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Executive Committee approves radio show, NAMB magazine

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee gave the green light for a weekly talk-radio program to be produced by the convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and a flagship magazine for the newly organized North American Mission Board

The radio program, titled "For Faith and Family," will debut Jan. 21, 1998, the eve of the 25th anniversary of the Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision that legalized most abortions in the United States.

Commission President Richard Land said one goal of the program will be to fuel a campaign to overturn Roe vs. Wade. "We are going to turn back the tide of death," Land pledged to Executive Committee members meeting Sept. 22-23 in Nashville, Tenn.

According to a media-strategy plan, other program topics will include promoting the sanctity of marriage, opposing homosexuality and racism, and challenging the strict separation of church and state.

Land will interview guests on the topic of the day and will take phone calls, electronic mail, letters and voice mail from listeners.

The program's annual budget is \$353,000 and will be funded in part by listener contributions, Land said.

The show will begin in several radio markets, which must be negotiated, and will be broadcast live nationwide each day via the Internet, Land said.

"On Mission Magazine," the working title of the new North American Mission Board periodical, is slated for release in January/February 1998. Plans call for it to be bimonthly and, during its first one-to-two years, to be sent free to about 100,000 subscribers.

It would replace magazines formerly published by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, Radio and Television Commission and Brotherhood Commission. Those publications were discontinued when the three agencies were merged in a recent SBC reorganization.

In other business, Executive Committee President Morris Chapman called increased giving by churches through the Cooperative Program unified budget "a sign of good health" for the SBC but raised concern about declines in the percentage of gifts that local churches and state conventions forward to national and international ministries.

"Perhaps the most devastating news about our health," Chapman said, is a decline in nationwide baptisms, despite record giving amounts.

Baptisms exceeded 429,000 in 1958-59, Chapman said. In 1995-96, despite \$412 million given through the Cooperative Program, Southern Baptist churches managed to baptize only 379,344.

"Our health is not everything we would want it to be," Chapman said. "Until we get a passion, we'll not see this change."

SBC President Tom Elliff attributed such statistical decline to "the law of the harvest."

"I cannot help but think we are reaping some of the sins we have sown in the past, especially when I see the decline of the number of baptisms," said Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla.

He called for Southern Baptist preachers who emphasize expository preaching, view the ministry as a calling rather than a profession, lead lives that are "spiritually consistent" and emphasize "doctrine, doctrine."

"We as Southern Baptists have so much for which we ought to be thankful," Elliff said. "God has taken a dinosaur by the tail and turned it around. God has caused a great ship to change course in the middle of the sea when it was adrift."

"While we are reaping, friends, we ought to be sowing as never before," Elliff said.

Members dealt with several procedural motions referred to the Executive Committee by last summer's Southern Baptist Convention.

In those actions, the Executive Committee :

- Declined to recommend changes in the way churches qualify for "messengers" to the annual meeting.
- Declined to limit criteria the Committee on Nominations can use to determine eligibility for leadership posts. Prior this year's SBC, some Baptists criticized an announced policy that the group would not nominate anyone whose church supports the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group which SBC leaders consider a rival.
- Declined to recommend a change in a convention process that would have required every resolution submitted to a Resolutions Committee to be presented for debate by all messengers.
- Rejected another motion asking the convention not be scheduled immediately following Father's Day, saying it could reduce the availability of meeting places. The convention is not scheduled to meet the week following Father's Day for the next five years, officials reported.
- Approved referred motions calling for more-readable messenger name tags and providing messengers additional information on the location of restaurants near SBC meeting sites.
- Approved a motion to consider New York City as a future meeting site and another to continue study of the amount of meeting space needed for the annual convention.

A Cooperative Program work group tabled discussion on a referred motion that would create a new track in the SBC's unified budget. The new option would allow churches to send money directly to the Executive Committee to be split 50 percent with the SBC and 50 percent to a state entity designated by the church. The proposal will be considered at the Executive Committee's next meeting, Feb. 16-18.

Another referred motion asked that no convention funds be disbursed to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The Executive Committee responded by reporting that it does not receive or send funds to the Fellowship. The SBC banned those practices in 1994.

In other business, the Executive Committee also approved a conflict-of-interest amendment to bylaws of the Southern Baptist Foundation, a subsidiary corporation, and voted to establish a committee to study the SBC's relationship with the Baptist World Alliance, an organization of Baptists worldwide.

In a statement to Baptist Press, Elliff said the SBC has had "a positive and encouraging" relationship with the BWA, but that recently "questions have arisen regarding perceived changes in the mission, focus and doctrinal positions of the BWA."

The study will ensure that Southern Baptists are "fully aware and in accord with their objectives, doctrinal positions and operational procedures," Elliff said.

Executive Committee chairman James Merritt named the following persons to the study committee: Morris Chapman, president and chief executive of the Executive Committee; Jimmy Draper, president of the Baptist Sunday School Board; Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board; Tom Elliff, SBC president; and Joe Reynolds, Gary Smith and Bob Sorrell, all members of the Executive Committee.

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Pat Robertson touts coalition's role in selecting next U.S. president

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Televangelist Pat Robertson believes his Christian Coalition could choose the next president of the United States, according to a secretly recorded tape made public by a long-time critic of the conservative group.

The Christian Coalition's founder and chairman made the claim to state leaders during a closed-door session of the group's annual "Road to Victory" gathering.

On the tape, Robertson said when Don Hodel became president of the Christian Coalition, he told him, "My dear friend, I want to hold out to you the possibility of selecting the next president of the United States, because I think that's what we have in this organization."

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State obtained the tape and made it public, renewing charges that the Christian Coalition is involved in partisan politics, a violation of rules for non-profit organizations.

But Christian Coalition spokesman Arne Owens said the tape does not prove the group is partisan. Robertson "was expressing his personal views of the political landscape," Owens said, and noted that in some of the taped remarks Robertson was referring to the broader pro-family movement and not specifically the Christian Coalition.

On the tape, Robertson, a former Republican presidential candidate, credited the coalition with influencing the 1994 congressional elections.

"Christians are not second-class citizens; we're going to fight for our rights. And if we have to get a constitutional amendment to do it, we'll do it," Robertson said. "It's not that hard once you get the Congress to vote. We just tell these guys, 'Look, we put you in power in 1994, and we want you to deliver.'"

Robertson also said he wants the group to have more influence inside the Republican Party and to focus on winning the White House.

"We've had a major presence in one of the major parties; we still haven't gotten the influence I think we ought to have inside the Republican Party. ... We can hold the Congress, get in some more good people into the Congress and into the governors' mansions and then focus in on the White House."

Robertson said Vice President Al Gore -- whom he called on the tape "ozone Al" -- would not win the White House because of questions about abuses of campaign finance. He said another leading Democrat, House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, could not win because he's "in the pocket" of the labor unions.

"So I don't think at this time and juncture the Democrats are going to be able to take the White House unless we throw it away. But we have to get a responsible person and we have to realize some strategy. So I just say that to know that we've all got to pray about it. And say, 'God we want your man, we want your man, we want your man.' ... And we've got to recognize that he has put his hand on somebody."

Robertson said in the past the group has lost effectiveness during the presidential primary because "we have split our vote among four or five people and so the other guy wins."

"And we have had a couple of so-called moderates," he said in an apparent reference to GOP presidential candidates George Bush and Robert Dole. "And moderates lose. You know. They lose. And we've had two major losers and I don't want any more losers, I want a winner."

Robertson made it clear early in the speech that it was not meant for the media. "This is sort of speaking in the family. It's speaking out of my heart and not from any kind of prepared text. If there's any press here, would you please shoot yourself? Leave. Do something."

Owens said Robertson's remarks should not be interpreted as the official position of the Christian Coalition. He added that Robertson was speaking in a "candid and frank" manner and said the coalition is looking into how the tape was made.

Owens confirmed that sophisticated computer software, which Robertson spoke of, is already being used by the group.

"We developed and have developed this fantastic computer model where we can identify all the voters in a particular area," Robertson said. "We can give people maps. They can look precisely at who people are by issues. It's very sophisticated and will get more so. So we can put into your hands weapons that are incredible."

Robertson said the group should employ divide-and-conquer tactics used effectively by infamous political machines of the past in Chicago and New York. "Don't ever let your enemy join together," he said. "Always get yourself in the middle to keep them split. And that technique we can use on others, but it's also used very effectively on us."

American United leader Barry Lynn, a regular Christian Coalition critic, described Robertson as a "fundamentalist Boss Tweed, preaching morality at Americans while running one of the most venal political machines in history."

An AU spokesman said the tape was obtained lawfully. He also said the tape undermines the coalition's claim to be a Christian, social-welfare organization.

The Federal Election Commission is currently suing the group, claiming it violated election laws by consulting with Republican candidates in the making and distribution of its controversial voter guides.

Owens said the coalition has had a 7-year pending application for nonprofit status before the Internal Revenue Service and hopes to have a decision from the IRS soon.

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Church ordered to return tithes given by bankrupt member

By Marv Knox

BAYTOWN, Texas (ABP) -- A state judge in Texas has ruled a Baptist congregation must relinquish tithes contributed by a church member who filed for bankruptcy.

Judge Tom Sullivan of Harris County Civil Court ruled that Cedar Bayou Baptist church in Baytown must turn over four years of tithes donated by church member Leland Collins to a creditor.

Cedar Bayou Church has voted to appeal the ruling, which awarded creditor Bill Gregory \$27,687.23 -- the amount Collins gave the church from Oct. 15, 1988, to Oct. 13, 1992 -- plus interest.

Gregory's company, Gregory-Edwards Inc., sued Collins and two other former employees in 1990, claiming they had been overpaid by \$90,000.

Gregory-Edwards won that case, and Collins declared bankruptcy to protect personal assets including his home, vehicle and retirement accounts. The bankruptcy case was settled in 1994.

In June of 1994, Gregory-Edwards sued Cedar Bayou Church for the tithes Collins contributed during the period he owed money to the firm.

The judge's ruling hinged on the contention that Collins made his contributions to the church "without receiving a reasonably equivalent value in exchange."

The church turned down several offers to settle the case, because a settlement would have violated the congregation's convictions regarding church-state separation, Pastor Richard Steel said.

"This case is not about bankruptcy," Steel contended. "The case is about religious liberty, about the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

"If a court can declare that a church member does not receive any 'reasonably equivalent value' for his tithes to his church, then the court is defining how one can practice his religious faith and oversteps its dominion in the realm of that relationship between church and state.

"No court has the right to define one's practice of religion and his attendant gifts in support of his religious faith."

Collins' gifts to the church were not fraudulent and not intended to shelter money from Gregory, Steel contended. Collins "has been a tither since he's been a member of this church -- 40 years or more," he said.

For his part, Gregory insisted the case is about fairness, noting Collins owed him the money before the bankruptcy petition was filed.

"The money he paid to the church was my money, not his money," Gregory said. "If someone had taken a pistol and robbed me and donated the money to the church, would the church have to return the money? Yes.

"It was not his money to give to the church. When I tried to receive the money, I got pooh-pawed by the church. ... I had no other choice but to pursue it in court. If I want to donate the money to the Methodist church, it's my decision, not his."

Gregory defended the court's "equivalent value" decision. "What the court came up with is that the benefits of the church are open to him, whether he tithes or not," he said. "It's a good idea; I donate to a church. But you can still get married or attend a church [without contributing]. I don't feel the church is going to say, 'We're going to charge you a fee to attend church. You have to pay to get to heaven.'"

Financial stewardship is part of religious practice, not the purchase of services, Steel countered.

"Giving is an act of worship, but a church member does receive 'equivalent value' of the highest order in the realm of the spirit and the soul, as well as the body -- the spiritual and temporal," he explained. "When one gives his tithes to his church, he is obeying the law of God and is practicing his very basic freedom as a citizen of the United States. For a court to declare what is 'equivalent value' for one's tithes is to overstep its authority."

That authority is a focal point of church-state relations and pits competing interests against each other, said Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee.

The Cedar Bayou case also illustrates the blow to religious freedom that was sustained this summer, when the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The act mandated the government must demonstrate it has a "compelling interest" in order to interfere with Americans' religious practice.

"Here's what's at stake," Walker said. "Bankruptcy laws are designed to allow a person who has gone into debt to not get buried by his debt, but to offer a number of plans where he can get back on his feet and where his creditors can be paid.

"But on the other hand, you've got religious liberty issues, where a person gives a tithe as part of an act of religious worship. This is good and should be permitted."

"What happens when the two principles collide?" Walker asked. "Two good things coming together must be balanced."

Under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, the state would have had to prove "they have sufficient compelling interest to nullify an accomplished, completed act of religious worship to require the church to give back money that already had been given," he said. "The state has an interest in making sure unsecured creditors get paid, but not a sufficiently compelling one for the state to stick its hands in the coffers of the church."

The Supreme Court's ruling that struck down RFRA applied to states, but not to the federal government. Consequently, a similar case involving Crystal Evangelical Free Church in New Hope, Minn., which is in the federal court system, receives RFRA protection, he said. But the Cedar Bayou case, in state court, won't.

That underscores the need for the states to pass "mini-RFRAs," which would apply the "compelling interest" principle to state laws, Walker said.

On another front, Congress is considering amending the federal bankruptcy codes to protect churches and other non-profit organizations from settlements such as the Cedar Bayou case, he added.

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Bankruptcy laws threaten tithes, witnesses tell congressional panel

By Andrew Black

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Witnesses at a Sept. 22 hearing urged a Senate subcommittee to change laws under which churches may be forced to pay back tithes and offerings given by people who later declare bankruptcy.

Witnesses at a Senate judiciary subcommittee, including a pastor who is fighting a court order to surrender tithes to bankruptcy officials, urged lawmakers to exempt religious donations from bankruptcy claims.

Crystal Evangelical Free Church in Minneapolis has spent \$280,000 over the past five years defending itself against a court order to pay creditors \$13,500 in tithes given by a couple who later declared bankruptcy, said Pastor Steven Goold.

The case made its way to the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which reversed lower court decisions and ruled in favor of the church. Later, the U.S. Supreme Court vacated that ruling and ordered the appeals court to reconsider the case.

University of Texas law professor Douglas Laycock, who is defending the church, said the basic law against "fraudulent transfers" -- where a debtor gives funds owed a creditor to a third party while receiving nothing in return -- dates back 400 years to Anglo-Saxon common law.

"Nobody ever thought that language applied to gifts to a church," he said. "Now that someone has thought of it, the claim is becoming routine."

Laycock said if it becomes clearly established that the protection applies to religious gifts, "the largest single source of funds of payment to creditors will be churches."

Steven McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, said the initial Minnesota decision drew "first blood" and would soon be followed by a "feeding frenzy of bankruptcy attorneys."

Goold said at least 100 similar cases are pending across the country in which churches were being asked to return tithes.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, who called the hearing to draw attention to the issue, plans to introduce legislation to protect tithes from bankruptcy procedures.

"Tithing is an important act of worship ... and it is terribly offensive to me to think of a federal judge ordering that this act of worship be undone," he said.

While the current bankruptcy code allows debtors to spend money on gambling, vacations and other entertainment, critics claim, some courts have ruled that tithing is a "fraudulent transfer" because the donor receives no tangible value in return.

Goold said if courts insist on applying such language to "the 4,000-year-old Judeo-Christian injunction of tithing," the bankruptcy code should be rewritten "to provide statutory exception for religious and charitable donations."

McFarland added that "the founders already did the calculus" in balancing legitimate business interests with religious freedom. "Religious liberty is more important than the economic interests of creditors," he said.

The appeals court which sided with the Minnesota church said the couple's right to tithe was protected by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a federal law that was later struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court.

The act allowed government to burden an individual's religious practice only if it could demonstrate a "compelling interest." Brent Walker of the Baptist Joint Committee said laws protecting creditors from fraudulent transfer are reasonable and needed. When they involve religious contributions, however, the government's interest in protecting creditors does not achieve the "compelling" standard mandated under RFRA.

The Supreme Court ruled RFRA unconstitutional in June, saying Congress lacked the authority to impose the law on the states. After striking down RFRA, the Supreme Court vacated the bankruptcy ruling and ordered the appeals court to reconsider the case.

Supporters of RFRA are watching the bankruptcy case to see if the court recognizes that RFRA is still applicable on the federal level.

President Clinton, several lawmakers and religious leaders say the high court's June decision does not invalidate the federal application of the law.

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Religious persecution bill will face tougher-than-expected battle

By Andrew Black

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bill to address global religious persecution that at first appeared to have broad support is now facing delays and opposition from lawmakers and some religious and human-rights groups.

The "Freedom From Persecution Act" would create a special White House office to monitor religious persecution and would cut off foreign aid to countries which engage in or condone persecution.

Introduced by Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va. and Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., the bill had 105 original co-sponsors and the blessing of Republican leadership.

More than 80 religious and public policy figures, including the presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Association of Evangelicals, sent a letter requesting that congressional leadership vote on the measure by November, when many churches are observing a "Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church."

Recently, however, critics have come forward, claiming the bill creates another layer of bureaucracy, elevates religious persecution above other human rights and is too broad in its use of sanctions, which could result in greater persecution.

The House International Relations Committee has on several occasions postponed efforts to finalize the bill.

In September, a subcommittee approved an amended version of the bill, offered by Rep. Christopher Smith, R-N.J., which addresses some concerns raised by critics.

"We went as far as we could without giving up the heart and soul of the bill," said Smith, chairman of the subcommittee.

Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., an original co-sponsor of the bill, said he would withdraw his support unless additional changes are made.

"There are ... those who oppose putting teeth behind legislation dealing with human rights. I have no common cause with them. But I do have some concerns about the legislation in its current form," Lantos said.

Lantos criticized the bill's "one-size-fits-all policy" in which sanctions kick in automatically when religious persecution is documented, which he said may be "counterproductive to U.S. national interests."

Another critic, Rep. Matt Salmon, R-Ariz., said, as a fiscal conservative, he has problems with establishing a new office in the White House and adding a layer of bureaucracy.

"I wonder aloud how political this office can become," he said. "Foreign policy initiatives are best suited within the administration and secretary of state."

The National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. sent a letter to members of the committee listing its reasons for opposing the Wolf-Specter approach. The letter also stated a commitment to finding an agreeable alternative.

A Wolf spokeswoman acknowledged receiving an alternative proposal from the NCC but said it didn't go far enough in getting tough on religious persecution.

The spokeswoman said Wolf is frustrated with recent opposition from "inside-the-beltway types who are flooding Washington with lobbyists."

"The voices of Christians in the pews are being drowned out," she said.

NCC Associate General Secretary Albert Pennybacker disagreed with claims that the bill's opponents are unwilling to be tough on persecutors.

"Exerting American muscle is a far too simplistic way of addressing a significant and often unique problem," he said. "That's not soft, that's smart."

Many claim the worst religious-persecution offender is the Sudan, where a militant and fundamentalist Muslim government has tortured and sold Christians into slavery.

Hassan Hathout, director of outreach for the Islamic Center of Southern California, said he fears such sentiment is driven by an anti-Islamic attitude and that religious persecution should be addressed by religious leaders, not politicians.

"The Islamic faith instructs us to be friendly and respectful toward other religions," he said. "Everybody hates religious persecution ... this bill will hurt Christians in the Muslim world and Muslims all over the world."

"The worst thing that can happen for, say, Christians in Egypt, is for foreign governments to try to protect them," he added.

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Vouchers approved by House panel, petition signed by clergy disputed

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON -- A U.S. House of Representatives panel has set the stage for an anticipated showdown over public funds for private schools in the District of Columbia by attaching a controversial voucher proposal to the city's funding bill.

The House appropriations subcommittee for D.C. voted 6-3 to send a bill, which outlines how the city will spend \$5 billion, to the full Committee on Appropriations. The Sept. 17 measure includes \$825 million in federal funds, of which, \$7 million would be set aside to provide "educational scholarships," or vouchers, to help low-income parents pay for tuition at private and parochial schools.

At a recent news conference on the steps of the Capitol, voucher supporters showcased a petition signed by D.C. residents, a petition signed by 120 clergy and a resolution from a local Baptist ministers' group.

The petitions were presented to House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and a bipartisan group of lawmakers. Signatures from the clergy were accumulated by Save the Kids Now, a group formed to push vouchers.

But at least two ministers have since asked that their names be removed from the clergy petition and said petition solicitors misrepresented the voucher proposal.

Sterling Tucker, head of Save the Kids Now, sent a letter to pastors that said the D.C. proposal would provide students from low-income families a "scholarship of up to \$3,200 to pursue the educational dreams through public or private schools."

Earl Trent Jr., pastor of Florida Avenue Baptist Church, joined other clergy members at a press conference to oppose vouchers and the clergy petition. He said it is misleading when the measure is only described as a "scholarship" for poor kids. "It's something that's kind of hard to say 'no' to until you find out what they're talking about, which is public money for private schools," he said.

"Any time you start taking public money and putting it into religious schools, which is exactly what this proposal would do, then you open the door for government intrusion," he said.

The two top congressional leaders used the press conference supporting vouchers to show bipartisan support for the measure. Joining the leaders were Rep. Floyd Flake, D-N.Y., Sens. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., Mary Landrieu, D-La., Dan Coats, R-Ind., and Sam Brownback, R-Kan., and House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, sponsor of the voucher proposal. The lawmakers were surrounded by about 150 African-American D.C. school children and several members of the clergy.

Gingrich said those opposed to vouchers ought to put their child into the worst public school in the inner-city. He asked why D.C. children did not have the right to the best schools, "the same as the children of rich folks."

Frank Tucker, president of the Baptist Convention of D.C. and Vicinity, an affiliate of the Progressive National Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., presented lawmakers with a resolution passed Sept. 8 by the group's executive committee in support of vouchers.

The resolution states that "our children deserve a first class education and they need it now." Tucker said the resolution passed the committee on a 33-2 vote but refused to provide a list of members of the executive committee.

He said that although he is confident of the vote on the resolution, it does not mean there is "unanimity" among Baptist clergy.

Lieberman appealed to fellow Democratic congressional members to allow an experiment with vouchers.

D.C. Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, who is leading the fight for home rule in the district, had a message for lawmakers who want to impose the plan in the face of a 1981 referendum in which D.C. residents voted against vouchers 89 percent to 11 percent. "Go home. Go to your own hometown and enact vouchers there. That will give your claim about caring about kids more credibility."

She said that D.C. does not mind being a laboratory, "but we do mind being guinea pigs in an experiment against our will." She said the measure is "a bad joke on D.C."

Norton also said vouchers were unconstitutional and pose a threat to religious schools. The First Amendment is "intended to protect religion from government," she said. "Catholic schools use an appropriate system of preferences and that is appropriate. Nothing we do here should tempt them away from their religious priorities," she said implying that tax dollars would open the door for government to tell religious schools how to operate.

The D.C. voucher proposal would provide 2,000 parents of students up to \$3,200 to pay for tuition at private or parochial schools.

Although some lawmakers are pushing for vouchers in D.C., Lott signaled recently that congressional leaders may shift from voucher proposals to tax incentives for private and parochial schools. Two tax proposals have been offered, including one to allow education savings accounts to earn tax-free interest and another to give parents tax credits for education costs, including tuition at religious schools.

Senate lawmakers are expected to offer an amendment to add the voucher provision in the D.C. funding bill. A Senate committee approved the funding bill without the voucher provision. House lawmakers are expected to debate the issue in the full committee on appropriations in the coming weeks.

Lawmakers asked to extend religious workers visa law

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious charities and groups want congressional lawmakers to extend an immigration law that allows foreign religious workers to stay in the United States.

Provisions in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1990 are set to expire Sept. 30. If Congress fails to renew the measure, thousands of religious workers at churches and charities may be forced to leave the country.

The special provisions for religious workers expire every three years. Lawmakers on the Senate Subcommittee on Immigration are seeking to extend the provisions permanently.

A House leader, however, opposes a permanent extension.

A spokesman for Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, who chairs the House subcommittee on immigration, said Smith supports a "sunset" provision because the State Department and the Immigration Naturalization Service have documented fraud and abuse under the religious visa law.

The spokesman said Smith would be reluctant to make the provisions permanent until the abuse is resolved. The spokesman said lawmakers are working to revise the bill. "We will move in a timely manner and ahead of the deadline," he said.

Sen. Spencer Abraham, R-Mich., chairman of the Senate subcommittee, read a letter at a recent hearing that he received from Mother Teresa.

In her letter, the noted Catholic nun asked Abraham to extend the law so all religious workers "will continue to have the opportunity to be permanent residents and serve the people of your great country."

Abraham added his support for the measure. "As a nation founded by people who came to these shores so they and their children could worship freely, it is only appropriate that our country welcome those who wish to help our religious organizations provide pastoral and other relief to people around this nation," he said.

A Baptist church-state specialist urged Congress to grant the permanent extension.

"We must keep the doors of immigration open for ministers and religious workers," said Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee. "And we don't need to fight the battle again every three years."

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Women's groups take sides in debate over Promise Keepers

By David Finnigan

ORANGE COUNTY, Calif. (ABP) -- Promise Keepers, which drew scorn from a prominent feminist group in August, has found defenders among Christian women's groups, who say the real target of the feminists is Christianity itself.

It has been a monthlong battle of press conferences between conservative Christian women and more secular feminist women, most notably members of the National Organization for Women.

The sparring comes on the eve of the Oct. 4 "Stand in the Gap" rally in Washington, D.C., the largest-ever gathering of Promise Keepers, a stadium-based Christian men's movement.

On Sept. 16, the four-year-old Christian women's group, Ecumenical Coalition on Women and Society, held a press briefing announcing "A Christian Women's Declaration." The declaration is an attempt to countermand the influence of "radical feminist ideology," which the group's leaders say is passed off as "the lock-step of all women."

The declaration seeks to counter feminist thinking on issues such as affirmative action, the view that women are victims at the hands of men, church trends like "reimagining" Christianity in more feminist shades and the promotion by church leaders of "easy-to-get divorces, abortion on demand and lesbianism as acceptable lifestyle choices."

At its Aug. 25 Washington press conference, NOW President Pat Ireland said the Promise Keepers' goal is to make all women -- Christian and otherwise -- submissive to men, who would control all culture. She said Promise Keepers' wives, "at the urgings of Promise Keepers might give up their rights" beginning with "the right to vote."

NOW supporters at the press conference then started to dump into a trash can pictures of women in religion, politics, sports, law and the military, plus credit cards and voting documents. "All of our equality would be trashed if the Promise Keepers and their supporters have their way," Ireland said.

NOW's claim that Promise Keepers' want to revoke the 19th Amendment appalled some of the very Christian women Ireland was talking about.

"That's absolutely absurd -- their logic is completely flawed," said Stacey Miller, 34, a mother of three, speech pathologist and Promise Keeper's wife in Orange County, Calif. She said Ireland's claim about husbands not wanting their wives to vote, is "patently offensive."

Miller said NOW is "trying to find an issue, drive an issue, and I think they chose Promise Keepers to attack basically because a lot of that feminist view is hostile to Christianity."

Bev Remillard, mother of two and director of the women's ministry group at Miller's Conservative Baptist church agreed: "All we have is feminism nowadays. Our husbands have been told not to open doors for us, do nothing for us. So all we have is our Christianity to keep us going and that keeps our families going."

"I'm all for women's rights," said Leslee Marvin, at 28 a mom and quality engineer who attends Orangewood Avenue Baptist Church in Garden Grove, Calif. "But being a Christian doesn't make me any less of an activist for standing up for being a woman. I'm not brainwashed by any means."

Ireland's NOW press conference featured footage of last May's "Chosen Women" stadium event in which women pledged repeatedly to "submit" to God and their husbands. But women interviewed by Associated Baptist Press at the conference in May viewed submission in different terms than feminist critics.

"We have submission, but it's willing submission," said 22-year-old Julie Park, a pre-med student who attends a Methodist church in Los Angeles.

Dina Neufeld, 22, a mom and waitress from a small California town, said submitting to her husband is "not a dictatorship."

"As much respect as we have for our husbands, they have for us," she said. "That's the key element."

Promise Keepers spokesman Mark DeMoss said the NOW press conference mischaracterized the beliefs and motives of the group.

"NOW will have a difficult time finding support among American women in its criticism of an organization that is calling on men to be faithful to their wives, to be more involved in the lives of their children, to be more committed to their churches and to be active in their communities," DeMoss said.

Reaction against NOW's rancor over Promise Keepers also came from an unlikely source -- The Nation, a pro-feminist, progressive/liberal weekly magazine with 100,000 readers.

In its Sept. 15 edition, a Nation editorial written by four feminist women ended with reluctant praise for stadium events like Promise Keepers.

"No progressive cause is filling U.S. stadiums these days, and the most visible social movements are gathering under the flags of Christianity and social conservatism," the editorial closed. "How might the left contend with this phenomenon without simply dismissing it as right-wing manipulation? Clearly, contempt is not a useful response."