendment, said the writers of the First Amendment meant to "guarantee the freedom of religion, not the freedom from religion." He added that courts have expanded the definition of free speech in every area except religious speech.

(97-39)  
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JUN 23 1997

Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Ala., blamed fellow Alabamian and former Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black for removing religious freedom. Bachus said that until Black came to the Supreme Court, "We had the right to pray in school and we had the right to display the Ten Commandments. ... He was clearly out of step with his founding fathers."

House members opposed to the Istook proposal said it poses a clear and present danger to religious liberty.

Rep. Robert Scott, D-Va., said if the amendment were ratified, it "would represent the greatest retreat in religious liberties this country has ever experienced."

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, said it would mark the first time in history that the Bill of Rights would be amended. "With no disrespect intended, if I must choose between Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, the Bill of Rights and protecting religious liberty or Ernest Istook of Oklahoma, I will proudly stand with James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and the Bill of Rights," Edwards said.

The House members said the amendment would allow school-voucher proposals and federal funds for religious groups to provide drug programs and other social services now banned by court interpretations of the First Amendment. Scott said that most of the proposals could require recipients to participate in the religious activities as a condition for participating in the drug programs.

Edwards questioned whether the government would be able to deny funding to groups like David Koresh's Branch Davidians who want to organize day-care programs. "If you then deny them that funding based on their particular religion, you have then set up a government process of valuing one religion versus another," he said.

Some members accused supporters of the amendment of making misleading claims about Supreme Court decisions and the state of current law.

"Let's begin this debate by obeying the commandment against bearing false witness," said Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y. "Today, right now, the right to engage in voluntary prayer in schools is most certainly protected by the Constitution. The courts have said so, the U.S. Department of Education has said so, and so have many of the organizations supporting the Istook amendment."

Nadler asked how can people "who don't trust government to regulate the railroads or deadly weapons, trust the government to meddle in the religious education of our children?"

Rep. Stephen Horn, R-Calif., said concerns over "alleged incidents of suppression of students' and others' religious speech are best dealt with through better education of the teachers and administrators of what is already available under our Constitution, and not with the radical step of amending our Constitution."

At the press conference, Virginia pastor Bill Wilson said he wanted "politicians to keep their hands out of my business."

"The religious education of children is my job and not theirs," said Wilson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Waynesboro, Va. "And every time I have experienced the government trying to help me do my job ... it's been trouble."

He said that any partisan leader who supports public prayer "is obviously not reading the Sermon on the Mount or taking Jesus seriously when he said the way you pray is in private and quietly and not in front of people."

Istook has the support of several interest groups, including the Christian Coalition, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, Focus on the Family, Concerned Women for America and the Family Research Council.

Groups opposed to the Istook proposal include the American Jewish Committee, the Baptist Joint Committee, the Interfaith Alliance, People for the American Way and other members of the Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State Executive Director Barry Lynn said a vote on the amendment is meant to appease the Christian Coalition, giving the coalition a good issue for its controversial voter guides.

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, predicted debate over the amendment "will be as divisive and as frightening as the McCarthy hearings were in the 1950s."

"As this debate begins, my great and serious feeling is that My God, My God, here we go again in the United State Congress where I'll be asking you, 'Are you a Christian?' I'll be asking you, 'Do you believe in Jesus Christ?' I'll be asking you, 'Are you truly an American?'"

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## **North Carolina escrows funds for Meredith College**

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- North Carolina Baptists have responded to a February decision by Meredith College trustees to elect their own successors by escrowing the \$1 million in the state convention's budget earmarked for the historic women's college in Raleigh.

The February vote by the college's board of trustees had the effect of severing relations with the Baptist Convention of North Carolina, said Roy Smith, executive director of the 1.2 million-member state convention.

North Carolina's executive committee responded April 22 by withholding payment of the approximately \$1 million allocated to Meredith in the state-convention's unified budget.

"It is with great sorrow that we come to this point in the relationship with Meredith College, one of only two colleges chartered and started by the state convention," Smith said in a published statement in the May 3 Biblical Recorder newspaper.

Meredith, chartered in 1891, is the largest women's college in the Southeast. The school's trustees voted unanimously at their semi-annual meeting in February to make the board self-perpetuating, ending the state convention's influence in selection of trustees.

College officials say the move was intended to protect Meredith from a power struggle between moderates and conservatives for control of the state convention like the one experienced in the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1980s.

Conservatives wrested control of the national convention from moderates and enacted radical reforms in the SBC's six seminaries, including one in North Carolina, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Moderates have held on to control in the state convention, but are concerned about the future after failing to defeat a popular conservative presidential candidate for two straight years.

Funding from the state convention comprises about 4 percent of Meredith's \$24.3 million budget. The school's endowment totals \$33.4 million.

To make up for part of the loss in denominational funding, the school is raising tuition next year from \$7,420 to \$8,490.

The school has 2,574 women enrolled in undergraduate and graduate classes. Only 34 percent of Meredith's students are Baptist.

-30-

-- By ABP staff. With reporting by Yonat Shimron and Steve Devane.

## **Stetson becomes interfaith campus**

DeLAND, Fla. (ABP) -- Stetson University, which severed ties with the Florida Baptist Convention in 1993, has broadened its historic Baptist affiliation to become an interfaith campus.

The DeLand, Fla., school's 41-member trustee religious-life council, formerly exclusively Baptist, voted this spring to open its membership to the Jewish Federation of Florida, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Catholic Diocese of Orlando and the Episcopal Diocese of Central Florida.

The move reflects religious diversity already present on the campus. According to a news release, about 17 percent of the university's undergraduates are Baptist, while 26 percent are Catholic. Campus ministry programs range from Baptist Student Union to a Hillel group for Jewish students.

Stetson and the Florida Baptist Convention ended their century-old relationship by a negotiated agreement in 1993.

Despite severing those ties, the school's Baptist identity will remain strong, said Stetson President Douglas Lee, through Baptist involvement on the religious-life council and a strong Baptist campus ministry.

Though no longer a Baptist institution, Stetson continues as "an independent university committed to religious values and to a Baptist heritage," Lee said.

Lee said the decision to end ties with Florida Baptists was "perhaps the most courageous one we have made" and in the short-run produced negative results in both contributions and enrollment. Thanks to aggressive fund raising and a \$94 million endowment, however, the university remains financially healthy.

"In the long term, we are a stronger university because of our diversity," he said.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

## **Promise Keepers begins '97 tour, sets sights on Washington rally**

By David Finnigan

LOS ANGELES (ABP) -- The Christian men's movement Promise Keepers has begun its stadium-filling 1997 tour, with plans for a climactic, multiethnic, nondenominational gathering of men Oct. 4 in Washington, D.C.

The May 2-3 weekend saw the Promise Keepers regional conferences begin with a combined 100,000 men at two stadiums in Detroit, Mich., and at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

Five years ago, Los Angeles Fire Department Captain Steve Ruda was fighting fires and dodging bullets just yards from the Coliseum during the worst of the city's 1992 riots. Firefighters were working, he said, amidst "columns of smoke, bringing some sense into a city that was lost in sin."

But on this spring weekend among the Coliseum's 44,000 Christian guests, Ruda engaged his passion of making fellow Catholic men excited about Promise Keepers. He has been the point man for the Los Angeles archdiocese's approved, Catholic offshoot group, "Men of Promise."

After the conference weekend's Saturday night closing, Ruda organized a Saturday Mass. "For us as Catholic men, as Promise Keepers, the stadium event is wonderful," he said. "The relationship with our Christian brothers here is wonderful. But as Catholic men we finish up our Promise Keepers conference with a sacrifice of the Holy Mass and reception of the Blessed Sacrament."

Some Baptists say Promise Keepers could become a possible unifying point for Southern Baptists torn asunder by more than a decade of denominational division. "God's the only one who's gonna bring Baptists or any other denomination together," said Tony Forehand, assistant pastor from Desert Hills Baptist Church in Las Vegas. Some 24 men paid \$130 each for the church's hotel-and-bus package to L.A. Promise Keepers -- which with the two-day ticket at \$60 total was \$5 less than last year.

Jim Rice, associate pastor of South Shores Baptist Church in Orange County, Calif., said the Promise Keepers' emphasis on men supporting their local church pushes men to create, "a personal relationship with Christ, that's what the Baptists preach." His church had 30 men at the Coliseum, including the 58-year-old Rice's three sons-in-law.

Promise Keepers organizers say anecdotal reports have Washington-bound flights and trains from Dallas and the East Coast getting sold out for October's "Stand in the Gap: A Sacred Assembly of Men." Officials say some men are forgoing the regional stadium conferences to save money and time off for the Washington event. Last year's Promise Keepers' theme of racial reconciliation made headlines. This year's theme is, "The Making of a Godly Man."

Richard Devylder, 27, was born with neither arms nor legs, and sat through the L.A. conference in a wheelchair he moved with his right shoulder. Sitting by himself but having come here with church friends, the cheerful non-denominational Protestant said being born without arms or legs, "is what the good Lord wanted me to be. I definitely have purpose in what I am doing."

He opens his Bible with his mouth. (The Book of Joshua is a favorite -- "He's definitely a fighter," Devylder said of Joshua.) Los Angeles is either his third or fourth Promise Keepers -- he has lost track but keeps coming back. "Last night I was offered two jackets, a Coke and a bag of peanuts," he said, his head covered from a noon Saturday sun by a Chicago Cubs baseball cap. When asked who needs Christ more -- him or the Cubs -- Devylder laughed and said, "The Cubs need pitching, and hitting."

Near the stadium floor was another man who said that like Devylder he is "totally disabled, according to man's wisdom." For 30 of his 50 years, Jose Cisneros was an addict -- a five-time convicted thief and bank robber whose drug habit earned him 10 years in eight prisons in three states. He was one of numerous ex-convicts at the rally wearing black-and-white prison tattoos. To cure himself, he said, "I tried everything that man had to offer. The only thing that worked was that one day I cried out to the Lord Jesus and he saved me," said Cisneros, who now attends a Foursquare Gospel church in suburban Los Angeles. "From the guttermost to the uttermost."

Despite last year's racial-healing theme, some African-American men question Promise Keepers commitment to urban churches. Said one such man at the Coliseum: "When a large white group comes into the city, most black men are skeptical, Christian or otherwise. Most black preachers control their churches with an iron fist, and if the minister is not pushing it to his congregants, the men are not going to pick up on it."

Lacey Sykes, 36, a bank manager who is married with four children, attends California Baptist College and the Second Baptist Church, both in Riverside, Calif. "I think the Southern Baptists, since they are the largest denomination, they have to reach out and let the African-American community know that we are welcome as one under God," he said. "We're Christians first and we're Baptist by denomination."

The Promise Keepers 1997 conference will be in these cities on these days: Cincinnati, May 9-10, Houston and Tampa, May 16-17, Chicago and Seattle, May 23-24, Birmingham, Ala., and Kansas City, Mo., May 30-31, Knoxville, Tenn., June 6-7, Buffalo, N.Y., and Washington, D.C., June 13-14, Miami, Fla., and Fresno, Calif., June 27-28, Saint Louis, July 18-19, Pittsburgh, Pa., July 25-26, Minneapolis, Aug. 15-16, "Stand in the Gap; A Sacred Assembly of Men," Washington, Oct. 4, Dallas, Oct. 24-25.