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SBC drops American Airlines as official convention carrier

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention has dropped American Airlines as a recommended carrier for the convention's annual meeting next June, claiming the company broke a pledge that it would no longer support gay-rights organizations.

Bill Merrell, vice president for convention relations for the SBC Executive Committee, said American Airlines "gave explicit assurances that it would not lend support to movements destructive of the family and society," according to Baptist Press.

Contrary to that promise, Merrell said, American Airlines gave \$50,000 to media awards of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and \$25,000 to the Human Rights Campaign, two homosexual activist groups.

An airline spokeswoman denied any promise was broken.

"I can tell you that the corporation never made a pledge to drop its support of any organizations," Andrea Rader, a spokeswoman for American Airlines, told Religion News Service. Rader said that while American is "disappointed that the Southern Baptists will not be flying with us," the airline makes all decisions about corporate giving and marketing programs "in the interest of customers, our shareholders and employees."

American Airlines officials met in 1997 with six evangelical leaders, including Richard Land of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, after they purchased full-page newspaper ads in Washington and Dallas urging the airline to abandon policies that "promote homosexual behavior."

In January, SBC leaders announced that American Airlines and Delta Airlines would both serve as official carriers for the 1999 Southern Baptist Convention, scheduled June 15-16 in Atlanta.

Baptists in Southern states look for ways to partner in Northeast

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Baptists in several Southern states are exploring a new strategy of evangelizing the American Northeast in partnership with Baptists in that region.

A general sketch of the undertaking -- tentatively called the Northeast Project -- was outlined at a Jan. 26 consultation in Richmond, Va. Attending were representatives of state Baptist conventions in Virginia, the District of Columbia, Maryland/Delaware, Minnesota/Wisconsin, New England, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania/South Jersey and Texas.

Also attending were Bobbie Patterson, associate executive director of the Southern Baptist Convention's Woman's Missionary Union, and Earlene Jessee, executive director of Virginia WMU.

The Religious Herald, newsjournal of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, covered the meeting under background rules which permit it to report a general sense of the discussion and any action taken but prohibit direct quotation with attribution.

Although the forum was the third connected with the project, many details remain to be settled, said participants.

However, those attending the all-day session expressed a deep desire to accelerate the spread of an evangelical witness in the Northeast, one of the most secularized regions of the country and home for nearly a quarter of the nation's population.

A tentative set of priorities discussed Jan. 26 focuses on strengthening the base of evangelical ministry by starting new congregations, aiding the growth and development of existing churches, developing a ministry to college and university students, and offering leadership training.

These priorities will be discussed further at a March 29 meeting in Baltimore and possibly in June in Atlanta, when the group gathers in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Although a scheduling conflict kept representatives of the Mississippi Baptist Convention from attending the Richmond meeting, that state already has budgeted funds for the project. So has the Baptist General Association of Virginia, which has allocated about \$108,000 in its 1999 budget.

Participants said other state Baptist conventions have expressed interest in the project.

To maintain momentum, the group agreed a full-time coordinator would be necessary, perhaps guided by a steering committee representing participating state conventions.

Traditionally, Southern Baptist ministry in the Northeast has been led by the SBC's North American Mission Board, which provides substantial partnership assistance to churches, district associations and state conventions in the 11-state region.

Additional support has been provided by one-on-one partnerships between established state conventions in the South and smaller state conventions in the Northeast.

The Northeast Project will provide a new dimension to partnerships through its multistate approach.

Participants at the Richmond meeting were careful to say their efforts did not conflict with the NAMB or were not motivated by ill will toward the agency or its denominational parent.

"In no way are we trying to undercut NAMB work in the Northeast," Reginald McDonough, executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, said after the consultation, which was held in the Virginia Baptist Resource Center. "The NAMB has begun to focus on large metropolitan areas through its strategic-focus-city strategy. That's a good focus, but there is much more that needs to be done and this [the Northeast Project] will fill in some of the gaps.

"We're trying to fit into the overall picture to have an impact."

Participants also stressed their commitment to a cooperative approach that avoids what some called a "Baptist-welfare system," in which large sums of money channeled through the NAMB are transferred from Southern state conventions to Northeastern ones, often with strings attached.

Northeastern representatives said they were seeking a "truly reciprocal partnership" that gives them wide latitude to determine priorities in their region and allows them to offer their experience in ministry to churches in the South.

The Northeast Project will build on the state-to-state partnerships that are widely seen as successful and have attracted thousands of volunteers engaged in evangelism and social ministries.

Part of the success of the Northeast Project will be its ability to attract a continuing stream of volunteers to implement its goals. The leader of one Southern state convention said people in his state will be looking for "creative and innovative" ministries that will excite them. A Northeastern representative responded that Baptists in his region are open to creativity and innovation, which he said may be refreshing to some churches which have felt compelled to work within established frameworks.

A possible enthusiasm-builder will be the 300th anniversary in 2007 of the Philadelphia Baptist Association, to which many Southern Baptist state conventions and churches can trace their heritage. "This could be seen as returning to our roots," said one participant.

One plan discussed envisions a seven-year emphasis beginning in 2000 and culminating in the "celebration" year of 2007.

Other ideas discussed included:

- Establishing a network of "teaching churches" through the Northeast to model effective ways of ministry.
- Ensuring the growth of indigenous congregations that draw from native Northeasterners rather than displaced Southerners.
- Developing long-distance-learning mechanisms through communications technologies.
- Initiating long-term mentoring relationships between campus-ministry groups in the South and the Northeast.
- Providing financial support for churches to offer pastoral salaries commensurate with the Northeast's high cost of living.

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Educator William Hendricks to retire at end of August

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Longtime Baptist educator William Hendricks has announced he will retire at the end of August as director of the Baptist Studies Program at Texas Christian University's Brite Divinity School.

Hendricks was named to the post in 1995. He also is a lecturer in theology at the school in Fort Worth, Texas, which is affiliated with the 910,000-member Christian Church (Disciples of Christ.)

In a teaching career spanning nearly four decades, Hendricks taught theology 10 years at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., before retiring in 1995, 20 years at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth and five years at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif.

He has written numerous articles and books including *A Theology for Children* and *A Theology for Aging*. He and his wife, Lois, plan to remain in Fort Worth, where he will continue to serve as a consultant for the Baptist Studies Program.

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-- By ABP staff

Church's response to welfare reform poses moral drama, religious leader says

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A great moral drama unfolding in the nation is the plight of low-income Americans recently removed from welfare rolls and the church's response to them, said evangelical leader Jim Wallis.

"If Jesus were assessing our moral horizons, I don't think he would have much interest in whether witnesses were called in the Senate trial," said Wallis, convener of the progressive evangelical group Call to Renewal. "He would be talking about, 'how are those families faring?'" Wallis said.

The group sponsored a National Summit on the Churches and Welfare Reform Feb. 1-3 in Washington. More than 600 representatives from faith-based social service providers gathered at the event to explore the church's response to poverty and ways of partnering with government.

A lot of people "think we've got the easy answers," Wallis said. "They want [churches] to be a safety valve and clean up the mess of bad social policy."

"Well, we're not going to do that here," he said. "Call to Renewal is not going to become a new national 'something' of Christian-service providers. We're not going to do that because our biblical faith does not allow us that option. Rather there are some religious questions ... that we might ask of ourselves."

Wallis, told conference participants there is good news and bad news about welfare reform.

The bad news is that "politicians are still asking the wrong questions." They are congratulating themselves for rapidly falling welfare rolls, Wallis said. "But haven't we forgotten something here? The object was not to get people off of welfare," Wallis said, but to "move people from welfare to work and eventually out of poverty."

According to a Call to Renewal press release, nearly half the people who have been forced from welfare since 1996 are still unemployed. Those who find jobs are likely to earn less than \$11,000 per year, which is below the poverty line for a single mother with two children. Most find jobs that do not provide health benefits but lose government medical assistance for themselves and their children when they go off welfare.

Wallis said the good news is that churches, synagogues and other faith-based organizations have provided for millions of former welfare recipients.

"The good news is that this crisis facing our poorest mothers and their children has mobilized the faith community as nothing I have ever seen before in my lifetime," Wallis said. He said Call to Renewal wants to "build a national network and voice in solidarity, in relationship with those whom Jesus calls the least of these."

He said churches could start a new movement for the poor.

Wallis described a "new era" of partnership between government and religion. He pointed to Indianapolis, where the mayor worked with black Baptist churches to turn former crack-cocaine houses into drug-rehabilitation centers. The churches could not afford the back taxes to purchase the houses, so the city paid them.

"It's a new understanding of how you might work together in a city," Wallis said. "All around the country, new partnerships are forming around this principle: Everyone does their share and everyone does what they do best."

Wallis acknowledged that social-service providers are now being flooded with requests for help from low-income individuals. He received a letter from the head of a Portland, Ore.,-based food pantry that said the number of people coming for food is jumping 2,000 per month.

Wallis also addressed what he called the "900-pound gorilla in the room of every discussion." He said, "The problem of poverty ultimately is a problem of wealth and the glaring and growing disparities in the society between the top and the bottom of this country."

He said that 20 percent of the population now controls 80 percent of the wealth and 5 percent controls 45 percent of the income. Thirty years ago, CEOs made 30 times what their average worker made, Wallis said. Now, they make 326 times as much.

"Something bad is happening and no one is talking about it," he said. Microsoft head Bill Gates adds "\$2 million to his net worth every single day," Wallis said, while Disney's Michael Eisner makes \$90,000 per hour.

"The prophets did not just say take care of poor people. They railed against the unjust distribution of wealth in society," Wallis said. "Let us not underestimate the spiritual poverty of those in the middle in the society in our churches, where this issue can't be raised for terrible fear."

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Progressive evangelicals consider public funds for religious groups

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Two U.S. lawmakers touted tax funds for faith-based social services as religious leaders wrapped up a four-day conference in Washington on churches and welfare reform.

The conference was sponsored by Call to Renewal, a group formed to bring a progressive evangelical voice to public policy debates. It addressed new challenges facing low-income Americans who have been removed from the welfare rolls. Among other issues, the conference explored "partnerships" between religion and government.

One such measure, sponsored by Sen. John Ashcroft, R-Mo., is "charitable choice." The 1996 welfare reform provision allows pervasively sectarian organizations, including churches, to compete for federal funds to provide social services. Call to Renewal is establishing a national committee of religious leaders to explore ways of implementing charitable choice.

Religiously affiliated groups have long been permitted to provide tax-funded social services through separate nonprofit entities that do not engage in proselytization or promote religion. Under charitable choice, however, churches themselves may also operate social service programs without establishing a separate entity.

Under charitable choice, grants cannot be used to promote religion, but religious teaching can occur in programs utilizing vouchers. Disagreement exists about how much proselytization is permitted, whether churches should take charitable choice funds and what regulations should apply to churches if they do.

Ashcroft told conference participants Feb. 3 that religious groups, once afraid of accepting money from the government, are now accepting funds for social service programs under the charitable-choice measure. He wants to expand the initiative into other federal areas, such as juvenile crime, substance abuse and housing.

"It will allow you to administer a cultural remedy that our society so desperately needs without asking you to extinguish your religious and cultural character," he told Call to Renewal conference participants gathered on Capitol Hill.

"Government doesn't have all of the solutions," he said noting that faith-based groups have been successful because they address the deeper spiritual needs of people. "Let's find a way to enlarge the capacity of these groups," he said.

Also addressing the conference was another advocate of charitable choice, Rep. Tony Hall, D-Ohio. In an interview following his remarks, Hall emphasized that religious groups receiving public funds would be watched. "This is not a free lunch. ... We're going to be looking over their shoulder to be sure that they spend the money right," he said. Hall said government funded programs must not "shove religion down people's throats."

Hall said it is possible to administer the funds in a way that does not violate the separation of church and state. We want people that "love God and love others," he said. "But they're not going to violate the whole constitutional issue of combining church and state because they ought to be separate."

Many groups, including the Baptist Joint Committee and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, have raised church-state concerns under charitable choice.

BJC General Counsel Brent Walker said that government looking over the church's shoulder is one major reason why charitable choice is bad news for churches. "It will inevitably result in entanglement and regulation, I don't care how many times it is denied," he said.

"It's an iron law of politics that government regulates what it funds. We must help the poor but we have to do it the right way," he added.

Julie Segal, legislative counsel for Americans United, said that "it's important for religious organizations to do what they have always done, which is serving the needy. There are many creative, innovative ways to do that in partnership with government."

Segal said that the method chosen by Congress through charitable choice "will hamstring religious programs in government bureaucracy, will jeopardize the religious liberty of beneficiaries and will do grave damage to the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state."

While the Call to Renewal conference brought together leaders of religious care providers across the country to discuss issues like charitable choice, none of the 600 registered participants take federal dollars under the choice initiative. Some, however, do accept government funds through the more traditional approach of setting up separate entities that cannot promote religion with the funds.

Call to Renewal convener Jim Wallis said he prefers that churches set up separate entities to avoid money flowing into church treasuries, which may jeopardize "the prophetic voice of the church."

Another speaker, U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Andrew Cuomo, said partnership between government and faith-based groups is the "formula for the future."

"Faith-based organizations are the vehicle for change," Cuomo added. "Unless you can not only help the body but also the soul and the spirit, you won't really solve the problem."

Cuomo told conference participants that "partnerships with faith-based and community-based organizations -- where government provides the resources but the community-based organizations provide the programs and the initiative and the incentive -- that's how it works."

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Faith-based organizations consider public money, fewer restrictions

By Ashlee Ross

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Faith-based groups that consider accepting government grants must weigh the good the money will do against restrictions that may come with public funding, counsels a North Carolina minister.

Charitable choice, a provision in the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, allows government grants to go to sectarian institutions and to churches that provide government services for welfare recipients.

Although not a recipient of charitable-choice funds, North Carolina's Asheville/Buncombe Community Christian Ministry is a faith-based organization that has worked with federal money for 11 years.

Executive Director Scott Rogers said about \$500,000 of the agency's \$9.5 million budget comes from federal, state and local governments. The rest is from private support, including more than 220 mainline Protestant and Catholic churches.

Rogers said the agency keeps government funds in a segregated account not used to pay for any of its programs. "We don't want to rely on these funds for direct support," Rogers said. "In other words, we don't want to prop up one of our programs directly with funding underwritten by the federal government."

Rogers said the ministry would be willing to consider taking money through the charitable-choice legislation because it "meets our criteria."

"The criteria being that it doesn't require us to hire somebody who is not a Christian, and it doesn't require us to be handcuffed or muzzled [from] sharing our faith when asked," he said.

Rogers said he is wary of possible restrictions by the government.

"We've always been concerned about the strings that would handcuff us in terms of sharing the gospel or sharing our faith," Rogers said.

"Over a period of four, five, six, seven years, I've seen more and more regulations get added," Rogers said. "In some cases the regulations become prohibitive just from a paperwork and administrative standpoint."

Rogers said the ministry established different outreach programs including crisis ministry, jail and prison ministry, medical and dental assistance and home-repair ministry.

Along with these direct-aid efforts, the 4,600 volunteers are ready and willing to share their faith and to pray with the people they help.

"We encourage each of the volunteers to share their faith understanding of Jesus Christ," Rogers said. "We offer prayer if folks want it. We offer faith and hope in God. We offer them a chance to become a part of a local congregation if that's their desire."

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Biblical justice different than justice sought by House managers, says Cuomo

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP)-- A Congress consumed with a trial of the president "in the name of justice," is failing to address the kind of justice the Bible talks about, said U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Andrew Cuomo.

"That is not the justice that the Bible talks about. That is not the justice that the great thinkers talked about. That is not the justice that the great leaders talked about. They talk about a higher form of justice," he said.

Cuomo made the comments Feb. 2 addressing a conference on churches and welfare reform sponsored by Call to Renewal, a group formed to bring a progressive evangelical voice to public policy debates. The group is exploring ways government can partner with faith-based organizations to provide social services.

Cuomo described economic justice, racial justice, environmental justice, educational justice and social justice as higher forms of justice.

Speaking of economic justice, Cuomo said: "We are the greatest economy in history on the planet, but [we] still have one out of every five children tonight sleeping in poverty. Is that your definition of justice?"

"How about social justice, where we've gotten to a place as a people where we can have our homeless brothers and sisters sleeping on the streets -- 600,000 of them and it doesn't even phase us anymore?"

He said people will "bend down to pick up a piece of trash ... but will we bend down to help our brother and sister?"

Cuomo said the difference between public and private schools signals an educational injustice. "If you go to that private education, because you can pay the tuition, then God bless you, the future is yours. But woe be unto you who go to the public education system, because your future may be closed by the time you enter the first grade."

The nation "is not a success where it stands today, and people know it," Cuomo said. "The Dow Jones hitting record heights doesn't mean we're a success. ... Tell me how you treat one another, tell me how you live and I'll tell you whether or not you're a success."

Cuomo said he has visited "pockets of poverty" the country where people live in great need and despair. He also cited the 1998 murder of an African-American man who was dragged to death in Jasper, Texas, as a sign that Americans "have a far way to go" in achieving racial justice.

Cuomo attributed part of the nation's problems to what he called an "aspiration deficit." "Somehow we have gotten to a place as a people where we no longer aspire for better," he said. "We somehow are saying maybe this is all that it can be. ... We don't even dream a bolder vision or a brighter future."

"We're going to have to change public opinion," he said, "and let people know that we can actually solve these problems that have defied resolution for so long."

Cuomo also addressed the 1996 welfare-reform law, which Call to Renewal leaders say fails to meet the needs of the impoverished.

Cuomo said that while welfare rolls are at their lowest in decades, there are now "real challenges within welfare reform." Demand for emergency services has risen, he said, also noting that those who have left welfare rolls were the most mobile anyway. "And those that are being left on the rolls are the hardest to reach."

Cuomo said the debate in Congress over welfare reform was not "an informed policy debate" but "a political debate." He added, "And we were demonizing the people on welfare."

"It was a Congress pandering to some of the worst sentiments in the American people," he added. Americans were angry that government had tried and failed, he said.

He said the anger came from several sources, including racism. "You look at poor people in this nation and it's too often synonymous with minority people in this nation, and it's therefore someone else's problem."

The anger also came from a public that did want to reinvest in government programs that had failed. "The truth is government did make mistakes in the past, but we've learned from those mistakes, and we now know the right way to do it."

"We are essentially a nation that believes in the Judeo-Christian tradition," Cuomo said. "We preach one set of values: we preach community, and we preach compassion and we preach civility. But then, why do we live such a different set of values?"

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Texas appeals court sides with church in tithing case

By Larry Chesser

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Citing a federal law enacted last year to protect charitable gifts, a Texas appeals court ruled Feb. 4 that a Baytown Baptist congregation does not have to relinquish tithes contributed by a member who later filed for bankruptcy.

The ruling by the 14th Court of Appeals reversed a 1997 trial court order that Cedar Bayou Baptist Church must turn over to a creditor four years of tithes given by church member Leland Collins.

Last June, Congress enacted the Religious Liberty and Charitable Donation Protection Act of 1998, a law that protects tithes and other charitable donations given in good faith by individuals who later go bankrupt.

In its appeal, Cedar Bayou argued that the new federal law barred the recovery of Collins' tithes.

Writing for a three-judge appeals court panel, Justice Ross Sears sided with Cedar Bayou, holding that the 1998 law was "tailored to cover the exact type of charitable contributions" that Collins made to his church.

"The contributions made by Collins are directly covered by the new Act," Sears wrote. "Collins made charitable contributions, by cash or check, to Cedar Bayou Baptist Church consisting of 10 percent of his annual income."

The 1998 law protects charitable gifts of up to 15 percent of a debtor's annual income and more in cases where the debtor can show a pattern of giving more than 15 percent. The law also permits Chapter 13 bankruptcy filers to budget for tithes and other charitable gifts during the time they are repaying creditors.

Cedar Bayou pastor Richard Steel said Collins' gifts to the church were part of a long-term giving pattern and not an attempt to shift funds away from a creditor.

"He's been a tithing member of Cedar Bayou Baptist Church for more than 40 years," Steel said.

"We just thank the Lord that this case has been reversed," Steel said. "I'm thrilled for our church and for every church in Texas."

Steel said the church has incurred expenses of more than \$30,000 in defending and appealing the lawsuit but that most of that has been paid by designated gifts from within and outside the congregation.

University of Texas law professor Douglas Laycock, who argued the church's appeal and was among those urging Congress to pass legislation protecting charitable gifts, said after the appeals court ruling that the "important thing is that Congress has fixed this problem for the future."

Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Brent Walker applauded the appeals court's enforcement of the new federal law.

"It's simply wrong for a civil court to undo an act of worship by raiding the church's collection plate," Walker said. "We are to render unto Caesar, but tithes are God's part."

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