



Nashville, Tennessee  
**Associated  
Baptist Press**

Editor: Bob Allen  
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626  
Fax: 904.262.7745  
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

May 19, 2000

(00-44)

**IN THIS ISSUE:**

- Houston Baptist University alters ties to Texas convention**
- Mother's Day march seeks gun regulations**
- 'Moms' cite statistics about gun violence**
- Revocation of church's tax status upheld by federal appeals court**

**Houston Baptist University  
alters ties to Texas convention**

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Trustees of Houston Baptist University voted without opposition May 16 to end the Baptist General Convention of Texas' role in appointing the university's entire trustee board, offering instead for the state convention to name one-fourth of the board.

The trustees themselves would name the remaining board members.

BGCT officials received no advance notice of the proposal, were not present at the meeting and were taken by surprise when notified late that day.

University President E.D. Hodo and trustee chairman Charles Wisdom said in separate interviews May 17 that the action was necessary to preserve the autonomy of the institution. It was precipitated, they said, by the possibility that the BGCT would not renominate some current trustees or choose other desired individuals as trustees because those individuals are members of churches that do not financially support the work of the BGCT.

BGCT bylaws require that all individuals nominated to serve on boards of convention agencies and institutions be members of churches in cooperation with the convention. That traditionally has been understood to mean, among other things, that the church gives financial support to the BGCT. That expectation was clarified last September when the BGCT Executive Board adopted a nominating committee guideline that defines a cooperating church as one that "positively supports the ministry, mission and budget of the BGCT."

Hodo said HBU trustees had been concerned about this year's nomination process due to the stricter interpretation of what constitutes a cooperating church but grew most alarmed after a May 12 nominating subcommittee meeting in Houston.

"Information was iterated and reiterated that certain trustees on our board were at risk not to be continued," Hodo said. "Some nominees that were brought forward were eliminated because their membership is in a BGCT non-cooperating church."

Mark Bumpus, chairman of the BGCT committee on nominations for institution boards, confirmed that concerns had been expressed about some existing HBU trustees who were due for renomination but who are members of churches that did not contribute to the BGCT last year.

To his knowledge, Bumpus said, only two HBU trustees up for renomination this year are members of a church that did not financially support the BGCT in 1999. Both Diane Williams and Allene Lucas are members of Second Baptist Church of Houston.

Second Baptist, one of the largest churches in the state, has demonstrated an up-and-down track record of Cooperative Program contributions. The megachurch gave nothing to the Cooperative Program through the BGCT in 1999 and has posted contributions ranging from \$140 to \$78,000 in other recent years.

Because of the number of trustees from Second Baptist on the HBU board -- representing 15 percent of the board and a larger contingent than any other church -- and because of the high profile of the church, that church's giving record has been the focus of attention in the past.

Despite the lack of contributions from Second Baptist last year, the two trustees from Second Baptist "were not in jeopardy," Bumpus insisted. He explained that BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade had urged the nominating committee to extend a year of grace to candidates up for renomination this year. That message was conveyed to HBU representatives at the May 12 subcommittee meeting in Houston, he said.

"I thought Dr. Wade was being very fair, very gracious," Bumpus said.

While a grace period was offered to the existing trustees, the nominating committee would not set a new precedent by putting a first-time trustee on a board from a non-cooperating church, Bumpus said.

Hodo claimed the stance of the BGCT threatened the integrity of the university. "It's very simple," he said. "The study committee and the board felt that the autonomy of the institution was at risk and that position needed to be firmly nailed down."

"There were no political overtones, no theological overtones, no discussion of relationship to other institutions, no discussion of similarities to other actions," he added. "It was simply an internal issue."

And while the board found it necessary to change its trustee appointment process, that doesn't mean the cooperative relationship between the BGCT and HBU has to change, Hodo said.

"We do not see or anticipate a change in our relationship with the BGCT," he said. "We recognize there will be a response. We are amicable and ready to visit with those people and hear a proposal they would lay on the table."

BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade issued a brief statement in response to the HBU action, in which he noted the convention "has enjoyed a mutually beneficial affiliation with Houston Baptist University for more than 40 years."

"Texas Baptists have across the years elected to the university capable trustees," he said. "These Texas Baptist men and women have provided the leadership that has enabled Houston Baptist University to excel beyond the highest dreams of its founders."

The BGCT has given the university about \$8 million in the last five years alone, Wade noted. The current budget year's allocation for HBU is \$1.5 million, which constitutes about 5 percent of the university's operating income.

Wade characterized the HBU trustees' action as "unilateral" and a violation of the BGCT's constitution and the principles by which the university and convention have worked together.

The Christian Education Coordinating Board, the mechanism by which the BGCT relates to its nine educational institutions, was to convene by conference call May 22 to consider its response.

That response could include escrowing further contributions to the university until the matter is resolved. Such an action was taken in 1990 when Baylor University's board of regents unilaterally amended the university's charter to create a self-perpetuating board.

Through a year of negotiations, the relationship between Baylor and the BGCT was mended with a compromise that allows the convention to nominate 25 percent of Baylor's board. The compromise also resulted in decreased contributions from the BGCT to Baylor.

Hodo said the HBU trustees acted with full knowledge that their decision could result in reduced or eliminated funding from the BGCT.

"Their assessment is that this is not a money issue, this is an autonomy issue," Hodo said.

-30-

## **Mother's Day march seeks gun regulations**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Congress must change America's gun laws or the nation's mothers are going to change Congress. That was the message delivered by women who marched on Washington May 14 demanding "sensible" gun laws.

Organizers of the Million Mom March estimated that 750,000 participated in the Mother's Day march on the National Mall. Nearly 70 U.S. cities also held rallies of their own.

After heated debate May 17, the Senate approved 50-49 a non-binding, symbolic measure that calls for congressional action on gun controls by Memorial Day. Seven Republicans joined all but one of the Democrats to approve the "sense of the Senate resolution."

According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the National Rifle Association donated more than \$7 million to Republicans through political action committees, soft money and individual donations to candidates between the years 1991 and 2000. The leading gun-rights lobby donated \$1.7 million to Democrats.

Religious leaders told the Mother's Day rally that the country needs to address both the prevalence of violence in the media and the ease at which people can obtain guns.

"Is the need for sensible gun control a religious issue? You bet it is," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of The Union of American Hebrew Congregations. "The indiscriminate distribution of guns is an offense against God and humanity. Controlling guns is not only a political matter, it is a solemn religious obligation."

Along with other speakers -- celebrities, activists, teachers, victims of gun violence -- Yoffie took aim at the NRA for opposing most gun-control proposals.

"We are ready for a knock-down, drag-out, no-holds-barred battle against the NRA, which is the real criminals' lobby in this country and which is drenched in the blood of murdered children," he said. "We're going to find out who's getting NRA funds and who's benefiting from NRA ads and we're going to vote for the other guy."

The NRA declined to comment on charges made against them at the march. An NRA spokeswoman told Associated Baptist Press that the organization had not issued any responses to the Million Mom March. She also said that no one was available for an interview because they were focused on an upcoming annual meeting.

Yoffie told ABP that every religious group ought to be concerned about the problem of violence in the media, but religious groups should also be concerned about the availability of guns.

"Teenagers have violent fantasies and angry impulses, and controlling that is a problem for every parent on the face of the earth," Yoffie said. "But only in America can a disturbed kid have such immediate access to an arsenal of weaponry."

Television talk-show host Rosie O'Donnell emceed the event. Celebrities participating included singers Melissa Ethridge, Courtney Love, Rosanne Cash and Raffi as well as actresses Susan Sarandon, Reese Witherspoon and others.

The crowd heard from Sarah and Jim Brady. Jim Brady, former press secretary to President Ronald Reagan, was critically wounded from gunfire in the attempt on Reagan's life. He and his wife helped create the "Brady Bill," which requires a waiting period and background checks on handgun purchases made through licensed dealers.

From his wheelchair with the U.S. Capitol building in the background, Brady said, "If they don't change firearm laws, we will change the lawmakers."

Signs in the crowd read: "Congress, listen to your mother," "No child's life should end with a bang," and "Pack a picnic, not a pistol."

Mothers and victims of violence wept as they told their stories to a sea of rally participants, some of whom carried pictures of friends and family members killed by gunfire.

Veronica McQueen spoke of her 6-year-old daughter Kayla Rolland, who was killed by a fellow classmate. Gail Thorson's son Matthew was shot in the head and critically wounded at the New York Empire State Building in 1997.

Children were brought to the stage to ring a bell made of melted-down guns. They rang the bell 12 times to symbolize the 12 American children who die every day from gunfire.

Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund, also addressed the crowd.

"Abraham Lincoln, John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. are not here to lead us out of the wilderness of violence that killed them," said Edelman. "But mothers and grandmothers and others -- we're here and we're going to love our children more than the NRA loves their guns."

Lawmakers who favor more gun control also came out in force.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., said in an interview that, "Nobody is proposing to take handguns away." But he said licensing and registering handguns is as reasonable as requiring a driver's license. "If you want to drive a car, you have to show you can drive it safely," he said.

March organizers say they want:

-- Congress to require all handgun owners to be licensed and to register their weapons with the proper authorities.

-- A sensible cooling-off period and extensive background checks on people who want to purchase weapons intended only for killing or injuring humans.

-- Safety locks for all handguns.

-- To limit purchases to one handgun per month.

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Maryland's lieutenant governor and daughter of Robert F. Kennedy, who was assassinated with a handgun while running for president in 1968, told ABP that the "faith community has always been helpful in helping ensure child safety" and predicted religious groups would endorse gun control.

American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. endorsed the march and urged member churches to participate, according to a press release.

Jenny Hulen, an American Baptist chaplain, was among participants. "We have watched too many children die," Hulen said. "We have seen too many funerals. ... We ask ourselves 'why?' and forget the lessons we try to teach our children -- that every action has a consequence. These deaths are the logical consequences of our actions as a nation and of our legislature. It must stop."

## **'Moms' cite statistics about gun violence**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Second Amendment to the Constitution reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."

Following are statistics on U.S. gun violence compiled by Million Mom March organizers. Sources are the Centers for Disease Control and the National Center for Health Statistics.

According to march organizers, guns killed more than 32,000 Americans in 1997. A total of 4,223 of them were 19 or younger. That is equal to one every two hours.

Of the children and teenagers killed with guns:

- More than half, 2,580, were murdered.
- 1,262 committed suicide using a gun -- more than three a day.
- 306 died from an unintentional or accidental shooting.
- 630 people killed by guns were younger than 15.
- 191 were under the age of 10.
- 84 people killed by guns were children under 5.

American children under age 15 are 12 times more likely to die from gunfire than children in 25 other industrialized countries combined.

Gun homicide is the second-leading cause of death for young people ages 15-24.

-30-

-- Compiled by Kenny Byrd

## **Revocation of church's tax status upheld by federal appeals court**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A federal appeals court has upheld a first-time ruling by the Internal Revenue Service revoking the tax-exempt status of a church that in 1992 urged Christians to vote against presidential candidate Bill Clinton.

A three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia upheld the IRS action unanimously May 12. The 1995 IRS decision was based on full-page ads placed in USA Today and the Washington Times by the Church at Pierce Creek, a New York church operated by Branch Ministries, Inc.

The judges -- who were all appointed to the bench by President Ronald Reagan -- ruled that the "revocation of the church's tax-exempt status neither violated the Constitution nor exceeded the IRS's statutory authority."

The decision, written by James Buckley, rejected the church's claims that the revocation violated its right to the free exercise of religion guaranteed by the First Amendment and the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act. The court also rejected the church's charges that it was the victim of selective prosecution and that the IRS acted beyond its authority.

Buckley noted that the church has "an avenue available to it" to participate in political campaigns by forming a separate 501(c)(4) organization and then setting up a political action committee for that purpose.

To do so, however, the church would have to incorporate the organization separately and keep records to verify that no tax-deductible contributions to the church go to activities of its political arm, Buckley said.

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for the American Center for Law and Justice, which represented the church, said the decision is both disappointing and encouraging. "While we are disappointed with the appellate court's decision concerning the case involving the Church at Pierce Creek, we are encouraged that this court appears to provide a blueprint for churches to express their beliefs in a political context."

"This is an important decision that will set the legal tone for future involvement of churches in the political arena," Sekulow said.

The ACLJ told Associated Baptist Press May 18 that it has not decided whether it will appeal the May 12 ruling.

ACLJ attorney Mark Troobnick claimed the roadmap for churches to set up a PAC "did not exist for churches prior to this decision."

However, Rob Boston, a spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the decision stated nothing new. "It's not like churches suddenly have some new right, thanks to the effort of the ACLJ," he said. "Lots of non-church tax-exempt groups have created (c)(4) organizations and then spun off PACs from them. Churches could have done the same, but very few have a desire to get that deep into partisan politics."

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United, hailed the ruling. "All over the country, Religious Right figures like [Pat] Robertson, [Jerry] Falwell and others are trying to lure churches into jumping head first into politics," he said. "This decision should bring those efforts to a grinding halt."

"In light of this ruling, pastors who allow partisan politicking in the sanctuary are jeopardizing their church's tax exemption," Lynn added.

On Oct. 30, 1992, four days before the presidential election, the Church at Pierce Creek placed full-page ads that bore the headline "Christians Beware." The USA Today ad claimed that then-Gov. Bill Clinton supported abortion on demand, the homosexual lifestyle and giving condoms to teenagers in public schools. It charged that Clinton was "promoting policies that are in rebellion to God's Laws." It referred to biblical passages before asking, "How then can we vote for Bill Clinton?"

The bottom of the ad said it was co-sponsored by The Church at Pierce Creek, its senior pastor Daniel J. Little and by churches and concerned Christians. It said tax-deductible donations for the ad were "gladly accepted."

The advertisements came to the attention of the regional commissioner of the IRS. In 1993, the IRS informed the church that it was beginning a church tax examination. According to court documents, two unproductive meetings occurred between the parties. And, for the first time in history, the IRS revoked a church's tax-exempt status on Jan. 19, 1995.

The church and its pastor began a lawsuit soon thereafter. In 1999, a federal court in Washington upheld the IRS action. The May 12 ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia affirmed that decision.

-30-

**END**

---