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**Evangelical leaders issue
'religious freedom' declaration**

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Top evangelical leaders joined prominent Southern Baptists in a rejoinder to critics of efforts to preach the Christian gospel to people of other faiths.

A "Chicago Declaration on Religious Freedom" released June 2 challenged those who contend that attempts to proselytize non-Christians "undermine a peaceful, pluralistic society and may lead to intolerance, bigotry, and even violence."

That language echoed a plea last year by a council of interfaith leaders in Chicago for Southern Baptists to call off plans to blitz the city with volunteer missionaries this summer.

The Council of Religious Leaders in Metropolitan Chicago, in a November open letter to Southern Baptist Convention president Paige Patterson, expressed fear that an announced plan to send 100,000 evangelists to the city might undo progress made in interfaith dialogue or even encourage extremists to commit violence by fomenting religious differences.

Southern Baptists rebuffed that request, but more recent projections have scaled the scope of the planned effort back considerably.

The Chicago council isn't mentioned in the statement drafted over three months at the initiative of Robert Reccord, president of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, and Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. In fact, the effort's coordinator, NAMB vice president Phil Roberts, told Baptist Press it is called the Chicago statement because that is where most of the planning and writing meetings were held.

However, both the statement's text and comments by signers to the media were clear in their view that such criticism constitutes censorship.

"Evangelicals have run headlong into a sobering reality in our nation -- the noose is tightening around the neck of religious liberty," Reccord told Baptist Press.

"I think the declaration puts our critics on notice that they're going to have to defend what appears to a lot of Americans to be intolerance," Land told the Dallas Morning News. "They are denying our rights, because our faith calls on us to witness."

Joining 21 original signers were more than 60 individuals who endorsed the statement. Supporters include some of the nation's most influential evangelical leaders: Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright, Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson, Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary, David Neff of Christianity Today, Janet Parshall of the Family Research Council, Jay Sekulow of the American Center for Law and Justice and evangelist Billy Graham's son, Franklin Graham.

The statement declares, "Misguided or false notions of pluralism must not be allowed to jeopardize anyone's constitutional right to evangelize or promote one's faith."

The declaration calls for religious liberty for all, says Christians have a responsibility to evangelize and describes witnessing as "not merely an act of obedience but also an act of love."

It also acknowledges that "some Christian churches have failed to exercise proper respect for the rights of others" and rejects "coercive techniques, dishonest appeals, or any form of deception" in evangelism.

At least one Baptist critic of the statement, however, said Southern Baptist leaders confuse controversy with persecution.

Robert Parham, executive director of the independent Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn., said no one is denying conservative Christians the right to evangelize but merely criticizing methods that do not respect people of other faiths.

"They are crying wolf about religious liberty," Parham said.

"Rather than claiming their rights are denied, these leaders should share their faith without resorting to the denigration of other people of faith and targeting them for conversion," said Parham, the son of retired Southern Baptist missionaries.

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Texas Baptist executive to offer amendment to SBC faith statement

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptists' top paid leader says he will seek to amend the "Baptist Faith and Message" when a new version of the confessional statement is proposed to the Southern Baptist Convention June 14.

Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, previously criticized proposed revisions to the 1963 document for leaving out some key references that were included in the old statement.

Wade echoed those comments in his weekly column in the June 5 issue of the Baptist Standard newspaper.

"I believe any Baptist statement of faith should clearly affirm soul competency, the priesthood of the believer and local church autonomy, and it should make clear that Christ is our guide for interpreting the Bible," Wade wrote.

"As a Baptist ought to do when he or she has a concern, I will be at the SBC to offer an amendment, which I hope will be a unifying word for Southern Baptists," Wade continued.

This year's convention meets June 13-14 in Orlando, Fla.

The committee that drafted the changes issued a statement responding to a number of questions the document has raised. While priesthood of the believer, soul competency and the autonomy of the local church

are not enumerated in their statement, the committee said those concepts are implicit in the article on "the church," where it says that "each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord."

The committee also said that new language affirming that "all Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is himself the focus of divine revelation" is stronger and more historic than that in the 1963 statement. Words in that version describing Christ as "the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted," they said, have been used "to drive a wedge between the incarnate Word and the written Word and to deny the truthfulness of certain passages."

Texas Baptists are already on record as opposing one article of the new document. The state convention endorsed the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" last year, in effect rejecting a family amendment added by the SBC in 1998 that, among other things, calls for wives to submit to their husbands.

While Texas Baptist leaders said they believe the statement takes Scripture out of context, critics of the move said it cast doubt on moderate leaders' belief in the Bible and loyalty to the SBC. Despite a number of disagreements with SBC leadership over the years, the BGCT remains the largest contributing affiliate to the national body, giving more than \$20 million to the national convention's unified budget in 1997-98.

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-- By Bob Allen

BTSR professor to retire at end of school year

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- One of the early professors to join the faculty of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond is retiring at the end of the academic year.

Elizabeth Barnes, professor of theology at the Virginia seminary, joined the faculty at the start of the school's second year, in the fall of 1992. She has announced she will step down June 30 to devote herself to family needs and other concerns in her native North Carolina.

Barnes previously taught at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C. She said she plans to travel in retirement with her husband, John Eddins, a retired Southeastern professor, continue writing and research and volunteer for community service and ministry to migrants. Barnes, who has studied and written about faith and environmentalism, also plans to work with ecological concerns, she said.

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-- By ABP staff

PBS program features Baptist agency's Web site

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A Baptist agency's Internet offering is being featured by Religion and Ethics Newsweekly as its Web site of the month.

The PBS program each month features a Web site that producers say makes a significant contribution to religion and ethics. For June, they chose the Baptist Center for Ethics Internet site, www.baptists4ethics.com

"Our goal is to inform and educate," said Janice Henderson, a spokesperson for Religion and Ethics Newsweekly. "We like to feature Web sites that do the same. We believe the Baptist Center for Ethics site accomplishes that with its mission to provide ethical resources and services to congregations."

Robert Parham, executive director of the independent ethics agency in Nashville, Tenn., said the BCE is the first Baptist organization to have its Web site featured by the program.

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-- By Sarah Griffith

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