



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: **Bob Allen**
Executive editor: **Greg Warner**

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

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(00-54)

June 20, 2000

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Supreme Court blocks prayers at football games

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Opening high school football games with prayer violates the separation of church and state, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in an eagerly anticipated decision June 19.

While not banning all prayers at public schools, the court ruled 6-3 that a Texas school district's policy of allowing a student elected by a majority of classmates to deliver an invocation over the public-address system before home varsity football games is unconstitutional.

The policy of the Santa Fe Independent School District in Galveston County, Texas, amounts to state-sponsorship of prayer, which violates the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, the justices decided.

The First Amendment forbids the government from passing laws that either establish religion or prevent its free exercise. The school district argued that the student-led prayers were protected as private speech.

Writing for the majority, however, Associate Justice John Paul Stevens said electing a student under a policy set up by the school district to encourage prayer "is not properly characterized as private speech."

Joined in the opinion by Associate Justices David Souter, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Steven Breyer and Sandra Day O'Connor, Stevens said the policy violates the rights of students who do not wish to pray.

The Constitution does not ban all religious activities in public schools, however, Stevens said.

"Nothing in the Constitution as interpreted by this court prohibits any public school student from voluntarily praying at any time before, during, or after the school day. But the religious liberty protected by the Constitution is abridged when the state affirmatively sponsors the particular practice of prayer," he said.

The Santa Fe school board adopted the prayer policy in 1995. It allows students selected by their colleagues to deliver invocations and benedictions at graduation ceremonies and a "brief invocation and/or message" during pregame ceremonies at home varsity football games.

An anonymous group of Mormon and Catholic students and their mothers challenged the policy in court.

Previous court rulings have said that while an outside clergyman cannot deliver graduation prayers, the Constitution permits student-led prayers as long as they are "nonsectarian" and "nonproselytizing."

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the part of the Santa Fe policy governing graduation prayers but said it cannot be extended to football games.

In a 2-1 decision, the appeals court said football games differ from graduation ceremonies in that they are "hardly the sober type of annual event that can be appropriately solemnized with prayer."

The Supreme Court ruling addressed only the issue of prayers at athletic events, but criticism of the procedure for selecting students to lead public prayers could spill over into other cases where policies allowing graduation prayers are in question.

The majority election of a student to pray "does nothing to protect the minority," Stevens said.

And while the school district tried to craft a policy that passed constitutional muster, he said its intent was clearly to continue its tradition of opening football games with prayer.

"We refuse to turn a blind eye to the context in which this policy arose, and that context quells any doubt that this policy was implemented with the purpose of endorsing school prayer," Stevens wrote.

Chief Justice William Rehnquist filed a dissenting opinion, joined by Associate Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas.

Rehnquist said the tone of the majority opinion "bristles with hostility to all things religious in public life."

"Although the Court apparently believes that solemnizing football games is an illegitimate purpose, the voters in the school district seem to disagree," Rehnquist also opined. "Nothing in the Establishment Clause prevents them from making this choice."

Religious and civil liberties groups on both sides of the case reacted quickly to the first ruling on school-prayer in nearly a decade.

Melissa Rogers, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said the decision "reaffirmed that prayer is none of the government's business."

The BJC, along with Baylor University's J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies and the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, filed a friend-of-the-court brief against the Texas prayer policy.

Rogers said students may still pray at football games by gathering voluntarily in huddles or by praying during a neutral moment of silence. "The thing students can't do is insist that government facilitate and endorse prayers."

Rogers said religious liberties "aren't up for a vote." She said a majority in a small Texas town would not likely elect a Muslim to pray at the games. "But the First Amendment doesn't say 'freedom for me, but not for thee.' It protects the Muslim as much as the Methodist," she said.

Derek Davis, director of the J. M. Dawson Institute, said the ruling "champions historic Baptist principles of religious liberty."

The Santa Fe community is "a very Baptist community, but historically Baptists have been a minority and have understood the problems of being a minority," said Davis, who wrote the BJC brief. "It was disappointing to me that a Baptist majority in Santa Fe had forgotten those principles."

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said he was disappointed but not surprised by the court's ruling. While Land said he disagreed with the court, the agency did not file a brief on either side of the dispute because of concerns "about the less-than-ideal provision to ensure the opportunity for a more diverse student expression."

Land told Associated Baptist Press the district went out of its way to meet constitutional guidelines, but the "only chink" was that "they did not provide adequately for minority expression." However, Land said he does not believe the Santa Fe policy should have been overturned.

He said the decision allows "the minority to continue to suppress and silence majority expressions."

Jay Sekulow, chief counsel of Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, also criticized the ruling.

Sekulow, who presented oral arguments in favor of the Texas school district's policy, said the opinion "blurs the distinction between government speech and private speech."

"It is the free speech of the students that has been censored," Sekulow said.

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Texas pastor growing church in 'environment' of evangelism

By Toby Druin

GRAPEVINE, Texas (ABP) -- "Evangelism is environmental" at Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas, says Ed Young Jr., pastor of one of America's fastest-growing churches.

Young, son of former Southern Baptist Convention president and Second Baptist Church in Houston pastor Ed Young, describes his congregation's outreach effort like this:

"It is challenging our membership core to build relationships with people outside and invite them into church, and there, as they sit under teaching and get involved in small groups, they become Christians."

That environment of evangelism is bearing fruit. In the 1998-99 church year, the church led the Baptist General Convention of Texas in baptisms and was third in the Southern Baptist Convention with 1,156. More than 858 of those baptized were adults.

The church doesn't hold annual "revival" meetings that traditional churches often use to emphasize outreach and rededication. "Every weekend is a revival" said Young, who has been pastor of the church 10 years.

Also generally absent at the non-traditional church is the "altar call," where worshippers are invited to come forward to receive Christ or make some other kind of spiritual commitment. Instead, people interested in making a profession of faith or joining the church indicate their decision on a guest-registry card that is a part of the worship folder.

"We usually don't ask people to walk the aisle," Young explained. "Up to 80 percent of the time, I will pray a prayer for someone to become a Christian and just ask them to check off their decision" on the registry card.

"I grew up in churches where we had an invitation, and we did it here for the first four years," he added, "but the moment we moved from an invitation to a newcomers class, baptisms and conversions went up. In our newcomers classes, we share the gospel, explain the ordinances and tell them what church membership means."

Anyone seeking membership in the church must go through a newcomers class and be baptized by immersion. At the conclusion of each class -- the first 30 or 40 minutes of which is a presentation of the gospel -- they are given the option to join the church. If they want to join, they are questioned about the decision to make sure they understand what it means to become a Christian.

The system is working. The church averages more than 10,200 in attendance at weekend services held Saturday night and twice on Sunday mornings. During spring break, when many churches were explaining low attendance, more than 11,000 crowded into Fellowship's 4,000-seat auditorium to hear a sermon series by Young on "The Ulti-Mate: Finding the Love of Your Life."

He preached the series from the back seat of a Mercedes 500 SL convertible, parked on the stage. The topics included "Who's Behind the Driver's Seat?" on spouse selection, "Who's Driving the Car?" and "Don't Go Off-Road" about extra-marital affairs.

The clever titles and vivid illustration are examples of what Young describes as Fellowship's "commitment to excellence, to creativity."

On Mother's Day, instead of preaching a sermon, Young interviewed his mother, Jo Beth Young, about the Christian home and parental responsibility as they sat on the platform in two overstuffed chairs. For an evangelistic emphasis, he took a camera crew to Las Vegas and interviewed people on the Strip and in casinos about how to get to heaven. The interviews were edited into a video presentation and used before evangelistic services at Fellowship Church.

Baptisms at the church and more than 200 baby and child dedications on Mother's Day weekend are streamed onto the Internet where friends and relatives unable to attend can watch. The church's Web address is fconline.org.

A huge atrium/foyer outside the worship center offers visitors and members a gathering place before services, complete with an information booth, juice bar, fruit bar, Starbuck's coffee, Krispy Kreme donuts and a bookstore.

The creativity and fresh approach contribute to the church's appeal and keep visitors coming, Young said, "but we are never going to get into simply trying to top last week. We will be messing up when we do that. We try to let the Bible dictate what we do. We run an idea by several people, but we depend on God for the idea."

The church is patterned largely on the model of Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, but creativity is Young's watchword in everything he does.

Sermon ideas -- he prefers to call them "talks" -- are "my call," Young said. But they are submitted to both "creative" and "management" teams of staff members and volunteers for their critique and suggestions.

His staff -- or management team -- is largely made up of people who have been called to their positions while members of the church. Preston Mitchell, who heads spiritual development and has been on staff for five years, previously worked in public relations for Texas Utilities. Barry Ford, who heads the athletics program, worked in it for two years while employed by Southwest Airlines.

The teams meet after the Saturday night service to criticize what was done and to tweak it for the two Sunday morning services to follow.

"We try to create a climate of critique," Young said. "If people are going to give us two hours of their time, we better deliver. And besides, I am motivated by a healthy fear -- a fear of standing up there unprepared or flying by the seat of my pants and failing someone out there who doesn't know Christ."

Young's major role, he said, is to "keep evangelism on top-shelf priority." He constantly reminds his teams and the church that 98 percent of the people in the church are there because someone invited them.

"I will do two or three messages a year challenging them to invite their friends," he said. One message was preached from a boat on the platform with Young encouraging the church to "throw out lifelines" to people. Each person in church that day was given a Lifesaver mint and told not to eat it until they had invited a non-Christian person to church and seen them trust Christ.

"I try in my own life to know people who don't know Christ," Young said. "I want to hit both sides of the Great Commission."

The idea is to constantly fill the church with people who recently have been won to Christ, he said. "You can't be a great disciple-making church if you are not filling the church with freshly redeemed people."

The creativity extends to the music program, which is contemporary but varies from week to week. On Mother's Day weekend, it had an all-male "Back Street Boys" motif, but on other Sundays, it might be a lone cellist, all women or a duet.

"The higher the unpredictability," Young said, "the more you communicate."

Young, who is 39, said Fellowship is not trying to reach any particular niche of people, although the majority are in the 20-40 age range. Overall, the church reaches a broad cross-section of people. Many drive from all over the Metroplex to attend the church, which is located across Highway 121 from Grapevine Mills Mall, just north of Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

"We're not a big church; we're a small town," the pastor said. "And we want to be a church that grows smaller and smaller while getting larger and larger."

The smaller and smaller reference is to the small groups that members are channeled into -- Connections classes (Sunday school) and Hometeams, groups of 10 to 20 that meet twice monthly on Sunday evenings for a meal and Bible study, prayer and support.

Many other programs also are offered. Hundreds attend Bible and book studies on parenting, divorce recovery or other subjects on Tuesdays each week. The church does not have a regular Wednesday evening program, but instead has a "First Wednesday" service each month which includes an intense period of worship, prayer and testimonies with baptism and the Lord's Supper and no preaching.

Children in the church attend Connections classes in a wing of the building that illustrate the seven days of creation, and they have their own worship service.

An athletic ministry involves 2,000 to 3,000 people and has been vital in enlisting unchurched people.

Not having "Baptist" in its name has been an asset rather than a liability, Young said, although the newcomers classes are told up front that the church is Southern Baptist.

"It is one of the best decisions we have ever made," said Young of keeping Baptist out of the church name. "We are not shy about being Baptist; we just didn't want a label to be a detriment to people coming here for the first time."

"We wanted a church with no barriers," explained Mitchell, who has attended the church since it was begun in 1990. "Sadly, denominational affiliation is a barrier to some. I don't think it is, but we just felt that (not having Baptist in the name) sent a message that we are welcoming anyone and we are more than a Baptist church."

"We lost some people who wanted to be connected to a traditional Southern Baptist church," he added, "but hundreds more came."

The church gives a relatively small amount of its budget to missions, Young said, because it is involved in many direct missions projects, including inner-city work in San Antonio and Piedras Negras, Mexico.

"I have a world missions heart," he said, "but at this stage so many thousands are coming here there is barely enough just to reach them. I don't want to fly over one mission field to get to another."

'Innovative' church leaders study various worship styles

By Dan Martin

GLORIETA, N.M. (ABP) -- Four distinctive worship styles aimed at reaching unchurched people were demonstrated and discussed during the National Innovative Church Leadership Conference at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center.

The 350 participants from 27 states and Canada experienced worship styles presented by four diverse congregations that aim their ministries at specific segments of the population:

-- The Next Level Church in Denver aims at reaching unchurched GenXers.

-- University Baptist Church of Coral Gables, Fla., uses a multisensory, multicultural style to reach the transitional community of modern Miami.

-- Lake Pointe Baptist Church of Rockwell, Texas, uses a blended worship style to reach the boomers and busters in the rapidly growing suburb of Dallas.

-- Willow Creek Community Church of Barrington, Ill. -- one of the original innovative churches -- showcased its recent efforts to reach junior high and high school age young people known as GenY.

Participants stood, clapped, sang, swayed and even danced a little as they experienced the worship styles that are attracting new and often unchurched generations.

"We asked each church to bring a worship team and to present a worship service which exemplifies their primary worship style," said Bob Cavin, director of the Texas Baptist Leadership Center, one of four co-sponsors of the event.

Those attending also were given the opportunity to take part in three breakout sessions discussing all aspects of the philosophy, vision, strategies and organizational design of the congregations.

"Our aim was that the senior pastor and staff members of each of the four churches very honestly discuss their roles with participants," Cavin said. "We asked them to discuss form (mission, vision, values and philosophy) function (structures, strategies and organizational principles and design) and family (assimilation, strategies, team building and lay leadership development)" he added.

Both University and Lake Pointe average around 5,000 in regular worship attendance. The Next Level Church in Denver and the youth ministry at Willow Creek average around 2,000.

All the churches use a team approach for leadership, and each employs some modification of small group structure, whether it is called Bible study or something else.

Planners were pleased with the turnout and outcome of the conference, but are going to move it to locations around the nation to offer it to people who cannot easily get to northern New Mexico.

Next year's conference will be May 29-31 in Franklin, Tenn., just south of Nashville. Subsequent meetings will be in the West and in the Dallas/Fort Worth area.

The conference was co-sponsored by the Texas Baptist Leadership Center, LifeWay Christian Resources, the Georgia Baptist Convention and Glorieta Conference Center.

Gen-X pastor, nearing 30, talks of being 'over the hill'

By Dan Martin

GLORIETA, N.M. (ABP) -- John Miller wears a short ponytail, plays the keyboard and exuberantly directs the praise team of The Next Level Church in Denver.

Miller, who studied classical music at the University of Colorado, told participants at a breakout session at the National Innovative Church Leadership Conference that he feels he soon will be over the hill as a worship leader for the Gen-X-style church.

"I am looking now for someone 18 to 20 to take my place," he said.

Miller was one of the founding pastors of the church, which attracts about 2,000 young adults every Tuesday evening. He was just 20 when the congregation started as an outreach of Applewood Baptist Church in a Denver suburb under the leadership of Senior Pastor Trevor Bron.

Bron told participants at the conference he believes it takes young leadership to reach those in their 20s. "It says something when they come and see young guys leading the service," he explained. "They can relate to that."

Thus, Miller thinks he is getting outdated because he is not far from 30 and is thinking about marriage and children.

What happens when he is "over the hill?" he was asked.

Using a Native American analogy, he said the young men are the warriors and the older men are the elders. He anticipates when he moves off the stage as the worship leader he will become an elder. "The elders, when they stopped going out as warriors, became the mentors," he said.

The vision of The Next Level Church is to "restore our generation and generations to come to be worshippers of God," Miller said. "We believe that, as humans, we are naturally worshippers. The question is, 'Who or what do we worship?'"

"Worship is the single most important thing in life. Humankind was born out of God's desire for worship. Worship is the doorway to God's love and provision. When we become worshipful people, the floodgates open and God enters into our lives."

The young music leader described worship as "singing praises to (God), giving sacrificially of our resources, reading his word and communicating our love to God and his people."

"Being a worshipful person is an attitude of the heart, a natural appreciation for God in everything. When we have this attitude, God's presence ceases to be an experiential feeling and becomes a reservoir out of which life and love flow."

Miller and Bron are two of the four ministry leaders of the congregation, which has moved several times in its short history to accommodate growing numbers of worshippers. The church soon will move into a large building in Denver, which it hopes will serve for some time.

The other two ministry leaders are Chad Leavitt, community pastor, responsible for small groups, mentoring, equipping leaders and other aspects of discipleship, and Jared Mackey, ministry pastor, overseeing the local ministry operations of the growing congregation.

Bron said all four areas -- teaching, worship, community and ministry -- "are our core values and are so interconnected that none of them stands on its own. If one of them is raised above the others, the church does not do what it was intended to do."

The name of the church, he added, comes from the fact that "everybody is at a different level spiritually" ranging from the new believer to the longtime follower. "No matter where people are, it is our desire to help and encourage them to go to the next level spiritually in their relationship with God and his son, Jesus.

"The Next Level Church seeks to be a community of diverse people with common commitment and central focus," he said, quoting one of the congregation's core values.

"We desire to do all things with excellence so as to honor God and inspire people. We pray God may use our generation to change the world maybe one last time."

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Congregations must customize models for growth, expert says

By Dan Martin

GLORIETA, N.M. (ABP) -- "Church growth is not so much a magic formula as it is a series of sensitive and creative responses to a changing environment," according to Steve Stroope.

Stroope, who led Lake Pointe Baptist Church in Rockwall, Texas, from 53 members in 1980 to more than 5,000 in 2000, was one of the key speakers at the National Innovative Church Leadership Conference at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center.

"Three things make up environment," he said. "The first is our understanding of the mind of God. God does not change, but our understanding does. The second is the community in which we minister. And the third is the church itself."

Stroope emphasized that every congregation has to find its own strategy and purpose and cannot merely transfer a program that works somewhere else and expect it to be effective.

He quoted futurist and theologian Leonard Sweet who said that congregations which try to "do Willow Creek find themselves up a Willow Creek without a Hybels."

Willow Creek is an often-studied and imitated innovative congregation in suburban Chicago headed by the visionary pastor Bill Hybels.

Reaching people requires a "clear, concise biblical purpose," a reliance on the sovereignty of God and intentional prayer, Stroope said.

He and Lake Pointe's minister of education, Carter Shotwell, said the purpose statement of the church has "not changed much" in the 20 years since it was founded.

Shotwell quoted the purpose statement: "Share the love of God with unchurched people in the Lake Ray Hubbard community and the world in such a way that they have the best opportunity to become fully developing followers of Jesus Christ."

The purpose of the church is to reach unchurched people and then to develop them into fully developing followers of Christ, he explained.

The church emphasizes four parts of the process of creating "fully developing followers," Shotwell said.

"The first is to worship God. The second is to live by God's word. The third is to contribute to God's work. And the fourth is to have an impact on God's world. No one is there yet, and we must continue to develop in all four areas."

When a person becomes a member of Lake Point, he or she makes five basic commitments, Stroope said.

The first is to become involved in adult Bible fellowship. "A person can't join the church without making a commitment to go to adult Bible fellowship."

The second is that the new member agrees to serve somewhere in the church. "There is no committee on committees, where somebody can get stuck in a job. We let people experiment in finding their spiritual gift."

The third is to give in a biblical way. "We expect our people to give systematically, proportionately and sacrificially."

The fourth is that "as long as they are a member, they will keep a list of three people they are actively witnessing to," he said.

The fifth requirement is that at least once a year every member must work in the nursery. "He or she can choose the age group and whether it is in Sunday school or worship, but they are expected to participate at least annually."

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Churches must 'exegete' communities, pastor says

By Dan Martin

GLORIETA, N.M. (ABP) -- If Christians plan to build bridges to their communities, they must know where the bridge is going to land, Bill White said.

"We need to exegete our communities," White told participants in the National Innovative Church Leadership Conference at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center. "We need to correctly interpret our audience. If we are going to build a bridge, we need to know what is at the other end."

White has served six-and-a-half years as pastor of University Baptist Church in the Miami suburb of Coral Gables.

If churches are going to effectively reach people, leaders need to know about their communities, "what they look like, what their backgrounds are, what their religious preferences are."

"Who is my neighbor?" is a necessary question, he said.

Miami has 3.5 million people and is a multinational, multicultural, multilingual world-class city, with residents from 156 countries of origin, he said.

"Fifty-seven percent are Hispanic, 20 percent are black, 23 percent are Anglo. There are more Jews in Miami -- 145,000 -- than live in Tel Aviv," he said.

When the Southern Baptist Convention released statements about targeting Jews for evangelism, "it made our job harder," White said. "That did not build bridges.

"If you are interested in catching fish, you don't throw a grenade into the lake before you put your line in," he added.

Only 16 percent of the residents of Miami are white Anglo-Saxons, White said, and only 10 percent are Protestant. "On any given weekend, 90 percent of the population of Miami doesn't attend (church) anywhere."

Because of the nature of Miami, University Baptist Church -- which was established in 1927 -- is a church in transition, he explained. In the congregation are people from 50 countries of origin who speak 19 native tongues.

"There is just about every religious background imaginable, from Hindu, Buddhist, Islam--all of the major world religions -- to every New Age thing you can think of, Santeria with its animal sacrifices, to secularism and naturalism," he added.

The congregation has studied the people and cultures around it and has structured its outreach and worship service to appeal to people of every nation and language and culture.

In the model worship service presented by University Baptist Church at the conference, there was a blend of worship styles: salsa, liturgical dance, praise music, jazz, Caribbean-accented music and others.

In his message, White likened the community of faith to a quilt and passed out snippets of cloth, which he invited worshippers to touch and see. The church, he explained, is like a quilt.

"The Bible tells us we are God's workmanship, knitted together, sewn together. It is God who does the sewing in love. We are no longer spiritual scraps blowing in the breeze, but we are parts of a whole ... God's community ... a community of belonging."

The vision of University Baptist Church is "to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ together in transformational community, changing lives, changing families and changing our world," White said.

"All we do must be bathed in prayer, based in Scripture and empowered by the Holy Spirit," he said as he listed the five priorities of the congregation:

- Guiding to Christ, which includes building relationships with seekers, sharing a verbal witness and helping them commit to Christ and his church.

- Gathering to worship, which is coming together with people of faith to experience who God is and what God does.

- Growing in community, including participating in a small group for discipleship, mutual support, Bible study and prayer.

- Giving in ministry, which means generously sharing spiritual gifts and financial resources.

- Going on mission, extending the love of Christ through acts of compassion and the sharing of the gospel in Miami and beyond.

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