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**House chaplain spat sparks
bias charges, partisan rancor**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Republican leaders defended their rejection of a Catholic priest as chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives against charges of anti-Catholic bias and partisan politics.

Timothy O'Brien would have become the first Roman Catholic House chaplain. Instead, Republican leaders gave the job to Charles Parker Wright, a Presbyterian, to replace James Ford, a Lutheran, who is retiring after 21 years.

An 18-member search panel sent the names of three candidates to House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill.; GOP Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas; and House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Mo. O'Brien reportedly received the most votes in committee balloting, and Wright came in No. 3.

Hastert and Armey passed over O'Brien, however, denying the panel ranked the candidates. Gephardt voted for the Catholic priest.

O'Brien told The New York Times that he would have been selected if he were a Protestant. "If I were not a Catholic priest, I would be the House chaplain," he said.

Other critics suggested the selection of Wright, who has ties to the National Prayer Breakfast, was a move by GOP leaders to placate the Religious Right.

Hastert and Armey defended their votes in a Dec. 10 letter to fellow Republicans. They said Wright "has the best interpersonal and counseling skills," and said O'Brien should not have been awarded the job just because he is a Catholic. "Just as this chaplain position was never closed to anyone based on his or her religious affiliation, it could also not be awarded to someone based solely on his or her religious affiliation," the lawmakers said.

Armey added in a statement issued Dec. 13 that Wright's experience as a pastor better equips him for the post than O'Brien, a political-science professor. "I believe the Reverend Charles Wright had more pastoral experience and that's why I selected him," Armey said.

The GOP leaders said the search panel didn't rank the candidates.

But Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Calif., said the committee did rank the three candidates by voting on each, adding that she was "extremely disappointed" in the GOP leaders. She said O'Brien received strong bipartisan support while Wright's support came primarily from Republicans.

Historically, the Speaker of the House has named the chaplain, but Eshoo said setting up a committee to perform a search "was a signal that things were going to be different."

She said the committee worked hundreds of hours, believing their work would be a "historical roadmap" for future Congresses. If the leaders did not intend to heed the committee's advice, she said in a telephone interview with Associated Baptist Press, "Why form a committee?"

A vote before the full House on Wright's selection is expected in early January, when lawmakers return from the year-end break.

The dispute has rekindled debate over whether taxpayers should continue to foot the \$400,000 bill for chaplain offices in Congress. The House chaplain office receives \$136,000 in the current budget and the Senate office \$277,000.

Congress has opened its sessions with prayer since the First Continental Congress in 1774. The chaplain post began in 1789. These days, only a handful of House lawmakers typically attend the morning prayers.

Barry Lynn, head of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said abolishing the House chaplain post "would be in keeping with the church-state separation principle provided in our Constitution."

Courts generally have said it is constitutional for taxpayers to fund chaplains who serve in the military, prisons or hospitals because those institutions may prevent people from attending church or receiving pastoral care.

Some say lawmakers are a different situation, but Eshoo pointed out the congressional chaplains minister to members who find themselves far from their regular house of worship.

The Supreme Court spoke to the issue in 1983, reversing a Nebraska court's ruling against public funding of a chaplain in the state legislature.

Observers say it is unlikely that Congress would vote to abolish the offices. Previously suggested alternatives have been unsuccessful.

In 1995, a GOP leader suggested abolishing the paid office and using a volunteer system as a way to save money, but it never came to pass. The House moved to volunteer chaplains for a time in the 19th century, but concluded the practice was unworkable and restored the paid offices.

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Fellowship announces nominees for offices, new staff member

ATLANTA (ABP) -- A Virginia pastor will be nominated as the future top officer of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship when the group meets this summer.

Officials at the Atlanta-based Fellowship have announced that Jim Baucom, pastor of Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., will be nominated moderator-elect at the Fellowship's June 29-July 1 General Assembly in Orlando, Fla.

Fellowship officials also announced a nominee for another elected office and the hiring of a new staff member.

If elected, Baucom would serve one year as moderator-elect and then automatically assume the office of moderator, the group's highest elected office, for another year. He would preside over the General Assembly in 2002, as well as meetings of an 83-member Coordinating Council leading up to the annual gathering.

Sarah Frances Anders, a retired sociology professor at Louisiana College, is the Fellowship's current moderator. Donna Forrester, a minister of pastoral care and counseling in Greenville, S.C., and this year's moderator-elect, will succeed her in July.

The Fellowship will also elect a new recorder at next summer's General Assembly. Joel Snider, pastor of First Baptist Church in Rome, Ga., is being nominated for the post currently held by Carolyn Dipboye of Oakridge, Tenn. Dipboye has held the office three years.

In a staff change, former MissionsUSA editor Phyllis Thompson has been named associate communications coordinator for the Fellowship. She begins work Dec. 28.

Thompson worked 20 years for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board (now North American Mission Board), including 10 years as editor and managing editor of the agency's flagship magazine. For the past two years, she has worked as a freelance communications specialist.

Her CBF responsibilities will include planning and editing a newsletter and overseeing the Fellowship's Web site.

The newsletter's current managing editor, Sarah Zimmerman, plans to leave her part-time role in March for a 27-month assignment in Senegal, West Africa, as a Peace Corps volunteer.

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-- By ABP staff

Baylor church-state scholar takes 1-year assignment at BJC

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Derek Davis, director of Baylor University's J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies in Waco, Texas, has been named special counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee for the year 2000.

Davis, 50, will assist the Washington-based organization with projects including writing court briefs in coordination with the general counsel's office. He will also continue to work full time at Baylor.

"I'm anxious to defend the Baptist tradition of the separation of church and state," Davis said. "I have come to think of the Baptist Joint Committee as one of the leading religious advocates in America."

The Baptist Joint Committee's general counsel, Melissa Rogers, called Davis "the premier Baptist church-state scholar in America."

Davis, who is editor of the Dawson Institute's "Journal of Church and State," said it "natural" for the world's largest Baptist-affiliated university to work in partnership with the Baptist Joint Committee. Baylor "cares very deeply about religious liberty and the separation of church and state as being the best guarantor of religious liberty," he said.

Davis is a graduate of Baylor Law School. He also holds a master's degree in church-state studies from Baylor University and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas in Dallas. He has written, co-written or edited 10 books.

The J. M. Dawson Institute offers masters and doctoral degrees in church-state studies.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Bedouins experience Christ's world but not Christ, say missions workers

By Robert O'Brien

LONDON (ABP) -- With a culture straight out of Bible times, the Bedouins understand how a shepherd feels while seeking a lost sheep. They know about fig trees that don't bear fruit. They sow seeds on rocky soil.

While analogies invoked by Jesus still ring true to these nomadic Arabs in the Middle East and North Africa, few acknowledge Christ as Lord.

Yet patient mission workers report modest inroads into the predominantly Sunni-Muslim people group.

Some have accepted Christ. Others are now considering the possibility that Jesus is more than, as Islam teaches, a prophet. Small groups meet for Christian worship in caves or tents.

So says a London-based representative of The Network for Strategic Missions, an interdenominational organization that focuses on people groups deemed "unreached" by Christianity.

One such people group is the Arabic-speaking, desert-dwelling Bedouins, which are largely unexposed, and generally resistant, to the gospel.

Christians who work with unreached peoples in areas potentially hostile to Christianity are not identified for security reasons.

"Ministry to Bedouins has been sparse because access to them is limited by governments, and they live in a harsh environment," said a representative of the Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. "It usually takes years before ministry bears fruit."

"Arabs frequently ask what I do for a living," another Baptist worker said. "When I explain that I help Bedouins in remote places through agricultural projects, I usually get a look of disbelief or a belly laugh. They can't believe someone from America would 'waste their time' working for people they characterize as 'stubborn and lazy.'"

"I tell them my work is from God. As Muslims, they understand that. What they find hard to comprehend is the grace, acceptance and love represented by the work."

The Network, based in Virginia Beach, Va., focuses on strategies to transcend denominational differences by linking prayers, talents and resources of evangelical churches with unreached-people groups.

It cooperates with a variety of "Great Commission" Christians, including personnel representing both the Southern Baptist Convention and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

"Most people say a witness is sharing John 3:16," said a Baptist representative of the Network, which has eight regional offices to focus on different areas of the unreached world. Yet, "I had one Bedouin say the most significant thing I did to open his heart was our kindness to his children."

"If you'll come to my village and love them the same way you've loved me, you will win everyone," a Bedouin man told him.

Bedouins are known today, as they were in Bible times, for hospitality and sharing with passersby.

"They're very perceptive," said a close observer, "and will size you up as you sit and talk with them and share their food."

One Bedouin looked deeply into the eyes of a Baptist worker and announced: "This man speaks straight from the heart. He speaks the truth."

Another, commenting about Christians, observed, "There's something different about the expressions on their faces and in their eyes."

A Bedouin believer standing nearby quickly explained: "The difference is the presence of Jesus in their lives."

Though living in the Bible's "Promised Land," that hardly describes their existence. Most desert-based Bedouins live either as rootless nomads in tents or as farmers who have gravitated into a more-settled life.

But Baptists focusing on the people group are laying groundwork to once again make their home a land -- as the Bible describes it, -- "flowing with milk and honey."

Children will receive milk as part of an early childhood-education project. Other ministries will include teaching low-income families to keep bees and produce honey for food and sale.

But Bedouins won't live by milk and honey alone in projects supported by contributions and volunteers from the United States.

Various projects focus on helping Bedouins establish self-sustaining income projects, water-resource development, livestock and poultry development, drip-irrigation home gardening to conserve water and increase yields, and planting olive, fruit and nut trees.

Most Bedouins know hunger and hardship. They wear lightweight, light-colored, loose-fitting clothing -- cinched with a leather belt -- to protect them from heat, sun, wind and sand. The belt is said to reduce hunger pangs when tightened.

Projects seek to help children and widows trying to support a family. One such effort for widows is included in projects for drip-irrigated gardens and raising poultry and rabbits for food and income production.

Water-resource development projects include restoration of a cistern built in Roman times and construction of new collection, storage and distribution systems.

Historically, Bedouins have been camel-caravan desert nomads. Today, roads and pickup trucks have largely replaced camels. Animals of choice now mainly include sheep and goats.

Many Bedouins have given up a nomadic lifestyle for a more settled life because of economics, population pressure, politics and scarce resources.

But they still call themselves Bedouin, and their nomadic past shapes their mindset and worldview, and their customs have roots dating back to the biblical times of Abraham.

"Some still live in tents the year around, but their range of movement is measured in a few kilometers each year, compared to migrations of thousands of kilometers by their ancestors," an observer said.

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