



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

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**ABC News religion reporter
calls for integrity in journalism**

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- Accepting a religious-liberty award for pioneering coverage of religion on television, ABC News correspondent Peggy Wehmeyer said she would rather be remembered for integrity in her reporting.

"The longer I'm a journalist, the more I'm convinced the qualities a journalist must have are character and integrity. I don't remember hearing much about that in journalism school," Wehmeyer said in accepting Associated Baptist Press' Religious Freedom Award Sept. 21 in Dallas.

"The question I have to ask every day is will I take the high moral ground and what will it cost," she said.

Wehmeyer, who in 1994 became the first national religion correspondent for a TV network, said her goal is to let viewers understand the "heart" of those who hold differing religious views.

"I would rather take you into the hearts of people, so even if you disagree with them you can understand their hearts," she said. One of her ideals, she said, "is to take people and the ideas they care about seriously."

Wehmeyer, who began her reporting career 20 years ago at a local TV station in Dallas, recalled that she "really cut my religion-reporting teeth" on covering Southern Baptists.

"All my big stories" during her early years at ABC-affiliate WFAA-TV, she said, centered on controversy between conservatives and moderates in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s. She said it saddened her to realize the battle is still going on.

Saying she personally liked people on both sides of the controversy, she once idealistically believed if she could get them all in one room, they could work out their differences. Amid the awful things reported on the news each day, she said she found it ironic that "these people couldn't get along."

Wehmeyer said she knows the SBC struggles were "very painful" for many Southern Baptists. "They were for me, too," she said. "I loved the Southern Baptists."

Still, she said she found one aspect of Southern Baptists' independent spirit refreshing. "I liked it that you don't cause controversy behind each other's back," she said. "You do it right out in the open."

Wehmeyer is the seventh recipient of ABP's religious-freedom award, instituted in 1994 to honor individuals whose achievements advance the principles and practice of religious freedom, particularly in the field of journalism.

In a videotaped message, ABC News anchor Peter Jennings, said, "As much as anybody, Peggy has helped us understand how faith, morality and religion intersect with American life."

A plaque honoring Wehmeyer said she has "elevated the public discourse in society" about religion.

The awards banquet marked a 10th anniversary for the independent national news service based in Jacksonville, Fla. It accompanied the regular semi-annual meeting of ABP's board of directors, who met at the Harvey Hotel near the Dallas-Fort Worth airport. That was the scene of a meeting of Baptist editors in July 1990 where the idea for establishing ABP was first discussed.

Weeks later, after the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee voted to fire two top editors of the SBC news service, Baptist Press, the formation of ABP, a self-supporting cooperative of denominational newspapers, was officially announced.

Today, the news service lists media subscribers including Baptist state papers and religion writers at secular media outlets across the nation. It also maintains a Web site, www.abpnews.com, and two years ago branched into publishing with the launch of FaithWorks, a Christian lifestyle magazine targeted to young adults.

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Paul Pressler returns to Lynchburg on anniversary of 'jugular' comment

By Robert Dilday

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- Paul Pressler returned to Lynchburg, Va., Sept. 12, 20 years to the day after making his "going for the jugular" comment that for many captured the essence of the theological controversy that raged for two decades across the Southern Baptist Convention.

The retired Houston judge, who was a key leader in the effort to establish the current conservative stance of the nation's largest Protestant denomination, was the featured speaker at a 20-year anniversary celebration sponsored by Old Forest Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg.

In 1980 Pressler and Paige Patterson, then president of the Criswell Institute of Biblical Studies in Dallas, led a two-day conference at Old Forest Road Church -- one of dozens, perhaps hundreds, coordinated by the pair as they sought to elect conservative presidents of the SBC.

According to the Religious Herald, which first reported the story, Pressler described the important role of placing conservative trustees on the boards of SBC agencies and seminaries in order to shift the convention to the right and then said: "We're going for the jugular. ... We are going to have knowledgeable, Bible-centered, Christ-honoring trustees of all our institutions, who are not going to sit there like a bunch of dummies and rubber stamp everything that's presented to them, but who are going to inquire why this is being done, what is being taught, what is the finished product of our young people who come out of our institutions going to be."

The remark was widely reported in the denominational press and became one of the quintessential soundbytes of the SBC theological battle. For many moderates, it symbolized the secular political tactics they charged conservatives used to assume power.

But Pressler, at the 20th anniversary celebration, dismissed such criticism of what he said was clearly a "metaphorical" statement.

"I said [in 1980] the lifeblood of the convention is its trustees and then using a metaphor ... I said we need to go for the jugular, we need to go for the trustees, saying in effect through a metaphorical expression that the trustees were the lifeblood of the Southern Baptist Convention and if we were going to affect what happened in the Southern Baptist Convention, we would change trustees and by changing trustees, we would change the convention."

Pressler described some reporting of the comment as a "complete, fraudulent misrepresentation," although he acknowledged the statement was made "unwisely."

"I've learned ... that you do not give people something that can be taken out of context," he said.

"It's amazing what the press can do when a reporter has a preconception and has an agenda that they are trying to sell, and we in the Southern Baptist Convention suffered through erroneous reporting from many quarters for many years.

"I praise God now that most of our state [Baptist] papers are being fair and Baptist Press [the SBC's publicity arm] is being fair and we have seen tremendous changes in the Southern Baptist Convention."

Those changes have placed the SBC solidly in a conservative stance and as a result Pressler, 70, said he is reducing his involvement in the denomination's life.

"There are not many people who have the privilege of seeing the reason for which they were born fulfilled in their lifetime," he said. "I truly feel God called me to work on the restoration of the Southern Baptist Convention to its former biblical fidelity. Now I am getting away from activity in the convention as quickly as possible because I think it is not beneficial for a person who ... has participated in the victory to hang on and I want to leave it to others to lead."

Wayne McCraw, pastor of Old Forest Road Church, said he was pleased at the opportunity to host Pressler at his church.

"When I realized it had been 20 years (since the 'jugular' statement was made), it seemed like a good thing to celebrate the anniversary."

McCraw said he had also invited Paige Patterson, who now is president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N. C., but that a conflict had prevented him from attending.

"The Lord willing, we'll have those two men back for the 25th anniversary -- the silver anniversary -- if we're not in glory," said McCraw.

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Gift honors founder of Richmond seminary

By Robert O'Brien

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Friends of retired North Carolina Baptist educator Morris Ashcraft have donated \$100,000 in his honor to the capital campaign of a seminary he "walked out on a limb" to help launch a decade ago.

The anonymous gift from a North Carolina Baptist couple was announced Sept. 12 during the 10th anniversary convocation of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (Va.) that honored Ashcraft and other founders.

The gift boosted the \$10 million "Building the Dream" campaign of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond to \$9.3 million, said Thomas Graves, who joined the then-struggling seminary in 1991 as president and professor of philosophy of religion.

"Early seminary leaders walked out on a limb" when they started out amid the conflict and changes affecting Southern Baptists and theological education, founding trustee John Trotti of Richmond told the opening convocation.

"Morris Ashcraft climbed out on the limb" as acting president in 1989," Trotti said, "while others were trying to saw it off."

Graves said the seminary would name its dean's suite of offices in honor of Ashcraft. Now retired in Wake Forest, N.C., Ashcraft is former dean and professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary there. Graves is former pastor of St. John's Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., and a former professor at Southeastern Seminary.

The two seminary leaders and founding incorporators, trustees, students and others took part in a program of celebration and worship at the opening convocation.

Graves recalled the 32 students who enrolled in BTSR's first class in 1991. "We owe a lot to the courage of those first 32 students who came to an untried and not-yet-accredited seminary, meeting in a basement" of a Richmond church.

The seminary has gone on to earn full accreditation, add a doctor of ministry degree and expand into facilities purchased from another seminary. It has 230 graduates and opened the current semester with about 250 students.

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Clinton holds last White House breakfast with religious leaders

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Religious leaders gathered Sept. 14 for the last of eight annual prayer breakfasts held by President Bill Clinton, whose presidency has often polarized the religious community.

The breakfast has been used to bolster support for Clinton, who has taken previous opportunities to address issues ranging from race relations to personal confession of sin.

Addressing about 125 pastors, rabbis, priests and others in the East Room of the White House, Clinton took the opportunity this year to urge religious leaders to promote debt relief for the poorest countries of the world, as a "moral issue."

Before fielding questions for nearly two hours, Clinton pleaded for help from the religious community on issues of global justice, including more money to combat HIV/AIDS in Africa, support for meal programs in poor countries and debt relief.

"How can we sit here on the biggest mountain of wealth we have ever accumulated, that any nation in all of human history has ever accumulated?" Clinton asked. "And we're not just throwing money away; we're only giving this money to people who not only promise to, but prove they are able to take all of the savings and invest it in the human needs of their people."

"We have reaped great benefits from the information revolution and the globalization of the economy," Clinton said. "We, therefore, have great responsibilities. We have responsibilities to put a human face on the global economy."

Sitting at the same table with Clinton and about eight others was Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Vestal told Associated Baptist Press it was "an inspiring experience to be in the White House ... and there is the president of the United States, who is obviously a person of faith and a committed Christian."

It was a "reminder to me," Vestal noted, "of the diversity of this country and how important liberty is, how important faith is."

Vestal said he left feeling more inspired to work for debt relief for poor countries. He said it was natural for CBF -- "a fellowship who welcomes Baptist Christians and says join us in ministry and mission"-- to heed the call to work for debt relief from a president "who by heritage and conviction is a Baptist." CBF is already a supporting body with the Jubilee 2000 USA movement to enact the debt reduction.

Clinton reminded us of "how we can hold on to the truths that we believe deeply and yet find ways to find our common humanity under God," Vestal said. He was also struck by Clinton's "passion" for his post-presidency work and "his desire to address social-justice issues on a global level."

He noted the support Clinton continues to receive from the breakfast and "how much this breakfast means to him."

"The older I grow, the more I realize how all of us are broken, we're just broken in different places and different ways," Vestal added. "I think this president has genuinely sought support and help from fellow people of faith. And recently he has shown us an honesty and vulnerability about his struggles, and in that sense he has been an inspiration to many of us."

"There was a lot of love in that room," said Vestal.

Also present at the breakfast was Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee.

Walker said the eight religious gatherings with Clinton have been "instrumental in bringing people of various faiths together to discuss important public-policy issues, to get to know one another and to establish common ground despite differences. I hope whoever is elected in November will continue the meetings."

Some other Baptists present at the breakfast were James Dunn, BJC Endowment president and Wake Forest Divinity School professor; Hugh Tobias, pastor of Riverside Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla.; pastor; Chris Doss, law professor from Samford University's Cumberland Law School; Charles Adams, pastor of Hartford Memorial Baptist Church in Detroit; Jeni Cook Furr, chief of chaplains for V.A. Hospitals; Calvin Butts, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York; Billy Kyles, pastor of Monumental Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn; Brian Harbour, pastor of First Baptist Church in Richardson, Texas; and Bill Shaw, president of the National Baptist Convention, Inc.

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Tax funds for religious ministries continuing trend in legislation

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- "Charitable choice," a buzzword coined in 1996 in debate over welfare reform, continues to gain ground in the closing days of the 106th Congress.

Amendments that would make churches and other religious organizations eligible to receive tax dollars have been added to two major pieces of legislation in recent weeks, and supporters are hoping to attach similar language to spending bills that must be hammered out by October to avoid a government shutdown.

Critics of charitable choice, which would permit government funding of "pervasively sectarian" social programs such as drug-rehabilitation services, include church-state separation supporters who say it is unconstitutional and threatens churches with government regulations. But the measure has bipartisan support in Congress and is supported by both leading presidential contenders.

"The political opposition to this idea is not that strong, and the support is bipartisan," said Rob Boston,

a spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a leading opponent of charitable choice. "More and more we are coming to the conclusion that this battle will have to move into the courts."

While conservative religious groups are pushing the plan, other religious and civil-liberties groups have signed a letter opposing charitable choice. Signers include the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Baptist Joint Committee, National PTA, People For the American Way and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., touted the letter from the floor of the House of Representatives in an unsuccessful attempt to amend the charitable-choice initiative in the Child Support Distribution Act. Scott's proposed changes failed and Congress overwhelmingly approved the child-support bill Sept. 7. The charitable-choice initiative was also attached to an Even Start bill Sept. 12 designed to boost children's literacy.

Scott's amendment would have required that beneficiaries of social services not be subjected to sectarian worship, instruction or proselytization.

"The concern here is that you have individuals seeking assistance in a federally funded fatherhood program, and in essence they become a captive audience," Scott said. "It is wrong to take advantage of their need for services and essentially require them to participate in a federally sponsored sectarian worship program."

Scott's amendment failed 153 to 257.

Scott also said charitable-choice proposals allow churches to continue their practice of only hiring fellow believers while accepting tax dollars. It would "turn the clock back on civil rights laws," he said, offering an unsuccessful motion to make clear that religious organizations could not take federal money and then discriminate in their hiring based on religion.

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, another vocal critic of charitable choice, supported Scott's motion. "It is wrong to take the American people's tax dollars and put out a sign that says no Jews, no Protestants, or no Catholics, no Muslims need apply for this federally funded job," Edwards said.

But Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., said the employment issue "is a question of church governance and whether we are now going to say that churches, if they are going to participate in any federal program, can no longer be churches."

"If we take the religious nature out of the churches and say that they cannot control who they hire, we have changed the nature of current law," said Souder, a leading proponent of charitable choice.

Souder said the measure is needed because "it allows religious faith-based providers to become involved in this without diminishing the religious freedom of the beneficiaries or of the organizations."

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China-trade bill passes Congress, despite religious-freedom concerns

By Jeff Huett

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Senate voted Sept. 19 to permanently normalize trade with China, despite a State Department report two weeks earlier citing a "deterioration" in the Chinese government's respect for religious freedom.

The measure grants the same trade rights to China that the United States provides any of its "most favored" trading partners. The bill passed the House of Representatives by a 237-197 vote on May 24.

The Senate bill, which passed 83-15, will end an annual review of the trade status for China.

Abuses of human rights, however, made some Senate lawmakers leery of granting the privilege.

For the second year in a row, the State Department placed China on its list of "countries of particular concern" for violations of religious freedom.

In its 1999 country report on human rights, a bipartisan commission on international religious freedom said "a grant of (permanent normal trade relations) at this juncture could be seen by Chinese people struggling for religious freedom as an abandonment of their cause at a moment of great difficulty."

That report led to China's designation as a "country of particular concern" for religious freedom violations in both 1999 and this year's report, released Sept. 5.

The 2000 report said members of some religious groups in China were subject to "harassment, extortion, prolonged detention, physical abuse and incarceration in prison," because of their religious practices.

Normalizing trade with China drew opposition from individuals and groups across the political spectrum from conservative former Republican presidential hopeful Gary Bauer to the liberal Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn.

Wellstone introduced three amendments to a China trade bill, none of which gained Senate approval. Wellstone's amendments would have delayed normalizing trade with China until the country's government improves on a series of religious-freedom and human-rights issues.

"The question is not whether we integrate China into the world economy," Wellstone said in a statement. "The question is on what terms do we integrate them."

Wellstone said the Clinton administration is focused on improving human rights through trade, "but trade alone will never guarantee change."

"We cannot award China with PNTR while she continues to harass and jail people because of their religion and beliefs," he said.

Other senators who agreed with Wellstone in principle said they voted for the bill despite misgivings. Any of the amendments proposed to the bill "would be a killer amendment," said Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont.

"If those amendments are passed, we will not have a bill," he said.

The vote represents a victory for the Clinton administration, Republican leaders and the business community and a loss for labor unions, human-rights advocates, defense and many liberal Democrats.

Passage of the law is expected to open new markets for U.S. goods. If China enters the World Trade Organization as expected later this year, it also would allow a China-U.S. trade agreement that opens doors for American goods in the country. The agreement would require the opening of Chinese markets to U.S. agriculture, services, technology and telecommunications exports.

In Senate debate, Baucus said prominent religious leaders, such as the Dalai Lama and Billy Graham, have voiced support for China's entrance into the World Trade Organization.

But Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, issued a statement in May opposing normalizing trade with China.

"Given the People's Republic of China's deplorable and oppressive human-rights persecution, it is without pause that I oppose granting of permanent normal trade relations to China," Land said. "Our government and people of faith in China should expect genuine, demonstrable, and purposeful progress in the area of human rights from the Chinese leaders."

Sen. Rod Grams, R-Minn., however, contended that, "As so many religious leaders with long-term experience working in China contend, the best way to advance religious freedom is to further our engagement with China economically and otherwise."