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**News service announces plans
to open Washington bureau**

By Ken Camp

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Associated Baptist Press plans to open a news bureau in Washington, D.C., as soon as funds become available.

The ABP bureau would take over a role filled for 40 years by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, which recently lost its press credentials to cover the capital. By representing an independent news agency, the ABP bureau would be able to reapply for the press credentials lost seven months ago.

ABP's board of directors will consider the proposal at its April 13 meeting. But Greg Warner, executive editor of the 10-year-old national news service in Jacksonville, Fla., said the bureau likely will not open until ABP raises the funding, estimated at \$75,000 for the first year.

ABP is a subscription-based news service that is used primarily by Baptist state newspapers and religion writers at secular newspapers and magazines across the nation. In addition to subscription fees, it also receives operating support from organizations, churches and individual donors.

The Baptist Joint Committee, which is located two blocks from the U.S. Capitol, will provide office space for the ABP Washington bureau at a minimal cost for at least three years and assist with transitional funding, according to an agreement drafted by staff of the two organizations.

The Baptist Joint Committee has operated a Washington news office, called Baptist News Service, for about 40 years, reporting on governmental issues in the capital. The office served as the Washington bureau for Baptist Press, news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, until the SBC voted to cut ties with the Baptist Joint Committee in 1991.

Tom Strode, media coordinator for what is now called the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, became Washington bureau chief for Baptist Press at that time.

Until last year, the Baptist Joint Committee's news-service correspondents held congressional press credentials issued by the Standing Committee of Correspondents. Credentials allow correspondents access to press galleries of government entities and to records and background papers.

But in 1995, when Strode's credentials came due for renewal, the correspondents committee voted unanimously to reject his application because he was an employee of an agency that conducts lobbying.

Strode reapplied in February of 1999. Two months later, he was notified that his request was denied.

Not long afterwards, the Baptist Joint Committee received word that credentials for Baptist News Service would not be renewed because of its close ties to the BJC. The correspondents committee reportedly expanded its discussion of Baptist Press to include other press agencies of religious organizations because SBC leaders argued that if the BJC qualified for credentials, so should the ERLC.

The BJC appealed the decision but lost. Last September, the Baptist News Service surrendered its credentials to the standing committee.

As a credentialed news service, Baptist News Service has used internal controls to guard the integrity of its reporting, said Larry Chesser, director of communications and associate executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee. However, he said allowing ABP to take over that responsibility would resolve any question about editorial independence.

"I think this is a win-win situation for Baptist readers and Baptist publications," Chesser said. "Baptist readers deserve credible reporting from Washington. This arrangement would remove any appearance of conflict in interests."

Chesser added the transfer would for the first time allow the BJC staff to develop new programs in public relations and education it had in the past avoided in order not to jeopardize its press credentials.

ABP executive Warner said the new arrangement should be mutually beneficial to the news service and the Baptist Joint Committee, and should provide Baptists enhanced news coverage in the nation's capital.

"We believe that we can do what the Baptist Joint Committee cannot in terms of helping restore credentials that had been lost and assuring access to the sources in Washington on which they have come to depend," Warner said. He said it would also allow broadening the scope of the Washington reporter's assignment, which in the past has been primarily focused on religious liberty.

Warner said ABP could open the Washington office immediately if funds were available. "This is a wonderful opportunity for us and for Baptists, but one for which we could not have planned. We don't have the money in our budget right now, but we're going to do everything we can to make it happen before the end of the year."

ABP already has received a \$20,000 grant from the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which both subscribes and contributes news to ABP. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship recently turned down a request to fund the new bureau this year. ABP is seeking additional funding from other organizations and individuals.

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First Baptist, Athens, severs ties with SBC

ATHENS, Ga. (ABP) -- The historic First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., has voted to sever ties with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Church members voted 285-28 to discontinue affiliation with the nation's largest Protestant denomination at a church conference April 9, according to an announcement released to the media.

The 800-member, 170-year-old congregation had belonged to the SBC since the convention's founding in Augusta, Ga., in 1845.

The break follows a 2-year study, which concluded the church and denomination had been moving apart since conservatives took control of the SBC in the late 1970s.

Differences cited by church members included pastoral authority, academic freedom at seminaries and the role of women. The church "strongly favors" the priesthood of all believers, free academic inquiry and women's ordination, the statement said.

A church spokesman said the church is one of the first in Georgia to sever ties with the SBC, but he didn't know if others would follow its example. "We can only speak for our behavior," Al Crace, chairman of deacons, told an Athens newspaper. A decision by another church would be "their decision," he added.

The congregation plans to remain in fellowship with Sarepta Baptist Association, the Georgia Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The vote comes while the church is between pastors. Jon Appleton retired last year after 23 years as pastor. Kent Anglin has been serving as interim pastor.

Crace said the vote was taken so the new pastor would know the church's position. He said a new pastor could be named by this summer.

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-- By ABP staff

Religious communicators urged to 'stop whining' about change

By Mark Wingfield

CHICAGO (ABP) -- Religion today operates in a highly public context, and the faithful who feel threatened by this environment ought to stop whining, Martin Marty told an international gathering of religious communicators.

Marty, an author, social researcher and former history professor at the University of Chicago, was a keynote speaker at Religion Communicators Congress 2000, a convention held every 10 years for professional communicators in the world's religions.

Marty began his speech by noting he hears "a lot of whining in religion" today -- whining about the increasing secularity of the world and the indifference shown to religious belief.

While times may be changing, whining won't help, he advised. "No one ever changes because somebody's whining. The world doesn't grind to a halt and say, 'Well, we didn't pay enough attention to you, and you've whined enough now, and we're going to pay attention to you.'"

A primary source of whining today is despair because the "good old days" are gone, he noted.

"When people whine about religion's place in the public world today because there were 'good old days' when they had it easier, I would say there were different old days," Marty countered. "Our predecessors of 1970 and 1950 ... who also complained about the old days being gone, discovered how to talk about the time gone by."

Marty suggested the threat of secularism is sometimes overblown.

"As to secularity, depending on how we define it, there's a lot of it out there," he admitted. But the root word, "seculum," simply means "of this age" and "got into dictionary at time when people tried to make a

distinction between the sacred and the profane."

"The secular world is a good reminder that there's another side," he said. "But in many respects, we are all secular in many of our doings. ... There is no single thing out there called the secular."

People find more opportunities to whine today because most people are more distracted and specialized in their interests than ever before, Marty said. "People are distracted, however urgent their attempts to come to grips with life and death."

This isn't just true of religion, but of most vocations, Marty said, confessing that even historians discover reason to whine frequently because they don't find each other relevant.

To illustrate, he cited a faculty symposium among historians where one of his peers presented a paper on "The Middle Years of Michael the Drunkard." Marty wondered why he never had heard of this historical figure, and then he discovered the character only lived 29 years and "his middle years were three."

Whining also results when the faithful sense that the world is indifferent to religion, Marty added.

"Religion takes shape in the face of the world's indifference," he reported. "But we fight the world's indifference by being different."

Increasing pluralism in the culture also leads to whining, Marty said.

But this situation is only going to intensify, he predicted. "Pluralism is the context in which we work, and it's not going to go away."

In such a context, "we don't get to set the whole agenda, but they don't either," he said.

Rather than whining about what they can't do to express their faith, Christians ought to take advantage of all the ways they can express faith, Marty said, giving an illustration from the ever-raging battles over separation of church and state.

"We fight all the time about a creche on the 30 square yards of a courthouse lawn when there are 300,000 lawns within a few miles where (creches) would be celebrated. Or we fight over the Ten Commandments on an Alabama courthouse wall, when there are plenty of options to teach the First Commandment, which is problematic, and the other nine, which are not, in our schools."

In a pluralistic and secular culture, "you can't expect everyone in the political order to agree with the sources of your faith," he cautioned.

But in the end, faith will prevail, he predicted. "On the really vital things, secular reasoning gives out."

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Mega church lives by word-of-mouth appeal

By Mark Wingfield

CHICAGO (ABP) -- Communications strategy has played a key role in the rapid growth of Willow Creek Community Church, yet the church never has advertised in a newspaper or on radio or television, a church official told religious communicators.

The only advertising Willow Creek has done in the last 25 years has been by word of mouth, said Steve Bell, executive vice president of Willow Creek Association, the educational arm of the non-denominational church in suburban Chicago.

"People tend to go to church when they're invited by someone else," he explained.

Bell addressed about 50 participants in the Religion Communicators Congress 2000, held in Chicago March 29-April 1. Nearly 100 Southern Baptists were among the 1,200 conference participants. The Willow

Creek conference was a daylong option that included a tour of the church's 145-acre campus in South Barrington, Ill.

Rather than relying on secular marketing strategies such as print and broadcast advertising, Willow Creek from its inception determined to focus on how it communicated the message of the gospel itself, Bell said.

Willow Creek was founded with "a commitment to say we must communicate the everlasting truths of Scripture in such a way that people can get it, ... to communicate truth in a way people know what you're talking about," he said.

The church has become known worldwide for its "seeker-sensitive" worship services, its use of drama and contemporary music in worship -- and for its success at reaching people who previously were unchurched.

Attendance at Willow Creek's four weekend services now pushes 20,000, with up to 6,000 returning for mid-week services geared for core members. The church baptizes more than 800 people a year, even though baptism services are held only twice a year.

A desire to advertise only by word of mouth is one of three organizational concepts the church has drawn on from its beginning 25 years ago, Bell said. The other concepts are a mandate to be culturally relevant in communicating the message of the gospel and a commitment to do everything with excellence.

When Willow Creek began in 1975 with services held in a movie theater and led by a recent college graduate, "not too many people took it seriously," Bell explained. The church was spawned from the youth ministry of South Park Church in Chicago.

But after the church began to grow rapidly, its innovative style came to the world's attention through an interview of Pastor Bill Hybels with Peter Jennings on ABC-TV and a feature article in Time magazine.

One of the lessons learned from Willow Creek's unexpected success is that "many times a fresh movement of the Spirit of God happens with young people because they simply don't know it can't be done," Bell suggested.

Yet the church that might have been voted least likely to succeed in 1975 is perhaps the nation's most-watched and most-emulated Protestant congregation today.

The success of Willow Creek Church spawned so many inquiries from other churches that Willow Creek Association was formed in 1992 to help tell the church's story through conferences and other special events.

The association now includes 5,240 member churches from 90 denominations, Bell said. Member churches do not formally unite with Willow Creek but sign on to receive information and updates and purchase literature and products. For example, dramatic sketches written and first performed at Willow Creek have become staples of contemporary worship services in many Baptist churches.

The mission of Willow Creek Association is to "help churches turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ."

Although the church itself still does no advertising -- and only last year developed its first general brochure -- the association does market the church's resources and conferences. Last year, the association trained 76,000 church leaders worldwide through its conferences.

A primary message Willow Creek Association imparts through its conferences comes out of the communications philosophy behind Willow Creek Church from its inception.

"At its core, the church is about community," Bell said. "We have made an all-out, full-court press to become a church of small groups."

It is in this personal, one-on-one and small-group encounters that the gospel is best presented and best received, he said. Communication, in this sense, is "a very focused evangelistic effort."

Church-state scholars offer 'common ground' for schools

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Two church-state experts offered "3 R's" for finding consensus on religion's proper role in public schools to a group of school administrators and parents -- rights, responsibility and respect.

Charles Haynes, senior scholar for religious-freedom programs at the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., described three commonly shared principles that he said provide the civic framework for American democracy. They are the right to soul liberty and freedom of conscience, the responsibility to work for the common good, and respect for individuals whose deeply held beliefs do not match one's own.

"Those shared principles we have agreed to as American citizens allow us to engage each other across our differences," Haynes said. "In this new century, if we don't understand that Americans are defined by principles and not by bloodlines or kinship, we won't make it as a nation."

Haynes and Oliver Thomas, a constitutional attorney, led a series of workshops for public-school principals, superintendents and other administrators and conducted a "town hall" public forum in the Dallas area April 6-7.

"Finding Common Ground: The Appropriate Role of Religion in the Public Schools" was sponsored by the Dallas Independent School District Religious Community Task Force. Cooperating agencies included the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Texas Education Agency regional service center.

"At a time when litigation has replaced baseball as the national pastime, why would a public school district choose to deal with the issue of religion?" asked Thomas, special counsel for the National Council of Churches. "I would say because it's too risky not to do it," said Thomas, an ordained Baptist minister and former general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington. "We can't afford not to deal with the issue."

Public schools should be neither laboratories for religious indoctrination nor "religion-free zones," Thomas said. Schools should not teach religion, but they should teach about religion, he said, because it is a vital part of American life.

"Religion matters. It matters deeply in the United States," Thomas said.

"As students learn about the deeply held religious beliefs of their neighbors, understanding and respect grows," Thomas said. "On the other hand, failure to understand fosters intolerance."

"Ignorance is a breeding ground for bigotry and prejudice," Thomas said.

In an increasingly pluralistic and religiously diverse society, Thomas said citizens must find ways to live with their differences and discover a "common ground" on which they can stand.

"Columbine and Kosovo are both about the inability of people to live together across their differences," Thomas said.

"The Constitution does not begin, 'We the tribe.' It's, 'We the people.'"

In a question-and-answer session, Haynes and Thomas addressed issues of:

-- School prayer. "Stay tuned" was Thomas' best advice regarding how the Supreme Court would rule regarding student-led prayers at public high school football games.

"The good news is that the debate has moved beyond where we were for three decades. It's not a question of whether government should promote religion. Now the questions are about limits on student involvement," he said.

On the related issue of student-led prayers at graduations and similar events, Thomas predicted that the court might ask a school if it is willing to create a "First Amendment minute" -- a brief open forum in which a student would have unrestricted access to the microphone.

"The court would be likely to say if you have created a forum ... have at it, and you get what you get," he said.

Both Thomas and Haynes expressed doubts about the advisability or even the possibility of crafting a non-sectarian, non-proselytizing prayer.

-- Creationism. "We don't have consensus guidelines on this, but we need them," Haynes acknowledged. "Extremes have dominated the debate for too long."

Haynes said his personal preference is to teach evolutionary theories as the prevailing models within the scientific community, while notifying students that the theories are under critique.

Teachers should offer disclaimers that the purpose of teaching evolutionary theory is not to undermine what a student may learn about the origin of life from parents or faith communities, he said. In particular, science teachers should avoid making metaphysical claims outside the bounds of science.

-- Parents. Whether a school is crafting a course of study about religion or offering a reading selection that some parents might find objectionable, parents should be recognized as having primary responsibility for the well-being of their children, both Haynes and Thomas stressed.

"Make sure you communicate with parents and listen to parents," Thomas said.

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Brochure outlines principles for religion in public schools

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Six principles provide civic ground rules for addressing the role of religion in public schools, according to a brochure published by the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University.

The brochure, "Religious Liberty, Public Education and the Future of American Democracy," was sponsored jointly by organizations ranging from the conservative Christian Coalition to the liberal People for the American Way.

The six guiding principles are:

-- Religious liberty for all. "Religious liberty is an inalienable right of every person."

-- The meaning of citizenship. "Citizenship in a diverse society means living with our deepest differences and committing ourselves to work for public policies that are in the best interest of all individuals, families, communities and our nation."

-- Public schools belong to all citizens. "Public schools must model the democratic process and constitutional principles in the development of policies and curricula."

-- Religious liberty and public schools. "Public schools may not inculcate nor inhibit religion. They must be places where religion and religious conviction are treated with fairness and respect."

-- The relationship between parents and schools. "Parents are recognized as having the primary responsibility for the upbringing of their children, including education."

-- Conduct of public disputes. "Civil debate, the cornerstone of a true democracy, is vital to the success of any effort to improve and reform America's public schools."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For more information and additional resources on religious liberty issues, contact the Freedom Forum First Amendment Center at 615-321-9588 or visit the web site at www.freedomforum.org

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