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AU says Falwell interview may threaten SBC tax status

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention's tax-exempt status could be jeopardized if its Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission airs a radio interview with Jerry Falwell taped June 12, according to a church-state watchdog group.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State Executive Director Barry Lynn said Falwell's comments made during a taping for the ERLC's nationwide "For Faith and Family" radio program were partisan. He said Falwell is attempting to help defeat Vice President Al Gore in the November presidential election.

In a June 14 letter to ERLC President Richard Land, Lynn urged Land not to air the interview because "many listeners of the SBC-produced program would certainly conclude that his partisan agenda has the official endorsement of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Associated Baptist Press attempted to contact SBC officials for a response, but Land and others had not returned from the SBC gathering in Orlando, Fla., or were out of their offices for other reasons.

According to an article by the SBC's Baptist Press, Falwell said more than once during the interview that his comments on the presidential election were personal and not those of the ERLC.

Lynn wrote the letter after reading an ABP account of the interview conducted by Land in the SBC exhibit hall.

"The American people, I think, sense something right now -- that we are about to lose America," Falwell said. "Ronald Reagan would not have been president unless Bible-believing Christians in 1979 and 1980 by the millions said, 'We've had enough,' and threw Jimmy Carter out and put Ronald Reagan in, to put it bluntly."

"If we don't do the same thing Nov. 7 with Mr. Gore," Falwell said, "and get somebody in there to rebuild the moral values and fabric of this nation, we're going to be in the same mess or worse than we were in 1980."

In a copy of the letter obtained by ABP, Lynn told Land: "I can understand that Falwell may have been more partisan in his interview than you had expected. If his comments had been broadcast live, the commission and the Southern Baptist Convention would probably not be held legally responsible for his opposition to the Gore candidacy."

"However," Lynn continued "since the program was taped for later broadcast, airing it now -- knowing of its partisan content -- could put the SBC's tax-exempt status in jeopardy. Accordingly, I am writing today to strongly urge you to refrain from airing this interview."

Lynn said the ERLC is an agency of the Southern Baptist Convention tax-exempt religious organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Service Code. "Therefore, your agency and its programs are subject to the restrictions governing tax-exempt entities and partisan politics."

He noted that a federal appeals court recently upheld an IRS decision to revoke the tax-exempt status of the Church at Pierce Creek, a New York church that placed full-page newspaper ads days before the 1992 presidential election saying that voting for Bill Clinton would be a sin.

"The message here seems clear: Tax-exempt religious organizations do not have the right to intervene in partisan politics," said Lynn. "Your broadcast of the Falwell interview, I believe, would do just that. Because Falwell is a Southern Baptist pastor and prominent leader in your denomination, many listeners of the SBC-produced program would certainly conclude that his partisan agenda has the official endorsement of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Lynn said that the goal of Falwell's "People of Faith 2000" campaign, which Falwell touted in the interview with Land, is "to register certain types of voters to ensure that Gore loses the election and that Republican candidate George W. Bush is elected."

Lynn also listed penalties against organizations operated by Falwell in the past, including the IRS decision to retroactively revoke the tax exemption of Falwell's "Old Time Gospel Hour" for the years 1986-87, holding that he had improperly funneled money from the ministry into a political action committee. Falwell was also fined \$6,000 by the Federal Election Commission in 1987 for transferring \$6.7 million in funds intended for his ministry to political committees.

"Given Falwell's pattern of violating the nation's election laws, I believe it would be prudent for the SBC to keep him at arm's length," Lynn urged Land.

In the interview with Land, Falwell said that "People of Faith 2000" aims to engage 200,000 evangelical churches and 28 million "faith-based families." Pastoral registration packets will be mailed to the churches.

Pastors are not asked to promote candidates or parties, Falwell said, but to take advantage of the motor voter registration law. For example, pastors could take time in a Sunday morning service to lead members to fill out voter registration forms, he said. The church could collect the forms and deliver them to the appropriate registrar.

It will require registering 3 million to 4 million more voters than took part in the 1996 elections "to almost guarantee pro-life, conservative, pro-family persons elected to the Congress, to the state legislatures and to the White House," Falwell said.

Americans United launched "Project Fair Play" in 1996 to educate religious institutions about the rules prohibiting electioneering by tax-exempt religious organizations.

Through the project, AU has reported nearly 30 houses of worship and religious ministries to the Internal Revenue Service for violations. Among them, AU reported one church this year accused of working to defeat George W. Bush in the presidential primaries and another that the agency says endorsed Vice President Al Gore.

Asked whether it matters that Falwell said he was giving his personal viewpoint on the election and not the ERLC's, Lynn said: "Our concern in this case is not with Jerry Falwell, but with the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. As an individual, Falwell is perfectly free to oppose Al Gore and support George W. Bush. But the commission is a tax-exempt religious entity, and under federal tax law, it may not use its programming to disseminate a partisan political message. As a point of law, Falwell's 'disclaimers' are irrelevant."

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Baptists to observe 'Reality of Hell' Sunday

By William Perkins

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Southern Baptist churches will be asked to kick off their new church year each October with a new emphasis on the reality of hell.

Evangelist Bailey Smith announced June 14, in the annual sermon of the Southern Baptist Convention, the establishment of "Reality of Hell Sunday."

Smith, a former SBC president, said he asked the North American Mission Board to cooperate "to make what God has laid on my heart a reality."

"Our new church year will begin on Sunday, Oct. 1, 2000," Smith said. "We are calling that day Reality of Hell Sunday and requesting every pastor and every evangelist to preach on the scriptural doctrine of Hell and offer an evangelistic invitation."

Smith said special materials would be distributed to Southern Baptist churches urging observance of Reality of Hell Sunday.

Smith, who in 1981 uttered his famous quote, "God Almighty does not hear the prayers of a Jew," is well known for pointed remarks.

As he has done in the past, Smith reserved some of his strongest criticism for U.S. President Bill Clinton, a member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark.

"We have a Southern Baptist in the White House with the morals of an alley cat," he said. Noting that Clinton confessed that his relationship with Monica Lewinsky was "inappropriate," Smith labeled it a "sin."

"Stirring your coffee with a knife is inappropriate," he quipped.

For all the talk about a Southern Baptist being in the White House, Smith said, "I'm ready for a Christian, myself."

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ABP Washington bureau gains press credentials

By Robert Dilday

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The new Washington bureau of Associated Baptist Press has obtained congressional press credentials, a step that will enhance coverage of moral, social and religious-liberty issues in the nation's capital.

Press credentials will give the bureau, which was opened by the 10-year-old independent news agency May 1, access to congressional press galleries and make written testimony and background material readily available.

A committee of Washington journalists that grants the press credentials determined June 6 that the ABP bureau complies with press gallery guidelines that require editorial independence and prohibit members from lobbying the government.

Until last year, Baptist News Service, a division of the Baptist Joint Committee, had covered stories in the nation's capital for ABP, which is based in Jacksonville, Fla. But after Southern Baptist officials raised concerns about ties between BNS and the Baptist Joint Committee, which does lobbying, the committee of journalists withdrew its credentials.

Earlier the committee had revoked the credentials of Baptist Press, the SBC's news service, for similar reasons.

ABP directors decided in April to open their own bureau and seek credentials.

"Credentials certainly enable easier access to the people, places and events that make news in the nation's capital," said Kenny Byrd, who was named ABP's Washington bureau chief last month. "Baptists should be encouraged that the ABP Washington bureau is both dedicated and equipped to reporting news that interests them."

"I'm grateful the committee recognized the unique and independent nature of ABP," said Bob Allen, editor of Associated Baptist Press. "There needs to be someone covering governmental issues from a Baptist perspective."

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D.C. Baptist executive announces retirement

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Jere Allen, executive director of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention since 1992, has announced his retirement, which will become effective at the end of this year.

In a June 5 letter to the executive board of the D.C. convention, Allen said: "I will be nearing 67 years of age when I retire. And this will be the end of the implementation of a vision-based strategic plan for the years 1993-2000. I am pleased with the results of that plan and believe its implementation has been the centerpiece of my time with you."

Lynn Bergfalk, president of the convention, will chair a search committee and expects to have a successor named by the time Allen leaves office.

The convention is aligned with both the Southern Baptist Convention and the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. In 1998, Allen led the group to become triply aligned, establishing ties with the predominantly African-American Progressive National Baptist Convention.

Under Allen's leadership, the number of churches in the DCBC has increased by 21 percent.

Allen also took a leading role in the Southern Baptist Convention's 1995 resolution apologizing to blacks for racism in the denomination's past.

Allen is a graduate of Auburn University in Auburn, Ala. He holds degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va. After 16 years as a pastor, he joined the staff of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta, where he worked for 12 years.

He and his wife Faye, now a retired public-school teacher, have three children and five grandchildren.

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-- By ABP staff

Resignations impact Southern Seminary's school of church music and worship

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Two longtime leaders of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's school of church music and worship have announced their resignations.

Lloyd Mims, dean of the music school, has accepted a position effective July 1 as dean of the school of music and fine arts at Palm Beach Atlantic College, a Baptist school in West Palm Beach, Fla. John Dickson, the music school's associate dean for doctoral studies, will become director of choral activities Aug. 1 at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas.

Mims' wife, Marilyn, has taught since 1994 as the Louisville, Ky., music school's vocal artist in residence. She has accepted a similar position at Palm Beach Atlantic.

Tom Bolton, associate dean for professional studies, has been named interim dean of the music school. Music professor Ronald Turner will serve as associate dean for doctoral studies. Additionally, Chip Stam has been named associate professor of church music and worship. He currently is pastor of music and worship at Chapel Hill Bible Church in Chapel Hill, N.C.

The recent resignations come amid decreasing enrollment at Southern's school of church music and worship. Although seminary officials declined to cite specific enrollment figures, seminary president Albert Mohler attributed much of the decline to shrinking enrollments in undergraduate music programs that traditionally have fed into graduate-level programs.

"The whole context of musical education is in a time of transition," Mohler said. "Enrollment in undergraduate programs has been seriously declining. At this point, it seems unlikely any graduate program in music can expect to operate with the number of students seen back in the heyday of undergraduate programs producing music majors."

Also noting "shifts in the local church toward different styles of music and musicianship," Mohler said he is "not sure what the right size" of Southern's music school will be in the future.

"We are not primarily concerned at this point about being large or small, but the issue of quality and maintaining leadership," he added.

Mims, who has served on the seminary faculty since 1983, said, "Numbers wise, we're about where everyone else is across the country -- and that is down. There's a downward spiral in the number of people majoring in music."

Despite internal challenges faced by the music school, Mims said his decision to leave "has nothing to do with external issues at the seminary or political influences at all."

Citing the potential for rapid growth of the music program at Palm Beach Atlantic, Mims added, "This is a good point in my life to make a transition."

Although "in one sense, I'm sorry to be leaving the work I'm doing here," Mims said, "I feel the strongest sense it is God's urging for us to move on at this point."

Mohler said Mims "has given superb leadership to the school of church music and worship as dean and has been a wonderful faculty member since his first day."

Mims and his wife "will be missed," Mohler said. "They have added so much to the life and work of Southern Seminary."

Mohler said Dickson also "will be greatly missed," noting that he "is a consummate musician, a man of great gifts."

Dickson, who has served since 1985 as Southern's coordinator of conducting studies, also served the past 14 years as minister of music and worship at Highland Baptist Church in Louisville. He said the music

school's enrollment decline played a direct role in his decision to leave.

Although reluctant to discuss concerns about the music program when contacted by a reporter, Dickson wrote in a recent church newsletter article to Highland members that after 15 years at Southern, "we returned from England this past year to discover a music school severely depleted of singers and with little hope of a rewarding future for a choral conductor."

"As much as I have worked to resist the politics," he wrote, "the inevitable has finally arrived and we knew we had no choice but to leave."

"It's an issue of numbers," Dickson said in an interview. "That's the gist of the reason I began looking for another position. If there were enough challenges here, I would have stayed."

"At this point in this school there are not sufficient opportunities for me to reinvest myself here for the second half of my ministry career," he explained. "I've looked elsewhere and found a very rewarding opportunity that I believe God has called me to."

Dickson noted, however, that "Southern Seminary has had a tremendously large part in making me who I am. The influence I've had in shaping other called ministers in Christian ministry I owe to Southern Seminary and the opportunities I've had here."

Affirming that "the quality of students and the great strength of teaching here at Southern have not diminished," he voiced confidence that current and future music school faculty "will re-energize this school."

Mohler said he has "no doubt we will be able to find the quality of faculty to recruit the quality and quantity of students we will hope to come."

Earlier this year, seminary officials announced plans to restructure the music school to focus more on praise and worship leadership. The school will move from two divisions to three, including an institute of praise and worship.

"Clearly it is a time of transition," Mohler said. "We are determined that Southern Seminary's school of church music and worship will represent the very best in terms of maintaining a program of quality musical education and reaching out to the churches to develop new models of partnership."

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States failing to implement 'charitable choice,' study finds

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Many states are ignoring a "charitable choice" initiative in Congress' 1996 welfare reform that allows the government to contract with religious organizations to provide social services, according to a Christian public-policy center.

A study of nine states by the Center for Public Justice said despite the law, faith-based groups, including churches, in many cases still face "restrictive and secularizing rules" if they want to compete for tax dollars.

"It is a scandal that, nearly four years later, many states have still not put into place new protections required by the law for faith-based groups and their clients," said Stanley Carlson-Thies, the center's director of social-policy studies.

Texas and Wisconsin received the center's only two passing grades for making it easier for faith-based groups to receive public funding. Others -- California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New York and Virginia -- received either "insufficient" or "unsatisfactory" marks because of their failure to comply fully with the new guidelines.

While Texas was praised for its efforts to "maximize openness to religious groups," Virginia, Illinois and others were criticized for ignoring the new initiative and for faith leaders being unfamiliar with the concept.

In Massachusetts, the center complained, "the state says it follows the U.S. Constitution so it can ignore charitable choice."

And in New York, "complicated church/state politics" have blunted implementation of charitable choice, the group said. "Savvy religious groups can maneuver for funds, but the state hasn't re-engineered itself to be more welcoming."

The "charitable choice" measure is continually being added to spending bills in Congress. Supporters say it allows religious groups with a proven record in providing services equal footing with secular ones in competing for funds. Opponents, including several religious groups, however, charge the initiative both unconstitutionally funds sectarian groups and burdens recipients with regulations.

Another recent study by the public-justice center found a "modest but significant increase" in faith-based groups providing social services since 1996. "But states have far to go before faith-based groups will have the equal opportunity to compete that charitable choice requires," stated a press release from the group.

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