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Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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'Charitable-choice' provision creates dilemma for Baptists

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A new "charitable-choice" provision attached to the 1996 welfare-reform bill has created a dilemma for some Baptists, traditionally strong supporters of the separation of church and state.

The provision authorizes local governments to contract with churches for social services such as soup kitchens and emergency food pantries. And there's a movement afoot in Congress to expand charitable choice through other legislation.

"If such proposals were to pass, churches would become eligible to conduct a broad range of government services," according to a unanimous report of the 18-member Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, which opposes charitable choice.

"Charitable choice is a radical departure from the traditional relationship between government and churches," the report says.

While the government has long contracted with organizations that are religiously affiliated, it has until now avoided funding of entities that are "pervasively sectarian," such as churches and church-related organizations which are "saturated with religious teaching and worship." Charitable-choice legislation, the report says, crosses that line.

"The Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission opposes charitable-choice provisions, believing them to be a violation of religious liberty, to be unconstitutional, and to constitute a grave danger to the integrity and independence of the church," the report continues.

"It is not the role of the church to be a functionary of government," said Phil Strickland, executive director of the Texas Baptist moral-concerns agency.

While church-related organizations such as hospitals have taken government money before charitable choice, those organizations don't proselytize, Strickland said. He said his greatest fear is that as churches become dependent on federal money, they will be forced to compromise the gospel message.

For example, one pastor told Strickland he was looking forward to receiving charitable voucher dollars, because it would free up money the church now uses for ministry to go into a building program.

"This clearly strikes at the heart of the church's commitment to fund their own ministries through their tithes and offerings," Strickland said.

Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, also opposes what he describes as "the touch of government" on the local church as a "classic violation of the establishment clause" of the First Amendment.

"The charitable-choice provision in the new welfare law is unnecessary, unwise and unconstitutional," Walker wrote in the BJC newsletter, Report from the Capital.

Walker said the BJC opposes charitable choice for many reasons. One reason is what government pays for, it ultimately controls, thus weakening the church's prophetic role. Organizations won't "bite the hand that feeds them," he said.

Forcing churches to compete for government funds will cause conflict between denominations, Walker added. The new law also violates the religious liberty of citizens by using tax dollars from non-believers or persons of differing faiths to support ministries of specific churches, he said.

But not all Baptists see it that way. One Virginia Baptist described charitable choice as a new partnership between church and state.

"I feel very good about the faith community being recognized as part of the overall community," said Sheri Link, director of church-and-community ministries at Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va.

Link worked on a task force to help Fairfax County develop the structure to carry out the welfare-reform provisions.

"I feel strongly that a healthy community incorporates all of the principals in the community -- business, faith, public services. Each has a role and responsibility that makes for a healthy community," Link said.

Link said reasonable regulations tied to receiving government funds need not infringe on a church's independence.

For example, she said the church-and-community ministries of Columbia Baptist Church have received Emergency Food and Shelter National Board Program funds for years to help people with rent or mortgage payments and utilities within the community. The government requires those funds be used in the county in which they are allocated. That is a reasonable guideline, she said.

"I have no problem with that," Link said. "I have the responsibility of using those funds within the guidelines to help keep people from becoming homeless."

She said the Fairfax County guidelines implementing the welfare-reform bill do not contradict the church's mission. "In Fairfax County, the community funds are in accordance with the mission of Columbia Church; therefore, I have no problems applying for them."

The church's ministries include helping people with food, clothing, furniture, housing grants and other needs. The church also runs a career corner, designed to help people find jobs, works with Habitat for Humanity and accepts vehicle donations to give to persons who need transportation to and from work.

Being part of a community network helps strengthen those ministries, Link said.

"When we know what each other is doing, it helps," Link said. "It takes more than one of us. We can't do things alone. That's been my experience of 18 years here at Columbia."

In the 1950s and 1960s, the church tried to tackle the burden of social responsibility alone, Link said. Then, government tried to meet the need. But now, they can work together, she said.

"In some people's opinion, it is dangerous ground," she said. "They could probably find something wrong with it, but I am seeking solutions. It is not that the others are wrong. There's a place for people who study the Constitution, ... [but] I want to work for people to make life better."

Strickland said churches should "take a long and careful look before becoming state contractors." Strickland said it is ironic that the government decided to fix the welfare system by creating a new kind of dependency -- local-church dependence on federal funds.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, has said religious groups should be entitled to any government funds that are available to non-religious private charities but warned that such funds come with strings attached.

"The federal government does have the right to say if you are going to use federal money in a ministry, you can't evangelize in that ministry," Land said in an interview last year. "To me that is an unacceptable price to pay for government funding. I would advise churches to not take the funding."

Land said he supported that policy, noting that if a Catholic church receives a federal grant for an after-school program, Catholic doctrine should not be taught in that program. "I don't want the government funding Mormon evangelization or Catholic evangelization any more than I think they ought to fund Baptist evangelization," he said.

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-- Pam Parry is a free-lance writer in Alexandria, Va.

Bill Mackey nominated as Kentucky executive

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A Baptist leader from South Carolina has been nominated as executive secretary-treasurer of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

Bill Mackey, 56, director of leadership development and evangelism for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, will be presented to the Kentucky convention's executive board Dec. 8 by a 14-member search committee.

If elected, he would succeed Bill Marshall, who retired after 14 years as KBC executive secretary-treasurer. Mackey would assume the post Feb. 1, nearly one year after Marshall stepped down.

Mackey is described by friends, colleagues and the search committee as a creative leader who will help the 770,000-member convention position itself for the 21st century. In South Carolina, he was part of a cutting-edge reorganization that grouped the state Baptist convention staff into leadership teams focused on serving the needs of local churches.

Search committee chairwoman Peggy Hicks of Louisville described Mackey as "a man who has a vision for the future and knows who we are."

She said Mackey is "conservative but non-political."

"He feels he's there for everyone," she said, explaining that meets the committee's profile. "Early on the search committee said we must find a centrist."

She predicted Mackey would be "inclusive" by relating to Kentucky Baptists of all political, theological and geographic categories, as well as of all church sizes.

Mackey has served on staff of the South Carolina Baptist Convention since 1979, first as evangelism director and since 1992 as director of the leadership development and evangelism growth team.

Mackey moved to South Carolina from Kentucky, where he was pastor of First Baptist Church of Whitesburg from 1969 to 1979. Prior to his Whitesburg pastorate, Mackey was associate pastor of First Baptist Church in Middlesboro, Ky., for three years.

Mackey earned the associate of arts degree from North Greenville College, the bachelor of arts degree from Furman University, the bachelor of divinity and doctor of ministry degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has received additional education at Fuller Theological Seminary, the Center for Creative Leadership and Daniel Management Center at the University of South Carolina.

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Conservatives win top posts in Tennessee Baptist Convention

JACKSON, Tenn. (ABP) -- Conservative candidates captured two top offices in the Tennessee Baptist Convention, after a get-out-the-vote campaign swelled registration to a near-record 2,155.

Meeting Nov. 11-12 in Jackson, Tennessee Baptists elected Knoxville pastor Doug Sager as president of the 1.1 million-member state convention. Sager, pastor of First Baptist Church of Concord in Knoxville, defeated Earl Wilson by a vote of 968-850.

Sager was endorsed by the conservative group Concerned Tennessee Baptists and at a pre-convention pastors' conference. Most moderates voted for Wilson, a former pastor and retired executive of the Tennessee Baptist Foundation, though he was not publicly endorsed prior to the convention.

In the race for first vice president, Hollie Miller, pastor of Sevier Heights Baptist Church in Knoxville and a member of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, won by 17 votes in a runoff election against James Hutson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Rockwood.

Miller was nominated for the post by Jerry Sutton, pastor of Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, and a leader in the state's conservative movement.

In September, Sutton mailed a letter to pastors across the state urging churches to send their full contingent of messengers to the annual meeting to elect conservative leaders.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group, "controls" the state convention, Sutton charged, "because so many cooperating Tennessee Baptists tend to sit on the proverbial fence and choose to do nothing."

"In short, we choose unity over truth," the letter said.

In another race, this one without political overtones, Ken Clayton, pastor of Tulip Grove Baptist Church in Old Hickory, was elected second-vice president over Clay Austin, pastor of First Baptist Church in Blountsville.

In other business, outgoing president Herbert Higdon appointed a 15-member "relationships focus group," which will seek reconciliation between political factions. The group is scheduled to report to the state convention's executive board in September and to next year's convention in Kingsport.

Messengers approved a record \$30.1 million Cooperative Program budget, which allocates 37.5 percent to the Southern Baptist Convention and 62.5 percent to the Tennessee Baptist Convention.

The convention also agreed to enter a three-year missions partnership with the Carioca Baptist Convention in Brazil and extended a current partnership with Baptists in Canada by three more years.

Resolutions were passed opposing gambling and religious persecution.

It was the second largest convention gathering in Tennessee Baptist history, eclipsed only by 2,286 messengers in 1992.

Voucher initiatives fail in first session of Congress

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Despite repeated attempts, lawmakers ended the first session of the 105th Congress without passing legislation that would use tax dollars to help parents pay for tuition at religious schools.

At the beginning of the term, Republican leaders put educational vouchers at the top of their education-reform agenda. Congressional leaders tried various legislative vehicles to enact voucher proposals. While voucher supporters won some votes, they failed to gain final approval for any voucher measure before Congress adjourned Nov. 13.

Needing to approve several appropriations bills before leaving town, lawmakers compromised by removing a controversial voucher proposal that was holding up a spending bill for the District of Columbia.

Under an agreement, the Senate approved the D.C. funding bill without the voucher plan but passed the voucher measure in a separate bill on a voice vote.

The House is expected to take up the D.C. voucher plan, now separate from the funding bill, during the next session of Congress. President Clinton is expected to veto the measure if it reaches his desk.

Another House voucher proposal failed Nov. 4 on a 228-191 vote. The "Help Empower Low-Income Parents Scholarships Amendments" (HELP) would establish the first nationwide program to provide vouchers for private and parochial schools.

The HELP plan was taken from the "American Community Renewal Act," which failed to get a House vote this year. It would provide tax incentives for up to 100 low-income "renewal communities" that enacted a voucher program.

Congress also failed to move another proposal designed to boost funds available for private and religious elementary and secondary schools. The measure passed the House but ran into a filibuster in the Senate.

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