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**Gore selects first Jewish
vice presidential candidate**

By Kenny Byrd

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Presidential candidate Al Gore's historic selection of a Jewish running mate has stirred discussions of religious faith and the presidency the most since John F. Kennedy's election as the first Catholic president 40 years ago.

Gore announced Aug. 8 that Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., would join his ticket. He becomes the first Jewish vice-presidential candidate of a major political party in American history.

As an Orthodox Jew, Lieberman keeps a kosher home, observes the Sabbath from Friday nights to Saturday nights and will not campaign on the Sabbath. He says, however, that his faith would not prevent him from fulfilling the duties of office. For example, Lieberman walked from his house to Congress one Sabbath to cast a vote in support of the Gulf War.

Making the announcement in Nashville, Tenn., Gore, a Southern Baptist, said: "Joe and I come from different regions and different religious faiths, but we believe in a common set of ideals." Lieberman said that when Gore called him on the phone and asked him to be his running mate, the two men said a prayer together.

Gore compared Lieberman's selection to Kennedy's nomination in 1960, the last time the Democratic Party held its convention in Los Angeles. "That year we voted with our hearts to make history by tearing down an old wall of division," Gore said, adding that "we will make history again" at this year's convention, also being held in Los Angeles.

In comments to the crowd, Lieberman referred to passages from the Old Testament Book of Chronicles. He said he desired: "To give thanks to God and declare his name and make his acts known to the people. To be glad of spirit. To sing to God and make music to God and most of all to give glory and gratitude to God from whom all blessings truly do flow. Dear Lord, maker of all miracles, I thank you for bringing me to this extraordinary moment in my life."

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, called Lieberman's selection "a confirmation of our founders' wise decision to outlaw any religious test for public office."

"One's religion is no more a disqualification for office than one's eye shade or hair color," said Walker, a Baptist minister.

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said Gore's choice of Lieberman "is both bold and unorthodox." Land said Lieberman considers his faith to be very important and that the ERLC has worked with him on issues concerning religious persecution abroad and curbing violence and pornography in the entertainment industry.

Gore is "tacitly endorsing the permissibility of people bringing their faith perspectives to bear on public policy," Land added. "If it is acceptable for Senator Lieberman to bring his Judaism to bear on public service, then it's kosher for evangelicals and Roman Catholics to do so as well. And that is as it should be."

But Land did criticize Lieberman's pro-choice position on abortion, an issue the Southern Baptist leader called the "pre-eminent issue for most evangelicals."

Lieberman's religious statements in Nashville drew the attention of Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "We celebrate the fact that a Jewish American has been added to a national presidential ticket," Lynn said. But he added, "While Americans are a religious people, many of them get nervous, and properly so, when candidates appear to place too much emphasis on their personal faith in the context of a political campaign."

Lynn said Lieberman's religious views could become problematic if he discusses them too much in the campaign or makes a habit of opening public appearances with prayer.

Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, said the selection "is a healthy sign of how our nation is embracing pluralism."

At least one report of anti-Semitic comments was reported a day following the selection announcement.

A Dallas official from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was quickly suspended from his duties after criticizing the Lieberman selection. Lee Alcorn said on a radio show, "I think we need to be very suspicious of any kind of partnership between the Jews at that kind of level, because we know their interest primarily has to do with money and these kind of things."

NAACP President Kweisi Mfume suspended Alcorn before Alcorn resigned from his post as president of the Dallas NAACP.

Former presidential candidate and civil rights leader Jesse Jackson praised Mfume's quick action against anti-Semitic remarks and urged people not assume the view of one African-American is representative of the black community as a whole.

"You must not assume a tree-leaf is a tree," said Jackson. "You must not look at black-Jewish relations through a keyhole but look at us through a door." Jackson said blacks and Jews have been allies since slavery, working together as abolitionists, in the women's suffrage movement and in others.

"We live under a Constitution, not a religious writ," Jackson said, "The idea of a Southern Baptist and a Jew on a ticket together ... that's good news for all of America."

Lieberman belongs to the Orthodox branch of American Judaism. Orthodox Jews are generally more strict in their observance than the Conservative and Reform Jewish denominations. About half of America's Jews are reportedly non-observant, or secular.

According to news reports, Lieberman walked more than two miles from his home to the Capitol during last year's impeachment trial, because his faith does not permit him to drive on the Sabbath.

Lieberman became well known during impeachment proceedings as the first Democratic lawmaker to publicly criticize actions of President Bill Clinton. He called Clinton's behavior immoral and inappropriate, but he later voted to acquit the president of any impeachable conduct.

Lieberman addressed the question of working on the Sabbath in an interview with CNN's Larry King. "(In) my record and my personal reading of my religion, but also my sense of obligation, (there's) not a moment's hesitation to be there, not just in a national emergency, but whenever I am needed to serve the

interest of the people of the United States." He pointed to daily national security briefings, saying, "Of course I would receive those on the Sabbath."

Lieberman supports the death penalty and the Middle East peace process. On abortion, Lieberman is for a woman's right to choose and said Jewish law generally says "what begins at conception is potential life."

"Depending on which rabbi you talk to, some say the fetus at viability, when it can at least theoretically sustain life on its own, outside the body of the mother, that's when life begins. Many other rabbis say that it begins at birth. So it's a matter of personal judgment," Lieberman said.

Hadassah Lieberman, the candidate's second wife, was born in Czechoslovakia after World War II. Her parents, both survivors of Nazi concentration camps, named her in Hebrew for Esther -- a Bible heroine for whom an Old Testament book is named.

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Commission lists countries with religious persecution

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A government panel that monitors religious persecution abroad has cited four new countries that could be considered for U.S. sanctions for violating religious rights of their citizens.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has recommended that Laos, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Turkmenistan be listed as "countries of particular concern" under a 1998 law designed to curb religious persecution around the world.

In a letter to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the 10-member commission further concluded that Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Serbia, Sudan, and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan should be kept on the list, which the State Department will release in September.

Further, the independent commission formed under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act recommended that the State Department closely monitor religious freedom in India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. It also noted deep concerns about religious violence in Indonesia and Nigeria.

The commission once again criticized the denial of access to embassy cable traffic, which panelists say could help them confirm reports of religious freedom abuses and their causes.

In the letter, panelists said that:

-- In Laos, during the last 12 months, increasing numbers of Protestants, Baha'is and Catholics have been subjected to detention, arrest and harassment, and more than 50 persons have been reportedly imprisoned for the peaceful practice of their faith.

-- In North Korea, religious freedom is apparently non-existent. The government has imprisoned religious believers and suppresses all organized religious activities except that which serves the interests of the state.

-- In Saudi Arabia, the government brazenly denies religious freedom and vigorously enforces its prohibition against all forms of public religious expression other than that of Wahabi Muslims. Numerous Christians and Shi'a Muslims continue to be detained, imprisoned and deported.

-- In Turkmenistan, where the ruling regime is reminiscent of Stalin's, only the official Soviet-era Sunni Muslim Board and the Russian Orthodox Church are recognized by the state as legal religious communities. Members of unregistered communities -- including Baha'is, Christians, Hare Krishnas, and Muslims operating independently of the Sunni Muslim Board -- have been reportedly detained, imprisoned, deported, harassed, fined, and have had their services disrupted, congregations dispersed, religious literature

confiscated, and places of worship destroyed.

The letter to Albright was signed by Commission Chair Elliott Abrams, a former assistant secretary of state during the Reagan administration.

Commissioners John Bolton of the American Enterprise Institute and Laila Al-Marayati of the Muslim Women's League voted "no" on the vote to include Saudi Arabia.

Commissioners Michael Young, dean of the George Washington University Law School, joined Nina Shea, director of Freedom House's Center For Religious Freedom, in dissenting from the majority's decision not to recommend India as a country of particular concern.

The State Department must unveil its list of "countries of particular concern" in September and then the president has a few months to either impose penalties on those nations or explain why he does not. He has broad authority to refuse implementation of penalties at all.

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Texas megachurch dually aligns, threatens to pull out of state group

PLANO, Texas (ABP) -- A suburban Dallas megachurch has threatened to leave the Baptist General Convention of Texas unless the state group declares full support for the Southern Baptist Convention.

Members of Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, voted July 23 to dually align with the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, a conservative group that supports SBC leadership but is at odds with moderate leaders of the 2.7 million-member BGCT.

A study committee identified eight "grave concerns" about the state convention, including a move last year to reject a family amendment to the SBC's "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement. Unless the state convention reverses that stand and affirms long-term support for all SBC ministries, the resolution said the church would likely drop its affiliation with the BGCT outright.

With more than 14,000 members, Prestonwood is among the largest SBC churches but is not currently a strong financial supporter of the BGCT. The state convention stands to lose about \$6,000 a year should the church sever ties, according to the Baptist Standard. In addition, seven Prestonwood members serve as trustees of BGCT agencies. Should the church break ties with the state group, its members would become ineligible to continue as trustees.

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-- By ABP staff

East St. Louis center transforms young lives

By Michael Leathers

EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill. (ABP) -- A young boy walks through the Christian Activity Center in East St. Louis, Ill., making the rounds with an adult securing the building for the night. Less than an hour earlier, the

unobtrusive brick building in the heart of the inner city had been bustling with children and teenagers. Only a few linger now as the boy asks his older companion a few curious questions about God.

For Chet Cantrell, the center's director since 1989, that's where real ministry begins. The after-hours talks. The conversations in the van before the field trips hit the road. Although a myriad of physical and spiritual activities captures the attention of these young people, it is these one-on-one, spontaneous opportunities to disciple that represent the center's heart.

"The easiest thing for us to do is to win kids to Christ," Cantrell said, "but what we're called to do is to make disciples." And to do that, adult leaders have to get involved in the day-to-day lives of the 160 young people, from 6 to 18 years old, who show up at the center every weekday during the summer. When the school year gets up and running in a few weeks, that average attendance will jump to 240. "There's no sense in fulfilling the Great Commission if you're not willing to get to know people."

Maintaining a comfortable environment for the children is particularly important as staff members carry out the center's "calling card" -- an extensive recreation program. Children need an hour to 90 minutes of daily physical activity, Cantrell said, to help them succeed in school. The center meets that need with basketball and other team sports. A new gym was built in the 1990s with help from a \$100,000 grant from United Parcel Service. A fenced-in play area is in the back. There's even an indoor trampoline in a room next to the kitchen. The team sports also help the center teach important values, including sharing, cooperation and interacting with authority.

Workers and volunteers take children on field trips, ranging from the St. Louis Zoo to a nearby water park, and to weeklong summer camps. They took more than 120 children, from 6 to 11 years old, to a camp in Ironton, Mo., for five days and their preteen and teenagers to a camp in Branson, Mo., for inner-city youth. The activities are eye-openers for children and teens who rarely have a chance to leave a city known for its high crime. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, East St. Louis had the highest homicide rate in the nation.

That's why keeping young people off the streets, where they could be involved in crime or become the victims of crime, is central to the center's mission. "We're the place to go. There's nothing else for the kids," Cantrell said. "We live in a broken neighborhood, and these kids have a passion for wholeness." The center responds with firm rules and regulations so children know the boundaries and can feel secure. That also means adult leaders treat each other with respect. "What really matters to kids is how the adults in their lives react to each other. Kids like for us to love them, but they really like to see us love each other."

Complementing its recreation programs, the center offers educational initiatives, including after-school tutoring and homework assistance during the school year. Student teachers from nearby Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville provide the instruction. The center has a part-time worker, who teaches computer classes in the second-floor computer lab, and offers reading classes. Seven high schoolers comprise a youth leadership team absorbing all they can learn about computers so they can teach elementary kids this fall. A grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development will provide salaries for the teen teachers.

Life-enhancement programs inform kids about a variety of topics from bicycle safety to hygiene. A nurse on staff offers health education. Last summer, children received vision testing. About 40 had severe eye problems, with 25 fitted for glasses so far.

All these recreational and educational activities create an environment for discipleship to flourish, Cantrell said. Children know that the adults -- at least nine full- and part-time workers as well as a host of volunteers -- will spend time with them, answering their questions and praying for their concerns.

"Our purpose is to establish relationships with kids that will make discipleship happen," Cantrell said. The center offers separate weekly Bible studies for girls and boys. Girl Talk is on Thursdays; Men of Honor meets on Wednesdays. A Friday-night worship service is popular with younger children while many of the older youngsters attend a devotion time scheduled shortly before closing each night.

The center has been meeting spiritual needs in East St. Louis since its heyday in the early 1950s, when the ministry was known as the Baptist Goodwill Center. Its ministry then focused on day care, social services and some children's work. The Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board owns the center, and the Metro East Baptist Association manages the staff. Cantrell is a NAMB-appointed missionary, whose salary and benefits are provided by NAMB and the Illinois Baptist State Association.

The son of missionary parents, Cantrell grew up on an Indian reservation, where he saw poverty, unemployment and alcohol abuse. Those social ills stirred up strong anger in his younger years, wondering how God could allow such suffering and how Christians could do so little to alleviate it. God took his anger and replaced it with a compassionate heart for urban ministries, he said.

While many Christians still have fears about coming to the inner city, Cantrell has seen others ignore those worries and volunteer their time to help the center's ministry. "There would not be a work here if not for the cooperative efforts of Baptists," Cantrell said. "We can do so many things together that otherwise could not be done."

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