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**Gore touts public funds
for religious ministries**

By Kenny Byrd

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Vice President Al Gore has proposed a "new partnership" between government and faith-based programs to meet "crushing social challenges" such as drug addiction and gang violence.

In a May 24 speech delivered at a Salvation Army drug-rehabilitation center in Atlanta, Gore pledged that if elected president he would endorse the "charitable choice" concept included in a 1996 welfare-reform package.

Gore said efforts by the right to enforce a specific set of religious values and by the left to divorce faith from public policy have created a false choice between "hollow secularism or right-wing religion."

"There is a better way," said Gore, a Southern Baptist.

"Today I give you this pledge," he said. "If you elect me president, the voices of faith-based organizations will be integral to the policies set forth in my administration."

The "charitable choice" initiative, originally sponsored by Sen. John Ashcroft, R-Mo., was approved in the 1996 welfare-reform package. Ashcroft introduced another bill May 25 that would expand charitable choice to cover all federal programs that fund social services.

Ashcroft said Gore's support could be "a very important asset" to efforts in Congress to expand the provision to areas of housing, drug treatment and services for seniors.

Religious groups have long been able to qualify for federal funds for social services by setting up separate organizations that do not proselytize or promote their religion. Under charitable choice, however, churches for the first time may receive money for such services directly.

In his speech, Gore lauded a service provided by the Christian Women's Job Corps, a ministry of the Southern Baptist affiliated Woman's Missionary Union. Gore said he met a San Antonio woman on welfare who had given up on finding work and felt she did not have the skills to keep a job.

At the Christian Women's Job Corps, Gore said, she was mentored through prayer and Bible study and

began to gain self-confidence. "Faith gave her a new feeling of self-worth, of purpose, something no other program, no matter how technically sophisticated, could give her." She later received a job at Wal-Mart and earned employee of the month.

However, an official from the WMU organization said in an interview the Christian Women's Job Corps would refuse government money.

Trudy Johnson, spokeswoman for WMU, said the group does not take government money and urges their offices scattered across the country to also refuse government funds because of church-state issues. "There's always the fear that even though the claims are 'no strings attached,' there may be some," she said. "We don't want to be the test case to discover what the strings might be."

Gore's remarks met criticism from advocates of church-state separation who previously opposed similar proposals by Republicans.

Both Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State and People for the American Way's President Carole Shields said the plan is unconstitutional.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said Gore "ripped his britches" by endorsing the concept. "The unintended consequences of charitable choice, though we accept the pure motives of its sponsors, may make it the most massive church-regulation bill of this decade," Dunn said.

"We definitely do not need any more government meddling in or attempting to manage religious ministries," Dunn said.

Gore said his proposal would include "strict safeguards" to protect the separation of church and state. "Government must never promote a particular religious view, or try to force anyone to receive faith," he said. "We must ensure that there is always a high-quality secular choice available. We must continue to prohibit direct proselytizing as part of any publicly funded efforts. And we must establish the same clear accountability for results we would expect of anyone who does the public's business."

Gore said that overcoming social problems such as drug addiction requires more than money or assistance. "I believe that faith in itself is sometimes essential to spark a personal transformation and to keep that person from falling back into addiction, delinquency or dependency," he said.

A spokesman for the Gore presidential campaign said, "a lot of groups have been helpful in this area without having to proselytize." The spokesman said the program would have to be implemented carefully. "Groups that want to proselytize can do so, but not with public funds," he said.

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Baptist scholar calls for redefinition of Holocaust

By Bob Allen

JACKSON, Tenn. (ABP) -- A Baptist scholar contends that Nazis sought total annihilation of Europe's Gypsy population in the Holocaust, challenging the widely accepted theme that Jews alone were targeted for extinction.

Historians agree that in addition to 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust during World War II, another 5 million non-Jewish civilians -- including Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, political prisoners, Poles, Ukrainians, the handicapped and mentally ill -- were also murdered for a variety of reasons.

The conventional view is that only Jews, however, were singled out for total extermination. David Gushee, a professor at Union University in Jackson, Tenn., disputes that view in a paper co-written with student Sheri Lovett.

Gushee and Lovett call for "a revised definition of Nazi genocide" describing the Holocaust as an attempt to destroy two groups deemed most dangerous and "unhealthy" -- the Jews and the Gypsies. They say both groups were destroyed in roughly the same percentage of their European population before the war and would have suffered even greater losses had the Nazis not been defeated.

"Evidence supports the claim that the Gypsies of Europe -- like the Jews but unlike any other people group -- were also targeted by the Nazis for total annihilation," Gushee and Lovett contend.

While that recognition "could have a significant impact on the shape of Holocaust definition," they say it "need not and must not in any way diminish our understanding of the depth and breadth of Jewish victimization."

Gushee and Lovett acknowledge the debate over how to define the Holocaust has divided scholars.

Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal has described the Holocaust as the systematic murder of 11 million people, 6 million of whom were killed because they were Jews. Author and 1986 Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, however, argues that a broad definition of the Holocaust could lead to weakening the memory of Jewish victims. He accuses Wiesenthal and others of "diminishing" the tragedy against Jewish people.

But Gushee and Lovett contend that current discussion of the Holocaust "obscures the experience of victims other than the Jewish people," particularly Gypsies.

"The sparse recognition of the Gypsies' fate in the Holocaust has had profound consequences in their post-Holocaust history," they write. While Jews received a homeland with the establishment of Israel in 1948, Gypsies were returned to hostile lands and continue to face persecution to this day.

"Our thesis ... is that the definition of the Holocaust, as well as the standard narrative by which the Holocaust is conveyed, needs revision in order that more accurate and adequate account can be made of the Gypsy experience under Nazism," they argue.

Gushee and Lovett estimate the Nazis killed 500,000 Gypsies, or around 60 percent of the entire pre-war Gypsy population in Europe. That percentage approaches the two-thirds of the pre-war European Jewish population represented by 6 million Jewish victims.

"Whatever the numbers, in the killing fields and at Auschwitz, Jews and Gypsies shared a fate similar to each other and different in important ways from that of any other group -- though, of course, in moral perspective every victim matters equally and immeasurably."

Hitler's "hatred was much more focused on the Jews than on the Gypsies," Gushee and Lovett admit, but his racist policies "came to have deadly consequences for Gypsies and others."

"Remembrance of the Holocaust must not be seen as a zero-sum game, in which recognition of one group's suffering invariably diminishes that of others," they say. "The goal should be a truthful accounting of what actually happened, in all its horrific fullness, and what it means for humanity today."

The tendency to emphasize the Jewish experiences under the Nazis has caused Christians to relate to the Holocaust "almost exclusively on such matters as the tortured history of Jewish-Christian relations," Gushee and Lovett contend.

While Christian anti-Semitism should continue to be an important emphasis, they suggest, there is a similar history of "European anti-Gypsyism" that is not as well recognized.

Gushee, who previously wrote a book on Christians' behavior toward Jews during the Holocaust, offered an indictment concerning churches' response to the plight of Gypsies.

"The history of the Gypsies is a story of a people who have been and continue to be marginalized, even when it comes to how their Holocaust narrative is told," Gushee and Lovett argue. "Christians are not free to look away from anyone who is voiceless or victimized."

Though historical sources documenting anti-Gypsy efforts are spotty, Gushee and Lovett contend Gypsies were classified and targeted for elimination as early as 1938.

Of 23,000 Gypsies assigned to Auschwitz, more than 21,000 were killed during 17 months. Jewish survivors share poignant accounts of the sound of Gypsies playing their violins, in an effort to maintain some semblance of community and identity, while waiting to die in gas chambers.

"The fuller integration of the Gypsies (and other victims) into the defining and narrating of the Holocaust is a matter of extreme sensitivity for the Jewish people and others ... who are deeply committed to full recognition of the evils visited upon Jews," Gushee and Lovett concede.

"However, it must be possible -- and to us it seems morally obligatory -- to break open the settled narrative structure of Holocaust discourse to include more fully those who played the violins at Auschwitz and whose ashes were mixed with their Jewish compatriots in suffering."

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Schools liable for sexual harassment committed by students, high court says

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Public schools may be held liable if they ignore peer sexual harassment by students, a sharply divided U.S. Supreme Court ruled May 24.

The high court ruled 5-4 that school districts may be sued if they act with "deliberate indifference" to known acts of student-on-student harassment. The ruling targets harassment that is "so severe, pervasive and objectively offensive" that it bars a victim's access to an educational opportunity or benefit.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote the decision, allowing school districts to be sued under a federal civil rights law (Title IX) that bars sex-based discrimination in educational institutions receiving federal funds. Justices John Paul Stevens, David Souter, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer joined O'Connor in the majority opinion.

Recipients of federal funds, including public schools, can be held liable only when they exercise "substantial control over both the harasser and the context in which the harassment occurs," the majority said. School districts retain "substantial" control over students in a classroom setting, the justices ruled.

Four justices, in a dissent written by Justice Anthony Kennedy, argued that while school boards may be held liable for sexual harassment by teachers, who act as agents of the school district, they are not responsible for such behavior by students.

The dispute before the court involved a lawsuit filed by Aurelia Davis against the Monroe County, Ga., Board of Education. Davis alleged that school officials failed to respond to repeated complaints that a fifth-grade classmate was sexually harassing her daughter.

O'Connor rejected Georgia school officials' argument that Davis was trying to hold the school board responsible for the student's actions. Instead, O'Connor wrote, Davis is attempting "to hold the board liable for its own decision to remain idle in the face of known student-on-student harassment in its schools."

Kennedy's dissent, which was joined by Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Justices Anthony Scalia and Clarence Thomas, predicted the majority's ruling will result in numerous lawsuits, which "will impose serious financial burdens on local school districts, the taxpayers who support them, and the children they serve."

O'Connor said damages "are not available for simple acts of teasing and name-calling among school children, however, even where these comments target differences in gender."

"Rather, in the context of student-on-student harassment, damages are available only where the behavior is so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it denies its victims the equal access to education that Title IX is designed to protect," she wrote.

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Supreme Court rejects challenge to ban on noncommercial ads

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court rejected May 24 a bid by two nonprofit advocacy groups to force Phoenix transportation officials to display their advertisements on the outside of city buses.

Children of the Rosary and the American Civil Liberties Union challenged the city's policy of limiting advertising on municipal buses to "speech which proposes a commercial transaction." They claimed the policy violates the First Amendment's free-speech guarantees.

The city adopted its current policy after Children of the Rosary won an earlier challenge to a previous policy that specifically barred political and religious advertisements.

Under its new policy, the city rejected one advertisement with a "Choose Life" message next to the Children of the Rosary logo, which depicts a fetus surrounded by a rosary that is connected to a cross at the top. The ad also contained an appeal to purchase the message as a bumper sticker.

The city also refused an ACLU ad for a bumper sticker with the message: "The ACLU Supports Free Speech for Everyone."

A federal district court rejected a challenge to the Phoenix policy filed by Children of the Rosary and the ACLU, and the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld that ruling.

Sitting as a visiting member of the appeals court, retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Byron White wrote that an advertising panel on a city bus is not a public forum. In such a nonpublic forum, White said, the city may restrict speech on the basis of subject matter, but not on the basis of viewpoint.

"The First Amendment does not prohibit the government from imposing content-based exclusions, as long as such are reasonable, which is the case here," White wrote.

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Senate OKs gun control measures, religious memorials, prayers at schools

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Senate approved tougher gun-control measures May 20 -- one month after school shootings in Littleton, Colo., that left 15 people dead and on the same day another school shooting occurred in Conyers, Ga.

After several days of heated debate, Vice President Al Gore broke a 50-50 tie in the Senate to approve a Democratic proposal that would strengthen restrictions on purchases at gun shows.

The measure, sponsored by Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., would require mandatory background checks for all transactions at gun shows. It would also require a mandatory background check on gun transactions at pawnshops.

The Lautenberg amendment was one of several gun-control measures approved as part of a sweeping bill to address violent juvenile crime.

An amendment offered by Sens. Herbert Kohl, D-Wisc., and Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, would require that every handgun be sold with a child-safety device.

Another adopted amendment sponsored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., would ban juvenile possession of semiautomatic assault weapons and large-capacity magazines. Enhanced penalties against juveniles who possess guns were also approved.

However, an amendment offered by Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., to regulate the transfer of firearms over the Internet failed.

Passage of the tougher gun laws was seen as a defeat for the powerful National Rifle Association and other gun-control opponents, who contributed nearly \$9 million in soft money and donations to political-action committees and candidates from 1991 to 1998, according to the Center for Responsive Politics.

The Senate also addressed cultural and religious issues in the juvenile-justice bill.

An amendment sponsored by Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., expressed the Senate's view that memorials or services that use religious symbols, motifs or prayers at public schools to honor a person slain on campus do not violate the First Amendment's ban on government establishing religion. It was approved by the Senate 85-13.

The measure also would authorize the U.S. attorney general to provide legal assistance to any agency that has to defend the constitutionality of religious motifs and require that each party to any lawsuit pay its own attorney's fees and costs.

The Allard amendment gained momentum after news reports stated that Littleton officials were opposed to the inclusion of religious symbols in any permanent memorial at the public park.

Allard pointed out that for at least one Columbine victim, Cassie Bernall, Christianity was very important. "Why is it that we can speak honestly about sports interests or favorite movies of other slain students in this memorial, but for students like Cassie, we must omit the most important part of her life?"

Advocates of church-state separation criticized the Allard amendment.

"Even great human tragedy does not permit suspension of the Constitution," said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The juvenile-justice bill provides approximately \$1 billion annually to fight juvenile crime and prevent juvenile delinquency.

The Senate approved a measure to require large online-service providers to offer their subscribers filtering software to stop objectionable materials. But lawmakers rejected an amendment to limit violent material on television to hours when children are less likely to be watching. They also rejected the establishment of a commission to study the motion-picture industry. The panel would have made recommendations to Congress and the president to promote accountability within the industry.

Book chronicles adventure of search for Noah's Ark

By Cathy Casper

TAZEWELL, Tenn. (ABP) -- Recent months have witnessed a revival of interest in Noah's Ark, culminating in a made-for-TV movie advertised as the event of a lifetime but criticized by many Christians for taking too many liberties with the Bible story.

Four east Tennessee men took their interest in the subject to an extreme, leading them on an adventure to Turkey to view what some claim is the final resting spot of Noah's Ark.

Attorney Ron Leadbetter, private investigator Barry Rice, physician Jerry Lemler and his son, Russell, now a West Point cadet but then a high-school senior, are not explorers.

They are ordinary men who set off with intrigue in their eyes and hope in their hearts to the mountains of Turkey, traveling to a region explored by few before them. Recently they have chronicled their difficult journey in a book entitled "Journey to Noah's Ark," which contains rare photographs of the site.

A long-time adventurer, Leadbetter has taken many tumultuous trips in the past, usually traveling with whatever vagabond party of friends he can cajole into coming along. He is known for taking the kind of trips that most vacationers avoid. His travels have taken him to parts of the world that are not well explored, including several that are exotic and extremely dangerous.

"He has never been one to do the standard golfing in Saint Andrews or touring the vineyards of France," said traveling companion Lemler.

Leadbetter's interest in the Noah's Ark site began after he met an amateur archeologist from Nashville, Ron Wyatt. Wyatt, who traveled through the mountains of Turkey many times in the 1970s and '80s, was convinced he had found Noah's Ark and was instrumental in helping to set up a visitor's center presently located at the site.

The meeting with Wyatt fueled Leadbetter's desire to see the site for himself, prompting a trip that took three years to plan.

The exact location of Noah's Ark is disputed. Some dismiss the Old Testament story as a myth borrowed by Jews from an ancient Babylonian epic. Many people believe the Bible story is literally true, however, and some suspect remains of the Ark may still be hidden on Mt. Ararat, a nearly 17,000-foot peak in remote eastern Turkey. Others argue the Bible speaks of the "mountains of Ararat." Lemler and others believe the word "mountains" holds the clue.

"The plural mountains is the key, which does not necessarily mean Ararat itself," said Lemler. Wyatt's discovery was indeed several miles west of Mt. Ararat, on what is known as the "Duripinar site."

Lemler said studies on the site have been inconclusive. Several U.S. expeditions to the site over the last 15 years have said it is nothing more than a rock formation with no significance for archeology. Some tests have claimed the object is composed of decayed wood, but other researchers say all evidence it could be Noah's Ark is based on assumptions and not science. While there have been many claims of a discovery of Noah's Ark, none can be verified beyond a reasonable doubt, according to ark researcher B.J. Corbin.

The formation matches the dimensions of Noah's Ark as identified in the Bible. It is about the length of one-and-one-half football fields.

The site was not easily reached, down 10 miles of dirt roads and over the mountains from Iran. Americans have been discouraged from visiting, and in recent years the visitor's center has been closed.

"Right now because of the even further escalation of hostilities in the area, the site has been closed and we as far as we know are the last westerners to have visited the site," Lemler said.

Lemler's group was fortunate enough not only to see the site, but the guard Hassan, also known as the "keeper of the Ark," allowed them to walk out onto area to explore it firsthand.

The men say the walk is what convinced them. They found hundreds of seashells on a site 50 miles away from the nearest body of water, and it is a freshwater lake.

"It was not like someone took a truckload of sea shells and spread them out for our pleasure," Lemler said. "They were there on the boat and in the immediate vicinity, but no where else in that region."

Lemler believes if the object is not Noah's Ark, it is an amazing engineering feat by someone. All four men say they are convinced it is a boat on a mountain with no other explanation of how it got there.

"We are not talking about someone out in a desert who sees a flying saucer landing," he said. "We are talking about a physician, a West Point cadet, an attorney and a private investigator -- four people who generally have a fair level of smarts, are inquisitive and are not four nuts who had to find something."

After returning to the United States, the men began to speak to various civic and religious groups about their experiences, showing video, photographs, shells they collected and stones they believe were used for ballast on the Ark. Each group was curious and wanted to learn more. That prompted the idea for writing a book.

Lemler describes the experience in Turkey as awe inspiring, "It is like when I was a kid and touched the Liberty Bell for the first time only on a much larger scale," he said.

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: Cathy Casper is a reporter at the Claiborne Progress in Tazewell, Tenn. This story is used with permission. The book "Journey to Noah's Ark" is available at bookstores and on the Internet at www.lakemoor.com

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