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**Report urges greater awareness
to dangers of alcohol abuse**

By Sarah Griffith

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Alcohol-related deaths outnumber deaths from drug use 4-to-1, yet parents are less concerned about their teenagers using alcohol than drugs, according to a new study.

While alcohol-related deaths vastly outnumber deaths from illicit drugs in America, 21 percent of parents fear their teenagers using drugs, while only 5 percent fear teenage abuse of alcohol, according to a report by the non-profit organization Drug Strategies.

That is due to effective public-awareness campaigns about the dangers of drugs, according to a report titled "Millennium Hangover: Keeping Score on Alcohol."

Drug Strategies, a Washington-based research group, said the media ought to give equal attention to alcohol abuse, which the report termed "America's most pervasive drug problem."

Though its ill consequences are less recognized, alcohol abuse is more widespread than abuse of illicit drugs, Drug Strategies said.

Of the nation's 113 million drinkers, 10 million are underage and 33 million "binge drink," or have more than five drinks at one time. An estimated 14 million Americans need treatment for alcohol problems, the report said.

Alcohol's consequences also cost society more money than drugs, the report continued. Estimated costs for alcohol abuse in America due to health problems, accidents, crime and "lost productivity" total \$167 billion annually.

"Even though the costs of alcohol abuse to society are 50 percent greater than all illicit drug abuse costs combined, voters are not telling elected officials that alcohol abuse presents a pressing problem," the report maintained.

More federal money is allocated for research on illicit drugs than for research on alcohol. There is an Office of National Drug Control Policy, but there is no similar federal program for alcohol abuse.

The report calls alcohol the "drug of choice" among teens, used more than all illicit drugs combined. While less than half (42 percent) of parents said they thought their children had consumed alcohol, a majority of teenagers (79 percent) said they had, according to a Hart Research poll cited in the report.

Alcohol abuse contributes to 7 out of 10 child-abuse cases, the report continued. And despite health risks to unborn children, drinking among pregnant women is increasing. Four in 10 violent offenders said they were under the influence of alcohol when they committed their crimes.

"These problems will persist well into the next century unless greater leadership emerges to address alcohol abuse and its consequences," the report maintained.

Among ways to fight alcohol abuse, Drug Strategies called for:

- Increased alcohol excise taxes.
- Physicians communicating alcohol's health risks to patients.
- More youth treatment programs.
- More employer-intervention programs.
- Raising the price of alcohol for the military.

A Baptist ethicist said church members should take advantage of the election cycle to make their voices heard on alcohol policy.

"Southern Baptists have historically spoken forcefully about the dangers of alcohol and other drugs," said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn.

"During this presidential-election cycle, one of the best ways to exert our influence is to speak loudly for an increase in the federal excise tax on alcohol, a proven strategy to fight alcohol abuse," he said.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information about the report, go to www.drugstrategies.org on the World Wide Web.

Studies show widening gap between rich and poor

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The booming U.S. economy has benefited the middle class but widened the gap between the country's haves and have-nots, according to two recent reports.

A private study released Jan. 18 showed the earning gap between the richest and poorest Americans widened in the 1990s. Income for the richest 20 percent of Americans rose 15 percent in 10 years since the late 1980s. Earnings at the bottom fifth of wage earners, meanwhile, grew less than 1 percent, according to the study by the Economic Policy Institute and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

The following day the U.S. Federal Reserve released a separate study showing changes not only in income but also in net worth, the difference between a person's total assets and total liabilities.

The federal study found that Americans' net worth grew strongly between 1995 and 1998, with mean net worth rising 25.7 percent and the median 17.6 percent. The strongest gains came for those with incomes of \$100,000 or more, a group likely to have made large gains in the stock market.

Groups with the lowest incomes, however, lost ground despite America's economic boom. The median net worth dropped 25 percent for those earning less than \$10,000, while the mean declined 14 percent.

At the other end of the spectrum, those earning \$100,000 or more, the mean net worth rose 22 percent, while the median fell slightly. The study said the difference between the median (midpoint) and mean

(average) indicates "a widening dispersion of net worth among families in this group."

America's middle class, meanwhile, also gained ground. The median net worth for those earning between \$25,000 and \$49,999 grew 6 percent, to \$60,300. For those earning between \$50,000 and less than \$100,000, it rose 20 percent, to \$152,000.

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-- By ABP staff

High court rejects challenge to Maryland's Good Friday holiday

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has left standing a Maryland law requiring public schools to close on Good Friday.

The justices refused without comment Jan. 18 to hear claims by a former teacher that the mandated holiday violates the separation of church and state.

Judith Koenick challenged the holiday statute in a lawsuit filed against the Montgomery County Board of Education. A federal district court ruled against Koenick in an opinion upheld by the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

The appeals court said the Maryland law does not endorse or advance Christianity and serves a "secular purpose" of closing schools on days when a large number of students probably would not attend.

The law "does not grant an added benefit to members of one faith that it does not grant to everyone but rather treats all of the affected parties the same with respect to religion," the appeals court said.

The mandated four-day holiday -- which includes both the Friday before and Monday following Easter -- has been part of the Montgomery County school calendar for 130 years. It now anchors a longer 10-day spring break observed by the district's schools, the court noted.

School officials also added Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, and the first day of Rosh Hashanah to the list of school holidays because of high absenteeism among teachers and students on those days.

In urging the high court to hear her claim, Koenick argued that federal courts are divided over mandated holidays on Good Friday and that justices should resolve the matter. Her appeal said the 4th Circuit's approval of the Maryland law contradicts a 1995 decision by 7th U.S. Circuit of Appeals that struck down an Illinois law closing schools on Good Friday.

Another 7th Circuit ruling, however, upheld an Indiana statute making Good Friday a holiday for state employees.

The American Jewish Congress supported Koenick in her bid to challenge the Maryland law. The group filed a friend-of-the-court brief saying the state "has placed its imprimatur on Good Friday in the eyes of public school students and the rest of its citizens."

While Montgomery school officials had actual evidence of absenteeism to support closing schools on Jewish holidays, Koenick and the AJC said, there was no documented evidence to support projections of high absenteeism on Good Friday.

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Religious freedom commission targets China, Russia, Sudan in statements

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In its first months of work, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has issued a series of statements detailing threats to religious liberty in China, Russia and the Sudan.

Steven McFarland, executive director of the commission established under a 1998 law, said the panel is "up and running."

The commission recently criticized China's move to consecrate five Catholic bishops, an effort to disavow Chinese Catholics' allegiance to the Vatican.

Rabbi David Saperstein, chairman of the commission, said the move revealed "an escalating pattern of religious repression in China."

In previous weeks, the commission also criticized China's repression of followers of Falun Gong -- a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism and traditional Chinese exercise. The Chinese government has labeled it a "dangerous cult" and has issued a warrant for the arrest of the sect's teacher, Li Hongzhi, who now lives in the United States.

The commission criticized the sentencing of several Falun Gong and Christian leaders to long prison terms. "They are not operating in a vacuum," Saperstein noted. "The outside world is appalled by what they are doing."

The commission also denounced American mayors and governors for apologizing to the Chinese government for earlier proclamations honoring the Falun Gong spiritual movement. The panel said the apologies came as the result of pressure by the Chinese ambassador.

The panel has also followed religious freedom issues in Russia and Sudan.

Charging that the war in Chechnya is being fed by religious bigotry against Muslims, Saperstein in December urged the Clinton administration "to press Russia to stop playing upon popular prejudice and fear of Muslims to justify its military excesses."

Earlier, the commission issued a statement applauding a Russian court's decision that religious groups already registered in 1997 do not have to re-register under a restrictive religion law passed that year.

In the Sudan, the commission said, attempts by the government to impose Islamic law have restricted the delivery of food aid to those in need. "The Sudanese government is deliberately starving people for religious, as well as, political, military and ethnic reasons," the panel said.

The panel urged the U.S. government to pressure Sudanese officials to stop banning food flights. It also urged U.S. officials to ship food directly into southern Sudan in addition to its participation in the United Nations' food aid program.

The 10-member commission, created under the International Religious Freedom Act, provides independent recommendations about curbing religious persecution to the administration.

McFarland said the commission either meets or holds a teleconference every two weeks. The panel plans to hold a Feb. 15 hearing on religious freedom around the world.

"What will make or break the commission," McFarland said, "is the response of the American people to our findings and recommendations."

He said it might be too early to know whether the committee's work has already helped faith groups facing persecution by their government. "But some of the effects will be invisible," he noted. "If you're looking over people's shoulder and keeping them honest, how do you know what you may have prevented."

Florida Bible history courses unconstitutional, group says

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- "Why is it hard for a non-Christian to understand things about God?"

This question is not from a Sunday school class but from a "Bible History" course being taught in Florida public schools.

People For the American Way, a civil-liberties group, contends 14 Florida school districts that have used the curriculum in high schools since 1997 are violating the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.

"There is a right way -- a constitutional way -- to teach about the Bible in the public schools, and there is a wrong way," said Ralph Nees, president of the Washington-based People For the American Way.

According to a PFAW report released Jan. 13, up to 20 percent of Florida's public schools are doing it the wrong way.

Courts have ruled that public schools may teach about religion in an academic sense, but they cannot study the Bible devotionally or seek to proselytize or advance a particular faith.

PFAW charges that groups such as the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools have been urging local school boards around the country to adopt curricula that teach the Bible from a Christian perspective and its content as historical fact. In 1998, PFAW won an injunction against a portion of a Florida Bible class in Lee County. School board officials then agreed to withdraw the entire curriculum.

While PFAW officials aren't saying the National Council is directly responsible for "Bible History" curriculum in the current report, they contend the group's material was used in Lee County.

However, Elizabeth Ridenour, president of the National Council on Bible Curriculum, denied that Lee County or any of the 14 counties were using curriculum provided by her organization.

Ridenour said her organization agrees with PFAW in some areas. "We agree that the Supreme Court says it is legal to teach the Bible as history and literature as an elective and not for indoctrination."

Where they part, however, she continued: "We do not agree with them on some of the other ways they want the Bible taught. They would have some events censored out -- the Creation, Resurrection and the Virgin Birth. The Supreme Court does not say you have to censor the Bible."

Ridenour said the Council's curriculum has been used in school districts in 29 states without legal problems. "We teach only the Bible and what it says," she said. "We do not teach whether it's true or false. The students draw their own conclusions."

After investigating publicly available records, PFAW issued the report criticizing the curriculum being used in Florida schools. Nees said the "Bible History" approach is "hopelessly flawed and should be abandoned."

PFAW provided the state education department with a new publication offering guidelines on how to use the Bible in public schools in ways allowed by the Constitution.

"The Bible and Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide" was published by the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center and the National Bible Association. A wide range of religious and civil-liberties groups endorsed it, including PFAW, the Christian Legal Society, the National Association of Evangelicals and the Baptist Joint Committee.

"We simply cannot afford to raise a generation of biblical 'know-nothings.' But, the Bible can't be taught as if it were a Sunday school instead of a public school," said Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington.

The PFAW report says the 14 Florida counties teach the courses from a Christian (usually Protestant) perspective and that students are assumed to be Christians. Some of the specific complaints in the report include:

-- Students are most often taught that the Bible has 66 books, even though the Bible accepted by Catholics has 73.

-- An exam question asks students at a high school in Columbia County, "If you had a Jewish friend who wanted to know if Jesus might be the expectant Messiah, which book of the Gospel would you give him?"

-- In Okaloosa County, a workbook question asks: "What is Jesus Christ's relationship to God, to creation, and to you?"

-- An exam on Genesis asks Columbia County students, "What stages in the Temptation and Fall of Man do we still find ourselves [in] today?"

-- Most courses include study, and sometimes memorization, of the Ten Commandments. The students are generally not made aware that the commandments are arranged differently by Christians and Jews.

Other school districts listed in the report are: Clay, Escambia, Hillsborough, Indian River, Levy, Madison, Marion, Polk, Santa Rosa, Taylor and Walton.

A spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Education said school districts are controlled locally and the state department cannot tell them what to do. But JoAnn Carrin said the department is concerned about the PFAW report and looking into issues raised and "working with the local school districts."

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