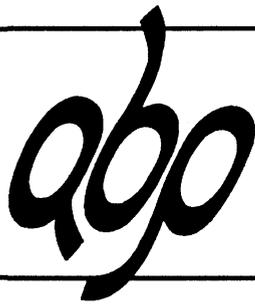


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**Southern Seminary trustees vote
to eliminate 'Covenant Renewal'**

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Symbolically marking the completion of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's conservative shift, trustees voted April 10-11 to eliminate the school's "Covenant Renewal" document.

The agreement was adopted in 1991 by trustees, faculty and administrators during the height of political turmoil in the Southern Baptist Convention. It was designed to promote "fairness in selecting faculty across the theological spectrum of our Baptist constituency." The document called for "intentional employment of conservative evangelical scholars" to achieve faculty balance.

Two years later, conservative leader Albert Mohler succeeded Roy Honeycutt as president, hastening the faculty's conservative transition. During the nine years the Covenant Renewal was in place, 80 percent of Southern's professors have been elected or appointed to the faculty. Among the school's 73 assistant, associate and full professors, only 14 were faculty members at the time the covenant was adopted.

Mohler said current faculty members took the initiative to eliminate the covenant. Faculty members reportedly voted unanimously to endorse the change, noting that faculty and administrators are covered by Southern's Abstract of Principles and the SBC's "Baptist Faith and Message" statement.

Background information provided to trustees added that the document was "intended for a time of transition as a way to enable trustees, faculty and administration to work." The material noted that the agreement "served a valid purpose at a particular time in the life of this institution, but no longer seems necessary."

The 1991 action came at a time when faculty, administrators and trustees "were not unified on the direction of the seminary," Mohler said.

"It seemed that a breaking point had been reached," he added, describing the Covenant Agreement as "a negotiated way of pointing toward the future."

Citing a spirit of unity among the three groups today, Mohler said, "The time has clearly come when (the agreement) is no longer necessary."

Stephen Corts, chairman of the board's executive committee, introduced the proposal to trustees. Declaring that faculty, administrators and trustees "have a covenant for which we need no document," he added, "Common confidence in the uncompromised, unerring Word of God renders this document no longer necessary."

"I remember a time when I did not think it was possible for the unity I see now," Corts noted. "This is a marker on our way to God's future."

After adopting the proposal without discussion or opposition, trustees spontaneously applauded the action.

Trustees also voted to shorten the name of the seminary's James P. Boyce College of the Bible to "Boyce College." The Boyce program, accredited in 1998 by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, is scheduled to graduate its first students this year.

According to Mohler, mission strategists have indicated the word "Bible" in the school's name "may cause graduates to face difficulties in entering some nations or accepting international opportunities."

Corts said the name change is designed "to create and maintain opportunities for our students in our nation and beyond. We want them to be as effective as possible in areas where that name would be a hindrance."

Asked about the possibility of renaming the school "Boyce Christian College," Corts said the word "Christian" also would "make the obstacles worse rather than better in some foreign settings where there is hostility to who we are and what we're about."

In other action, trustees:

-- Adopted a 2000-2001 budget of almost \$19.2 million, a 3.4 percent increase from the current budget. The budget includes increases of approximately 5 percent for student apartment rentals and student fees as well as an average salary increase of 2.5 percent.

-- Approved Mohler's request to establish a team to develop a long-term plan for meeting the seminary community's child-care needs. That action followed a recent decision by administrators to close the child-care center and a subsequent decision to keep the center open at least another year. Trustees also authorized the administration to reinstate revenues and expenditures for the Child Development Center in next year's budget.

-- Broke ground for the proposed Rice/Judson conference center and guest-housing project. The \$5.76 million project, originally proposed in 1994, is part of the seminary's 10-year, \$70 million campus master plan adopted last year by trustees. The project involves converting two student apartment buildings into conference rooms and guest housing. The facility will be used to house people attending campus conferences, students enrolled in short-term classes and prospective students. Construction is scheduled for completion by the end of 2001.

-- Approved a response to an SBC Executive Committee request concerning SBC agencies' ecumenical involvement. Noting that Southern "conducts no cooperative endeavors with other denominations and religious groups, other than participation in academic associations, accrediting agencies and educational consortia," the response added that the seminary "is involved in no interdenominational or inter-religious endeavors or activities that would compromise our cherished convictions in any manner."

-- Elected three faculty members with tenure, including two who already were serving by presidential appointment. The three are: William Cook, associate professor of New Testament, who has been serving at Florida Baptist Theological College; Tom Nettles, professor of historical theology, who has served at Southern since 1997; and Gregory Wills, associate professor of church history, who has taught at Southern since 1995.

Trustees also heard a report that the financial board had approved renovations and utilities upgrades for the president's home at a cost of up to \$150,000.

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Mohler critiques E.Y. Mullins, doctrine of 'soul competency'

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- An emphasis on "soul competency" in the 20th century has "infected" the Southern Baptist Convention with an "autonomous individualism" that undermines biblical authority, contends a seminary president.

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, offered his critique March 30 in an annual Founders' Day address at the campus in Louisville, Ky.

Mohler, who often appears on national TV as a spokesman for SBC positions, analyzed the influence of his predecessor E.Y. Mullins, the seminary's fourth president, who served from 1899 to 1928.

Mullins was the most visible Southern Baptist spokesman of his day. He was a denominational statesman, a shaper of Baptist theology and the driving force behind the "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement adopted in 1925.

Mohler currently serves on a committee charged with proposing revisions to the current "Baptist Faith and Message" version. The yet-to-be-released rewrite is scheduled for consideration at the SBC annual meeting in June.

Soul competency is the name given to a belief that individual Christians are responsible to God for interpreting and following the Bible. It underlies Baptists' congregational form of church government, in which both clergy and laity are viewed as "priests" and equal before God.

Both Mullins and Herschel Hobbs, chairman of the committee that revised the "Baptist Faith and Message" in 1963, viewed soul competency as Baptists' most distinctive doctrine. "The 'Baptist Faith and Message' of Southern Baptists is based upon the competency of the soul in religion," Hobbs wrote in a 1971 book about what Baptists believe.

In contrast, many of today's SBC leaders tend to emphasize the importance of correct doctrine and view the senior pastor as a spiritual authority in the church.

In his address, Mohler charged that Mullins steered Southern Seminary and the SBC off the course charted by their founders by making personal experience more important than biblical authority.

"In Mullins' theology, we see a shift from biblical revelation to religious experience as the starting point," said Mohler, who has a Ph.D. in theology.

This, he continued, represented a "revolution from the influence of James Petigru Boyce," the seminary's founder and Mullins' mentor.

Though such a belief "did not make Mullins a theological liberal," it did link him with the modernists of the early 20th century, Mohler said. Mohler cited various instances where he said Mullins was influenced by Northern "liberals" before assuming the seminary presidency.

Mohler's view, however, is strongly disputed by Russell Dilday, distinguished professor at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary and former president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Dilday, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Mullins, has countered Mohler's previous comments on Mullins in speeches and writings.

"To suggest Mullins makes experience his source of authority or puts it above the Bible ... is an inaccurate reading of Mullins," Dilday said. "He makes it very clear the Bible is the ultimate authority."

"Mullins does give great emphasis to Christian experience in his thought, but the view of James Leo Garrett is more accurate in pointing out that he used it primarily as an apologetic tool, not as the source of Christian truth nor as a universal organizing principle," Dilday said. "Mullins is clear on the fact that the Bible is the authority, not experience."

Another scholar who also wrote his doctoral dissertation on Mullins concurred.

"Mohler does not understand Mullins and thus distorts his teaching and discredits his leadership and influence," said Dwight Moody, dean of the chapel at Georgetown College, a Baptist school near Lexington, Ky.

Mullins is credited with crafting what Baptist historian Bill Leonard has termed the "Grand Compromise." By leading Southern Baptists to embrace a general statement of consensus beliefs, Mullins helped build a denominational environment that encouraged churches differing on secondary issues to work together in common causes of missions and evangelism.

"Doctrines were articulated in such a way as to make room for congregations that represented a variety of diverse theological traditions. Each could believe that its way was the Baptist way," Leonard wrote in his 1990 book, "God's Last and Only Hope."

"This was less a synthesis than a Grand Compromise based in an unspoken agreement that the convention would resist all attempts to define basic doctrines in ways that excluded one tradition or another, thereby destroying denominational unity and undermining the missionary imperative," Leonard explained. "Doctrinal positions were articulated in terms general enough to unite as many Southern Baptists as possible in fulfilling the missionary task."

In his Founders' Day address, however, Mohler said the Grand Compromise was destined to fail.

"This Grand Compromise did not last and could not last," he said. "I do not question Dr. Mullins' motives, ... the sincerity of his heart, the clarity of his vision. ... Yet there is a warning to us in the intentional shift Mullins made away from revelation as the sole source of religious authority and Christian theology and a shift to experience; for as we have discovered, human experience is no solid ground for establishing truth."

Leonard, a former professor at Southern Seminary who now is dean of a new divinity school at Wake Forest University, conceded the Grand Compromise "may not seem appropriate now, but it was one way of trying to reconfigure and re-energize a divisive and defeated people post-Civil War."

"To take the Grand Compromise out of its historical tradition and try to judge it almost a hundred years later may be appropriate contemporary theology, but it is bad history," he said.

Mohler said Mullins' emphasis on soul competency had a positive impact in denying "external human authorities" in matters of faith, but it also carried long-term negative effect.

"The result was an autonomous individualism that has infected the Southern Baptist Convention and ... evangelicalism to this day."

Southern Baptists today should "look with a critical eye and judge ... what should be kept and what should be left behind in the legacy of every historical generation," Mohler advised.

Mohler's comments on Mullins' legacy came on the heels of even stronger statements published in the Winter 1999 issue of the seminary's theological journal.

"For over 70 years, Southern Baptists have harvested the shallow discipleship and vapid theology that resulted from sowing Mullins' theological seeds of experience," wrote Sean Michael Lucas, a seminary archivist and associate director of the seminary's Center for the Study of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"It is time to return to the emphases of the founders of the Southern Baptist Convention, trained in the hardy doctrinal tradition of the Princeton theology," Lucas continued. "If we do, perhaps God would be pleased to grant us a new Reformation that will lead to a new Renaissance."

Lucas also criticized the popular "Experiencing God" discipleship materials produced by LifeWay Christian Resources as "imbalanced" and having "little doctrinal content."

Although "Experiencing God" has been the best-selling product of the SBC publisher in the last decade, it wrongly follows Mullins' emphasis on personal experience, he suggested.

And incorrect discipleship will lead to incorrect theology, he wrote. "It would not be a far leap from discipleship with little doctrinal content to salvation with little orthodox doctrinal content."

LifeWay President Jimmy Draper said he has not read the article assailing "Experiencing God," but he has heard similar criticism from others.

Draper said he doesn't want to get into a fight over it, but any suggestion that LifeWay promotes experience over Scripture is misguided.

"My own experience or anybody's experience always is measured by the word of God. But there are people who seem to feel God doesn't reveal anything to us."

"To imply that 'Experiencing God' says experience is more valuable than the canon of Scripture is simply not true," Draper said. "Such a claim takes 'Experiencing God' out of the context in which it exists.

"When you got saved, you had an encounter with God. You experienced it. That wasn't just doctrine. 'Experiencing God' is about helping people come to grips with God's purpose and will for their lives. Anybody who tries to simplify it to a doctrinal treatise does not understand it."

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Analysis: Mullins scholars say Mohler's speech driven by Calvinism

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- A seminary president's criticism of an influential theologian and the doctrine of soul competency has more to do with advancing a strict Calvinistic theology than with Baptist history, according to historians and theologians asked about the remarks.

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said E.Y. Mullins, the seminary's fourth president, put Southern Baptists on a wrong course with his emphasis on personal experience and his advance of the doctrine of soul competency.

The March 30 speech echoed Mohler's introduction to a 1997 reprint of Mullins' classic book, "The Axioms of Religion." In that introduction, Mohler warned that soul competency "serves as an acid dissolving religious authority, congregationalism, confessionalism and mutual theological accountability."

Soul competency is the name given to a belief that individual Christians are responsible to God for interpreting and applying the Bible. It underlies Baptists' congregational form of church government, in which both clergy and laity are viewed as "priests" and equal before God.

In contrast, many of today's SBC leaders tend to emphasize the importance of correct doctrine and view the senior pastor as a spiritual authority in the church.

In addition, Mohler advocates a theological system called Calvinism, a view shared by some but not all SBC conservatives.

Mohler's criticism of Mullins and soul competency "is a back-door way again to get the Calvinistic agenda out there," said Alan Lefever, director of the Texas Baptist Historical Collection in Dallas.

Lefever and other Mullins scholars contacted by a reporter challenged Mohler's assertion that Mullins' theology undermined biblical authority in Baptist life. Mohler's problem with Mullins, they said, appears

rather to be his departure from the rigid Calvinism embraced by the seminary's founders.

The doctrine of soul competency does not fit well with strict Calvinism, added Russell Dilday, distinguished professor at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

"The idea of soul competency is that nothing stands between us and God, that we can go directly to God without pope or priest," he explained. "That would contradict Mohler's view on Calvinism," which emphasizes the sovereignty of God to the exclusion of any need for personal experience.

One of Calvinism's most controversial tenets is that God predetermines whether humans are saved or damned. A related tenet teaches that those predestined to be saved -- the elect -- will irresistibly be drawn to faith in Christ and cannot choose otherwise.

Mohler is part of a growing network of Southern Baptists who want the Southern Baptist Convention to embrace a strict, "five-point" Calvinism, which they cite as the doctrinal moorings of Southern Seminary's founders and some of the founders of the SBC itself.

Southern Seminary founders James Petigru Boyce and John Broadus embraced Calvinism, which is also known as Reformed theology or "the doctrines of grace."

While most Baptists are influenced by Calvinism, many prefer a "modified" version that affirms both divine sovereignty and free human will.

While Mohler and others desire Southern Baptists to return to the theology of Boyce and Broadus, the denomination steered away from Calvinism for good reason, said Bill Leonard, a Baptist historian who previously taught at Southern Seminary and now is dean of the new divinity school at Wake Forest University.

"For one thing, they could not accept the damnation of infants," Leonard said. "They could not accept the idea of election. They rejected the Boyce/Broadus tradition of election and limited atonement. They turned away on the question of limited atonement toward general atonement."

"General" atonement is the belief that Christ's death on the cross atones for the sins of anyone who believes. The "limited" atonement view held by five-point Calvinists is that Jesus died only for the elect.

Leonard said Mohler is buying into a "fallacy of Baptist origins."

"There is an idea that there is one kind of Baptist history, one kind of Baptist identity and if we can find it, we can be real Baptists," Leonard explained. "The moderates have that same fallacy at times, as do the conservatives."

"Historians have to keep reminding Baptists that they are the only post-Reformation people who began at both ends of the theological spectrum," he added. "This idea that there's one kind of Baptist and I know which kind it is, is to miss the point of the whole Baptist identity."

While Mohler makes much of the presumed change in direction at Southern Seminary from Broadus to Mullins, "the only true progression you see between Broadus and Mullins is the de-emphasis on Calvinism," Lefever said.

This change was in keeping with the changing view of Baptists at the time, he added. During Mullins' tenure at Southern, Texas Baptists founded Southwestern Seminary, with B.H. Carroll as president. Carroll was a "modified Calvinist," Lefever said, who was followed in the presidency by L.R. Scarborough, a "whosoever will may come" style evangelist.

To suggest that Mullins opened the door to theological liberalism among Southern Baptists would be an "unfortunate misrepresentation," added Dilday, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Mullins.

"This man spoke an orthodox Baptist view at a time when it was being questioned," he continued. "To attack this man whom, at his death, George Truett and others said was one of the greatest men who ever lived, is a cheap shot. Mullins probably was the most important Baptist apologist of the century."

Mullins must be understood in the context in which he lived and worked, Leonard said. "He was trying to come to terms with a changing world post-slavery, post-industrial revolution and new science.

"You can fault Mullins, if you want to, for no longer being helpful in a postmodern context, but had we continued in the Boyce/Broadus tradition, we would have remained a racist Southern sect," Leonard said. "Mullins, for better or worse, was trying to get away from that."

Curtis Freeman, professor of Christianity at Houston Baptist University and a sometimes critic of Mullins himself, agreed with Leonard's point.

"As we assess the Mullins legacy, we may well find that soul competency has too much rugged individualism in it to reach a lonely postmodern culture of moral strangers," Freeman said. "Here we may find help in the 16th and 17th century Anabaptists and Baptists who emphasized the responsibility of each believer's priesthood within a community of disciples."

"However, I am not persuaded that going 'back to the future' with the (Calvinistic) orthodoxy of Boyce and the Princeton theology which birthed it offers a viable approach of relating the gospel to our culture," he said. "It is too male, too rationalistic and too authoritarian."

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SBC, Texas Baptist leaders meet behind closed doors

By Marv Knox

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Key leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention and Baptist General Convention of Texas met April 6 on the campus of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

But, according to an agreement reached by all the participants, they're saying very little about their discussions.

The only official word about the meeting is a brief statement released by Southwestern Seminary President Ken Hemphill and affirmed by BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade.

It states: "Participants said the informal luncheon was a friendly and helpful conversation concerning ways the conventions can continue to work together in Kingdom causes. While acknowledging that there are concerns which continue to be studied, participants said it was the sort of conversation that can lead to a new level of trust and partnership."

Relationships between the Texas convention and the SBC have been strained in recent years. The SBC has turned theologically and politically to the right during the past two decades. The BGCT has declined to follow the national convention's lead.

The Fort Worth meeting apparently was prompted by SBC leaders, who learned Wade was scheduled to preach in the seminary's chapel service that morning. Hemphill reportedly asked Wade to meet with a group representing SBC concerns. The size of the meeting grew steadily, with participants added to the group up until late the night before the meeting.

In addition to Hemphill, SBC representatives included Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee; Jimmy Draper, president of LifeWay Christian Resources; Jack Graham, pastor of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano and a member of the Executive Committee; O.S. Hawkins, president of the Annuity Board; Don Kammerdiener, executive vice president of the International Mission Board; Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; and Randy Singer, executive vice president of the North American Mission Board.

In addition to Wade, BGCT representatives included Jim Denison, chairman of a BGCT committee studying missions-sending agencies and pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas; Clyde Glazener,

BGCT president and pastor of Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth; Dick Maples, associate executive director; Bernie Spooner, director of the Bible study/discipleship division; and Phil Strickland, director of the Christian Life Commission.

Participants generally characterized the meeting as cordial, with some conciliatory statements expressed.

"It was a good meeting," said Draper, who was a longtime Texas Baptist pastor before he took the helm of LifeWay in Nashville, Tenn. "Any time we can communicate and talk together, that's good.

"The meeting was polite. There was not any hostility or anger. We were able to surface some things that will give us a foundation for discussion in the future."

Wade affirmed the BGCT's intention to work with groups, such as the SBC, that will reciprocate goodwill, Draper added, expressing a hope for future cooperation built on relationships.

"There was a time when everybody trusted everybody," Draper noted. "Unfortunately, we're in a time when there's little trust. Building relationships is how you restore trust."

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Arizona Baptist magazine adding news section

PHOENIX (ABP) -- Barely two years after replacing their newspaper with a feature-oriented magazine, Arizona Southern Baptists are once again reading news in their state-convention publication.

For the first time since it replaced the 65-year-old Baptist Beacon in November 1997, the current issue of Portraits contains four pages of news.

"When Portraits was created in late 1997, it was with the intention of helping you learn how God is working through our Southern Baptist family and how you can get involved," Portraits Editor Elizabeth Young wrote in the magazine's March issue. "The method chosen to accomplish this was feature stories. We wanted to educate and motivate, while also engendering a warm, family feeling."

Recent tumultuous events, however, caused convention leaders to rethink that policy. The collapse of the Baptist Foundation of Arizona and Grand Canyon University's voting to sever ties with the convention were reported in secular media but not in the Baptist publication.

"We've heard you," Young told readers. "Arizona Southern Baptists have been in the news lately. And you want to know what's going on -- from a Southern Baptist perspective."

The four-page news section, titled "Snapshots," will be a regular feature in future issues, Young said. In addition to local news, it will include briefs compiled from the Southern Baptist Convention news service Baptist Press.

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-- By John Loudat

House adds 'charitable choice' to \$6.9 billion housing measure

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- House lawmakers voted overwhelmingly April 6 to allow pervasively sectarian organizations, including churches, to compete for funds in a \$6.9 billion bill designed to boost home ownership among low-income municipal workers.

The American Homeownership and Economic Opportunity Act became the latest in a series of congressional proposals that includes the "charitable choice" initiative.

Houses of worship have long been allowed to set up separate agencies that receive government funds for providing secular services. But under "charitable choice," houses of worship would for the first time qualify for direct support from taxpayers.

If passed, the law could face a legal challenge. The Supreme Court has said previously that government funding of "pervasively sectarian" organizations is unconstitutional.

During the 20-minute debate on the amendment, which ultimately carried 299-124, lawmakers debated what type of groups could receive the federal money and if those recipients could continue their practice of hiring only people from their own faith.

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, said: "I have no problem with faith-based organizations -- Catholic Charities -- getting federal money. I have a huge problem with the federal government directly funding the First Catholic Church, the First Methodist Church, the First Synagogue, or the First Wiccans with direct federal money. That has huge implications."

"Those pervasively sectarian organizations have special protections under the law where they can discriminate based on someone's religious faith," Edwards added.

But Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., who proposed the amendment, said charitable choice is an attempt to codify what the Department of Housing and Urban Development is already doing -- "encouraging faith-based organizations to have a place at the table in receiving federal funds to provide social services." In 1997 HUD Secretary Andrew Cuomo started the Center for Community and Interfaith Partnerships designed to begin interfaith housing initiatives.

But a HUD spokesman disagreed with Souder's characterization of the interfaith program. "With all due respect to the congressman, we are very mindful of constitutional concerns," he said. "It is true that HUD encourages faith-based groups to get involved in housing initiatives, ... but we do not fund churches, synagogues and temples in any way."

The HUD spokesman added that separately created nonprofit groups, such as Lutheran Services, that are set up not to proselytize but to provide secular services may apply for federal money.

Both leading presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore have endorsed the idea of "charitable choice."

Souder said the initiative makes it clear that religious programs "will not be forced to change their identity or the characteristics which make them unique and effective -- these protections include their religious character, independence and employment practices."

"The goal here is to allow faith-based organizations to compete without handicapping them by eliminating the characteristics which make them effective in improving the lives and restoring communities," Souder said.

But Edwards said government always regulates what it funds, and he noted that for the first time federal money could be used by a group that discriminates based on religion.

"If money goes to a church associated with Bob Jones University next year, under your amendment, can that church, that religious organization put out a sign saying, 'Using your tax dollars, no Catholics need apply for a job here?'" Edwards asked.

Souder responded that it HUD would have the discretion in determining fund recipients. "If Secretary Cuomo ... chose to give it to a place that would discriminate on that basis, which could include Jewish, Catholic, evangelical, then it could happen."

Edwards asked Souder if "the Wiccans (will) be able to apply for federal tax funding."

Souder replied, "It's unlikely under President Bush, that the witches would get funding."

Edwards said that Souder "has made my point. He is saying that under 'the Bush administration,' they would pick out which religious organization qualifies for federal tax dollars and which ones would not. And that's exactly what Mr. Madison and Mr. Jefferson did not want when they founded the basis of the Bill of Rights."

"They did not want politicians and government officials deciding which religious organizations receive official government approval and which ones do not," Edwards added.

Souder said: "Faith-based organizations are not willing to give up their faith in order to become a part of a charitable system. They will just choose not to participate."

In another amendment added to the housing package, lawmakers approved a provision that would prevent communities from using federal Community Development Block Grant funds to acquire church property without the consent of the church.

Rep. Carolyn Kilpatrick, D-Mich., sponsored the provision designed to respond to the plight of St. Luke's Pentecostal Church in upstate New York. According to Kim Trent, Kilpatrick's secretary, the church saved for 21 years to purchase a building for \$130,000.

But the Town of North Hempstead Community Development Agency has attempted to use federal funds and eminent domain to buy the building for \$50,000 less than the church's purchase price. The town and the church are currently in a legal battle over the dispute.

"We must not allow cities and towns to use CDBG funds to displace congregations without their consent," Kilpatrick said.

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House lawmakers introduce bill protecting workplace religious freedom

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Seeking to protect workers from having to choose between their job and observing their faith, a bipartisan group of lawmakers introduced the Workplace Religious Freedom Act on April 11.

Reps. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., and Asa Hutchinson, R-Ark., held a joint press conference with religious leaders to show the broad backing of the bill.

Nadler said bill would bring "real meaning to the unfulfilled promise" of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that was amended in 1972 to ensure religious freedom on the job. He said a 1977 Supreme Court ruling gutted the protection by relieving an employer of the duty to accommodate an employee's religious observances if the employer had shown "any meaningful effort whatsoever."

"Our bill will even the balance," Nadler said. "It will not cripple American business," but it will lead to a "fair and reasonable result."

Under WRFA, employers are required to accommodate their employee's religious practices unless the accommodation were to place an "undue burden" on the employer, such as a "significant difficulty or expense."

Hutchinson said the bill would make religious freedom in the workplace a "reality." He noted that while he and Nadler disagree on many issues, "we're together on this."

Other sponsors of the bill include Reps. Charles Canady, R-Fla.; William Goodling, R-Pa.; Martin Frost, D-Texas; and Anthony Weiner, D-N.Y. The group is expecting more sponsors.

Rep. Carolyn McCarthy, D-N.Y., said that WRFA's "time has come."

Also speaking at the press conference were representatives from a broad coalition of religious and civil-liberties groups.

Nathan Diament of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America issued a written statement, saying that in various workplaces: "Orthodox Jews have been pressed to work on Saturdays, Muslim women have been told to remove their head scarves and devout Christians have been told to punch in on Christmas. In the land of religious freedom, this situation is unacceptable."

Melissa Rogers, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the bill "formulates a way to balance the competing legitimate interests of the employee to practice his or her religion and employers to operate a business."

Richard Foltin, legislative director in the American Jewish Committee's Office of Government and International Affairs, said groups in the coalition have "sharp differences" on a broad range of public-policy issues, including religious ones. "Be that as it may, we are united on a fundamental principle -- that no employee should arbitrarily be forced to choose between obedience to his or her faith and keeping a job," Foltin said.

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END
