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## **Parties laud settlement of Louisiana College lawsuit**

PINEVILLE, La. (ABP) -- Parties on all sides issued statements welcoming settlement of a 1996 defamation suit filed by four professors at a Baptist college in Louisiana.

Following months of negotiations, a settlement was reached in late February, 20 months after Louisiana College professors Carlton Winbery, Fred Downing, James Heath and Connie Douglas sued Leon Hyatt of Pineville and the conservative organization Louisiana Baptists Speaking the Truth in Love for publishing and distributing letters the professors claim were false and defamatory.

Among charges in the letters, which were circulated by conservatives prior to the 1995 annual meeting of the Louisiana Baptist Convention, were that the teachers taught anti-Christian values, exposed students to pornography and urged tolerance of homosexuality and abortion. The professors' lawsuit termed those and other charges "absolutely and patently false."

Terms of the settlement included payment of attorney fees from a legal fund raised by Louisiana Baptist leaders and required Hyatt to write a letter of apology to each professor.

The settlement also assures that college trustees will take "no adverse action" against the professors as a result of the lawsuit. The professors pledge to teach in accordance with the Bible and college statements on academic freedom and responsibility.

"This is the beginning of the peace movement to put things behind us and move on in the spirit of reconciliation," said Louisiana Baptist Convention president Robert Anderson. "This is an example to show that we must love each other and forgive each other and work together to win this state to Christ."

While Louisiana College was not directly involved in the suit, the school's president, Rory Lee, said he was pleased "we as Louisiana Baptists are moving forward in a positive manner as we pursue our mission of winning people to Christ and of providing meaningful ministries such as the finest quality of education in a Christian setting."

In a joint statement, the four professors stated that "after almost a full year of reflection and prayer" they filed the lawsuit over "injurious and defamatory statements made in conjunction with a concerted plan for control of our state convention."

"We did not take this action for financial gain but rather in an effort to stop those unwarranted attacks on our personal and professional reputations as well as to protect the academic integrity of Louisiana College and to continue the tradition and spirit of free inquiry long associated with our college. Regrettably, the courts offered the only venue where the required degree of civility existed.

"We are now pleased and gratified that this case has now been settled in such a manner that, to the greatest extent possible, our personal and professional reputations have been restored. We are most appreciative of the Louisiana College board of trustees' affirmation of our past dedication and commitment to the college and its students."

Hyatt issued a statement voicing appreciation for the settlement and other comments.

"I am happy that four professors at Louisiana College have released and discharged all claims they made against me and Louisiana Baptists: Speaking the Truth in Love," Hyatt said. "I am eager for the suit to become forgotten past history as soon as possible."

Hyatt also expressed gratitude that "the atmosphere at Louisiana College that caused us to take the actions that precipitated the lawsuit has greatly changed" and "that the new administration and the board of trustees are willing to hear concerns we have about problems that have not yet been solved."

"We are happy to be able to express ourselves to them, so that taking our appeal to the churches is no longer necessary."

Hyatt said he was glad to write the apology letter that was part of the lawsuit and sent to each of the four professors. "Our purpose was to bring about change in some moral and doctrinal positions of the college and not to hurt anyone. When some individual professors said they experienced pain and anguish, I was sorry. ... In the future, I commit myself as much as is possible to conduct our efforts in a way that makes it plain we are challenging policies, not individuals."

In the apology letter, Hyatt says to each professor: "I sincerely regret and apologize for any and all personal hurt, pain, inconvenience, suffering or embarrassment suffered by you from any action initiated or performed by me. In the intense struggle of the past two years over the theological stance of Louisiana College and the Louisiana Baptist Convention, I have prayed that as little hurt as possible would be caused to or felt by all individuals involved. I have sincerely tried to work with that goal in mind. A number of people have told me I have not fully succeeded. I truly regret and apologize for that failure."

Hyatt acknowledged that he was responsible for compiling, duplicating and distributing letters circulated under the title "What You Should Know About Louisiana College" and that he did not verify their accuracy. "I trusted the writers of the letters, and believed what they wrote was true," he wrote.

"I am sorry for the personal pain I have caused you or any other person," Hyatt's letter continued. "You are a dedicated scholar, a sincere person, and a skillful teacher. I like you as a person. I pray for you daily. I am sorry for statements I have made that reflected on you as a person and for actions I have taken that offended you as an individual. I want to reaffirm my love for Louisiana College, its administrators, its faculty and you."

"I am eager to work to uphold my theological convictions without disparaging the motive of those who hold different convictions," he continued. "I want God to give me the ability to express my convictions in a loving and constructive way that does not harm other individuals. I am open to advice and counsel from any person who can help me act in such a manner."

Hyatt said he now has two regrets. "I long for the professors to respond to my apologies by saying they accept those apologies and forgive me," he said. "We all need that affirmation as we face the future of our college together.

"My second regret is for the unfortunate decision of the district judge, who ruled against our claim that secular courts have no jurisdiction over religious disputes. I consider his decision to be one of the worst church-state decisions since the First Amendment was adopted."

Hyatt's lawyer had sought to have the suit dismissed on church-state grounds. An Alexandria judge declined that request, however, and was upheld by both a state appeals court and Louisiana's Supreme Court.

"The First Amendment is a fundamental right of all Americans, and no court should attempt to take that right away under any circumstances," Hyatt said. "If this decision should become legal doctrine in America, our religious 'freedom' would be more akin to that in dictatorial countries."

Winbery, however, said the judge's decision indicates that persons must be civil even in religious disagreements.

"If we can go from this point with a commitment to be civil and to respect one another and to do the best we possibly can to make sure our statements about one another are accurate, then I think it's a great day," Winbery said.

As talk about settlement grew serious, the professors involved in the suit sought assurances from Louisiana College trustees that they would not be penalized for their involvement in the matter.

Trustees subsequently approved a binding contract outlining such assurances for the professors during their September 1997 meeting.

The contract states that no adverse action shall be taken against the professors as a result of their filing the lawsuit. It also states that no adverse action shall be taken against the professors "for any prior conduct, action or behavior that has in any way been the subject or focus of the lawsuit."

"Adverse action" then is defined to mean such things as termination; suspension; reprimand, rebuke or censure; adverse comment or report in the personnel file; adverse or negative recommendation of job performance or character; loss of or challenge to rights of tenure; reduction in salary; loss of current job status; public criticism; denial of future salary increases or promotion; and any action that reasonably could be considered adverse or detrimental.

A subsequent paragraph notes it is not the intent of the agreement to create a lifetime contract for the professors.

Trustees then affirm the professors "for their past dedication and commitment to the college and its students."

In turn, professors offer three covenant pledges in the contract. They pledge that their teaching "will uphold and recognize the authority and divine inspiration of the scriptures, ... will be tolerant of students' views that do not wholly coincide with their own and will be supportive of students' needs in this regard, ... [and] will be consistent with the statement about teacher responsibility and academic freedom in the faculty handbook."

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-- By ABP staff

## **Trustees vote to keep seminary in New Orleans**

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary will remain in its inner-city location rather than move to the suburbs, trustees voted March 11.

"Today we say to Southern Baptists -- you have a seminary on mission in New Orleans," seminary President Chuck Kelley said after the unanimous vote to keep the seminary in New Orleans and begin developing a plan for a massive campus renovation.

That vote came after a two-year study commissioned by Kelley in which seminary leaders examined relocation possibilities and researched opinions of those associated with the school.

The results surprised committee members, who began the 1996 study with the assumption it would be best for the school to move.

In a survey, nearly 600 faculty, current and former students and others ranked "opportunities for ministry in the city" as the seminary's greatest strength. They ranked factors including crime, public schools and "moral atmosphere" of the city as "major" weaknesses, but also identified encouraging trends such as a falling crime rate, improved economic conditions and planned growth in family entertainment.

A campus study found many facilities worn and outdated, but estimated it would cost \$70 million for a major renovation, compared to a cost of \$120 million to \$150 million to relocate.

The trustee study also found the seminary is held in high regard within the community and that members of the neighboring area have good feelings for the school. They suggested that the key for the future is for the seminary to reflect the same attitude toward the neighborhood.

"We need not to be afraid to fall in love with the city of New Orleans and not to be afraid to live in this part of town," Kelley said in presenting the findings of the work group.

As far as facilities, the group identified needs for a library addition, an improved recreational center, construction of a continuing-education center and development of a student-hospitality center. The group also suggested the need to relocate off-campus apartment housing to the campus.

"This is not the place we have to be. This is the place we want to be," Kelley said. "And this is the place God wants us to be. This is the place where God is going to do something that will surprise us all. I don't know what it's going to be yet. But I know it's going to bring glory to his name, and it's going to be a great illustration of his power."

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-- By ABP staff

## **Critics continue to protest international seminary 'refocusing'**

PRAGUE, Czech Republic (ABP) -- Critics continue to assail a decision last September to "refocus" International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic, from a traditional seminary to supplementing basic theological education offered national Baptist seminaries across Europe.

Fifty-six former teachers, students and "friends" of the seminary recently signed on to a letter asking "that this hasty and unfortunate decision be reconsidered."

"We want to make it clear to Baptists that the seminary as a theological seminary is being closed," explained two signers, former professor Gunter Wagner and his wife, Doris, an alumna. "The 'refocusing' spoken about by those responsible for the decision is not in fact a refocusing of the seminary, but rather a refocusing of the utilization of the property and the library," the Wagners wrote from their home in Corralles, N.M.

The 56 signers endorsed a letter sent in January to European Baptist Federation president David Coffey by another long-time teacher at the school, formerly located in Ruschlikon, Switzerland.

"You have now effectively limited post-graduate theological education in a Baptist context to Great Britain and [the] U.S.A., both of which have plenty of colleges and seminaries and universities," wrote Thorworld Lorenzen, a long-time professor at Ruschlikon. "They never needed IBTS."

American and British schools "want international students," Lorenzen said, but "they are very expensive, not international and for various other reasons are often not the best context for people from Asia, Africa and Latin America."

In September, the European Baptist Federation's executive committee approved a sweeping seminary "refocusing" recommended by IBTS trustees. The plan will transform the institution from a traditional theological seminary into a network hub offering specialized programs to supplement basic education offered by 45 seminaries and Bible schools across Europe, many of which have sprung up in recent years.

The controversial change means, among other things, that current faculty will be replaced and students must transfer to finish their degrees.

The plan calls for discontinuing course work for the seminary's bachelor of theology and its five-year master-of-theology programs.

In their place, courses will be developed to offer specialized instruction in missions and evangelism, Baptist and Anabaptist studies, Christian education and human rights/religious freedom.

The new focus will "shift direction to concentrate on those things that will most help the mission [and] life of European Baptists," said Keith Jones, a British Baptist who chairs the seminary's board of trustees.

It is also hoped to expand influence beyond the seminary's relatively small student body by networking thousands of European Baptists through the offering of advanced or specialized training, continuing education and courses for lay people.

Supporters of the change said it was overdue and necessary in light of changes in Europe's political and religious landscape.

Critics of the plan, however, said European leaders caved in to demands of more conservative Baptist unions in eastern Europe, which distrusted the seminary because it was heavily influenced by the more-liberal West.

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-- By Bob Allen

## **Religious Freedom in China making progress, clerics say**

NEW YORK (ABP) -- A delegation of U.S. religious leaders returning from a trip to observe the status of religious freedom in China declared the trip a success, saying they were able to raise religious-freedom issues directly with Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

According to Religion News Service, the leaders, criticized by some for being too soft on Chinese officials, said the trip could lead to an ongoing dialogue with the Chinese government about religious freedom.

"It was the beginning of a process," said Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation and one of the three delegates to China.

"Religion is now on the agenda of the top leaders of China," Schneier said at a March 18 press conference in New York.

Schneier, along with National Association of Evangelicals President Donald Argue and Roman Catholic Archbishop Theodore McCarrick of Newark, N.J., spent three weeks touring China on a trip that grew out of last year's Washington summit between Jiang and President Clinton.

While the White House hand picked the delegation, it traveled with funding from private foundations to underscore its independence.

The three said religious persecution in China is well-documented and their visit had limited but important goals that may someday lead to greater freedom.

Days before the delegation released its report, McCarrick said Christianity is exploding in communist China and that the Chinese are far from spiritually impoverished.

He said the biggest obstacle to church growth is the Beijing government's requirement that all churches register with the government, leading many to join the "underground, unofficial church."

They visited six cities, including Lhasa in Chinese-occupied Tibet, and met with Jinag and other top Chinese officials. In addition, they gave Chinese officials a list of 30 religious leaders believed to be in jail or otherwise restricted because of their religious activities.

However, some China critics maintained that the delegation was used by both China and the White House to make it appear both were doing more than they actually are to address the issue.

"In fact, they were manipulated in China by the official propaganda machine and treated to a Potemkin religious tour," said Nina Shea, director of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom.

"Washington also used them to abdicate its responsibility by shifting the push for human rights to the sphere of citizen diplomacy while it gets on with the business of talking trade with China," she said.

Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., disagreed, calling the panel's report "even-handed."

Campbell, who had criticized Clinton for not including an NCC official on the delegation, nevertheless liked the report. "It's important because it acknowledges the limits of religious freedom but doesn't insist, like some critics, that this is religious persecution greater than ever in history."

Argue said: "I can assure you that we pressed [our] points very forcefully. We were not wallflowers. We pressed the points with vigor."

In their report, the delegation said they pressed Chinese officials to end their insistence that religious groups receive government sanction or face a possible crackdown. They also urged the Beijing to allow religious groups "to relate more fully" to international religious bodies.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Istook vote to coincide with graduations, House official says**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A U.S. House vote on the Religious Freedom Amendment will occur in late May or early June, to coincide with graduation ceremonies at public schools, according to a spokesman for the House majority leader.

It would be the first full House vote on a constitutional amendment concerning religious freedom in 27 years. The measure is sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla.

Horace Cooper, press secretary for House Majority Leader Richard Armey, R-Texas, said the vote, originally scheduled for early July, has been moved up to "help remind people about how people of faith are stymied when they enter the public arena -- in this case, with commencement exercises."

Cooper said the House GOP leadership made the scheduling decision.

The Istook measure would allow some forms of government-endorsed religious speech and school-sponsored prayer. It would open the door for education vouchers and other government benefits for religious groups that would otherwise be barred by the First Amendment.

Lawmakers and religious groups supporting the measure say it is needed to correct judicial misinterpretations of the religion clauses of the First Amendment. The supporters, including the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and the National Association of Evangelicals, say individuals are often prohibited from expressing religious beliefs in public areas.

Opponents of the measure, including the Baptist Joint Committee and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., insist that courts already protect religious practice. They urge education about what current law already protects to resolve religious-expression disputes which arise in public schools and the public square.

Democrat lawmakers have charged that GOP leaders are voting on the amendment to fulfill a promise made to the Christian Coalition and other conservative Christian advocacy groups.

Cooper said "a vote on the issue that the public has been concerned about for some 30-odd years is occurring because we, in a Republican Congress, are trying to be responsive to the concerns of the public."

Steven McFarland, director of Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom recently told Associated Baptist Press the Istook amendment is "the guerilla in the doorway" holding up other legislation that may benefit religion such as a bill to protect tithes from bankruptcy laws.

McFarland said there are two theories about what to expect after a vote on Istook's proposal takes place. One is that Democrats and moderate Republicans who don't want to be labeled as "voting against God" will want to vote immediately on another measure impacting religion that they can support. The other theory, he said, is that the conservative leadership will not want another vote on a measure dealing with religion so that candidates running for office in 1998 will be judged by how they vote on the Istook amendment.

Cooper denied that the vote would be used as a vote "for" or "against" God. "We'll let the American people judge about the merits of the vote," he said.

On another church-state front, House leaders expect to schedule a vote on a bill that would give federal dollars to the District of Columbia to help some low-income parents send their children to private and parochial schools. Cooper said a vote on the D.C. voucher measure, which cleared the Senate last year, is expected in mid-May. President Clinton is expected to veto the measure.

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