

Senators asks Justice Department to investigate Americans United

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Six Republican senators have asked U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno to investigate whether Americans United for Separation of Church and State unlawfully attempted to interfere with election initiatives of the Christian Coalition.

The senators asked Reno in a July 2 letter to determine whether Americans United "has violated either the spirit or letter of federal law." It was signed by Sens. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., Strom Thurmond, R-S.C., Jeff Sessions, R-Ala., Sam Brownback, R-Kan., Paul Coverdell, R-Ga., and Don Nickles, R-Okla.

The senators pointed to AU's "well-orchestrated past efforts" to warn churches they might jeopardize their tax-exempt status by distributing Christian Coalition voter guides. They also pointed to a Christian Coalition voter-registration drive held July 4 and AU's possible interference with the coalition's "lawful" activities.

The senators said the law provides criminal penalties for someone who "intimidates, threatens, coerces, or attempts to intimidate, threaten, or coerce, any other person for the purpose of interfering with the right to vote."

"If it is true that Americans United or any other organization has attempted to disenfranchise religious voters by intimidating people of faith into not participating in the political process -- thereby silencing their voices on moral issues -- then all Americans should be outraged," the letter stated.

AU Executive Director Barry Lynn responded by sending a July 19 letter to the senators and a copy to Reno. "Frankly, I am appalled at this outrageous and wholly baseless action, and I am asking for an immediate retraction and public apology," he wrote.

"My organization's activities in attempting to educate churches and religious leaders about the legal difficulties associated with houses of worship engaging in partisan politicking have been clearly lawful and reasonable," Lynn said. "What you have chosen to describe as 'intimidation' is actually an educational effort designed to inform religious leaders about federal tax law."

In a press release, Lynn said: "This appears to be a transparent effort on the part of (Christian Coalition founder Pat) Robertson and his friends in the Senate to intimidate us." He called it "reckless and irresponsible for these senators to ask for a criminal investigation of a citizens' group, without any evidence."

Lynn also suggested a link between the letter to Reno and a June meeting between Robertson and some GOP senators.

AU distributed a time line of events that says Robertson met with GOP Senate leaders June 17 to discuss ways to "re-energize grassroots voters." AU says Robertson met with Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss, Nickles and Coverdell.

A Christian Coalition spokesman said Robertson did not ask the senators to send the letter.

"Barry Lynn is not concerned about the tax status of churches," said Chris Freund of the Christian Coalition. "He is worried that people of faith are going to get out of the pews and into politics."

A spokesman for Nickles said the Oklahoma senator met with Robertson. He told Associated Baptist Press that after a preliminary check, he could neither deny nor confirm that Robertson asked senators to send the letter to Reno.

A spokesman for Brownback said Robertson has met with the Kansas senator and the issue may or may not have come up. "But that is not the point," he added, the "question" is whether Americans United intimidated voters.

Joe Conn, spokesman for Americans United, said the Federal Election Commission has sued the Christian Coalition for violating election laws. Conn also said it is not "surprising" that Helms signed the letter. "Helms is in office today in large part thanks to the Christian Coalition who bailed him out in 1990," Conn said.

A Helms official said the North Carolina senator has not met with Robertson in at least two years. The spokesman said reading an article in which Lynn was quoted as criticizing the Christian Coalition prompted him to sign the letter.

A Justice Department official said the letter is being reviewed by the public integrity section of the criminal division.

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Fellowship reports increase in financial contributions

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Bolstered by a special fund aiding refugees from Kosovo, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship ended its fiscal year with financial contributions 10 percent above last year.

The Atlanta-based Fellowship also reported a record year for gifts to global missions. Undesignated receipts, meanwhile, were below budget.

"We received more money, but more of it had restricted uses," said Gary Skeen, coordinator for finance and administration.

Gifts for the year totaled nearly \$15.1 million, up 10.4 percent over last year, Skeen reported. Undesignated donations totaled \$8 million, 97 percent of the amount budgeted.

Gifts to global missions exceeded \$5 million, up nearly 13 percent over the previous year.

Designated gifts, meanwhile, grew by 52 percent, to \$2 million. That figure includes more than \$400,000 raised for relief ministries for Kosovar refugees.

A total of 1,806 churches gave money to the Fellowship in the 1998-99 fiscal year, 124 more than the previous year.

Next year's budget, adopted at the Fellowship's General Assembly in June, is \$15.5 million. It includes a \$5.25 million goal for the global-missions offering.

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-- By ABP staff

Lawmakers lack the will to end hunger, leaders of anti-hunger group contend

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON -- Hunger is a solvable problem, but lawmakers lack the political will to end it, Bread for the World leaders said recently.

As the anti-hunger advocacy group celebrated its 25th anniversary in Washington, leaders warned proposed federal spending cuts could threaten necessary funds for food programs

Art Simon, who founded Bread for the World in 1974, said experts then were saying that population growth was rapidly overtaking the ability to produce food, and it seemed "implausible" to make any headway on hunger.

"Dramatic progress has been made," Simon said, "but not in the United States." Since 1974, the number of hungry around the world has dropped from one-third of the globe's population to one-fifth, Simon added.

"It's much clearer now than it was then that hunger is a solvable problem," he said.

Bread for the World President David Beckmann said at the June meeting that hunger could be solved for roughly \$50 billion a year. "That's a lot of money, but Americans spend that on movies," he said, adding that "the government ran a surplus of well over \$50 billion this year."

During a conference breakout session, Lynette Engelhardt, congressional advocate for the organization, said the United States has the money and the programs to end hunger, but lawmakers "lack the political will."

She said the U.S. should put more money into anti-poverty programs. Pointing to the first federal budget surplus in decades, she asked, "If not now, when?"

Another BFW congressional advocate, Kim Wade, said that food programs face cuts due to spending caps set by Congress in recent deals to balance the budget.

The two advocates said Bread For the World is calling for a \$181 million increase in a program that is also celebrating its 25th year of existence -- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.

The WIC spending level passed by the U.S. House of Representatives is \$45 million short of what is needed to maintain the current caseload of 7.4 million women, infants and children, they said.

A Senate committee has approved the minimum needed to maintain 7.4 million people, but BFW advocates fear the House and Senate spending conflict may be resolved by splitting the difference.

BFW advocates also are seeking passage of the Debt Relief for Poverty Reduction Act, which would require the United States to cancel most of the bilateral debt owed to it by poor countries. An international coalition called Jubilee 2000 has formed to work for the bill's passage.

The day before the conference began, leaders from the top industrial countries, known as the G-8, reached an agreement to offer as much as \$100 billion in debt relief to 33 of the world's poorest countries. Jubilee 2000 leaders, however, are calling for more.

Increasing the minimum wage is another provision sought by BFW leaders to combat hunger. Engelhardt said 10 percent to 11 percent of the American workforce earns minimum wage, which is \$3,000 below the official poverty line.

"People can afford to pay their workers a fair wage," she told conference participants. "If you believe in a minimum wage at all, shouldn't it be a living wage?"

Bread for the World leaders have not reached a consensus on a controversial proposal known as "charitable choice." First approved in the 1996 welfare-reform act, it would allow pervasively sectarian organizations, such as churches, to receive tax dollars for their social-service ministries. Opponents say the measure would violate the separation of church and state and subject religious institutions to government regulations.

Wade said the hunger organization has no position on the proposal, which continues to be attached to many congressional spending bills.

Also speaking at the conference were current and former lawmakers.

"When we are generally in good times as a society it is much more difficult as a society to focus on social problems," observed U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman. He said many of the "working poor" do not realize they are eligible for food stamps, because they confuse them with welfare.

"It's our responsibility to in fact let people know that there is help for struggling families to get proper nourishment," Glickman said.

Rep. Marge Roukema, R-N.J., said it is "absolutely criminal to let children go to bed hungry, in this the luckiest country in the world or in any country in the world."

And Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, said, "We've paid attention to a few at the top and not the many on the bottom."

Longtime Bread for the World staff members Joel Underwood and Barbara Howell were honored for their work at the agency. And former Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill., announced the creation of the BFW internship in honor of his brother, Art Simon.

In the meeting's keynote address, the former senator and presidential candidate said, "Religion can be a powerful force for healing or a powerful force for harm."

He lamented that "the wealthiest nation" would tolerate mass poverty and hunger. While the United States acted to halt ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, he said, more than 1 million people died in genocide in the Sudan and more than 900,000 in Rwanda.

He said the U.S. provides a low amount of international aid in comparison to other industrialized countries. Norway -- with a population of roughly 4.5 million people -- took in more Kosovar refugees than the United States -- with 250 million people, he said.

Simon said the question that should be asked about the future of the U.S. government is "not really whether government is large or small, but whether government is good or bad."

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Bread for the World releases book compiling statistics on hunger, relief

Following are statistics released at Bread for the World's annual gathering. The information comes from a book released at the conference titled "Grace at the Table: Ending Hunger in God's World." David Beckmann and Art Simon are its authors.

-- The U.S. Conference of Mayors reported a 14-percent increase in requests for emergency assistance in 1998 and said 21 percent of all requests went unmet.

-- A total 828 million people in developing countries around the world are going hungry "in the stark sense of lacking enough food to sustain normal activity," according to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization.

-- The World Bank estimates that 1.3 billion people, or 20 percent of the human race, live in "absolute poverty." They survive on less than a dollar a day and are too poor to afford an adequate diet and other necessities.

-- 35 million people (one out of every eight) live in U.S. households that are food-insecure or hungry. Two million suffer severe hunger.

-- A Department of Agriculture study says 3 percent of the U.S. population -- about 7 million people -- are hungry.

-- The United States ranks last when compared to the 20 other industrialized donor countries in terms of proportion of its national income given in aid to developing countries. "Moreover most U.S. foreign aid serves strategic or military goals rather than humanitarian or development goals," the book states.

"When a 1995 University of Maryland poll asked how much of the federal budget goes to foreign aid, the respondents' average estimate was 15 percent. When asked what share of U.S. tax dollars aid poor countries, respondents supported an average of 5 percent of federal spending. In fact, foreign aid spending is less than 1 percent of the U.S. budget."

-- In 1997, 13 percent of the U.S. population fell below the official poverty line, and 30 percent remained in poverty for at least two months.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

'Soup-kitchen syndrome' limits churches in fight against hunger, expert says

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The "soup-kitchen syndrome" -- defined as "a feeling that if you're not handing soup to someone, you're not helping end hunger" -- makes it harder to involve church members in legislative advocacy for anti-hunger and poverty programs.

So said Bread for the World activist Harold Stanton at a breakout session at the organization's recent 25th anniversary.

Bread for the World recruits congregations to become a "covenant church" by agreeing to educate church members on hunger issues. Covenant churches also participate in an annual "offering of letters," written by church members to urge lawmakers to vote for specific anti-hunger legislation.

Participation in the anti-hunger advocacy organization varies by denomination, said Tom Murphy, who works with Bread for the World's church relations. He said roughly 350 Southern Baptist individuals and 14 churches are members. Presbyterians, meanwhile, have more than 5,000 members and 226 covenant churches. Catholics have 15,000 members and 212 covenant churches. Counting all kinds of Baptists, there are 1,500 Baptist members and more than 50 churches.

Murphy said Bread for the World has strong relationships with several Baptist groups and is working on extending those relationships.

Steve Nelson, director of hunger concerns for the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said Southern Baptists respond to hunger directly through the Southern Baptist World Hunger Fund. The Southern Baptist Convention spent \$10.4 million on hunger relief last year, including aid to inner cities and emergency food and development projects around the globe, he said. However the SBC does not

work typically through legislative advocacy, but by raising awareness about hunger, he said.

"We don't think our primary thrust needs to be legislative on this issue," Nelson said, adding that a "direct response" is sometimes more effective. Nelson, who said the welfare system over the past 50 years has largely failed, said a handout is not as effective as personal involvement. "We do the poor no favors if we share bread for the body and don't share the bread of life for hungry souls," he said.

Becki Wilson, representing a Baptist BFW covenant church from Nashville, Tenn., said she was excited to see others at the conference who are involved in interdenominational groups that work with civic and government leaders.

"I don't believe that's happened much in Southern Baptist groups yet," she said. "Too often, we're so busy insisting the key issue is 'who's right' that we forget the real issue is helping people. I'd love to see us get in the lead of finding ways to work with the entire community to meet community needs," said Wilson, a member of Crieewood Baptist Church in Nashville.

"So often we've been led to believe that Christians are supposed to be politically ignorant or inactive, and I don't feel that's true," Wilson said. "God intends stewardship, or care of all our resources, in a way that's more akin to justice than to tithing."

Wilson said anti-hunger advocates "need to realize that they have to call upon government leaders at all levels to let them know that ... food stamps, trade and debt reduction are significant hunger and poverty issues and that we want them to effect changes in these."

She referred to Bread for the World's 1999 legislative focus -- the Jubilee 2000 movement to cancel the debts of poor countries. Pointing to the name's biblical roots, Wilson said the Jubilee year was supposed to be a year in which debts were forgiven, slaves were freed and land was returned to its original family owners.

"The devastating effects of loss or catastrophe were not intended to be permanent, because jubilee justice would mandate readjustment so that families could be self-sustaining again," she said. "Working toward that kind of justice for everyone is what I believe God intends."

President David Beckmann said advocacy carried out by Bread for the World members in Birmingham, Ala., may have precipitated the recent decision by the leading industrial countries to lower some of the debt of some poor countries.

Bread for the World members from an independent Presbyterian church in Birmingham met with Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Ala, who sits on the House Banking Committee, in March 1999. A BFW staffer present at the meeting said Bachus told the advocates he had originally planned to tell the group he would take their concerns about the Debt Relief for Poverty Reduction Act under consideration.

But instead, he became a sponsor of the bill and later brought on other GOP sponsors.

And when the House Banking Committee met on the bill, Bachus gave a stirring speech in support of the measure. "We in America are fond of saying I had a bad day," he told colleagues. "We should realize that even on our worst days we are blessed with so much more: more food, more shelter, more clothes [than others]."

"For the people living in these poor countries, their suffering is temporal; it will end with their lives," he continued. "For us, this decision will follow us. We will not only live with it in this life, but we will live with it in the next life."

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