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- Southern Baptist woman named head of VA chaplains**
- Texas congressman honored for stand on religious liberty**
- Attorney panel outlines list of legal snares for churches**
- Prudent child-care policies can protect church, lawyer says**
- 'Dumbness' a common culprit in church-state pitfalls, speaker says**

Southern Baptist woman named head of VA chaplains

By Jerilynn Armstrong

HAMPTON, Va. (ABP) -- Jeni Cook, 43, has become the first Southern Baptist and the first woman to oversee chaplain work for Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) hospitals nationwide.

U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Togo West appointed Cook as director of the National Chaplain Center in Hampton, Va., effective March 1.

"I am honored to be in this position and still catching my breath," Cook said from her Virginia office. "I received the call and within three weeks my family moved from Dallas to Virginia. It has been a whirlwind, but I felt the hand of God on our lives during the entire process."

A 16-year federal employee, Cook has for the past 14 years held positions with VA North Texas Health Care System in Dallas, where she most recently was chief of chaplain service.

Before that she worked two years as a chaplain for the Federal Bureau of Prisons in Fort Worth.

"I am a federal employee blessed with endorsement from the Southern Baptist Convention," Cook said. "I deeply believe in the Baptist principle of religious liberty and attempt to honor this commitment daily in my ministry."

In her new position, Cook oversees the work of more than 650 employed VA chaplains nationwide. She comes to the position at a critical time in health care.

"The chaplain ministry is facing a major challenge," she said. "As hospitals look for ways to reduce costs, some administrators are eliminating chaplains. This is a tragic mistake and disservice to our patients and their families. Chaplains provide critical, spiritual care during times of crisis."

Cook said research shows that spirituality and pastoral care have a measurable impact on mental and physical health.

"Science is discovering what we have known for a long time. A healthy spirit contributes to the prevention of disease and the recovery from illness.

“We can reduce resources or eliminate chaplain services, but we cannot eliminate the spiritual needs and the impact these needs have on people. There must be a spiritual and moral emphasis in the hospital setting,” she said.

Cook received a bachelor’s degree from the University of Oklahoma, a master’s from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a doctor’s degree from Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University.

She also was the first woman ordained as a Southern Baptist minister in Oklahoma in 1980 by her home church, First Baptist of Enid.

“My calling to the ministry as a chaplain is a clear one, but a calling that I believe God shared kindly and slowly,” she said. “There were no female role models in clergy positions when I graduated from college, but my father was attending seminary and his interest and enthusiasm sparked my interest.”

Cook said she entered seminary planning to become a Christian counselor. “However, the Lord led me in a different direction as I took other courses and received CPE (clinical pastoral education) training,” she said.

“I love chaplain work and believe it fulfills my calling. It is very rewarding work, and it is a special honor to serve our nation’s veterans.

Quoting a stained-glass window in her new office, Cook said, “American veterans are God’s gift to us. Freedom is their gift to the world.”

-30-

Texas congressman honored for stand on religious liberty

By Mark Wingfield

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards has received the first Barbara Jordan-Mark Hatfield Courage Award from the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

The Texas Democrat received the award at a banquet on the campus of Baylor University, during a conference on church-state issues in ministry sponsored by the Washington-based BJC and George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

The award is named for a Democratic representative and a Republican senator who were champions of religious liberty during their terms of service, said James Dunn, BJC executive director.

The award honored specifically Edwards’ leadership last year in the House of Representatives against the Religious Freedom Amendment proposed by Rep. Ernest Istook of Oklahoma. That legislation would have amended the U.S. Constitution to allow broader expression of religious beliefs in public forums.

The Baptist Joint Committee and numerous other religious groups strongly opposed the legislation, while others supported it. The bill garnered a simple majority in the House but not the two-thirds majority needed for passage.

Dunn said Edwards demonstrated a “peculiar and unusual kind of courage” in opposing the bill.

In a brief acceptance speech, Edwards highlighted the importance of religious liberty for all people.

“I cannot imagine any freedom more important than religious freedom,” he said. “If you can’t practice your faith ... believe in God without the intervention of the government’s hand, ... then all other freedoms are at risk.”

Edwards, a Methodist who married the daughter of a Baptist pastor, said his life was changed when Baylor University Chancellor Herbert Reynolds showed him the text of a 1920 speech delivered on the steps of the U.S. Capitol by Baptist preacher George W. Truett. Truett was the pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, and the speech he gave became a landmark statement of Baptist belief on church-state separation.

Truett's speech "has haunted me ever since," Edwards said. "It has changed me and forced me to change my political priorities."

Failure of the Istook amendment should give concerned Baptists only slight comfort, Edwards warned. "While we defeated the Istook amendment, ... the fact is over half the members of the House of Representatives voted to change the first 16 words of the First Amendment."

"People like you are going to have to continue the fight," he said.

-30-

Attorney panel outlines list of legal snares for churches

By Ken Camp

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- The day when churches were considered off-limits to lawsuits is gone, meaning congregations need to beware of legal snares, lawyers told participants at a church-state conference held on the Baylor University campus.

Three attorneys from the Fort Worth, Texas, firm of Bourland, Smith, Wall and Wenzel spoke on "Keeping Your Church Out of Court: Pitfalls to Avoid as Seen From the Pulpit" during a conference sponsored by George W. Truett Theological Seminary and the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

The attorneys identified several legal pitfalls common for churches:

-- Incorporation and operation. Neither incorporating nor declining to incorporate insulates a church from legal hassles, Shiela Korb said.

A church must have the consent of a majority of its total membership in order to incorporate. While that may not be difficult for a new congregation, it can be a major hurdle for a long-standing church that continues to carry many non-resident or inactive members on its rolls, she noted.

Another problem is that unless churches review their articles of incorporation periodically, they may not realize their period of duration has expired.

"The church's charter can be forfeited if this happens," she said. "It can be corrected by filing articles of amendment and making the period of duration perpetual."

-- Bylaws. Many churches do not understand that bylaws are required whether the congregation chooses to incorporate or remain unincorporated, Korb added.

Bylaws must stipulate the requirements for a quorum, voting rights of members, information about how business meetings are called, the percentage vote required to approve items and who has authority to conduct business on the church's behalf.

Bylaws also should clarify procedures for calling and dismissing staff, for disciplining or withdrawing fellowship from disruptive members and for amending the bylaws, the attorney said.

-- Charitable immunity. A church may open its staff and volunteers to lawsuits if it fails to meet the requirements of laws protecting church workers from liability, Butch Korb told the conference.

To qualify for the protection under Texas' Immunity and Liability Act of 1987, a church must meet organizational and operational tests, Korb said. The church's governing documents should stipulate the congregation's charitable purpose, he added.

Volunteers -- individuals who perform services without pay other than reimbursement for expenses -- fall into two categories: direct-service volunteers and officers, directors or trustees.

Direct-service volunteers, such as Sunday-school teachers, have immunity if they are acting in good faith and within the course and scope of their volunteer duties. The "good faith" test does not apply to officers, directors and trustees. Both categories of volunteers are subject to limited liability when it comes to the operation of motor vehicles.

Employees have limited liability while acting in the course and scope of their duties if the organization has liability insurance coverage that meets certain standards. Similarly, the organization has limited liability if it has adequate liability insurance coverage.

However, "there is no immunity or limitation for an act or omission which is intentional, willfully or wantonly negligent, or done with conscious indifference or reckless disregard," Korb said.

-- Child abuse. "Any person who has cause to believe abuse or neglect has occurred has a duty to report," Korb said. Failure to report is a Class B misdemeanor in Texas, punishable by fine and imprisonment.

That duty overrides all privileges, such as the normally privileged communication between a member of the clergy and a person seeking spiritual counsel, he added.

Another pitfall is the failure of churches to implement prudent policies concerning the prevention of child abuse in a church.

-- Taxes. The IRS "\$250-substantiation rule" stipulates that a donor must receive a receipt from the church for all contributions of \$250 or more. The receipts must be provided prior to the filing of the donor's tax return. Otherwise, the IRS will deny the charitable deduction if the donor is audited.

The "\$75-disclosure rule" says the church must provide a donor at the time of a donation a receipt for a "quid pro quo" payment of more than \$75. The receipt must state the amount of payment, the value of an item purchased, and stipulate that only the difference is deductible.

For instance, a church may hold a golf tournament in which participants pay a set amount to participate with the understanding that proceeds go to a charitable cause. The church should provide participants a receipt noting the value of green fees, golf cart rentals and any souvenirs such as shirts or golf balls provided to those who play. The receipt should indicate that only the difference between the total entry fee and the total amount of the itemized list is deductible.

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Prudent child-care policies can protect church, lawyer says

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Churches can help prevent child abuse and protect themselves and their workers from lawsuits by putting together prudent policies, a Texas attorney told participants at a Baptist-sponsored church-state conference.

Liability arises because of alleged negligence in selection, supervision and retention of workers with children, Fort Worth attorney Butch Korb told participants in a conference sponsored by Truett Seminary and the Baptist Joint Committee.

Korb suggested four actions churches can take:

-- Adopt worker-screening policies. The courts have ruled that churches and charitable organizations have a duty to exercise reasonable care in selecting workers who are in contact with children. Screening is needed both for volunteer and paid workers, he said.

-- Follow the "two-adult" rule. At no time should one adult be left alone with children. Having at least two adults present takes away the opportunity for a bad worker to commit an act of child abuse. It also protects good workers from false claims of abuse by providing a corroborating witness.

-- Practice the "six-month" rule. Churches should determine a "reasonable time," usually at least six months, to become acquainted with new members before recruiting them to work with children.

-- Memorialize "due diligence." Document everything. Write down every step taken in the selection and supervision of workers with children.

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-- By Ken Camp

'Dumbness' a common culprit in church-state pitfalls, speaker says

By Ken Camp

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Borrowing a line from country-pop diva Shania Twain, David Currie offered simple advice to help Baptist preachers dodge church-state pitfalls: "Don't be stupid. Don't be ridiculous. Don't be absurd."

Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, presented interpretations of the theme "Pitfalls to Avoid as Seen from the Pulpit" at a conference on church-state issues and the ministry. The conference on the Baylor University campus was sponsored by George W. Truett Theological Seminary and the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Texans ought to know something about pits and falling in pits, Currie said at the outset, drawing on his background as a rancher. He connected falling into pits with the lifelong advice of his mother, who frequently admonished him: "I hate dumbness."

"Most pitfalls we fall into can probably relate to a very simple factor: dumbness," he said, adding that Americans "don't talk enough about stupidity anymore."

Likewise, most church-state problems in ministry could be avoided by more careful thought, Currie said.

Returning to the Shania Twain theme, Currie exhorted ministerial students and others at the conference: "Don't be stupid in relation to authority and confuse your kingdoms."

Christians have dual citizenship in the kingdom of God and in an earthly nation, and problems arise when they fail to realize that the two are not the same, he said.

"Folks get in trouble and act stupidly when they try to use government as a way of spreading the kingdom of God," Currie said. "One of the principles of freedom is that people do have the right to live life according to their own values. We are not a moral authority ... for non-believers."

When seeking to influence public policy, Christians should argue their positions in the secular marketplace of ideas on the basis of the common good, not on the basis of a divine authority that non-believers do not recognize, he asserted.

“Don’t be ridiculous and forget your role,” Currie urged, pointing out that pastors are called to be servant leaders, not just servants and not just leaders.

“To understand your role as a leader only is to end up obsessed with power and arrogance, and you will fall. To understand your role as servant only is to understand your role as one of weakness and appeasement, and you will fail,” he said.

Finally, “Don’t be absurd and practice bad theology,” he said, noting that Baptists, of all people, should operate from a foundation of biblical teaching and a clear sense of their own history.

Currie claimed the Religious Right is theologically liberal because it has a watered-down doctrine of sin and a warped view of salvation. Rather than recognizing the impossibility of human perfection and the futility of trying to bring about heaven on earth by human effort, the Religious Right tries to use governmental powers to enforce morality and public piety, he said.

“If we get everybody praying, it doesn’t mean we’ll get everyone saved,” he said. He criticized efforts to use “earthly power to try to bring about heavenly results.”

-30-

-- Mark Wingfield contributed to this story

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