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**Baptist-sponsored gathering in London
calls for moving 'beyond toleration'**

By Robert O'Brien

LONDON (ABP) -- In a world full of intolerance, even "mere toleration" of other faiths isn't enough. Speakers from various nationalities, religions and backgrounds made that point repeatedly at a Baptist-sponsored conference in London, July 8-10.

Conference speakers highlighted problems of injustice and inequity around the world, focusing on the conference theme -- "Beyond Mere Toleration: Religious Liberty as a Basic Human Right."

The conference, attended by a select 100 participants from a dozen countries and religious backgrounds, also prompted plans for future endeavors including upcoming human-needs and human-rights projects in Armenia, Poland, Russia, Sweden, and Africa.

"This wasn't just a Baptist or British meeting," declared James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, co-sponsor of the event along with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

"It was a world meeting that looked at religious liberty and human-rights issues from a variety of perspectives and declared that we should not merely tolerate those who are different from us but value, respect and empower them," Dunn said. "It was a conference without borders -- ideological, geographical or religious -- to showcase the rights of neglected people in a complex world."

"Unless every person is valuable there can be no peace," said Kimete Basha, a native of Kosovo and wife of the Albanian ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg. She is spearheading efforts to bring reconciliation between Serbs and her battered Albanian and Kosovar people to offset hatred and the "spirit of vendetta."

Basha and other speakers urged people of faith to shun arrogance, persecution, segregation, violence and protectionism and practice humility, compassion and justice in a multi-colored world.

Speakers explored the plight of various groups that are either not tolerated or barely tolerated, including the poor, racial and religious minorities and other citizens of the world powerless to help themselves.

Stanley Mogoba of South Africa joined other speakers urging industrialized nations to do something about vast economic disparity between the world's rich and poor.

"As we enter the third millennium of Christianity, are we only going to drift along?" asked Mogoba, a Methodist bishop, president of the Pan Africanist Congress and a member of South Africa's parliament.

Sharing resources is the world's largest problem, and poor countries must get help to develop sustainable economies, said Mogoba, an advocate of "Jubilee 2000," a global movement urging the world's richest nations to "adjust the scales" of justice by canceling debts owed by poor countries.

Lonnie Turner, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship representative and one of the conference planners, echoed Mogoba.

"Forty-one highly indebted poor countries borrow to service their debt, and service their debt to borrow, so they can earn the privilege to increase their debt," Turner said. "It's a vicious cycle. Countries starve their children to pay their debt."

Sociologist Eileen Barker of London noted that removal of religious freedom around the world from new or "strange" religious groups fractures the principle of religious freedom and creates an atmosphere for removal of those rights from older, more established religions.

Even older religious groups, such as Baptists, Assemblies of God and even Russian Catholics have been singled out for persecution and restrictive legislation in various countries, she noted.

"We subscribe to a culture that describes these people as 'other,'" said Barker, a faculty member of the London School of Economics and internationally recognized expert in new religious movements. "We go along with constructing and maintaining an image that demonizes the small and strange. We have to remember that members of these groups are humans, too."

A panel made up of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders urged people of faith to respect freedom for truth with a small "t," rather than only "The Truth" as they perceive it.

"We can do this without wishy-washy compromise about what we believe," said panelist Charles Wellborn, a Baptist and professor emeritus of religion at Florida State University. "Every person is entitled and compelled to proclaim his faith and free to convert if he chooses."

"Religious 'toleration' satisfies neither my spiritual nor my intellectual conscience, and it's an offensive word to me," Wellborn said. "If some power has the right to grant toleration, it has the right in theory to take it away."

Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, addressing racial injustice, echoed a concept of the conference that human rights of various kinds are not isolated concerns.

For example, "racial justice issues overlap with religious liberty issues because often a person's ethnic identity overlaps with religious identity," said Davidson-Gotobed, racial justice coordinator for the London Baptist Association and British-born citizen of Jamaican descent.

"Those perceived to be different are deemed exotic at best and inferior at worst," Davidson-Gotobed said.

She said Baptists of all nations must be "prepared to cross the divide of mistrust and misunderstanding, starting with just one person. After all, you can only eat an elephant one mouthful at a time."

Historian Faith Bowers of the historic host Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church noted that "horrors of racism abroad and at home" have awakened many churches to wider social concerns.

She urged Baptists to come out of their "comfort zones" to stand with oppressed people and not let the Baptist idea of separation of church and state stifle the church's prophetic voice against social injustice.

Albanian woman calls for reconciliation in Balkans

By Robert O'Brien

LONDON (ABP) -- An Albanian woman speaking at a Baptist meeting in London urged fellow Kosovars not to respond to "Serbian barbarism" with the "spirit of vendetta" and hatred.

Amid news reports of violence by ethnic Albanians seeking revenge for Serb atrocities during NATO's 78-day bombing of Yugoslavia, Kimete Basha called for reconciliation in the Balkans at a Baptist-sponsored conference on religious liberty and human rights.

As wife of the Albanian ambassador to Belgium and Luxembourg, Basha has a platform to potentially make a difference in the aftermath of ethnic-cleansing horrors in her native Kosovo.

But she admits she had to work through her own feelings to come to her present point of view.

"Anger and hatred boiled in me," she said. "But I had to refuse to respond to it and look inside to see what makes us human."

What she found was compassion, which she said is necessary both "to help those who are suffering" on both sides of the conflict and to promote the idea of reconciliation and forgiveness, she said.

When the rector of the University of Pristina issued a call for help in reopening the damaged university in Kosovo's capital city, Basha responded quickly.

She did so "as a symbolic gesture" to help a school where Serbian and ethnic-Albanian students "once studied together peacefully and even fell in love and got married," she said at the London conference.

Basha, who was librarian at the International School in Brussels for 18 years, took on the University of Pristina library as her part of the project. She set out to replace all the books in the Albanian language that Serbs had burned.

Response to her calls for help included a \$10,000 gift from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, CBF representative Lonnie Turner told participants at the conference sponsored jointly by the Baptist Joint Committee and Atlanta-based Fellowship.

Basha, who is deeply involved in several projects to help ethnic Albanians, dreams of creating a foundation to help Albanians, wherever they live in the region, and instill a new vision in them for forgiveness and peaceful coexistence.

That idea struck a chord with another conference speaker. Doug Tipps heads a new organization that is planning an international conference next year in Stockholm, Sweden, to "facilitate reconciliation among representatives of the Balkan region."

"The world is no longer a monolith. It contains every cultural and religious color of the rainbow," said Tipps, who helped raise funds for the London conference and heads Global Strategies for Religious Liberties based in San Marcos, Texas.

"People of all cultures, including Serbs and Albanians, must move beyond fear, violence, segregation and protectionism toward a just embrace of the variegated cultural landscape," said Tipps, who is also pastor of First Baptist Church in San Marcos.

Basha said she believes Serbs must seek forgiveness for ethnic cleansing but added that her people must muster the willingness to give it. "Unless every person is valuable there can be no peace," said the woman whose first name, Kimete, means "something of value."

Basha said she takes great pride in the way poor people in small villages in Albania took in refugees and their children and fed and protected them. "Albanians confronted terror and barbarism with dignity, generosity and pride," she said.

That broke a hurtful stereotype around the world that Albanians are "unstable and profoundly corrupt," Basha said. "They showed the world that Albanian people still have deeply ingrained values and hospitality."

Basha has launched efforts and seeks assistance to repay the kindness of those villages in Albania by helping them improve their standard of living.

Meanwhile, her region-wide dream includes teaching young residents of the Balkans values she said she learned from her father -- humility, truth and honesty.

"I dream of lasting peace in the Balkans," she said. "We're all 'condemned' to live together. We might as well live together well."

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South African leader calls for greater sharing of resources

By Kenny Byrd

LONDON (ABP) -- Inequity in the sharing of resources is the world's largest problem, and poor countries must receive help to develop sustainable economies, said a South African leader who spent nearly four years in prison in his fight against apartheid.

With the fall of political apartheid -- South Africa's system of racial separation -- the biggest "apartheid" that people still must overcome is learning to live together unselfishly, said Stanley Mogoba, president of the Pan Africanist Congress and member of South Africa's Parliament.

"As we enter the third millennium of Christianity, are we only going to drift along?" asked Mogoba, who is also a Methodist bishop. "What can we do to love the world and help poorer countries develop?"

Speaking at "Beyond Mere Toleration," a Baptist conference addressing religious freedom as a human right, Mogoba said religious-freedom problems cannot be solved without addressing vast economic disparity between the world's rich and poor.

"How else do you approach the question of leveling the ground?" asked Mogoba, an advocate of "Jubilee 2000," a global movement urging the world's richest countries to cancel debts owed by the poorest countries.

"In a human society, the scales need to be adjusted," he said.

Lonnie Turner, a conference speaker and planner, echoed Mogoba, noting that 41 countries of the developing world -- 33 of them in Africa -- are categorized as HDPC (highly indebted poor countries.)

"The poor in the HDPC don't belong to the Third World, but to the Fourth World," said Turner, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship representative based in Brussels, Belgium. "In Zambia, for example, 85 percent of the people live on one dollar a day, and 73 percent have no access to clean water."

"That kind of poverty won't pay off any debts," Turner said. "These folks, among the world's most neglected people, will go to their graves with unpaid debt, unless the industrialized nations find the political will to take serious action."

Turner said poor nations "borrow to service their debt and service their debt to borrow, so they can earn the privilege to increase their debt."

"It's a vicious circle, indeed," Turner said. "Countries starve their children to service their debt."

Mogoba pointed to the Bible story of Jesus feeding 5,000 people with a mere five loaves of bread and two fish.

"Because of sharing, more could be found for everybody," he said at the conference sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship at London's Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church.

Mogoba said South Africa experienced a miracle at the end of apartheid. "Poised on the edge of a precipice of revolution and a certain bloodbath, it was pulled in a different direction -- the direction of reconciliation."

Mogoba spent nearly four years in South Africa's infamous Robben Island prison -- including six months in solitary confinement -- but turned toward love rather than bitterness over his wrongful imprisonment.

He decided in prison to enter the ministry and came to be known as one who facilitates reconciliation. Often "the very people who need to come together don't want to come together -- and other people die in the process," he said.

The task of the church for many years to come, he said, will be "enabling polarized people with deep feelings of fear, hatred and distrust to find each other and live together in the same country."

He said reconciliation means giving all people, not just South Africans, back their human dignity and providing employment, parity of wages and universal suffrage. The world can begin reconciliation by relieving poor countries of their debt, he added, noting that would mean "a new life for the world -- a new start."

Recently, the leading G7 economic powers agreed to cancel a large portion of debts facing many countries, but Jubilee 2000 leaders say the agreement "seems to increase creditors' already overwhelming power over this process."

"This is a time when we need to move beyond mere toleration to a life of sharing, a life of actually ensuring that the resources of the world are available to all," Mogoba said. Going "beyond mere toleration" is more than claiming love and forgiveness, he said.

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-- Robert O'Brien contributed to this story.

'Old thinking' colors evangelical plight in Eastern Europe, Bulgarian leader says

By Robert O'Brien

LONDON (ABP) -- Bulgarian Baptist president Theo Angelov took one look at his name badge and saw red.

"I don't like red," he quipped, reaching instead for a blue lapel badge also available at a July 8-10 conference on religious liberty in London.

The long struggle for religious freedom by Christians behind the Iron Curtain explains Angelov's disdain for the color, which to many Eastern Europeans symbolizes communist oppression.

"The survival of Bulgaria's evangelical churches is one of the biggest miracles of our day," Angelov said at the conference sponsored jointly by the Baptist Joint Committee and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Before communism collapsed, communists imprisoned church leaders (including Angelov's father), destroyed church buildings and banned theological education, Angelov said.

"And yet the faith of the people survived," he marveled in an address to about 100 religious leaders from a dozen countries and religious affiliations.

Angelov inspired conference participants with reports on how evangelical Christianity has grown since the political scene changed in 1989, when communist control and spying ceased.

But Angelov, general secretary-elect of the European Baptist Federation, said red-tinged "old thinking" still causes problems for religious liberty in Eastern Europe.

He described resurgent efforts by the Orthodox Church to regain its status as the state church in Bulgaria. A mindset still exists that Orthodox leaders are loyal to the nation, he said, "while all evangelicals -- including Baptists -- are enemies of the state."

The "same thinking prevails today in many former communist countries," Angelov said. Orthodox leaders seek a preferred position while government leaders -- especially on the local level -- hinder efforts by evangelicals to meet, minister and build churches, and in some cases permit violence against them

He described cases in Romania, where police stood by while a mob led by Orthodox priests beat Baptists, and Moldova, where a church building was destroyed in a similar incident.

"The idea is for the state to control all religious activities, and this is what links us with the past," Angelov said. He said the mindset is so deeply rooted that even most leaders of new democratic parties "believe this is the way it should be."

"Desire to protect and help the Orthodox Church comes from the understanding that this church always cooperated with the state -- even the communist state," he explained.

Angelov said the Bulgarian government recently enacted legislation assuring democratic protection to minorities, but mentioned only ethnic -- and not religious -- minorities.

"The difference (between) the rights of religious minorities and majority groups will continue to be the main source of concerns for religious freedom in many countries," he said.

Angelov said passage of new religion laws is "of great importance for democratic developments in all the countries of the former communist system." Restrictive laws have already passed in Russia, Uzbekistan and Macedonia, and others are expected to follow in countries like Bulgaria.

If new laws "simply copy the spirit of the past," Angelov warned, "religious freedom and equality will continue to be a big problem in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe."

Angelov said time and hard work are needed to overcome old thinking in new Eastern European democracies and to ensure justice for evangelicals and other religious minorities.

"Freedom of religion and conscience is the most basic and constructive of all freedoms," he declared. "Indeed, it may be called the cornerstone of all freedoms and human rights. Without freedom of religion, all freedoms are endangered."

Angelov praised U.S. Baptist churches and organizations for humanitarian and spiritual aid to Eastern Europe.

"We appreciate and need help," he said.

"But don't bring us your theological and diversity controversies," he added. "We have enough problems and divisions of our own."

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Cults deserve same religious freedom as mainstream faiths, speaker contends

By Andrew Black

LONDON (ABP) -- Members of new religious movements, sects or cults deserve the same freedom to choose, practice and promote their faith as citizens of any other faith, sociologist Eileen Barker told an international group of Baptist religious-freedom activists in England.

The conference, "Beyond Mere Toleration: Religious Liberty as a Basic Human Right," was sponsored July 8-10 at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in London by the Baptist Joint Committee and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Barker and other speakers said denying religious freedom to new or strange groups is not only wrong in principle but could open the door for later removal of those rights from older, more established religions.

Groups such as Baptists, Assemblies of God, and even Russian Catholics have been singled out in various countries for persecution and restrictive legislation, speakers noted.

Barker acknowledged that many people feel "apprehension and repulsion" toward newer religious movements like Hare Krishna, Scientology and the Unification Church. When she accepted the invitation to speak at a conference titled "Beyond Mere Toleration" about cults, a friend responded: "Yes. Some of them are beyond toleration."

"My friend may have a small point," said Barker, a professor at the London School of Economics and internationally recognized expert on new religious movements. Some activities are "absolutely beyond toleration," she said. She cited Aum Shinri Kyo followers leaving lethal gas on the Tokyo subway, sexual child abuse by Children of God members, and "horrible murders" by Charles Manson's followers.

"Some behavior is intolerable," Barker reiterated, "but we must not tolerate intolerance" in principle and application.

"What do these paradoxes mean?" she asked. "Well, I suppose it means that things just 'ain't that simple," answered Barker, who consults with law-enforcement officials faced with responding to crises with cults.

However terrible the actions of particular groups, it's essential not to generalize about new religious movements and to label them a danger to society, Barker said.

New religious movements differ in many ways, but they do have certain characteristics in common, Barker noted. Early Christians shared many of those traits, she added.

"It's possible the sets of beliefs most of us hold originated in a group that had sect-like characteristics," Barker said. This idea is a stark contrast to popular images of cults as "brainwashers" who prey on the defenseless. The brainwashing concept is only a metaphor, Barker said, adding that the idea of group members becoming mindless zombies is contrary to all evidence.

"The older established religions are better at 'brainwashing,'" Barker joked. "They get to work on children from birth."

People join small and strange religious groups for many reasons, including some positive ones, such as gaining an opportunity to sacrifice for their beliefs, she said.

Their newfound faith also gives them a chance to develop self-confidence and to discover greater meaning in life. For many cult members, the group is often an escape from a society that doesn't meet their needs, Barker explained.

"People join because they choose to," said Barker. "We have to remember that members of these groups are human beings."

Barker gave examples of ways in which new religious movements are mistreated, including loss of civil rights, physical attacks, and restrictive laws.

"We subscribe to a culture that describes these people as 'other,'" Barker said. "We go along with constructing and maintaining an image that demonizes the small and strange." Media also demonize by printing sensationalist stories and promoting negative stereotypes of new sects, she said.

Tragedies like the deaths at the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, are often made worse by these negative stereotypes, said Barker, who consulted with U.S. officials in the aftermath of the event to look for ways to do better in the future.

In sociological terms, this is called "deviance magnification" -- where each side feeds off the mistrust and confrontation of the other, she said. "We often push them (cults) into becoming worse. We can enable them to become better."

Barker concluded with suggestions about what going beyond "mere toleration" might mean:

-- Remember that sect members are human beings, too.

-- Actively work for a society where it's unacceptable to demonize cults and promote the idea of brainwashing.

-- Respect freedom for truth with a small "t," rather than only for "The Truth."

-- Speak and act in a way that does not give permission for anyone to degrade, remove freedoms or attack groups without just cause.

In acknowledging real tragedies that have occurred among members of new religious movements, Barker said that "normal" groups aren't immune from unacceptable behavior, either. That includes sexual child abuse by some Roman Catholic priests and huckster-type television preachers who con money from followers.

Toleration can sometimes be a "wishy-washy relativism" of passive indifference to the beliefs of others, but going "beyond mere toleration" takes much more effort, Barker said. She suggested that Jesus himself kept some pretty strange company -- eating with them, calling them down from trees, and washing their feet.

"What about the Children of God (whose members were taught to be 'hookers for Jesus' to show God's love and save souls)?" she asked. "Would Jesus have crossed the room to have a drink with one of them? I think he would have."

"Would you or I have crossed the room to have a drink with Jesus and his friends? I'm not so sure."

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-- Andrew Black is a freelance writer who works with the U.S. Department of Justice in Dallas. Robert O'Brien contributed to this story.

Fundamentalism a problem for all faiths, panel argues

By Kenny Byrd

LONDON (ABP) -- "If God were a person, he'd be turning in his grave," quipped a Jewish panelist discussing religious leaders who think they have the only interpretation of faith.

Sidney Brichto of the London-based Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues joined a Muslim and a Christian for a panel discussion July 9 at a conference titled "Beyond Mere Toleration: Religious Liberty as a Basic Human Right."

Brichto called it "arrogant" for any religious leader to tell others, "If you don't believe as I say, you aren't a good Christian, Muslim, Jew or whatever."

Because of the way people demean the beliefs of others, Brichto said, "If God were a person he'd be turning in his grave."

The panelists said fundamentalism in all three religions threatens individual choice and distorts tenets of their faith. The panel was part of a July 8-10 conference sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship at London's historic Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church.

"Fundamentalism is more dangerous inside a group than outside it," said Brichto. He added he has more in common with open-minded Christians than with Orthodox Jews.

Brichto said it is disturbing that orthodox interpretations are perceived by many as the "high road" of all three faiths.

Fundamentalists are viewed as the "real thing" Brichto said, "because they're fanatical; because they know exactly where they stand."

"The fact they're standing for the wrong thing doesn't worry anybody," he said.

Liberals, meanwhile, who value individual religious freedom, are labeled "wishy washy," Brichto said, but he believes "liberals are closer to Jesus than fanatics who know it all."

"And so unless you're prepared to kill for your faith, (they think) you really don't believe," Brichto said. People turn to fundamentalism, he argued, because they want "easy options (and) to be told what to do and how to think."

Panelist Charles Wellborn, a Baptist and emeritus professor of religion at Florida State University, observed that some may try to "force people to conform in terms of practice and external appearances" to a particular expression of faith.

"But there's a sanctuary of the individual soul that's inviolable," Wellborn declared. "In the final analysis, people will believe what they believe."

Brichto said the challenge to open-minded people "is to stand with our heads high and say that we are the bearers of true religion because we believe ... in that possibility of people exercising their freedoms with responsibility."

Brichto said "human rights, liberty and autonomy of the individual" lie at the center of faith. He called it "anti-religious" if "anybody denies, for any reason, an individual's autonomy."

Asad Beg, an administrator for the European Parliament, said some "Muslim people have not been the greatest ambassadors of their own religion." But he added all religions have individuals who do not represent their faith well.

Beg pointed to religious extremes in the Serbian-Orthodox Church and Northern Ireland. Viewed by Muslims only through those lenses, Beg said Christians "would be seen as people who have raped our women, burned our homes, desecrated our cemeteries (and) burned our people alive."

Beg also pointed out that on a recent trip to Nashville, Tenn., as a Muslim he "felt like an alien" while visiting America's Bible Belt.

Beg said Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet who will one day return to earth. He also discussed conflicts in the Middle East, where he was recently not allowed to view the grave of Jacob, because he is Islamic.

Beg also said many Palestinian Christians feel abandoned by Western Christians who are vocal supporters of Israel.

Brichto and Beg agreed that conflicts in the Balkans and Northern Ireland are not as tied to religion as many people would like to believe.

Origins of Kosovo's problems "may have been religious 500 or 600 years ago, but it became economic and political," Brichto said. The Irish debate is not Catholicism vs. Protestantism, he added, although it started in part because of the power of religion in the government.

When dealing with questions about treatment of religious minorities -- whether it be Christians living in the East or Muslims in the West -- Beg noted: "How can we move to the future without acknowledging our past?"

"What we need to do is acknowledge what has happened, recognize it and try to move forward," he said. "We need to learn about each other and try and build bridges for a common understanding."

Wellborn called extending the New Testament notion of "koinonia" (fellowship), "without diminishing its special meaning for the Christian community, to a larger community in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious world."

Wellborn said the concept means: "I respect a man or a woman who loves and seeks God, and I can walk with him or her in fellowship on that journey."

"It's a dream, it's an idea," he acknowledged, "but when have we made any real progress without being prodded by dreamers and idealists?"

Wellborn, who has lived in Britain for more than 20 years, said he believes strongly in Baptist doctrines of the priesthood of the believer, the authority of the individual religious experience and the separation of church and state. He said he also accepts "radical soul liberty that will settle for no less than free, informed, religious choice."

"Religious 'toleration' satisfies neither my spiritual nor my intellectual conscience," Wellborn said in keeping with the conference theme. "It's an offensive word to me."

"If some power has the right to grant toleration, it has the right in theory to take it away."

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Racial injustice a problem in England, Baptist leader says

By Kenny Byrd

LONDON (ABP) -- Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed often wondered what others in her school's multi-ethnic choir thought about the words "England's green and pleasant land" in her music teacher's favorite hymn.

"The uncomfortable reality is that for many in 'England's green and pleasant land,' day-to-day living is not so pleasant," she told participants at "Beyond Mere Toleration," a religious-liberty conference held July 8-10 at London's historic Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church.

Concerns about racial justice and religious liberty mingle in England, said Davidson-Gotobed, racial-justice coordinator for the London Baptist Association and a British law school graduate. That is because a person's ethnic identity often overlaps with religious identity.

"Therefore, you will find it difficult to address one without addressing the other," she said. It is easy to spot Sikhs, Muslims or Hindus, she explained. "They can't blend in," she said, unless they abandon traditional costumes that are important to their faith.

Despite such diversity, England has a poor record of dealing with ethnic differences, Davidson-Gotobed said. A 1996 British crime survey, for example, revealed that Asians are eight times more likely than any other group to suffer a racist attack in their own home, she said.

"Those perceived to be different are deemed exotic at best, inferior at worst," she added.

In addition to physical attacks, racial minorities also suffer psychological abuse, she said.

"Talk to Jews who find themselves cleaning and restoring desecrated graves of loved ones. Talk to Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims who have become expert in removing abusive racist graffiti from the walls outside their place of worship."

The media ignores such attacks, she said, which are "often suffered in silence."

Baptists who are true to their heritage must come out of their "comfort zones ... and stand with those for whom England is not so pleasant," said Davidson-Gotobed, a British-born citizen of Jamaican descent.

She said Baptists from all countries must be "prepared to cross the divide of mistrust and misunderstanding starting with just one person. After all, you can only eat an elephant one mouthful at a time."

Also speaking to racial and social-justice issues at the conference was Faith Bowers, a member of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church. Bowers just finished writing "A Bold Experiment," a history of the socially minded Bloomsbury church.

"The manifest horrors of racism abroad and at home have been a significant factor in reawakening many English churches to wider social concerns," Bowers said. She said the separation of church and state "should not be an excuse to stifle the churches' prophetic voice against social injustice."

She said English Baptists have traditionally believed in the separation of church and state, but it has not been as dominant a concern as it has been for Baptists in the United States. "Like it or not, we have had to live with established churches in Britain," she said. "But Brits are notoriously good at compromise. We get on with it."

Bowers said the current establishment does not present a great threat to religious liberty. "Indeed, English churches are sometimes all glad when the established church ensures that government hears a Christian voice raised for justice and righteousness."

But Bowers said Baptists have added their voice to a "fresh movement" for disestablishment of the state church in England.

Bowers also spoke in support of passage of a British Bill of Rights.

The conference met at a church with more than a 150-year record of involvement in religious liberty and human rights issues, volunteerism to meet human need, and opposition to unjust taxation and slavery.

An early pastor of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church refused to let Southern ministers from the United States preach at the church during the days of slavery. "We will have no complicity in worship with those who sell human flesh," Bowers quoted the pastor as saying.

In 1961, U. S. civil rights leader Martin Luther King was welcomed to Bloomsbury church's pulpit, she said.

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Religious Liberty Protection Act passes U.S. House of Representatives

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. House of Representatives approved a bill July 15 that would require state and local governments to have a compelling reason before interfering with religious practices.

On a 306-118 vote, House lawmakers approved the Religious Liberty Protection Act, sponsored by Reps. Charles Canady, R-Fla., and Chet Edwards, D-Texas.

Canady said the legislation is designed "to ensure the free exercise of religion is not trampled on by the insensitive and heedless actions of the government."

Edwards said he has been concerned in recent weeks about bills that would threaten the First Amendment's Establishment Clause in the wake of school shootings in Littleton, Colo. But "the legislation today does not focus on the Establishment Clause, rather it focuses on the importance of the Free Exercise Clause," Edwards said.

RLPA is Congress' second attempt to remedy the 1990 Employment Division vs. Smith ruling, which threw out the traditional "strict scrutiny" legal test and made it easier for government to interfere with religious practices.

In 1993, Congress enacted and President Clinton signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to return the requirement that government had to show a "compelling interest" before interfering with religious practices. But in 1997 the Supreme Court ruled that Congress lacked the authority to impose RFRA on the states. Lower courts have ruled that RFRA remains applicable on the federal level.

While most House lawmakers generally agree that protection for religious liberty in the states is needed in the face of the 1990 decision, they disagree on how to go about it.

RLPA would use Congress' spending-and-commerce powers to limit state and local governments' ability to place a substantial burden on the free exercise of religion. The law would require they employ the least restrictive means of furthering a compelling state interest such as health or safety. It includes a separate provision protecting churches and other religious organizations from restrictive zoning laws.

Canady said the bill "is designed to provide the fundamental civil right of all Americans to practice their religion with a high level of protection consistent with other fundamental rights."

More than 70 religious and civil liberties groups support the measure, including the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the Baptist Joint Committee, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Jewish Committee, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

"The basic freedom, religious freedom, spawns and undergirds all other liberties," BJC Executive Director James Dunn said after the House vote.

Still other religious and civil liberties groups that once supported RFRA now oppose RLPA.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which supported RLPA when it was first introduced in the last Congress, now opposes it over a possible threat to other civil and gay rights.

Rep. Patrick Kennedy, D-R.I., said he is "nervous" about this notion that "we're going to give religions preference in their religious tenets over our own civil rights."

"The right wing in the Republican Party is against gays and lesbians," he said. "They want to discriminate against people who are homosexuals. ... So they feel that if you have in your religion a belief that gays and lesbians should be damned by God, you should be able to discriminate against them."

An amendment offered by Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., failed 190-234. It sought to prevent larger businesses from denying housing or employment to homosexuals because of religious beliefs while still allowing the privilege for religious groups, individuals and very small businesses.

In support of his amendment, Nadler, who sponsored RLPA in the last Congress, said he now believes RLPA has a "terrible flaw" that his amendment would fix. RLPA should be used as a "shield" to protect religious liberty, not a "sword" against civil rights, he said.

Canady spoke against Nadler's amendment, however, saying it would address concerns raised by only a few on the far left -- "concerns based not on any current problem but pure speculation."

Canady said RLPA will continue the case-law tradition whereby the facts of the case will sometimes tip the scales to religions and sometimes not. "But the Nadler amendment will determine in advance that the interests of the government will always prevail in certain cases."

The Senate held hearings on federal legislation to protect religious liberty last month. President Clinton has issued a statement in support of RLPA, and the Justice Department has said it believes the bill is constitutional.

Ban on school religious activities went too far, appeals court says

By Larry Chesser

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A federal district judge went too far in his order barring school-sanctioned religious activities in an Alabama school district, a federal appeals court said July 13.

The appeals court instructed District Judge Ira DeMent to rewrite his 1997 order so that it does not prohibit "genuinely student-initiated religious speech" in DeKalb County public schools.

DeMent issued the order after Michael Chandler, a vice principal in the DeKalb County school system, and his son, Jesse, challenged a 1993 state law authorizing non-proselytizing, student-initiated prayer at school-sponsored events.

DeMent struck down the state law and issued a permanent injunction barring DeKalb school officials from enforcing it. He also appointed a "monitor" -- Chriss Doss, director of the Center for the Study of Law and the Church at Samford University's Cumberland Law School -- to oversee compliance with his order in DeKalb schools.

But in a 3-0 decision, the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said DeMent cannot require school officials to bar "student-initiated religious speech" in school.

"The suppression of student-initiated religious speech is neither necessary to, nor does it achieve, constitutional neutrality towards religion," the court said.

"Permitting students to speak religiously signifies neither state approval nor disapproval of that speech," the appeals court said.

Allowing such speech, the court said, acknowledges the school's "constitutional duty to tolerate religious expression. Only in this way is true neutrality achieved."

The panel ordered DeMent to revise the permanent injunction so that it does not "prohibit genuinely student-initiated religious speech, nor apply restrictions on the time place and manner of that speech which exceed those placed on students' secular speech."

The free-speech rights of students are not without limits, the court said, noting that the school "may impose the same reasonable restrictions on the time place, and manner of religious speech as it does on secular speech."

A student's right to express religious beliefs "does not extend to using the machinery of the state as a vehicle for converting his audience," the court added. "The Constitution requires that schools permit religious expression, not religious proselytizing."

The ruling left in place DeMent's conclusion that the law enacted by the Alabama legislature was unconstitutional on its face.

It also did not disturb his order barring school organized or officially sanctioned religious activities including "vocal prayer, Bible and devotional or scriptural readings, distribution of religious materials, texts or announcements, and discussions of a devotional or inspirational nature, in school or at school-related events, to include assemblies, sporting events, and graduation ceremonies."

Citing past efforts by DeKalb school personnel to encourage student participation in religious activities, the appeals court also left intact DeMent's appointment of a monitor to oversee compliance with the permanent injunction.

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, welcomed the appeals court's ruling.

"This decision is a major victory for student religious speech in public schools," said Sekulow, who worked with Alabama Attorney General Bill Pryor to appeal DeMent's ruling.

Pamela Summers, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union, which represented Chandler, said an appeal is likely, according to Religion News Service. However, she said much of the ACLU position was vindicated by the ruling.

Brent Walker, general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee, said "much of the 11th Circuit's opinion is right on target -- it approved most of Judge DeMent's order."

Walker said the opinion is "misguided to the extent it approves of student prayer in the context of state sponsorship, such as in the classroom, over the school intercom and at compulsory assemblies.

"Students do not have the right to lead a captive audience in prayer when the school compels or encourages their attendance," he added.

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END
