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Clinton says First Amendment works, should not be rewritten

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Just days before the U.S. House of Representatives was to vote on a Religious Freedom Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, President Clinton declared in his weekly radio address that the First Amendment already protects religious freedom and should not be rewritten.

House lawmakers were scheduled to vote June 4 on a constitutional amendment proposed by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., which would permit some forms of government-sponsored school prayer and allow tax dollars to be used for parochial school vouchers and other religious activities.

Clinton acknowledged the school-prayer issue has been controversial but insisted the Constitution does not require schools to be "religion-free zones, where children must leave their faiths at the schoolhouse door."

The president noted that controversy over the issue has declined since the administration issued comprehensive guidelines in 1995 spelling out a wide range of permissible religious expression in public schools. The guidelines represented a broad consensus of U.S. religious bodies.

"Since we've issued these guidelines, appropriate religious activity has flourished in our schools, and there has apparently been a substantial decline in the contentious argument and litigation that has accompanied this issue for too long," Clinton said.

Clinton said the guidelines issued in 1995 are being modified slightly to reflect more recent court decisions and are being reissued to all public school districts.

Use of the guidelines and other means to help communities "find common ground about religious expression is the right way to protect religious freedom," he said.

"There's also a wrong way, amending the Constitution," he added, noting that the First Amendment has protected religious freedom and allowed many faiths to flourish.

"Clearly understood and sensibly applied, it works," Clinton said. "It does not need to be rewritten."

He said the nation's founders "believed the best way to protect religious liberty was to first guarantee the right of everyone to believe and practice religion according to his or her conscience; and second, to prohibit our government from imposing or sanctioning any particular religious belief.

"That's what they wrote into the First Amendment. They were right then, and they're right now."

The vote on the Istook amendment will be the first vote in the House on a school-prayer amendment to the Constitution since 1971. That year, a proposal fell 46 votes shy of a two-thirds majority needed for passage.

In 1984, a school-prayer amendment backed by President Ronald Reagan fell 11 votes short of a two-thirds majority in the Senate.

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Federal appeals court upholds Idaho graduation speech policy

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A federal appeals court has upheld an Idaho school district's policy of allowing the four top graduating seniors to speak on any topic, including religion, at graduation ceremonies.

Madison School District No. 321 in Rexburg, Idaho, permits the top graduates to decide the content of their presentation. Graduates may deliver "an address, poem, reading, song, musical presentation, prayer, or any other pronouncement."

The policy was challenged by a community resident who filed her legal challenge under the pseudonym because she feared retaliation.

"Jane Doe" contended the policy violated the separation of church and state required by the Constitution, but a federal district court and the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals disagreed.

The appeals court rejected Doe's argument that the district policy should be struck down based on a 1992 ruling in which the Supreme Court declared a Rhode Island middle school's policy of inviting clergy to offer prayer at commencement exercises unconstitutional.

In contrast to the clergy-led prayers struck down in that case, the appeals court said the Idaho school district exerts no significant control over any religious content that student speakers include in the commencement program.

"When a state uses a secular criterion for selecting graduation speakers and then permits the speaker to decide for herself what to say, the speech does not bear the imprimatur of the state," the appeals court said.

By allowing any speech the student chooses, the appeals court said, the school district "neither advances nor inhibits religion."

Several church-state lawyers agreed with the appeals court's decision.

"There is a difference between allowing a student to speak on any topic, including religion, and designating part of the program for prayer," said Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee. "The former is not only permissible, it's constitutionally protected. The latter is neither."

Walker added that free religious speech by students should be encouraged, but "sponsorship of that speech should be avoided."

Steven McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom said the decision arrived in time to give high school students a civics lesson.

"When schools let students express their beliefs, they affirm, not violate, the First Amendment," said McFarland, whose organization filed a friend-of-the-court brief supporting the Idaho school district.

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, said the decision should be helpful in other districts.

"This decision is well reasoned and should clearly show other school districts that there does not need to be a constitutional crisis when a student wants to offer a prayer or mention God during a graduation speech," Sekulow said.

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Massachusetts man loses bid to place ads touting abstinence

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Massachusetts man has lost his bid to force a local high-school newspaper and yearbook to print paid advertisements promoting sexual abstinence.

Without comment, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected Douglas Yeo's request to decide whether the refusal by student editors to run the advertisements violated his free-speech rights.

Yeo, chairman of the Lexington Parents Information Network, sought to place the ads after the Lexington, Mass., School Committee decided to make condoms available to students as a public health matter. Yeo had campaigned against the condom-distribution policy.

He attempted to place ads declaring "ABSTINENCE: The Healthy Choice" in the Lexington High School newspaper, the Musket, and yearbook. Student editors of both publications rejected the ads based on unwritten policies against running political or advocacy advertisements.

Yeo filed suit against the town of Lexington and its school officials, claiming that his free-speech rights were violated.

A federal district court ruled against Yeo, but that ruling was reversed by a three-judge panel of the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

But in an opinion allowed to stand by the nation's high court, the full circuit court sided with the town and school officials, saying the decisions not to run the ads had been made by students, not state employees working for the school district.

To win his claim, Yeo had to show, among other things, that state officials or employees were sufficiently involved in denying his free-speech rights, the full appeals court said.

"Because the record establishes that the editorial judgment exercised was the independent judgment of the student editors of both publications, we resolve the question of state action against Yeo," the full appeals court said.

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Supreme Court rejects challenge to laws protecting clinic access

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court refused May 26 to hear arguments that federal and North Carolina laws protecting access to abortion clinics and other health-care facilities are unconstitutional.

Without comment, justices rejected a request from five North Carolina abortion foes to review a federal appeals court ruling that upheld the laws.

The North Carolina statute made it illegal to obstruct access to health-care facilities which offer abortions. The federal law, the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, established civil and criminal penalties for the use of force, threats or intimidation directed at people entering or leaving reproductive-health facilities.

The laws were challenged by plaintiffs Sharon Hoffman, Trudie Matthews, Diane Hoefling, Ronnie Wallace and John Bradley, who, according to court documents, "oppose abortion for moral, religious and scientific reasons."

A federal district court sided with the plaintiffs, holding that both laws violated the First Amendment and that the federal law exceeded Congress' law-making authority.

The 4th U.S. Circuit Court of appeals disagreed, reversing the district court on both laws.

In upholding the federal law, the appeals court rejected the district court's finding that Congress' constitutional authority to regulate interstate commerce did not authorize it to protect access to clinics.

Although the activity regulated by FACE "is not itself commercial or economic in nature, it is closely connected with, and has a direct and profound effect on, the interstate commercial market in reproductive health care services," the appeals court said.

The appeals court also reversed the district court's conclusion that FACE violates the free-speech rights of abortion opponents.

"The plain language of FACE prohibits only conduct that by force or physical obstruction injures, interferes with, or intimidates the provider or recipient of reproductive health care or speech that amounts to a threat of force that obstructs, injures, intimidates or interferes with the provider or recipient of reproductive health care," the appeals court said.

Other federal appeals courts have also upheld the law.

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Hybels says local church is the hope of the world

By Dan Martin

GLORIETA, N.M. (ABP) -- The local church really is the hope of the world, Bill Hybels told more than 500 church leaders from 30 states at the first annual National Innovative Church Leadership Conference at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center.

"Government does not have the solution to society's problems," said the pastor of Chicago's 16,000-member Willow Creek Community Church. "Education does not have the solution to the sin problem in this world [nor do] business or the military."

Hybels said the local church has an "entrustment" from Jesus Christ.

"We have the only message that can transform human life and redirect it," he said. "We have community that we can invite people to be a part of. We have the Holy Spirit to bind us together. We have the power of prayer ... We have a road map, the Bible. We have it all. It has been entrusted to us for this window of time."

The pastor said he hopes participants will realize what a privilege it is to be a leader in a local church.

The conference was designed to bring together church leaders to discuss the innovative church and to share ideas.

It was sponsored by the conference center in partnership with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the California Southern Baptist Convention, the Georgia Baptist Convention and the Baptist Sunday School Board.

In his presentation, Hybels told participants his church does not innovate for innovation's sake. "We innovate for one reason: to get the attention of believers and nonbelievers alike," he said.

"Many times church members go on auto pilot. Innovation is for capturing the attention of believers and moving them toward full discipleship."

Hybels, a storyteller, wrapped his message in the tale of a famous sailor who helped his sailing team win a championship. He paralleled the experience with the church.

"The first thing he asked us was what our mission is ... what we were trying to do," Hybels said. He said a church should not talk about anything else until "that is a done deal and ownership [of the mission] is all over the place."

Hybels said nine out of 10 pastors he talks with "cannot give me a simple statement of the mission of their church."

"A lot of churches assume that people know what their mission is, but most of them don't. Is it to propagate the doctrine of a denomination, or to pay the bills and keep the doors open, or to continue to hold services?"

"We have to be clear about what it is that we are trying to do. We have to clarify our mission," Hybels said.

He said every member of Willow Creek Church can describe the purpose of that congregation. "Our mission is to turn unbelieving people into fully developing followers of Christ."

Hybels said after the sailing team decided its mission was to win the race, the leader asked the team members to tell him their strategy.

"Want to know why a lot of people don't want to get clear on their mission? Because the next question is always, 'How you gonna do it?'"

Churches must build their strategy on their strengths, "what they are good at," Hybels said. "If it doesn't work, then change the strategy. At Willow Creek we are always trying to refine our strategy to make it work better."

After a congregation is "crystal clear on its strategy and together on its strategy, the next important thing is that people know their positions ... how to work together to get things done."

People in the church should know their gifts and work to use those gifts. "The church that gets everyone in their giftedness is a church that cannot be stopped," he said.

Positions in the church should go to those with the gift for that task, he said, "not to those with the money or those good at manipulation but to the person with that gift."

The next important factor the sailing team was asked was, "Are you willing to pay the price?"

"We have to challenge the people to give their best to God. A church will never reach its potential with half-hearted efforts of quarter-committed Christians," Hybels claimed.

The conference drew more than 500 participants.

Music was led by Denny Dawson of the People's Church (First Baptist Church) of Franklin, Tenn., and a former music minister at First Baptist Church, Dallas. The accompanist was Jim Gray, also of Franklin.

Dramas were presented at each session by Mark Tullos, of the Baptist Sunday School Board.

The team which planned the conference was made up of Ray Ezelle of the conference center; Bob Cavin of the BGCT; Lee Ross of the Georgia convention; Montia Setzler of the California convention and Ron Pratt of the BSSB.

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Internet important to innovative church

GLORIETA, N.M. (ABP) -- "The Internet may well prove to be the most important thing that has happened to the church since the invention of the printing press," Jesse Palmer said.

Palmer, co-founder and president of Details Communications in Birmingham, Ala., made his remark during a breakout session at the National Innovative Church Leadership Conference at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center.

"While it will never replace the fellowship of God's people gathered for worship and work, it will help us build Christian community, engage in missions and witness, minister to people, develop as disciples and use our gifts in ways we never imagined before," Palmer said.

The Internet "will literally revolutionize the way we do church," he said. "Literally everything an innovative church does will be affected. ... How and how well a church taps the potential of the Internet will determine if it is in reality an innovative church."

He offered eight marks of a great site on the Internet's World Wide Web:

-- Customer or user centered. Too often, he said, organizational concerns overshadow the needs of the user.

-- A dynamic home page. "It has a look which will arrest attention," he said.

- Intuitive organization which makes it easy to use.
- Current, well written content, which is updated. "Content still drives web sites and it should be informative, interesting and well organized," he said.
- Attractive, fast-loading graphics.
- Interactive features.
- Continuous creation, which means that it must be updated so that it looks different when people call a second or third time.
- Effective promotion, which increases its usefulness to church members and inquirers alike.

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