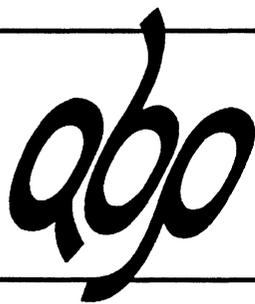


Nashville, Tennessee



Associated
Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

September 16, 1999

(99-76)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Gunman kills seven in Texas church rampage**
- Fort Worth shooting recalls earlier Texas tragedy**
- Istook reintroduces religion amendment**
- Interfaith Alliance wants to register, educate voters**
- Religious-liberty law's validity addressed at Senate hearing**

Gunman kills seven in Texas church rampage

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- When Glen Bucy first heard gunshots from outside the sanctuary of Wedgwood Baptist Church the night of Sept. 15, he thought it was part of a skit.

The time according to his watch was 6:55 p.m., and the program for this Wednesday night youth rally called for a skit about that time, he explained in an interview the day after the shooting at the Fort Worth church.

"I thought they were trying to do something about Columbine to remind us," he explained.

Bucy, a 17-year-old high-school senior, was sitting near the back of the church sanctuary because he, his brother and a friend had arrived late. After hearing the gunshots in the foyer, he turned to look behind him.

Standing on the other side of a glass door was the gunman, peering into the sanctuary.

"I looked at him, and he looked at me. We made eye contact. Then he started shooting right at me, through the glass," Bucy said. "We had glass fly all over us."

Then the gunman opened the shattered door and walked into the sanctuary, where a Christian band was playing and the lights were dimmed. Bucy grabbed his brother and best friend and pushed them under the pew, telling them to stay still.

As the gunman continued to fire, the band played on, and those seated in the front of the church did not understand what was transpiring behind them.

"A lot of people started applauding because they thought it was part of this skit," Bucy explained.

The applause angered the gunman, he said. "He started shouting, 'This is for real! This is for real!'"

That's when the gunman threw a pipe bomb, Bucy said, that "shook the whole building."

The band stopped playing, and terror reigned in the sanctuary for an unknown number of minutes as the gunman cursed religion and Christianity and randomly shot his 9 mm semi-automatic handgun around the room.

That's when the applause turned to screams.

"One of the youth group leaders stood up and talked to the guy, trying to calm him down," Bucy said. "Then he started to witness to him."

That angered the gunman further, Bucy said, causing him to reply, "This religion is a bunch of bull---." Then the gunman fired at the man who had tried to calm him, Bucy said.

The room went quiet for a minute, and then Bucy said he heard one last gunshot. When the lights came up, he looked across to another back pew and saw the gunman had sat down and shot himself in the head.

The crowd of about 150 youth and their leaders then began running from the sanctuary. As he passed through the foyer, Bucy said, he saw several people who had been shot before the gunman entered the sanctuary.

In all, seven people were killed by Larry Gene Ashbrook, 47, before he took his own life.

Three of the dead were either current or former students at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Wedgwood Baptist Church, located in a quiet middle-class residential neighborhood of southwest Fort Worth, long has been a popular church home for seminary students.

The seminary's regular chapel service Sept. 16 was turned into a memorial service for the slain students, with Wedgwood Pastor Al Meredith and President Ken Hemphill speaking.

"We come to you today in the midst of our grief, to know your hope and power and presence," Hemphill prayed at the service.

Slain were current seminary student Shawn Brown, 23, a Christian education student from San Angelo; and former seminary students Sydney Browning, 36, children's choir director at Wedgwood; and Kimberly Jones, 23.

The four teens killed were Kristi Beckel, 14; Joseph Ennis, 14; Cassandra Griffin, 14; and Justin Ray, 17.

Ennis had come to the rally with a youth group from First Baptist Church of White Settlement. Although not a member of the church, he had been a regular visitor in recent weeks, said Pastor Jim Gatliff.

Another member of White Settlement youth group--16-year-old Justin Laird--was among seven who were seriously wounded and being treated at area hospitals, Gatliff said.

The White Settlement congregation, located in a Fort Worth suburb, had just concluded a monthly business meeting when they got word of the shooting at Wedgwood. Not knowing the extent of the situation, they immediately reconvened for a brief prayer time, Gatliff said. "We just prayed for whoever and whatever."

Then the pastor got a phone call from the youth minister, who was calling from his cell phone at Wedgwood and gave the news that one of their students was dead and another paralyzed.

The congregation went to prayer once again, while many parents scurried out of the building to go find their teenagers.

Later, an all-night vigil was held at the hospital where Laird was being treated.

As of late afternoon Sept. 16, police had offered no clear motive for the shooting. Little was known of the gunman's background, except that he lived alone and his father had recently died.

Police searched his home in a Fort Worth suburb and reportedly found it a wreck inside. They seized 100 pieces of evidence, including the materials to manufacture pipe bombs and various writings said to express profound anger toward God and the church.

The shooting reportedly is the worst mass killing in Fort Worth history, but it is not the first fatal church shooting in Texas. In 1980 a gunman killed five people during a shooting spree at First Baptist Church of Daingerfield, Texas.

Fort Worth shooting recalls earlier Texas tragedy

By George Henson

DAINGERFIELD, Texas (ABP) -- The tragic shooting that left eight dead at Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, unearthed 20-year-old wounds buried just below the surface of the lives of many members of First Baptist Church in Daingerfield, Texas.

Five were killed when Alvin Lee King III, a former Daingerfield High School mathematics teacher, burst through the sanctuary doors clad in army fatigues and a steel helmet. Church members wrestled King to the ground almost immediately, but deadly rounds already had been fired, and two men were killed during the struggle to get King out of the building.

King also managed to shoot himself but was not killed. He later hanged himself in a county jail in 1982 while awaiting trial.

Daingerfield pastor John Stone said all of that history came immediately to mind for many of his members when they heard the news about Wedgwood.

"I have had a few call, but others have turned inward," Stone said. "Many have asked that I try to get word to the pastor at Wedgwood that in time God will restore."

The memories in Daingerfield are not only of that tragic Sunday morning, but also of the days following when God became especially real to those left hurting, he said.

"As painful as it is to remember, it is also something you don't want to forget, because if you do you also forget the faithfulness of God to his people," Stone said.

"The Scripture is true: 'In all things God works for the good of those who love him and who have been called according to his purpose.' Today it is hard for them to remember that, as it was for us 20 years ago, but God's Word is true."

Stone said his sermon the Sunday after the Wedgwood shootings will focus on the faithfulness of a loving God to his people, rather than the sermon he planned on the wrath of God.

While Stone has been pastor of the church for only five years, his wife grew up in the church and was there that fateful Sunday in June 1980. She, like others, thinks of that day often.

"Talking to members today, not a day goes by that they don't think about that day. You can't drive by this church and see the memorial to those who died that others might live with remembering. We remember, we pray and we thank God."

- 30 -

Istook reintroduces religion amendment

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON -- After suffering defeat in the last Congress, backers of an amendment to alter the Constitution's religious-liberty protections are mounting yet another attempt at passing the Religious Freedom Amendment.

Fifteen months ago, the Religious Freedom Amendment, sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., fell 61 votes shy of the two-thirds needed to pass the U.S. House of Representatives. The amendment would

have allowed some forms of government-sponsored prayer and tax-financed religious activities. Istook re-introduced an identical constitutional amendment Sept. 15.

“Now more than ever, we need to protect Americans’ right to express their belief in God and to pray on public property,” Istook said. “Under the guise of promoting tolerance, religious expression is being singled out for censorship.”

“We wouldn’t need a constitutional amendment, except that unelected judges have changed the Constitution for us, bypassing the public and its elected representatives. This is our only way to change it back,” Istook said.

But the same coalition of religious and civil-liberties leaders that led the opposition to the Istook amendment in the 105th Congress again denounced the measure. The coalition said prayers that are not sponsored by the government are already allowed in schools.

And Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, who led the fight against the amendment last year, said the Istook amendment has no chance of passing. “This Congress will not let the siren song of eight-second sound bites trample on the wisdom of our Founding Fathers when they built a wall of separation of church and state over 200 years ago.”

“The question before us is not whether God and prayer should be allowed in schools and public places. The question before us in Congress is whether we should have government-organized and government-sanctioned prayer,” he said.

But GOP House leaders joined Istook at a press event to support the proposed amendment. “Godless education threatens to debase our society for generations,” warned House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, R-Texas. Asked about the slim chances of passing such a measure, DeLay said, “It doesn’t matter if it has a chance of passing. The best way to have a national debate is to keep voting. You gotta keep the debate moving.”

“God is not welcome in our secularized schools,” DeLay told the audience. “There is one thing that is not allowed in school under any circumstance and that is prayer.”

DeLay later clarified that comment, telling reporters he meant that “prayer is discouraged in schools.” Members of the Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty criticized such characterizations of current laws as distortions.

Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, said that “students already have a right to pray, wear religious jewelry or shirts and offer religious remarks in the course of class discussion.”

“Prayer is a sacred act that government must not influence or control,” Walker said. “Baptists have historically opposed the use of tax dollars to advance religion. When the government funds religion, it violates the conscience of taxpayers who rightfully expect the government to remain neutral.”

Oliver Thomas, special counsel for religious and civil liberties at the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., told reporters at the coalition press conference that “the God I serve has never been tardy or even absent from schools.”

Interfaith Alliance wants to register, educate voters

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Leaders of the Interfaith Alliance denounced the use of religion for political purposes by presidential candidates and unveiled a voter-education initiative with a slogan of "register, learn, vote."

At a Sept. 15 press conference in the National Press Club building, Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, said that "while a candidate's talk about personal faith is a very legitimate means of personal identification, a candidate's talk about faith as a campaign strategy smacks of the manipulation of faith for political gain."

Pointing to the Democrat and Republican front-runners in the 2000 presidential race, Gaddy said, "Diligently in search of support from religious voters, both candidates use the language of faith to suggest a consensus among people of faith -- a consensus that simply does not exist around issues affecting the faith community."

The alliance, a group of progressive religious leaders established five years ago to counter the influence of the Religious Right, is asking candidates to accept its "Framework of Civility for Political Candidates." The framework asks hopeful lawmakers to show: integrity in making their case to voters; fairness in addressing the issues and opponents; respect for the dignity of others; and responsibility for words and actions.

The group is also launching a voter education and registration drive. But Gaddy, a regular critic of the Christian Coalition's voter-education efforts, said there is a "vast difference" in the alliance's approach. It will be "voter education, not voter persuasion," Gaddy said. He also said that voter guides would not be distributed. The Alliance has criticized the Christian Coalition voter-guide distribution as partisan and manipulative. By distributing the voter guides in houses of worship "there is an implicit endorsement of the conclusion that is obvious in the voter guides," Gaddy said.

The Christian Coalition denies that its voter guides are partisan and supports their use as a way of educating Christian voters on issues of concern to them.

Gaddy said that "much of the present political talk about religion suggests the existence of a monolithic faith -- the one 'true faith' -- within the nation. Though front-runners in the presidential race talk openly about their personal faith and value systems, neither candidate fully acknowledges the vast diversity that characterizes the American religious landscape."

Gaddy chided presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore for not backing up their faith-oriented rhetoric with actions.

"Governor Bush speaks of the importance of living by faith and the changed values in his life that resulted from an experience of faith," Gaddy said. "However, many in the faith community question his rigid endorsement of the death penalty and his resistance to speaking openly about a wide range of other issues.

"Vice President Gore stresses the importance of the work of the faith community in solving problems. Yet, many in the faith community question why his charitable contributions to support this work have remained so minimal."

Gaddy also criticized "charitable choice," an initiative touted by Gore and Bush to use tax dollars to fund religious social-service ministries. "Where federal dollars go, so do federal regulations," said Gaddy about the proposal. "We have some concerns when religious groups become conduits of federal monies even for the good end of social services."

Other alliance leaders spoke at the conference about the need for politicians to avoid using religion in manipulative ways.

“Religion and politics often intersect,” said Philip Wogaman, senior minister of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C. “But unfortunately we see vividly the growing trend of many to cloak political self-interest in the language of narrow religious doctrine.”

Sister Mary Carol Bennett, a Roman Catholic nun and a member of the Order of Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh, said candidates assume “litmus test” issues exist within certain faith traditions and that people of faith are “single-issue” voters. “This flawed approach and orientation leads to misguided policy development and strategies,” she said.

Leonard Jackson, associate pastor of the First African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, said that too often “the public debate on issues affecting people of faith is dominated by the loudest and harshest voices.”

Jackson said quality public education, access to health care, child care, crime and safety and civil rights for all Americans are a few of the vital issues in the upcoming elections. “It is imperative that religious people from all communities of faith have a voice in the national debate around these issues,” he said.

-30-

Religious-liberty law’s validity addressed at Senate hearing

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Influenced by the U.S. Supreme Court’s partial invalidation of a 1993 religious-liberty law, Senate backers of new religious freedom legislation want to make sure they get it right this time.

At a Sept. 9 hearing, the Senate Judiciary Committee heard four legal experts’ views on how Congress can strengthen religious-liberty protections without overplaying its hand.

The panel is considering legislation such as the Religious Liberty Protection Act, which comfortably cleared the U.S. House of Representatives in July.

But in the Senate, the legislation faces a brief and crowded legislative calendar as well as stiff opposition from foes who say individuals could use RLPA to avoid compliance with state and local discrimination laws.

RLPA was proposed after the Supreme Court ruled in 1997 that Congress lacked the authority to impose upon states the sweeping protections of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993. That measure allowed government to substantially burden religious practice only when it used the “least restrictive means” available to achieve a compelling governmental purpose.

RFRA’s across-the-board protections for religious liberty are still being enforced at the federal level.

Like RFRA, RLPA is an effort by lawmakers to respond to the Supreme Court’s 1990 ruling that the government no longer needs a “compelling reason” to restrict religious practice.

RLPA is a more narrowly crafted bill than RFRA. It would again make it harder for states and local governments to substantially burden religious practice, but only in activities that affect interstate commerce, in federally funded programs and in land-use matters.

Judiciary Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said it would be preferable for the Supreme Court to return to its former posture of providing strong protections for religious liberty under the First Amendment.

“Until it does,” Hatch said, “this Congress must do what it can to protect religious freedom in cooperation with the court.”

Hatch said the Senate is obligated to act expeditiously and “with painstaking clarity” to ensure any bill it passes rests on solid constitutional footing.

“It would be utterly futile to pass a measure that aggressively protects religious exercise but is thereafter invalidated by the courts as unconstitutional,” he said.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., a supporter of RFRA, cautioned that the Senate should craft religious-liberty protections in a way that does not undermine civil rights or a state’s ability to protect children.

“We should take our time and do this right, so we do not have to do it yet again,” he said.

Leahy’s concerns were shared by Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., who noted that the American Civil Liberties Union, which supported RFRA, opposes RLPA because of concerns it could be used to “trump” civil rights.

University of Texas law professor Doug Laycock told senators the challenge before Congress lies in determining how to protect religious liberty in a way that is consistent with its constitutional powers and Supreme Court rulings.

Laycock told lawmakers RLPA is constitutional and should be enacted.

“The Supreme Court has taken the cramped view that one has a right to believe a religion, and a right not to be discriminated against because of one’s religion, but no right to practice one’s religion,” Laycock said. He disagreed with arguments that lawmakers should bar use of RLPA as a defense against civil-rights claims. “A civil-rights exception is unnecessary, because most civil-rights claims satisfy the compelling interest test,” Laycock said.

Gene Schaerr, co-chair of the Religious Institutions Practice Group and a partner in the law firm of Sidney and Austin, told senators RLPA is constitutional. “It is a wise and prudent use of federal power,” he said. “And it will have an enormous, positive impact on religious freedom in this country.”

Schaerr said the combination of RFRA at the federal level, RLPA and the Supreme Court’s existing view of the free-exercise clause of the First Amendment would “likely cover about 90 percent or more of the religious-liberty problems that were covered by the compelling interest test” before that test was abandoned by the high court in 1990.

“But without RLPA, a great deal of religious freedom will be irretrievably lost,” he said.

But, in written testimony submitted to the panel, Marci Hamilton, distinguished visiting professor of law at Emory University School of Law, told senators RLPA is an invalid exercise of congressional authority.

“This bill is an unvarnished request from religious lobbyists to permit religious individuals and institutions to break a wide variety of laws,” she said.

-30-

END
