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Pharmacists top clergy for Americans' trust

By Marv Knox

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- A search for integrity leads to the pharmacy, according to a Gallup poll.

"For the ninth consecutive year, America's pharmacists top Gallup's list of 26 occupations rated for their 'honesty and ethical standards,'" the Princeton Religion Research Center announced in its Emerging Trends newsletter.

Sixty-nine percent of Americans ranked pharmacists for having "high" or "very high" standards, reported the center, which is run by the Gallup organization. That's an all-time high for any profession.

Poll respondents were called in late December and asked: "Please tell me how you would rate the honesty and ethical standards of people in these different fields -- very high, high, average, low or very low."

Clergy ranked second in the survey, with a 59 percent "high" or "very high" rating.

The latest ranking showed a 3 percent increase for ministers, up from 56 percent the two previous years.

Clergy peaked with a 67 percent ranking in 1985, dipped to 53 percent in 1993 and have climbed since then.

Other professions with overall high rankings are medical doctors, 56 percent; college teachers, 55 percent; and dentists, 54 percent.

Four professions received moderately high rankings -- policemen and engineers, 49 percent; funeral directors, 36 percent; and bankers, 34 percent.

The largest block of professions received average ratings.

They included journalists and public-opinion pollsters, 23 percent; TV reporters/commentators, 22 percent; business executives, local officeholders and building contractors, 20 percent; newspaper reporters, 19 percent; stockbrokers, 18 percent; state officeholders, 17 percent; and real estate agents, 16 percent.

Pollsters found several occupations received relatively high negative ratings.

These included lawyers and labor-union leaders, 15 percent; senators, 14 percent; advertising practitioners, congressmen and insurance salespeople, 12 percent; and car salesmen, 8 percent.

House committee approves Religious Freedom Amendment

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A proposed amendment to the United States Constitution, aimed at bolstering religious liberty, has been approved by a Congressional committee.

The House of Representatives' judiciary committee approved the Religious Freedom Amendment March 4. If passed, it would become the first constitutional amendment concerning religious expression since the Bill of Rights.

The committee's 16 Republican members voted in favor of the amendment, proposed by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., while 11 Democrats opposed it.

Despite clearing a first hurdle, the measure faces a stiffer test on the House floor, where a two-thirds vote is needed to move the amendment toward ratification.

Istook said he is in discussions with House Speaker Newt Gingrich over when the full House will vote on the measure. He predicted the vote -- the first in 27 years on an amendment concerning religion -- will take place before summer.

Another Republican lawmaker, Florida's Rep. Charles Canady, predicted last fall the Istook measure will clear House committees but will ultimately "fail to pass the House by the requisite two-thirds majority."

The Istook amendment would, for the first time, insert a reference to "God" into the Constitution and would allow some forms of government-endorsed religious speech and school-sponsored prayer. It would also open the door for vouchers and other government benefits for religious groups that would otherwise be barred by the First Amendment's establishment clause.

Democrats failed on seven attempts to amend the Istook measure. Democrat lawmakers said the First Amendment and the Istook proposal could not coexist.

Lawmakers supporting the measure said it is needed to re-emphasize the original intent of the First Amendment.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and we don't seek to change that," said Rep. Bob Goodlatte, R-Va. "But it has been twisted beyond recognition through court interpretations time and time and time again."

He said courts have ruled against teachers joining children at the school flagpole to pray, singing Christmas carols, posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms or courtrooms and writing school papers about Jesus and others.

Debate grew intense at times.

"What I so object to about this kind of an effort is that this isn't promoting religion, this is almost like 'religion lite,'" said Rep. Robert Wexler, D-Fla. "Because in order to really practice religion, at least the way I grew up and practiced it, I've got to do it in the way which my family has done it for thousands of years. And to practice it in a way where everybody can participate and feel comfortable isn't my religion or anybody else's religion. That's a religion one-size-fits-all."

He added: "Let's be real. What motivates people with respect to religion is a deep-felt belief that they learn in their family, from their parents, from their friends, from their particular brand of religion. It doesn't come from a 30-second, you know, religion-for-everybody commencement exercise."

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., told Rep. Charles Canady, R-Fla., that the problem is not with the Constitution. "It's with Mr. Canady and with other people like him who deliberately and willfully or perhaps ignorantly misstate the law and deceive the American people."

Canady asked that Nadler's words be "taken down," but Nadler voluntarily withdrew his comments from the record.

Supporters of the amendment include more than 25 religious and advocacy groups such as the Christian Coalition, the National Association of Evangelicals, the Traditional Values Coalition and the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. The measure has 151 cosponsors.

Opponents include a coalition of more than 50 religious and civil liberties groups that form the Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty.

The Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington-based religious-liberty organization, released a statement saying that the measure would harm religious liberty.

"Religious liberty is a gift from God," the statement said. "Baptists believe prayer is a sacred act that government should not control. Baptists have always opposed the use of tax dollars to advance religion."

The BJC statement also said the First Amendment requires "that the government accommodate religion without advocating it; protect religion without privileging it; lift burdens on it without extending it a benefit."

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Religious leaders urge lawmakers to reject Istook amendment

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The day before a House of Representatives panel cleared a proposed constitutional amendment for floor action, Protestant and Jewish religious leaders urged Congress to leave the First Amendment alone.

"We are here to say that the religious community, by and large, does not support this amendment," Oliver Thomas, special counsel for religious and civil liberties of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., said at a Washington news conference March 2.

Thomas said supporters of the constitutional amendment represent a narrow segment of evangelical Protestants and that many, if not most, evangelicals support Supreme Court interpretations of separation of church and state.

"Many Baptists, such as myself, are offended that the issue of prayer has, once again, been politicized," Thomas said.

Approved by the House judiciary committee on a party-line vote, the proposal by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., would make more room for state funding of religious activities and government-sponsored religious expression. Istook and his supporters say the amendment is needed to overcome decisions by courts and school officials that have stripped Americans of religious liberty.

"The American people have never accepted the Supreme Court's extra burdens levied against school prayer and against religious freedoms during the past 36 years," Istook said in concluding a legal analysis of his proposal. "It has been 27 years since this House has acted upon the necessary constitutional amendment to correct this, and the time to remedy that is now."

But Thomas said religious leaders were "compelled -- once again -- to respond to this oversold and overblown notion that the First Amendment needs fixing."

The former general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee said the First Amendment has been good for religion.

"It has given Americans the strongest religious and political institutions on earth," he said. "The vast majority of the churches and synagogues in America recognize this fact, and that is why they have not jumped on Congressman Istook's bandwagon."

He said Istook's proposal would create religious competition for tax dollars.

"If it passed," Thomas said, "Bob Jones University would be entitled to the same public funding as the University of South Carolina, Jerry Falwell's 'Old Time Gospel Hour' to the same tax support as National Public Radio. In the end, every religion in America -- from Heaven's Gate to the Nation of Islam -- will have its hand out."

Rabbi Jack Alan Luxemburg, senior rabbi at Temple Beth Ami in Rockville, Md., said passage of "the misnamed 'Religious Freedom Amendment' would replace constitutional protections with coercive practice."

Istook's amendment, Luxemburg said, would permit sectarian prayer broadcasts over public school intercoms, tax-funded denominational missions and proselytizing, religious symbols erected in public places and the public endorsement of one religion over another as long as government did not compel participation.

"We do not want an America racked by divisiveness fostered by religious communities competing for government funding -- and for the implied government endorsement," he said.

Rabbi Kenneth Cohen, executive director of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, Seaboard Region, called Istook's proposal "alarming to anyone who cherishes separation of church and state."

Cohen said he learned the "Lord's Prayer" in the first grade of a public school when the teacher had the entire class stand and recite it.

"I did not know that I was saying a Christian prayer from the New Testament," he said. "I think that was an insensitive, thoughtless thing to do to Jewish children, but it was the norm where I grew up.

"Congressman Istook would have us return to that sort of outrage."

Thomas predicted that the House vote on the Istook proposal will be featured in voter guides distributed by such groups as the Christian Coalition.

"It is, after all, an election year," Thomas said. "Millions of 'voter guides' will be distributed and, won't it be convenient to list members of Congress as being simply 'for' or 'against' school prayer?"

In a statement released at the news conference, the Baptist Joint Committee said the First Amendment "requires no less and allows no more than this: that the government accommodate religion without advocating it; protect religion without privileging it; lift burdens on it without extending it a benefit.

"Congress will do the public a serious injustice if it upsets this delicate balance by passing the so-called 'Religious Freedom' constitutional amendment."

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Chairman of House committee details an 'appropriate prayer'

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The chairman of the House judiciary committee stunned opponents of a proposed constitutional amendment March 4 when he offered his views on what would constitute an "appropriate prayer" under the proposal.

The Religious Freedom Amendment, proposed by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., was approved by the committee on a 16-11 party line vote. During a markup session on the bill, committee chairman Henry Hyde, R-Ill., offered his thoughts on what types of prayer is "appropriate" in public life.

"My own view of prayer in the context of a diverse society would not want to make people feel left out or isolated," he said. "But I've been around enough and heard enough prayer to know that there are ways of praying that stress two things -- the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. That's common to the Jewish faith, Muslim faith, the Christian faith."

"An appropriate prayer, it would seem to me," Hyde said, would consist of "not the things that divide us and alienate us, but the things that acknowledge our humanity and the author of our humanity. That's what I hope would come out of this."

When asked by a Democrat lawmaker who should write the prayer, Hyde said "the same people who prescribe what the prayer is everyday when we open our sessions of Congress -- anybody, take turns, rotate it -- anybody."

He added that "it doesn't have to be you or me or the Baptists or the Pentecostals. Just anybody and everybody."

Religious leaders in the Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty, which opposes the Istook amendment, were quick to call attention to their claim that the amendment would allow government officials to dictate how people pray.

"There they go again -- the government telling us how to pray," said Melissa Rogers, associate general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee.

"How does a congressman know what an appropriate prayer is for me or anyone else?" she asked. "Representative Hyde has just pointed out the Catch 22 inherent in the Istook amendment -- either least-common-denominator, government-approved prayer or robust prayer endorsed by the government, which is almost always divisive," she said. "Both offend my faith and the Constitution."

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said Hyde "signaled just what he intends this to be, which is majoritarian will that ignores the complexity of other religious viewpoints."

Lynn called it "extreme naivety or hypocrisy to suggest that government shouldn't be involved in prayers and then the next word is the suggested nature of the prayer that ought to be prayed."

"But this is inevitable when you get this close to mixing government and religion.," he said. "You're going to have government ending up deciding which prayers are the ones that are acceptable."

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After RFRA, religious freedom under siege, witnesses tell lawmakers

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- With protections of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act swept away by the U.S. Supreme Court, state and local governments are imposing substantial burdens on religion, 11 practitioners of various faiths recently told a Congressional panel.

A Jewish rabbi told lawmakers that county zoning laws in California prohibited an Orthodox group from holding a small-group prayer meeting in a neighborhood, even though rules of the faith forbid members from driving or riding in motor vehicles on the Sabbath.

"What do I tell an 84-year-old survivor of Auschwitz, a man who used to risk his life in the concentration camp whenever possible to gather together a 'minyan' to pray?" Rabbi Chaim Baruch Rubin of Los Angeles asked lawmakers. "Do I tell him that because he is old and weak and an amputee, that he must walk at least a mile and a half to pray, because to quietly gather down the block is illegal?"

Other witnesses before a hearing of the House subcommittee on the Constitution detailed burdens on religion such as having to turn over tithes because of bankruptcy laws and being forced to rent housing to unwed couples.

The hearing is part of an ongoing effort to respond to the Supreme Court's ruling that struck down the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The court ruled that Congress lacked the authority to impose the law on the states and mentioned in the ruling that lawmakers had failed to establish an appropriate record of burdens on religion to warrant RFRA.

Rep. Charles Canady, R-Fla., said the freedom of religion is a fundamental right, but the RFRA ruling "has left men and women of faith ... without adequate protection against laws that interfere with their religious practice."

In other testimony, Richard Steel, pastor of Cedar Bayou Baptist Church in Baytown, Texas, asked lawmakers to "provide us the needed protection as we worship God and support our worship with our tithes and offerings."

Cedar Bayou Baptist Church was ordered to turn over \$27,687 in tithes given by a deacon of the church who later declared bankruptcy.

Steel said church bylaws require that deacons tithe. "In our case, church members are made to decide whom they will obey, God or the court," Steel said. "No citizen should be placed in such jeopardy."

Some testimony highlighted a split that has always been acknowledged by RFRA supporters.

RFRA requires that government show a compelling reason before it substantially burdens someone's sincerely held religious practice. While a broad coalition of religious and civil liberties groups supported the RFRA standard, the groups often disagree on what constitutes "compelling" government reason and "substantial" burdens.

Evelyn Smith of Chico, Calif., testified that she avoids renting out her two duplexes to unwed couples, but the California Supreme Court ruled that she broke California housing rules.

"If I become aware that a couple is not married, I tell them that I am very uncomfortable renting to 'unweds,' as I call them. I tell them I am a Christian and that the Bible says sex outside of marriage is a sin and I do not want to condone it," she said.

American United for Separation of Church and State released a statement at the hearing about Smith's testimony, saying: "We are perplexed as to why she would be called to testify in this congressional hearing. ... There is no reason to believe that she or others similarly situated would or should prevail under a new version of RFRA."

"I don't think any religious beliefs should be used to exempt you from fair housing laws," said Rep. Robert Scott, D-Va.

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