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In this issue:

- **U.S. House lawmakers reject constitutional amendment**
- **Religious leaders, lawmakers denounce religion amendment before House vote**
- **Pennsylvania pastor turns down SBC appointment in protest**

U.S. House lawmakers reject constitutional amendment

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A proposal to add to religious-liberty protections in the Constitution has failed in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Religious Freedom Amendment, sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., received the support of 224 House members (197 Republicans and 27 Democrats), a majority but 62 votes short of the two-thirds margin needed to pass a constitutional amendment. Opposing the measure were 203 lawmakers (175 Democrats and 28 Republicans).

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, led the opposition the Istook proposal.

"I have mixed emotions about this vote," he told Associated Baptist Press as the June 4 vote was announced on the House floor. "I'm ecstatic that we have preserved the Bill of Rights and its protection of religious freedom. But I cannot celebrate the fact that a majority of House members were willing to vote against the first 16 words of the Bill of Rights."

The last House vote on a school-prayer amendment occurred in November 1971, when proponents failed to achieve the necessary two-thirds on a 240-162 vote.

Noting that the vote on the 1971 amendment was closer than Istook's, Edwards said the vote is a "tremendous setback to the pro-Istook forces."

"After nearly three decades of millions of dollars of expenditures by the far right, they have lost significant ground," he said.

Edwards charged the vote was taken to appease leaders of the Religious Right. "It's interesting that within three weeks of James Dobson's trip to Washington -- in his summit meeting with House Republican leadership -- that a vote was scheduled on this even though they knew it would fail."

Both sides claimed the vote as a victory.

Supporters of the Istook proposal said they would continue the fight to make changes to the Constitution made necessary because a small number of justices have incorrectly interpreted the First Amendment.

"A majority of the House agrees that the Supreme Court has gone too far in distorting the First Amendment and our religious-freedom rights," Istook told reporters after the vote. He said it typically takes four or five attempts to pass a constitutional amendment.

When asked why so many religious groups in the Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty opposed his amendment, Istook said he had a longer list of groups which favored it.

Istook said opponents of his proposal were members of the political-correctness movement that has "acquired a strangle hold on many members of Congress."

"There have been a number of people who have just had their heads in the sand and refused to recognize that there is a major problem with what the courts are doing," Istook said.

He said the leading edge of the political-correctness movement is to say "that if somebody chooses to be thin-skinned and intolerant and take offense at a simple prayer of hope, that they have the right then to censor everyone and stop it from occurring."

The vote on the Istook proposal followed four hours of heated debate. Supporters argued that courts have gone too far in restricting the ability of people to practice their religion in public settings, while opponents said religious liberty is already adequately protected by the First Amendment.

President Clinton opposed the amendment.

Edwards said he was motivated to lead the charge against the Istook proposal after reading a speech delivered by Baptist figure George Truett in 1920 on the steps of the Capitol.

"In that he said that God doesn't want forced followers. If God wanted forced followers, he could bring that about in a second. Clearly he gave men free will -- the right to choose or not to choose, to choose to believe or not to believe in God. The roots of that principle embedded in the Baptist faith motivated me to fight this fight," Edwards said.

"I can think of no other issue in my entire political career that would ever be more important to me than defending the Bill of Rights and its protection of religious freedom," Edwards said.

Edwards, who attends a Baptist church in Washington, said "it seems to stray from the Baptist tradition when one begins to tear down the wall of separation between church and state."

The Istook measure would have allowed some forms of government-endorsed religious speech and school-sponsored prayer. It would have opened the door for education vouchers and other government benefits for religious groups that would otherwise be barred by the First Amendment. It also would insert the word "God" into the Constitution for the first time.

-30-

Religious leaders, lawmakers denounce religion amendment before House vote

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- As debate on a "religious freedom" amendment to the Constitution began in the House of Representatives, religious leaders and lawmakers warned at a Capitol Hill press conference that the measure would undercut, not strengthen, religious liberty in the United States.

Joined by representatives of the Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty, Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, called Rep. Ernest Istook's Religious Freedom Amendment "a horrible solution in search of a problem."

Edwards said the Istook amendment, which later fell 61 votes short of the two-thirds majority needed for passage, would harm religion by getting the federal government more involved in it.

"I feel comfortable agreeing with James Madison and Thomas Jefferson and all of human history that the best way to ruin religion is to politicize it, and that's exactly what the Istook amendment does," he said.

The Istook amendment would have permitted some forms of government-sponsored prayer in public schools as well as tax support of parochial schools and other religious activities.

Religious groups were divided over the issue, with members of the Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty, including the Baptist Joint Committee and American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., opposing the amendment. Istook supporters included the Christian Coalition, the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and the National Association of Evangelicals.

Asked at the press conference if scheduling the House vote on the amendment was a payoff for support from the Religious Right, Rep. Christopher Shays, R-Conn., said he thinks "my side jumps too often when some special interest group ask them to and this is one of those times."

Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-N.Y., said the Istook proposal "has nothing to do with acknowledging the power of God, and everything to do with asserting the power of special interest groups that are all too human and flawed.

"The Religious Freedom Amendment has nothing to do with expanding religious freedom, and everything to do with expanding the opportunities for religious coercion."

Several Baptists spoke out against the Istook proposal at the press conference.

"A vote against the Istook amendment is not a vote against God," said Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee. "It's a vote in favor of religious freedom."

Howard Roberts, pastor of Ravensworth Baptist Church in Annandale, Va., told reporters he opposes "school-organized prayers at any time and any place."

"I join Roger Williams, that pioneer resister, in saying no to coercion of any kind related to faith expressions so that I can say a resounding yes to religious liberty," Roberts said. "No to the Istook amendment. Yes to the First Amendment."

Representing the Office of Governmental Relations of National Ministries, American Baptist Churches, Curtis Ramsey-Lucas said he is concerned that the amendment would lead to "a dangerous entanglement between church and state, jeopardizing the distinct roles, rights and responsibilities of both institutions and the religious liberties of all citizens."

Carole Shields, president of People for the American Way, told reporters she was "born and raised a Baptist preacher's daughter in Oklahoma."

"My best friend teaches school there," she said. "Mr. Istook is also from Oklahoma and it's hard for me to believe that he wants her to teach his children our faith with the support of the state."

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said the Istook measure would "gravely weaken religious liberties and tolerance as we know them in America" and would lead to sectarian competition and divisiveness.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the amendment "would be a constitutional Godzilla, crushing religious liberty in its wake and destroying the true freedom the Bill of Rights gives us."

Pennsylvania pastor turns down SBC appointment in protest

By David Winfrey

MOON TOWNSHIP, Pa. (ABP) -- A Pennsylvania pastor has declined appointment to the Southern Baptist Convention's Committee on Committees in protest of the other committee member from his state.

John Morris, pastor of West Hills Baptist Church in Moon Township, Pa., said he withdrew because the other member told him he was selected to address concerns about liberalism in the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania-South Jersey.

The other appointee, Chris LaRue, associate pastor with youth at Mason-Dixon Baptist Church in New Freedom, Pa., said Morris misinterpreted his remarks. "I really feel like he is trying to start something," said LaRue, 25.

Morris, 42, said political activity by SBC leaders is not welcome in the small convention, which tends to be conservative but has traditionally focused energies on missions and church planting rather than theological differences.

"Quite honestly, the people I've talked to in my state aren't going to put up with it," he said. "We just don't have time to be shooting each other."

The SBC Committee on Committees, which is appointed by the convention president in consultation with two vice presidents, is responsible for nominating members of the Committee on Nominations, an elected group which nominates trustees to serve on boards of various SBC entities.

Morris said he called to talk to LaRue after they both were named to the committee and later had lunch with him before deciding to decline. Morris said he was concerned about both the reason LaRue said he was nominated and about LaRue's short tenure in the state.

"He said he was put on that committee to address the concerns about the direction of the convention," Morris said. "It was very troubling to me. It was very troubling to our executive board."

But LaRue said he remembers the conversation differently.

He admitted he told Morris he desires "to try to keep the convention conservative," but said he did not mean to imply he thought the state convention is theologically off course. LaRue said he was "just saying: 'We're both conservative. We're trying to keep it conservative. Plain and simple.'"

Asked if he had any concerns about the direction of the state convention, LaRue said, "Not more than anyone else."

"We're far removed from any controversies," he added. "Obviously that's the direction we want to keep it going."

Morris, however, stood by his version of the story, saying he wrote down LaRue's quote because it surprised him. Morris said he understood LaRue to be saying the Penn-Jersey convention was becoming liberal, a charge Morris denies.

In his letter to SBC President Tom Elliff declining the appointment, Morris said Ken Cademartori, senior pastor at Mason-Dixon, had claimed credit for getting Morris appointed to the committee. Cademartori, a trustee of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and an avowed conservative, told Morris in a phone call that the Pennsylvania-South Jersey convention "needed his [Cademartori's] help getting back on course and only because of him was I on this committee," Morris said.

Pat Colladay, president of the Pennsylvania-South Jersey Baptist Convention, said he has seen no cause for concern about the direction of the convention. "I've never seen our convention be in a better position than it is today," he said. "Our baptisms are up, our giving is up, everything is working very, very well."

Colladay said he contacted Elliff after hearing from Morris. "Tom's a very gracious person. He didn't want to do anything that would hurt or harm our state," Colladay added. "I'm sorry to hear that John declined that (nomination) because he's a good man and he's worked well with the state."

Colladay said if LaRue expressed concerns about the convention they were made without a knowledge of the Baptist work taking place in Pennsylvania and South Jersey. "He hasn't been here long enough to recognize the direction we're going in, and he will."

David Waltz, executive director-secretary for the Pennsylvania-South Jersey Baptist Convention, said the state convention has not been influenced much by political activity in recent years.

"I would say that the general attitude is one of being in a mission setting trying to be about kingdom work and often feeling that a lot of the SBC politics is the luxury of those who are not so much on the cutting edge of ministry and mission," he said.

Mason-Dixon Baptist Church, which is near the Pennsylvania-Maryland border, just recently aligned with the Pennsylvania-South Jersey convention. It was started from a congregation in Maryland and has been aligned with the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware, Waltz said.

The church has been in conversation to join the Pennsylvania-South Jersey convention for about three years, Waltz added, but it actually joined at about the time LaRue was named to the Committee on Committees. It would have joined earlier, Waltz said, but the church's constitution had to be changed before it could become dually aligned with both Pennsylvania-South Jersey and Maryland-Delaware conventions.

Morris said he is concerned that Mason-Dixon's entry into Pennsylvania-South Jersey might have a negative effect on what he said has been a harmonious state convention.

"It grieves me to the point where I'm willing to go toe-to-toe with anybody who would try to hinder that unity that we have right now in our convention," he said.

Morris said he also objects to LaRue's selection because he has been in the state less than a year. "He hasn't even been in our state 10 months," he said. "He didn't even know his own DOM (association director of missions) or any other pastors in his association."

LaRue said he discussed that with Morris but believes that objection is pointed more toward those who recommended his appointment.

"I told him if those who appointed us were comfortable and confident with me then that's all I could go by," LaRue said. "I was confident in having him as a partner and the access to the other pastors in Pennsylvania-South Jersey."

SBC bylaws state that Committee on Committee members must have been resident members for at least a year of a Southern Baptist church that either is in the state or affiliated with the convention of the state from which they are appointed.

Morris said that when he expressed his concern to the SBC Executive Committee's office in Nashville, Tenn., he was told that "technically" LaRue would be a member of that church for a year by the time the committee has its first meeting June 8.

Morris said he expressed his frustration both to Executive Committee leaders and to an assistant to Elliff at First Southern Baptist Church of Del City, Okla.

"I said, 'What we don't need is guys in the South telling us dumb Yankees how to run our convention. We can take care of ourselves,'" said Morris, a Pennsylvania native. "I know that's not a good thing to say, and it's not very Christlike, but somewhere it's got to stop."

While Morris questioned why pastors with longer tenures in the state and in the state convention weren't nominated, Colladay said part of the problem was that Elliff received only six nominations from throughout the state convention for SBC leadership positions.

Waltz agreed, noting that after past controversy over nominations he has been less enthusiastic about responding to the letters requesting recommendations for SBC leadership.

Morris said he previously has sided with the conservative leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention, but "now it's given me a whole different spin, without a doubt."

Morris said he now considers himself to be a conservative similar to Richard Jackson, the former moderate-backed nominee for SBC president who called himself an inerrantist but said he wouldn't limit leadership roles to only those who were just like himself.

"In the state convention I'm considered to be an outspoken conservative. But in our state I'm respected because I respect the other people," Morris said. "I guess what I'm trying to do is encourage other conventions to put down the weapons of war against each other. We need to quit fighting each other and recognize that Satan's the enemy."

-30-

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