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In this issue:

- **House panel takes up religious-persecution bill**
- **Lawmakers shifting from vouchers to tax incentives for religious schools**
- **House approves alternative to parental-notification measure**
- **Ministers earn less, give more, than other professions, study says**
- **European Baptist leaders mourn two admired women**
- **Future of Baptist work in Albania still on hold**
- **Second round of talks aims at resolving Chiapas conflict**
- **Mission teams play vital role in church's outreach**
- **Corrections**

House panel takes up religious-persecution bill

By Andrew Black

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Republican congressional leaders pledged to give top priority to curbing global religious persecution as a House panel began hearings on a bill that would create a special White House office to monitor the issue.

The House International Relations Committee began a series of hearings Sept. 10 on the "Freedom From Religious Persecution Act." The bill is co-sponsored by Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., and Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa.

The Clinton administration opposes the measure in its current form.

The bill would create a White House Office of Religious Persecution Monitoring to report on the oppression of religious minorities and impose economic sanctions.

Sanctions could include withholding foreign aid, banning exports and denying visas to leaders of nations which foster persecution. The president could waive sanctions if they threaten national security.

The measure calls for immediate attention to specific persecuted groups recognized by the previous Congress and has provisions granting asylum to greater numbers of refugees fleeing religious persecution.

A number of religious groups, particularly evangelical Christians, have sought to raise awareness of religious persecution. Some of the groups claim that Christians are the most persecuted faith group in nations where they represent a minority. These groups and other human rights activists want Congress and the administration to do more about the problem.

House Speaker Newt Gingrich pledged to "take action on this vital issue" after he and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott met with a group of religious leaders. The group included Don Argue, president of the National Association of Evangelicals; Richard John Neuhaus of the Institute on Religion and Public Life; and Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

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Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, which claims 1.9 million members and is considered one of the more influential politically active religious groups, listed religious persecution as its "top legislative priority" last month.

Last year, the administration created an advisory committee to focus more attention on religious persecution. At the request of Congress, the State Department recently released a report on religious persecution that focused on the plight of Christians.

Specific persecuted faith groups often mentioned are Christians in the Sudan who have been killed and sold into slavery by a militant and fundamentalist Islamic government, as well as the underground Christian church in China, Bah'ais in Iran and Tibetan Buddhists.

"We must not be silent any longer," said Wolf. "Haven't we learned that silence reflects acquiescence?" he asked.

Wolf told the international affairs committee that he intends his legislation to be a "fundamental departure from business-as-usual human rights policy."

Committee members were quick to praise Wolf for his action on the issue and to state their commitment to fighting religious persecution, but a few members voiced reservations about the bill.

In testimony before the committee, Assistant Secretary of State John Shattuck said the administration "strongly supports the objectives of eliminating religious persecution, but we do not believe that the bill in its current form would accomplish this goal."

Shattuck said the legislation would create a "blunt instrument" that could possibly bring more harm than good to victims of persecution.

Specifically, Shattuck said it would threaten delicate relations with ally nations, create a "confusing bureaucratic structure" and establish a "de-facto hierarchy" of civil rights by elevating religious persecution at the expense of other human-rights violations.

He said in an interview that the measure would "tie the hands of the secretary of state, the president and all other officials who would want to engage with these countries to stop what they're doing."

Wolf responded that he was "shocked" that the administration was opposing the bill.

"Is business being put in front of human rights?" he asked. "This is not a blunt instrument -- this issue should always have a voice in White House meetings."

The committee listened to emotional testimony from a Tibetan Buddhist nun who was beaten, raped and jailed by Chinese officials and a Sudanese Christian who described chattel slavery and the forced conversion of Christians to Islam.

Witnesses included several participants in the meeting with the Republican leadership and representatives from organizations such as the International Campaign for Tibet, National Committee for Labor Israel and Amnesty International.

Stephen Rickard of Amnesty International welcomed the increased attention to international human rights but cited several problems with the bill.

Wolf addressed concerns that overt action would result in more persecution. "Tell an imprisoned priest we won't speak out because it will make things worse," said Wolf during the hearing. "I would rather err on the side of help than do nothing."

Supporters said the legislation is necessary to "put teeth" into threats against human rights violators. "Lack of State Department action creates a climate susceptible to persecution," said Land, president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

"I don't want to trust this issue to the kindness of the State Department," he added.

Lawmakers shifting from vouchers to tax incentives for religious schools

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In an attempt to boost the availability of funds for private and parochial schools, Congress may shift its focus from voucher proposals to tax incentives, according to a key U.S. lawmaker.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., said in an interview that lawmakers may shift their energy from vouchers to a plan that would enable parents to place money in a special education-savings account that could earn tax-free interest.

The tax proposal, offered by Sen. Paul Coverdell, R-Ga., would allow the accounts to be used for primary and secondary tuition at private and parochial schools.

Lott said the Senate may push voucher proposals as well. "We will probably have something in that area, too, but we may shift our emphasis to the Coverdell approach. ... because we think it's something we can do and it will help."

Several lawmakers, meanwhile, primarily in the House of Representatives, are still touting voucher proposals.

Funding for the District of Columbia for the 1998 fiscal year could be held up this month by debate over a voucher proposal by House Republican Leader Dick Armey of Texas. The measure would give scholarships of up to \$3,200 for 2,000 low-income children attending private and parochial schools.

The Coverdell and Armey proposals were among four bills discussed at a hearing held Sept. 9 by the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families.

Another, the American Community Renewal Act, would provide tax benefits to low-income communities, funds for sectarian services and would require participating "renewal communities" to enact voucher programs.

A fourth proposal discussed at the hearing is backed by Rep. Ron Paul, R-Texas. It would give parents a tax credit of up to \$3,000 for education costs, including tuition at religious schools.

Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, R-Ga., addressed the panel, demonstrating that such proposals are among top priorities for House leadership.

"I believe that we are in a crisis in education, and I believe it's time that we had some very direct, candid conversation about this crisis," Gingrich said.

Gingrich said the District of Columbia spends more money per pupil than anywhere else in the country, yet D.C. school children rank near the bottom of national test scores.

Gingrich said he favored both the Coverdell savings account proposal and Armey's "scholarship" proposal.

Gingrich said there has been no action taken to reform education after a 1982 "Nation at Risk" report outlined a crisis in education. "You can give me all of the malarkey you want to about reform, but the fact is that we've had 14 years and large inner-city public bureaucracies don't reform very rapidly and while they're not reforming, children are being destroyed," he told lawmakers.

Gingrich said he believed in public schools, but "public schools should be a magnet and not a trap."

Sen. Carol Moseley-Braun, D-Ill., disagreed with the notion of using public funds for private schools. "Public schools are the glue that has held our society together," she said.

She said vouchers benefit only a small percentage of students. She also responded to the assertion that public schools are spending more per pupil than private ones, saying that public schools spend more for special education.

"Private schools can charge less because only 17 percent of those schools provide special education, and it costs at least twice as much to educate disabled children," said Moseley-Braun. "Many also limit admission to students with good academic records, and they do not have to accept disruptive students," she added.

Moseley-Braun called vouchers "educational triage," taking the best kids out of the public schools. She said voucher proponents want to introduce a market-based solution to the problems existing in the public schools. "But by definition, markets have winners and losers, and our country cannot afford any losers in a game of educational roulette."

Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., said voucher proposals threaten the constitutional wall between church and state. "This issue will subject those proposals to successful court challenge," he said.

In Ohio and Wisconsin, voucher proposals that fund religious schools have been struck down by appeals courts, but the cases are being appealed to each state's Supreme Court.

While many church-state experts say that vouchers violate the separation of church and state, they concede that Coverdell's education savings account measure does not have the same constitutional problems.

Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said the Coverdell proposal "may pass constitutional muster, but vouchers clearly violate the Constitution's prohibition on the establishment of religion." He said that "there is a big difference between giving aid through grants or vouchers and refusing to tax."

But Steve McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, said he believes both vouchers and the Coverdell approach are constitutional. "In either program, government is not discriminating against or in favor of religion, it's promoting education and religious liberty," he said.

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House approves alternative to parental-notification measure

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. House of Representatives rejected an amendment to a spending bill which would have required clinics to notify a parent before giving contraceptives to minors, approving a substitute amendment in its place.

Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., proposed a parental-notification amendment Sept. 9 to a bill to fund the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education.

The measure would have required federally funded health clinics to provide written notice at least five business days before giving a minor contraceptive drugs or devices. It also would have required clinics to inform local authorities about any evidence of child abuse, child molestation, sexual abuse, rape or incest.

But on a 220-201 vote, the House instead approved a substitute amendment offered by Rep. Michael Castle, R-Del. It would require health-care centers to encourage family involvement and to counsel minors on methods to resist coercive sexual activity.

Castle said Istook's measure "would effectively drive a stake in the heart of the family planning program and it would encourage even more irresponsible behavior."

He added that "mandated parental notification, consent would scare teens into doing something stupid, like having unprotected sex in secret rather than having their parents find out that they wanted to do the right thing -- they wanted to be safe."

Istook said he did not intend his measure to require parental consent, but only parental notification.

-30-

-- By Kenny Byrd

Ministers earn less, give more, than other professions, study says

CAROL STREAM, Ill. (ABP) -- Ministers are paid substantially lower compared to other professions, tend to be generous with their money and are in debt, according to a recent study published in Leadership magazine.

According to the report, published in the magazine's Spring 1997 edition and summarized in the Sept. 1 Christianity Today, the median salary for pastors is about \$33,000. That compares to average or median salaries in other fields such as \$100,000 for a director of engineering, \$96,229 for school superintendent, \$97,000 for manufacturing vice-president and \$160,000 for top executive for a non-profit organization.

The majority of pastors (60 percent) earn between \$25,000 and \$49,999. Three percent indicated their salary was \$75,000 or more.

The study found that 13 percent of ministers moonlight to supplement their income. While almost half said they do not feel financially content, 70 percent of pastors said they rarely or never feel resentful about lack of money.

Almost two-thirds of pastors said their family tithes before taxes. Including those who give away 10 percent after taxes, the figure jumped to 76 percent. Only 35 percent, however, said they preach that their congregations should tithe.

More than half of pastors said they pay off their credit-card balances each month. For those who carry a balance, the median credit-card debt is about \$3,000, half as much as the average American's outstanding balance of \$5,800.

Ninety percent of pastors in the survey said it is appropriate for a pastor to ask for a raise, but 63 percent of those who feel financially discontented have never done so. Of those who have asked for a raise, only 13 percent said they didn't get one.

Nearly 40 percent of pastors said their churches do not have a policy for even cost-of-living raises.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

European Baptist leaders mourn two admired women

HAMBURG, Germany (ABP) -- As the world mourned during a tragic week that saw the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa, European Baptist leaders offered condolences to those most affected by the loss of the two admired women.

Princess Diana, 36, died Aug. 31 from injuries received in a car crash in Paris. Less than a week later, Mother Teresa died of a heart attack in Calcutta, just days after her 87th birthday.

Meeting in Albania, where Mother Teresa was born, leaders of the European Baptist Federation sent condolences to Roman Catholic Archbishop Rrok Mirdita in Albania.

"We know that Mother Teresa is with the Lord, whom she loved so deeply as her Savior and in whose name she has served the poorest of the poor," said a message signed by EBF General Secretary Karl Heinz Walter and members of the EBF Albania committee.

"May God bless the memory of Mother Teresa, especially in the hearts of the Albanian people, so that they will feel encouraged to invest love in all the needs of this country and its people," the message continued.

British Baptist leaders who had worked in charitable efforts with Princess Diana honored her charitable efforts.

"I know that all our Baptist churches will be sharing in the national feeling of grief and profound sadness following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, and prayers will continue to be offered for her young sons William and Harry, the Prince of Wales and all members of her family circle," said David Coffey, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. "We will also be remembering the other families so tragically involved in this horrendous event."

Tony Lloyd, a Baptist minister and executive director of Leprosy Mission, England, said his reaction was "one of total shock and distress." He said he had expected to meet with the princess in a few days to discuss a possible tour to Bangladesh.

A lingering image of Diana was her gentle approach to leprosy sufferers, Lloyd said. "She heightened the profile of the mission and dispelled the stigma surrounding leprosy by touching the patients," he said. A month before her death, she helped the mission raise more than 100,000 British pounds with a fund-raising meal in Kensington Palace.

She also was renowned for work with AIDS sufferers. She visited Mildmay Mission in London, the first AIDS hospice in Europe, three times between 1989 and 1994, said Peter Clarke, the organization's director of pastoral care.

"I was impressed with her humanity, her warmth, her naturalness and her very genuine interest in our work," said Clarke, a Baptist. "We have lost a good friend."

Michael Taylor, a Baptist minister, directs Christian Aid, an organization in Britain that worked with the princess in her efforts to ban landmines.

"We have greatly appreciated her contribution to raising awareness about the terrible effects of landmines around the world," Taylor said. "It is to her lasting credit that she chose to take up a problem which has such devastating effects on the lives of hundreds of thousands of people."

Coffey encouraged British Baptists and others to carry on Diana's charitable projects as a tribute to her memory. "I would suggest that the best memorial to the princess is that others take up the torch of her many commitments and live out the same quality of compassion that she displayed in her life," he said.

-30-

-- By ABP staff. European Baptist Press Service and the Baptist Times in London provided material for this report.

Future of Baptist work in Albania still on hold

TIRANA, Albania (ABP) -- Unsettled conditions in parts of Albania continue to postpone a plan to transfer oversight of Baptist work there from the European Baptist Federation to national leadership.

Leaders at a Sept. 3-7 meeting of the EBF's Albania committee said it would be at least early 1998 before decisions could be made about the future of Baptist work in the country.

The committee has coordinated missions work in Albania since the formerly communist country became open to Baptist work in 1992. Plans called for dissolving the Albania committee as soon as Baptist leadership became established enough to take over the work. An original timetable called for the transfer by 1998.

A civil war in March set back that plan, however, as missionaries and Albanian Baptists were forced to flee. Both native Christians and missionary personnel are slowly returning, according to European Baptist Press Service.

The European Baptist Federation will discuss the future of Albania at a council meeting Sept. 23-27 in Croatia.

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-- By ABP staff

Second round of talks aims at resolving Chiapas conflict

CHIAPAS, Mexico (ABP) -- A second round of talks between Roman Catholic and evangelical leaders in the Mexican state of Chiapas resulted in a commitment to expand the dialogue to include more churches in the strife-torn region.

"We affirm the roots of violence, including in the northern zone of the state of Chiapas, are not religious but are rather social injustices," said a joint statement released after the Sept. 2-5 talks. Participants pledged "to make efforts together, without hatred or violence, to collaborate in the eradication of such causes."

The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America coordinated funding for the second round of talks, after co-sponsoring an earlier dialogue in April.

Talks between the government and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation broke off more than a year ago, but there have been no further armed confrontations in Mexico's southernmost state. A related conflict, however, has polarized peasant farming communities along political and religious lines.

According to the International Service for Peace, more than 300 people have died and 4,000 more have been displaced from their homes in the last two years. About half of those displaced by the conflict have since returned to their homes.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

Mission teams play vital role in church's outreach

By Pat Cole

BILLERICA, Mass. (ABP) -- As Pastor Jack Parrott gazes across the construction site at New Colony Baptist Church, he sees more than a building program for the congregation he serves.

Parrott envisions a mission base to reach the 950,000 people who live on Boston's North Shore. That strategy includes the services of people from his congregations and mission teams from other states.

Parrott, a native of Barbourville, Ky., is convinced volunteer missions will play a vital role in helping his congregation and other Boston-area Baptists reach people for Christ.

"If we believe as Baptists that people need Jesus Christ and if we believe Jesus is coming soon, we've got to find the most effective methods to put on the field," Parrott said. "There's no way we can recruit and finance all the people we need. The task is more than ordained people can do."

Parrott and his congregation have shown their commitment to volunteer missions with a major capital investment. The church has converted the two-story house that once served as the church's educational space into a house for volunteer missionaries.

Named in honor of Kentucky Baptists Larry and Joyce Martin, the house can accommodate 10 long-term residents and 14 short-term workers.

Larry Martin is director of the missions and evangelism division for the Kentucky Baptist Convention and a former director of missions for the Greater Boston Baptist Association. He also is a former ministry vice president for the SBC Home Mission Board. His wife, Joyce, is a staff writer for Western Recorder and a former editor of the New England Baptist, monthly news journal of the Baptist Convention of New England.

"Larry and Joyce Martin represent a strong belief in the important role that volunteers play in ministry in new convention areas," Parrott said.

The house is managed by the Greater Boston Association and will provide accommodations for mission teams serving throughout the area.

Among the house's first guests are volunteers working on the \$600,000 sanctuary and educational space under construction at New Colony. Of the 250 volunteers staying at the house this summer, 150 will be working on the New Colony building project.

In front of the construction site, a sign tells onlookers a new worship center is being built. It also says the construction is being performed by volunteers from New England, Kentucky, South Carolina, Oklahoma and North Carolina. Parrott said he wanted the surrounding community to know Baptists cared enough to volunteer their time on the project.

The new sanctuary will seat 226 and will be expandable to 300. Currently, the congregation draws 130 people on Sundays, with attendance sometimes edging up to 150, exceeding the 144-seat capacity of the current sanctuary.

"We don't see 500 people worshipping on our campus," Parrott said. As the congregation grows, Parrott sees the church commissioning people to leave New Colony and start new congregations.

Already, the church sponsors two mission churches and two Bible studies that the church hopes will grow into congregations.

Meanwhile, New Colony remains committed to reaching a large population of young families who live in the community. Many of these families work in the computer industry, a mainstay of the local economy.

Through a large summer camp program, New Colony tries to reach out to children and their families. As parents bring their children to the camps, New Colony members and mission volunteers attempt to establish rapport with them.

The new sanctuary and educational space will be an asset in the church's efforts to attract new people, Parrott said. "If you don't go to church, going on church property is a big decision. We have programs in the sanctuary to draw people in."

During the past five years, New Colony has used more than 1,000 volunteers. Volunteers can perform a broad spectrum of tasks, and thus help New Colony and other churches in their mission enterprise in New England, Parrott said. "No matter what your gifts are, there is a way to use them in New England."

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CORRECTIONS: The Sept. 2 ABP story "Boyce Bible School dean to retire after this year" lists an incorrect age for Bob Johnson. His correct age is 63. The Sept. 9 story "With a grieving nation as backdrop, conference considers reconciliation," contains an error in the final paragraph. William Streich's correct hometown is Wichita Falls, Texas.

END