

Associated Baptist Press

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In this issue:

- Sider says 'economic hardball' won out in NIV gender dispute
- Religious groups want RFRA enforced on federal government
- First Amendment disputes rejected by Supreme Court
- Needed: 'Post-modern' churches for 21st century, author says
- On average, half of Baptist church members inactive
- Listen before members leap, church consultant says
- Three factors keep members coming to church

Sider says 'economic hardball' won out in NIV gender dispute

WYNEWOOD, Pa. (ABP) -- Last spring's spat over a "gender-accurate" Bible translation indicates that "economic hardball" has triumphed in the realm of theological debate, claims progressive evangelical Ron Sider.

The International Bible Society and Zondervan Publishing House changed plans for a new New International Version Bible translation in May, after controversy erupted over proposed "gender-accurate" revisions.

Sider, a prominent evangelical figure and publisher of Prism magazine, has written an open letter on the topic. The letter is published in the January/February issue of Prism, the bimonthly magazine of Evangelicals for Social Action. Sider's letter is addressed to James Dobson, World magazine, signers of the "Colorado Springs Guidelines," IBS and Zondervan.

Last spring, World, a weekly magazine based in Asheville, N.C., published a story claiming IBS and Zondervan were preparing to publish a "unisex" version of the NIV translation. The story set off a loud protest among conservative evangelicals, including several leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention.

World is edited by Marvin Olasky, who advocates a journalistic style he calls "directed reporting." Following that style, the magazine presents a kind of advocacy reporting, with news articles biased toward what editors and writers believe the Bible says about current issues.

Both Zondervan and IBS criticized the World magazine articles about changes in the NIV as hostile and inaccurate. The Evangelical Press Association investigated an ethics complaint against the magazine but later declined to render judgment after a failed mediation attempt.

Other evangelical figures, meanwhile, including James Dobson, president of Focus on the Family, and Baptist seminary presidents Paige Patterson and Albert Mohler, echoed positions expressed in the World magazine articles.

Officials with the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board held private meetings with Zondervan and IBS leaders, amid strong hints that the Sunday School Board might stop using the NIV in its publications.

As criticism of the proposed new NIV translation mounted, IBS and Zondervan announced they were dropping all plans for the revised NIV.

Just days later, Dobson spearheaded a summit of selected evangelical leaders which resulted in a document called the "Colorado Springs Guidelines." Those guidelines set forth principles of Bible translation held by opponents of the "gender-accurate" NIV.

Sider, in his open letter, said the Colorado Springs meeting disserved the Christian community because of the way it was convened and the haste with which it addressed a complex subject .

"That two of evangelicalism's most respected and influential agencies (IBS and Zondervan) would allow an ad hoc, one-sided (though admittedly powerful) group to dictate their publishing decisions is extremely disturbing -- indeed, potentially disastrous for the future of evangelicalism," Sider wrote.

"It is disturbing because it represents the triumph of economic hardball in the realm of theological debate," he added. "And it is disturbing for its immense lack of grace."

Sider criticized IBS and Zondervan for reversing their decision to publish the "gender-accurate" NIV version in response to economic and ideological pressures.

"How could the IBS reverse its decision ... without widespread consultation with the full range of evangelical scholars and without allowing the NIV Committee on Bible Translation input regarding the most accurate translations? After all, wasn't the Committee on Bible Translation designed precisely to insulate the process from ideological pressure of any sort?"

Sider described participants in the Colorado Springs summit as "highly unrepresentative" of the total evangelical community and noted Dobson has "very little training in biblical languages."

In addition to Dobson, Sider also had harsh words for World magazine's role in the translation war, citing portions of a rebuttal letter written by Kenneth Barker of the Committee on Bible Translation which World magazine reportedly refused to publish.

Sider challenged Patterson's role in the issue, citing an article he wrote for the May issue of Jerry Falwell's National Liberty Journal. In that article, Patterson attacked Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago as an example of a church infected with the same type of "feminist ideology" he said was driving the new NIV translation.

"This deliberate use of false and misleading innuendo is hardly an honest, fair way to debate important issues within the Christian community," Sider wrote.

Sider concluded his open letter by urging IBS "to give its circle of translation experts full freedom to make the best scholarly decisions they can about the most faithful way to translate the Scriptures into contemporary English." He also urged Zondervan and IBS to publish both the current version of the NIV and the revised version.

-30-

-- By Mark Wingfield

Religious groups want RFRA enforced on federal government

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A group of religious leaders is asking a federal appeals court to find that a religious liberty law which the U.S. Supreme Court said cannot be imposed on states still applies at the federal level.

The Supreme Court ruled last year, in *Boerne vs. Flores*, that Congress lacked the authority to impose the Religious Freedom Restoration Act on states and localities. The act, passed by Congress in 1993, strengthened protections for religious practice.

But attorneys for religious groups and the Clinton administration have argued that the high court's ruling invalidating the law did not apply to the federal government.

In a major test case for that argument, the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is deciding whether RFRA still prevents the confiscation of tithes to pay the debts of donors who later go bankrupt.

The appeals court ruled in 1996 that RFRA protected a Minnesota church from being forced to turn over \$13,450 donated by a couple during the year before they filed for bankruptcy. But the Supreme Court vacated that ruling and ordered the appeals court to reconsider the case in light of its ruling against RFRA.

After reargument of the case in December, a church-state lawyer was hopeful the appeals court would rule that RFRA still applies to the federal government.

"I am optimistic that Flores will be confined to what it is, a state case about the limits of congressional authority over states," said Steven McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom.

"I hope this court buries once and for all the idea that church offering plates are new reservoirs for creditors," he added.

A brief filed at the appeals court on behalf of a coalition of religious and civil-liberties groups argues that "RFRA unquestionably remains valid as applied to federal law."

The bankruptcy case "does not involve Congress imposing a rule of religious freedom on the states," the brief argues, but rather concerns Congress' power to "amend" the federal bankruptcy code.

In another brief, the U.S. Justice Department contends that RFRA does not violate the "separation of powers" doctrine by giving religion greater protection than current Supreme Court interpretations of the First Amendment.

"As long as federal legislation falls within Congress' enumerated powers, it may hold the federal government and federal law to a higher standard than the Constitution requires," the brief states.

-30-

First Amendment disputes rejected by Supreme Court

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has refused to hear First Amendment claims of a lesbian lawyer denied a promised job in the Georgia attorney general's office and of two Christian Scientists who sought to challenge large expenditures by their church.

The two disputes were among dozens of cases rejected Jan. 12 as the high court returned to the bench following a four-week recess.

Left standing in the Georgia dispute was an 8-4 ruling by the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals siding with former Attorney General Michael Bowers. Bowers was sued after revoking a permanent employment offer to Robin Shahar because of her planned "marriage" to another woman.

Shahar, who graduated sixth in her class at Emory University's School of Law, worked as a summer law clerk in the office in 1990. At the end of the clerkship, Shahar accepted Bowers' offer to become a staff attorney after completing law school and was scheduled to begin work in September 1991.

But after learning of plans by Shahar and another woman to make a lifelong commitment to each other in a Jewish wedding ceremony, Bowers withdrew the employment offer, telling her that as the state's chief legal officer, his tacit approval of the same-sex union would "jeopardize the proper functioning of this office."

Shahar sued, claiming Bowers' action violated her rights of free exercise and free association as well as her rights to equal protection and due process.

A federal district court upheld the attorney general's decision. A three-judge appeals panel reversed part of the judgment. After a rehearing by the district court, the entire 11th Circuit appeals court sided with Bowers, 8-4.

The appeals court said the attorney general's interest in promoting efficiency in his office outweighs Shahar's personal associational interests. The majority also cited Bowers' concern about public reaction to having a staff

- attorney who is part of a same-sex marriage.

"The attorney general has a right to take steps to protect the public from confusion about his stand and the law department's stand on controversial matters, such as same-sex marriage," the majority opined.

Three dissenters, however, argued that Bowers' "fear of negative public reaction" should not outweigh Shahar's freedom-of-association rights.

"Although public confidence certainly is a relevant concern for Bowers, it is important to note that catering to private prejudice is not a legitimate governmental interest," the dissenters said.

Left standing in the Christian Science dispute was a ruling by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court that two members of Boston's First Church of Christ, Scientist, lacked standing to challenge decisions by church leaders to expand electronic media activities.

Two members of the church -- Elizabeth Weaver, a justice of the Michigan Supreme Court, and Roy Varner, a Texas management consultant -- filed a lawsuit against directors and officers of the church and its publishing society. The lawsuit alleged that the defendants failed to abide by the church's governing documents in authorizing major television ventures in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The lawsuit alleged that the "series of risky media ventures" resulted in losses between \$400 million and \$500 million.

Church leaders argued that the ventures were undertaken to "promote" and "extend" Christian Science and to advance the church's religious interests.

A trial court ruled that Weaver and Varner had standing to sue, a decision church officials appealed to an appeals court and then the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.

The state's highest court said Weaver and Varner lacked standing to bring the suit and ordered the trial court to dismiss it.

Eighteen religious and civil liberties organizations had urged the top Massachusetts court to halt the lawsuit.

The religious groups said it is "inconsistent with the First Amendment for a civil court to determine a church's scheme of government, impose its interpretation of a church's foundational documents, or to review a church governing body's decisions about priorities, plans, and expenditures in pursuit of the church's mission."

Signers of the brief included the American Jewish Congress, the Baptist Joint Committee, the Christian Legal Society, the National Association of Evangelicals and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

-30-

Needed: 'Post-modern' churches for 21st century, author says

By Ken Camp

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Churches will thrive in the 21st century only if they love Jesus more than culture and give lay people permission to minister, author Bill Easum told a Texas Baptist conference.

But Easum, executive director and senior consultant with 21st Century Strategies, Inc., said control issues will prevent most churches from making the transition into the postmodern era.

"Control is the sacred cow of established churches, and it needs to be ground into gourmet burgers," he said.

Easum, author of "Dancing with Dinosaurs" and "Sacred Cows Make Gourmet Burgers," was the keynote speaker in an "innovative church ministries" track at the Texas Baptist Evangelism Conference, Jan. 11-12 in Fort Worth.

The postmodern way of viewing the world is more sensual than rational, more Hebrew than Greek, more chaotic than organized, more experiential than cognitive, and more biological than mechanical, he said.

Yet most established churches are firmly grounded in the modern world view and will not be able to break radically with the past, Easum said.

"You can't morph a machine into an organic substance," Easum said. "I believe the hope of the future is not in transitioning older churches but in starting new churches.

New churches for the 21st century will be permission-giving networks which empower people to exercise their spiritual gifts, Easum said.

"The Body of Christ is whole only when individuals are free to live out their God-given gifts without asking permission," Easum said.

Key elements of permission-giving churches include empowerment, trust, a common mission, freedom, decentralization and collaborative networks, he said.

"Permission-giving churches encourage autonomous, on-the-spot decision making by collaborative individuals and self-organizing teams," Easum said. "They encourage ministry to be delivered any time, any place, by anyone, no matter what."

The only boundaries in a permission-giving church are the clear teachings of Scripture and the purpose statement and core values of that particular church, Easum said. He cited a model presented by Charles Wesley, an 18th century founder of the Methodist Church: "In the essentials, unity. In the nonessentials, freedom. In all things, love."

Standing committees are replaced in permission-giving churches by loosely knit teams which focus on single issues, Easum said. The clergy's role is to equip laity to exercise their spiritual gifts in daily life while the church creates a "body culture," or environment, to facilitate ministry. Consensus about the church mission replaces majority rule or committee structure to set a church's direction.

Easum identified other characteristics of postmodern churches that will thrive in the 21st century. Easum predicted the postmodern church will be:

- Grounded in the Bible, not theology. The point of entry for many postmoderns will be identification with the story of Jesus as the "man of sorrows," not with theological truths about the nature of Christ.

- Culturally relevant. Music and technology are essential parts of the life and language of postmodern people. Music and technology -- blended so thoroughly that they cannot be distinguished from each other -- will become essential parts of worship in postmodern churches.

- Transformational. Postmodern people respond to "radical faith that makes a difference," not to logical presentations of doctrine.

- Lay-led. Postmodern Christians reject distinctions between laity and clergy. They demand the freedom to exercise their spiritual gifts. "Clergy must be willing to lose control of ministry," Easum said.

- Centered around community. The 21st century church will offer life in community, not activities for leisure time. It will place strong emphasis on discipling and accountability.

- Experiential. Emphasis will be on the immediate supernatural presence of God among people whose lives have been transformed. Postmodern people have no use for institutions, dogma and tradition, nor will they be satisfied with clergy who act as mediators between the people of God and the truth of God.

-30-

On average, half of Baptist church members inactive

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Pick up the latest copy of your church directory and start thumbing through it. As you go, count the faces or names of people you haven't seen at church lately.

If you attend an average Southern Baptist church, you will have marked off two of every seven people by the time you reach the end of the directory. And if your directory includes what Baptists call "non-resident members," you will have marked off every other name.

According to the latest data available from the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, 31.8 percent of Southern Baptist church members are "non-resident" members, said Chip Miller, a consultant with the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

That means they no longer live in the area where they hold church membership.

While that problem is vexing, an even greater issue is the number of church members who haven't moved but are nowhere to be found at church, Miller said. Across the Southern Baptist Convention, 20.7 percent of all church members are "resident inactives," he said.

Taken together, that means 52.5 percent of all Southern Baptist church members could be classified as inactive, Miller said. "The older the church and the bigger the church, the more likely you'll fit this profile," he said.

And the percentage of inactive members in Southern Baptist churches is increasing. The current figure of 52.5 percent is up 2.4 percent from the previous year.

"If that doesn't get your attention, what will?" Miller asked. "If this trend continues, how much longer can we stay in business?"

Yet, Miller said, churches commonly overlook inactive members and instead focus their energies on reaching new prospects.

"It's pretty easy for us who are well-connected to say, 'Phooey on them! Why should we waste our time with them when there are so many other people out there to be reached?' Miller said.

But Miller said churches have a responsibility to minister to all members, both inactive and active.

"Until they die or move away, they are still our responsibility," he said. "Some of these are hard to like; they've caused us grief. But if we're not caring for them spiritually, probably no one else is either."

And for anyone who has been frustrated by the futility of attempting to maintain contact with an inactive church member with no apparent result, Miller has some advice. Don't give up.

"When we have tried and tried and said, 'She's hopeless,' we have taken on a judgment of God. But God says no one is hopeless."

Statistics demonstrate that inactive church members can be reclaimed into the life of the church, Miller added. "Fifty percent of currently active church members have dropped out of church at some time in their lives."

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Listen before members leap, church consultant says

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- To reclaim inactive church members, learn to listen for cries of help, even if they are non-verbal, advises a church-leadership consultant.

Most people who drop out of church are crying out for help, but the church has failed to hear their cry, said Chip Miller, who works for the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

Miller's presentation is based largely on research by John Savage, a United Methodist pastor who two decades ago began looking in earnest at why people leave Protestant churches. Savage's published research is among only a small amount of literature available on the subject, Miller said.

Through interviews with thousands of church dropouts, Savage identified a common track leading to the church's "back door."

"The track out of church may take three months or three years," Miller said. "But once they cross the line and have dropped out, we have between six and eight weeks to reclaim them. Then there's a sealing off that makes them far more difficult to reclaim."

And the longer a church member remains inactive, the longer it will take to bring that person back into the fold, Miller warned. "Some research says for every year they're out, it will take one in-depth visit to bring them back."

Why do church members drop out?

Miller said Savage's research provides a crystal clear answer: "In every situation, without exception, there was a cluster of private anxiety-producing events. The pain of that cluster was alive in the psyche of that person even though some of those things happened years in the past."

Furthermore, the church failed to notice or address the pain building inside the person, causing him or her to feel rejected or unneeded and left alone to deal with life's pain.

What makes the situation complex, Miller said, is that in many cases the person in pain doesn't verbalize it or may not even be fully aware of the pain.

Those "private clusters of anxiety" may be related to church personalities or events, but they are just as likely to have nothing at all to do with church. In some cases, a person may have a disagreement with the pastor or another church member, but sometimes problems within the family or at work may play themselves out in anger toward the church, Miller said.

Taken individually, these anxiety-producing factors may appear small, he added. "But if they don't get resolved, they begin to stack up" until one more small thing creates an emotional overload.

He cited four major sources of anxiety, or unresolved fear:

-- Reality. This includes problems such as sickness, accidents, deaths in the family, dealing with problem children.

-- Moral. This includes people who get entangled in their own moral failures, as well as those who become embarrassed or distracted by the moral problems of other family or friends.

-- Neurotic expectations. This happens when people maintain expectations of themselves, their family or other church members that are not realistic.

-- Existential dilemmas. This happens when a person becomes obsessed with and panicked by the difficult questions of life, such as the meaning of life and death.

According to Savage's research, the church member who faces a cluster of these anxiety-producing events always gives out a cry for help. But it may not always be expressed verbally.

Miller cited the results of Savage's interviews with people who dropped out of church. "These people will be very clear: 'I tried to say it; I tried to communicate it, but nobody heard.'"

One reason nobody hears, Miller said, is because most church members are trained to screen out these negative signals. "We don't like to hear cries for help. It may trigger fear in us, or we may retaliate by telling our own story."

The latter point, Miller said, is as simple as playing a game of "any problem you've got I've got worse." Instead of listening to another's problems, too many church members immediately turn the focus on themselves by telling their own related problems, he said.

And that, Miller said, demonstrates the best key for closing the church's back door toward inactive membership: Learn to listen.

"Anytime your church gathers, people are going to be crying out. You can hear them if you will listen."

He told the story of a man who was chairman of a church committee. During a committee meeting one night the man hit his fist on the table, expressed words of frustration and walked out, saying he was never coming back.

Another member of the committee got into his car and followed the man home. He greeted him there and calmly asked the angry man what was going on in his life. It turned out the man had experienced a major setback in his job. Since the man couldn't express his frustration at work, he projected it on the church, Miller said.

The action of that one perceptive committee member stopped what was destined to become another family dropping out of church, Miller said. And the same could be true in many other churches if members would learn to listen to the verbal and non-verbal signals of people crying out for help.

Left unattended, these clusters of anxiety fester and grow, Miller said. "The problem may have happened 20 years ago, but when you sit down and talk with that person, it will be as fresh in his mind as if it had happened yesterday."

The challenge of reclaiming inactive church members is to help them unpack these anxieties and resolve them, he suggested. "Until we unpack that cluster to a satisfactory level, we don't have a ghost of a chance of getting them back in church."

While this may sound like a job only years of professional therapy could undo, compassionate church members must take the first step in reclaiming those who have fallen away, Miller said. "There are not enough therapists, there's not enough money to get this done professionally. We've got to do it informally. You'll stumble and bumble, but that's OK."

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Three factors keep members coming to church

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The best remedy for inactive church members is to catch them before they drop out, Chip Miller advises.

While it may not be obvious to those who aren't looking, people on their way out the church's back door almost always give clues of where they're headed, said Miller, a consultant with the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

One simple indicator is worship participation. For example, a person or family may begin moving farther back in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings than where they usually sit. Their worship attendance may become less frequent before they stop attending altogether.

Sunday school attendance may begin sliding as well, Miller said. Or a person may stop attending committee meetings or participating in some other group or activity. Or parents may begin letting their children drop out of church activities as an early step toward a full exit.

The extensive research of John Savage on this topic shows that "a pattern of attendance indicates what's going on at a deeper level," Miller said.

Particularly with worship and Sunday school in a Baptist church, if anyone is absent seven consecutive Sundays, "he's in trouble," Miller warned.

Another key is to understand what keeps a person bonded with a church, Miller added. He cited three essential factors:

-- The person's faith is being fed.

-- The person is part of a group where people know his name and he finds identity and support.

-- The person has a sense of ownership in what the church is doing.

"When one, two or three of these begin to unravel, you've got trouble," Miller said.

The best way for a church to prevent people from sliding away from active participation is to learn to listen, Miller said.

But in addition, keeping an accurate record of attendance and then reading those records also is vital, he said. "If you don't hear us, at least see us."

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