



# Associated Baptist Press

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## Chicago religious leaders ask SBC to cancel planned evangelism blitz

By Bob Allen

CHICAGO (ABP) -- Religious leaders in Chicago have asked Southern Baptists to back off plans to send 100,000 volunteers to evangelize in the city next summer, saying the effort could unintentionally incite religious hatred.

The Council of Religious Leaders of Metropolitan Chicago wrote a letter asking Southern Baptist Convention president Paige Patterson to reconsider plans to make Chicago the first stop in a highly publicized initiative called Strategic Focus Cities.

The council -- a group of 40 top leaders of the area's Roman Catholic, Jewish, Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant communities -- warned the effort could disrupt peaceful interfaith relations in the city and unwittingly provoke hate crimes by fomenting religious differences.

The Strategic Focus Cities strategy, coordinated by the SBC North American Mission Board, calls for focusing prayer, evangelism and church-planting efforts in two major metropolitan areas each year, starting with Chicago and Phoenix in 2000.

The effort is seeking to enlist 100,000 volunteers to come to Chicago July 8 to share the gospel with a million people who do not know Christ, according to material on the Web site of Celebrate Jesus 2000, an umbrella organization coordinating outreach among evangelical churches.

The protest by Chicago's interfaith community follows recent publicity over SBC pamphlets targeting Jews, Hindus, and Muslims for conversion. Leaders of those faith groups criticized those efforts, timed to coincide with major religious holidays, as offensive and disrespectful. Southern Baptist leaders defended those initiatives, saying the Bible requires Christians to preach the gospel to everyone.

The letter said Chicago's religious leaders recognize that seeking converts is a tenet of Southern Baptist belief and a constitutional right but that such initiatives should be "sensitive to local realities" and "neither attack nor target specific faiths or religious groups."

A promotional video calling for "an army of believers to converge on Chicago," the council said, "evokes images of a crusade." The leaders said they were particularly concerned about Muslims and Jews, "the two groups who appear to be among your primary targets," in light of religiously motivated hate crimes in the city during the last six months.

In May, vandals hurled stones through plate-glass windows at a suburban mosque. In July, Benjamin Smith shot six Jews as they left Sabbath services before launching on a three-day shooting spree.

"While we are confident that your volunteers would come entirely with peaceful intentions, a campaign of the nature and scope you envision could contribute to a climate conducive to hate crimes," the Chicago religious leaders said. "This would assuredly not be your intent, but it could be a disastrous consequence."

The letter suggested Southern Baptist plans might be better received if volunteers were doing service projects such as helping the poor. The council said member communions would work with Southern Baptists in those kinds of efforts and invited SBC leaders to "enter into discussion with us and reconsider your plans regarding this matter."

In responses to media reports about the letter, Southern Baptist leaders minimized concerns about religiously motivated violence and offered no indication that they intend to change their plans.

In a letter copied to several media outlets, Patterson responded by criticizing the Chicago religious leaders for releasing their letter to the media before he received it. He generalized that those types of communications are usually designed to intimidate rather than negotiate.

The SBC president said Southern Baptists are more likely to be targets of hate crimes than to cause them. "You appear to desire religious liberty for Bible-believing evangelicals as long as they agree not to exercise that freedom," Patterson said.

"It is but one small step from alleging that the bearing of witness for Jesus results in 'hate crimes' to the allegation that such a witness is a 'hate crime,'" he said. "When the sad day arrives when that last small step is introduced, America will have forfeited that sacred conviction of liberty of conscience that motivated the founders of this nation."

Other SBC leaders said some Chicago religious leaders apparently misunderstand the denomination's outreach programs.

"We are sharing Jesus' message, not a Southern Baptist message," Jim Queen, executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Baptist Association, said in a NAMB press release. "Our message is one of love, not hate."

NAMB President Robert Reccord said despite recent publicity to the contrary, Southern Baptists do not single out particular groups such as Jews or Hindus for evangelism. "Our purpose is life transformation through Jesus Christ, not proselytizing for a denomination," he said.

Reccord said Southern Baptists believe Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation, and it is "our biblical responsibility to share this good news in a loving, non-compulsive way and leave the results in God's hands and their own conscience."

The NAMB press release noted that Chicago's Southern Baptist churches, which are largely non-Anglo, have invited Southern Baptists from across the country to help them with evangelistic and service projects.

But according to the Chicago Tribune, one of the letter's principal authors said he has no problem with Southern Baptists sharing their faith as long it is in a context that does not threaten peaceful coexistence of religious groups.

"I'm certain that the local Southern Baptist community seeks converts as an ongoing part of their activities," said Ira Youdovin, executive director of the Chicago Board of Rabbis. "This is absorbed into the regular interplay of religions in the city. But bringing in 100,000 outsiders changes everything."

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## **Student accused of cheating sues seminary over suspension**

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A Southern Baptist seminary student suspended for allegedly cheating has filed a lawsuit claiming breach of contract and denial of due process.

Henry Judy, who claims innocence to the cheating charge, sued Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Nov. 16 in Jefferson County Circuit Court in Louisville, Ky.

Circuit Judge Steve Mershon issued a temporary injunction ordering that Judy, who is scheduled to graduate in December, be allowed to attend classes and take final exams. Seminary officials appealed that ruling.

The suit names the seminary, President Albert Mohler and four other professors and administrators.

Seminary officials suspended Judy from classes five weeks before the end of his final semester after a professor accused him of cheating on a quiz.

Seminary professor Eric Mitchell accused Judy, an "A" student pursuing a master-of-divinity degree, of cheating on a quiz in October.

Daniel Hatfield, vice president for student services, then wrote Judy a letter stating that he was to be immediately suspended from classes through December 2000 and that Judy and his wife, Darlene, would be evicted from seminary housing at the end of the current semester.

"We commend you and Darlene to the consolation of the Holy Spirit," Hatfield wrote. "We pray that you would submit yourself to the correction of Scripture, such that you might be molded by the Lord's righteousness."

Mitchell and Hatfield are named in the suit, along with Daniel Akin, vice president for academic administration, and another professor, Russell Fuller, who also accused Judy of cheating last year.

Judy denies cheating. He said he passed a lie-detector test, but seminary officials refused to consider the results.

Judy said he discovered all his grades for the semester were changed to "F"s on the day he was notified of his suspension. He claimed his fate was sealed before he began an appeal process outlined in a student handbook.

Judy appealed his suspension to the seminary's three-member Discipline Council and then to the 10-member Joint Discipline Committee. Judy requested that Fuller, who sat on the 10-member group, be removed because of his involvement in similar charges against Judy last year. The request was denied, and the committee voted 9-1 to uphold the suspension.

In a final appeal to Mohler, Judy's suspension was again upheld.

"Dr. Mohler, in one of his sermons, pointed out that we need to nurture and encourage and love the sheep and if one goes out, you bring him back and restore him," Judy said. "Here you have them saying, 'We're going to throw you out of the pen for your own good.'"

The temporary injunction orders the seminary to reinstate Judy as a student and allow him "to take the final exams in all classes in which he is currently enrolled." In their appeal, seminary officials claimed the temporary order denied them due process and raised First Amendment concerns.

The appeal defends the seminary's right "to determine whether its students meet the spiritual, religious, moral and ethical standards" of the Southern Baptist Convention, which owns the seminary. "Whether a student is qualified to continue his quest for a degree and to go forth into the public ministry and carry out the teachings of Jesus Christ is not a judgment call subject to review by the civil authority," according to the appeal.

Judge Mershon was expected to rule in a few days on a hearing on the injunction order held Nov. 29.

Akin declined to comment on either the suspension or lawsuit, saying it would be inappropriate to discuss a pending legal matter.

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## **Congress funds part of package for debt relief in spending bill**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton signed into law Nov. 29 a broad spending bill that includes partial funding for an international plan to reduce debt of impoverished countries.

The omnibus bill passed by Congress Nov. 19 includes \$123 million in relief of debts owed to the United States by poor countries. Clinton had initially asked Congress for about three times that amount as the U.S. contribution to a debt-relief agreement by world leaders earlier this year.

The measure also allows the International Monetary Fund to use a fraction of its own gold reserves to underwrite debt relief -- a provision not included in an earlier House version of the bill. That change alone is expected to free up roughly \$2.3 billion for relief of international debt.

"Unsustainable debt is helping to keep too many poor countries and poor people in poverty," Clinton said in a Thanksgiving letter to religious leaders. Clinton called it a "moral imperative" that the U.S. participate in international efforts to lift the burden of debt from a half-billion people in the world's poorest countries.

Religious leaders and human-rights advocates applauded the agreement but said it was only a first step.

"Congress is going to need to come back and fund the rest of the package," said David Bryden, communications coordinator for Jubilee 2000, a religious organization advocating debt relief. He called the debt-relief provision in the omnibus bill "a small but significant step." He said supporters remain cautious about conditions attached to debt relief.

Under the plan, the U.S. will forgive 100 percent of debts owed by poor countries provided that they use savings to address critical needs such as education, clean water and health care and to promote economic growth.

David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World, offered a mixed review. "Unfortunately, Congress did not provide sufficient funding to fully realize the international plan," he said. Still, he called the agreement a "major step" that will "provide real relief for many countries who struggle under a crushing debt burden."

Beckmann said the Christian anti-hunger group would continue to lobby Congress for more funds and to ensure debt relief is targeted at meeting the needs of the poor. "We will continue to work until children no longer have to forego schooling or medicine because their government's resources are directed towards servicing an unjust debt," he said.

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## **Congress offers ministers a chance to re-enter Social Security program**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Congress has opened a temporary window to allow ministers who previously opted out of Social Security back into the system.

Priests, rabbis and other ministers may exempt themselves from paying Social Security taxes if they object to the program on religious grounds. Once a minister decides to opt out, however, it is irrevocable.

Several years ago, a number of ministers "got bad advice" on opting out of the program, said Deirdre Halloran, associate general counsel at the U.S. Catholic Conference.

As they near retirement, such ministers "wake up and smell the coffee," she said, and realize that as a consequence of opting out, they will not receive Social Security benefits, including Medicare coverage.

Before adjourning for the year, U.S. lawmakers enacted a measure Nov. 19 allowing ministers who previously objected to participating in the Social Security system a two-year window to enroll in the retirement plan.

Halloran said only pockets of ministers opted out of the Social Security system in the first place but advised they take this opportunity to buy back in. "We don't believe that any future Congress is going to look kindly on reopening this issue somewhere down the road," she said. Congress last provided a temporary window to re-enter the program in 1986

To qualify, ministers must apply by April 15, 2002. They will still have to pay into the program for 40 quarters, or 10 years, before they are eligible to receive any benefits.

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## **Racism behind majority of hate crimes, FBI reports**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Racial prejudice was the motive in more than half of "hate crimes" reported to the FBI last year, according to bureau statistics.

The FBI said 55 percent of reported hate crimes in 1998 -- 4,321 of 7,755 total incidents -- were motivated by race.

Blacks suffered the greatest number of racially motivated hate crimes, 3,573. Of those, 58 percent (2,084) involved white perpetrators. Meanwhile, 567 of 989 anti-white offenses (57 percent) involved black offenders, according to the FBI publication "Hate Crime Statistics."

Intimidation was the most frequently reported hate crime, accounting for 38 percent of the total. Other crimes included destruction, damage or vandalism of property; simple and aggravated assault; and a total of 13 murders.

Of 1,390 reported religiously motivated hate crimes, 1,081 were against Jews. Sixty-one were committed against Catholics and 59 against Protestants.

Most states adopted hate-crime laws in the 1980s to increase penalties for offenses that are motivated by racial bias or other forms of prejudice.

A Baptist ethicist called on religious leaders to use their pulpits to condemn such crimes.

"Few opinion makers in America have the moral authority and weekly opportunities of congregational leaders to urge Christians to take the high road of impartiality and the less-traveled road of pursuing justice," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn.

A total of 10,730 law-enforcement agencies in 46 states and the District of Columbia participated in collecting the hate-crime statistics.

Hate-crime statistics from Alabama, Alaska, Hawaii and Wisconsin were not included.

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-- By Sarah Griffith

## **Despite concerns, most Americans optimistic about future, poll says**

By Sarah Griffith

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Most Americans are optimistic about life in the new millennium despite threats of devastating events, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey.

More than 80 percent of Americans feel confident life will get better after the year 2000, the study said.

Even Americans who fear potential disasters involving the environment, epidemics, natural disasters and international terrorism find hope and optimism in the anticipated "triumph of science and technology" in the future. Still, those surveyed said serious challenges lie ahead.

Global warming and shortages of food and resources caused by a growing world population cause concern for a majority of Americans, according to the Pew research.

Democrats were more likely than Republicans (81 percent to 68 percent) to believe global warming is a potential problem. More than a fourth of Americans (28 percent) believe global warming will definitely happen, while 48 percent say it will probably happen, according to the research.

Two-thirds of the public believe a serious terrorist attack on the United States is imminent. Older adults are even more concerned about terrorism -- 72 percent feel it is a major threat.

One third of those surveyed said they fear a nuclear war.

Despite such concerns, most Americans believe science and technology will continue to make the world a better place.

A majority of Americans -- 79 percent -- feel a cure for AIDS will be discovered in the new millennium. Eighty-one percent believe there will be a cure for cancer.

While a majority said they rely on science to solve problems in the next millennium, slightly less than half are looking to small business and organized religion to improve life in the future.

More women (50 percent) than men (39 percent) believe organized religion will play a major role in future success of American families and the nation.

Forty-four percent think Jesus Christ will return to Earth during the first half of the 21st century. One in five think Christ will definitely return.

Among white, Protestant, evangelicals, 72 percent said they would not want to live another 100 years to see what happens. Of secularists, 50 percent do not want to survive another century.

The nationwide survey of 1,546 adults was conducted in April and May.

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CORRECTION: Due to an editing error, the Nov. 23 ABP story "Conservatives sweep Louisiana convention" misreported a vote in the third paragraph. Please correct the sentence to read: "Instead, Baton Rouge pastor Tommy French, backed by the conservative Louisiana Inerrancy Fellowship, defeated the moderate-backed candidate 904-847."

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